

MILWAUKEE DOWNTOWN, BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT #21

INNOVATION

The Brighten the Passage was completed through a unique public-private partnership that brought together state, local, and federal governmental agencies, the development community, artists, and two downtown management organizations around the collective goal of strengthening connectivity between neighborhoods and overcoming the challenges created by the elevated I-794 freeway.

The project financing structure is also multi-faceted. Capital costs for the artwork and lighting improvements were layered into a tax increment financing (TIF) package that became available by new developments to the north of I-794. While Business Improvement Districts #21 (BID #21) and #2 (BID #2) also supplemented the TID funding, the downtown management organizations mainly focused on elevating the project from a Comprehensive Plan recommendation through its implementation. Moving forward, the organizations have a long-term commitment to operating and maintaining the project annually. This innovative partnership approach creates a new model for how underutilized public space improvement projects can be constructed, and maintained for the long-term in an environment of limited local government resources.

Improving underutilized zones that discourage pedestrian activity was a desired outcome achieved with this project. The project team aimed to enhance walkability and attract resident, worker, and visitor target audiences alike, giving them a renewed feeling that they are in a distinctive and vibrant place.

In addition to alleviating real and perceived barriers associated with overhead road infrastructure, Brighten the Passage also includes “green” components with modern LED lighting technology, therefore reducing energy consumption and decreasing long-term maintenance and operational costs.

OUTCOME

Brighten the Passage has resulted in multiple positive outcomes including:

- **Improved Connectivity:** - The project transformed an underutilized and unattractive space into one of the most unique urban art and lighting galleries in Milwaukee. The area is a new community asset that reconnects neighborhoods and is attracting new visitors.
- **Economic Impact: New Leases & Artist/Contractor Support:** - The Brighten the Passage improvements were a vital lease deal point requirement for a new-to-market restaurant group that is opening its first Wisconsin store in a commercial property adjacent to the project. Without the streetscape, art and lighting improvements, the restaurateurs would have searched for another location or completely the left marketplace. The restaurant will open in Summer 2021. Brighten the Passage contracts also provided \$60,000 in work for Milwaukee-connected artists and \$250,000 for Milwaukee-based lighting designers, installers, and programmers.
- **New Partnerships & Model for Public Improvements & Management:** - Brighten the Passage created a new template for how historically forgotten spaces can be improved and managed with government agencies, the development community, and downtown management organizations moving forward.
- **Community Engagement:** - The dynamic lighting provides an opportunity to change colors for ethnic festivals, sporting events, holidays, and more. Since the project launched there have been 20+ media articles accruing over 1.4 million impressions and over \$143,000 in earned media value.

- Durability & Longevity: - Brighten the Passage enlivens the zone daily and nightly. The management organizations have also created a reserve and maintenance fund to keep the project components in working order for years to come.

EXECUTION

The execution of Brighten the Passage was methodical and could only happen at the pace, and order, in which it was accomplished. First, the concept was embedded in the 2010 Downtown Master Plan. This provided the high-level vision to move forward. The concept was further made a priority and coined Brighten the Passage through a BID #21-led nighttime economy study that recommended filling dead zones between entertainment districts with new dynamic lighting and art.

This freeway section was rebuilt from 2014-2016, resetting the environment for decades to come. Simultaneously, BID #21 and BID #2 led a public design competition where members of the community submitted ideas on how to Brighten the Passage. The winning concept focused on aesthetic lighting.

Next, several new developments in the corridor were completed, providing a tax increment finance (TIF) package to enhance the adjacent streetscape. Since the lighting and art had gone from a Plan vision to shovel-ready, BID #21 and #2 made a compelling case for a TIF budget allocation to implement Brighten the Passage. With the support of businesses and units of government, the BIDs managed the design, construction, and programming contracts to have the project complete by the end of 2020.

REPRESENTATION

Brighten the Passage is a highly inclusive and representative project. Hundreds of community members and organizations were purposefully involved in the extensive public engagement process as part of the 2010 Downtown Master Plan process and the BID #21-led nighttime economy studies that shepherded this project forward.

The design competition which further arrived at recommendations of dynamic lighting and art was open to the public and received dozens of submittals from urban planning and architecture students, consultancies, and community members.

For the art installation, the management organizations commissioned four (4) diverse artists with varying backgrounds that all had a connection to Milwaukee. Several of the commissioned artists incorporated other community members to assist them in completing their works.

In order to complete the project, several different entities with various interests had to come together in agreement and issue their respective approval, including the State of Wisconsin Department of Transportation, the Federal Highways Administration, City of Milwaukee, and the private sector. Milwaukee Downtown, BID #21 and Historic Third Ward BID #2, both of which have a diverse board of directors, managed the project during implementation and will continue to operate the improvements moving forward.

REPLICATION

Most North American cities have in some ways been impacted by elevated freeway-building. In most instances, the impacts on the urban environment have been negative, resulting in large-scale demolition of homes, businesses, and communities, leaving behind overbuilt auto-orientated infrastructure with underutilized spaces underneath them. Downtown Milwaukee is no different; however, the successful approach to rebuilding these connections is unique and can offer a model applicable in other locations in Milwaukee and in other downtowns across the nation and beyond.

There are numerous opportunities in Milwaukee (and in other respective cities) to form new partnerships to derive viable solutions that turn these underutilized areas into assets. For example, lighting and even more so public art, tend to be "lower hanging fruit" that can be replicated where the freeway infrastructure creates the "canvas."

The I-794 corridor acts as the boundary between BID #21 and BID #2, and the under-freeway areas present multiple opportunities

for both organizations to strategically work together to implement improvement projects, similar to Brighten the Passage to rebuild community connections. In addition to this project, the organizations are working on building other community assets including more public art, active open spaces, and downtown's first public dog park.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Brighten the Passage was a complex implementation given the number of approving agencies that the downtown management organizations had to gain support from for the solution. The challenges of having multiple levels of approving authorities was eased early in the process by having a vision that everyone was brought into that was systematically advanced from concept to implementation. Regular on-site and virtual meetings with all the constituency groups and area businesses (to coordinate short-term parking changes during implementation) was important to ensuring open communication and continued support.

For example, the highway infrastructure that the lights are mounted on and the art applied is owned by the State of Wisconsin Department of Transportation, therefore, the downtown organizations were required to enter into a long-term maintenance agreement for the project. Since the capital funding came from the City of Milwaukee through a tax increment finance agreement, aligning all the partners in a timely manner to leverage this opportunity was critical to the project's success.

Due to the technical nature of the project, while the concept was developed in a community-driven process, it also required professional artists, lighting design services, electrical installers, and programmers.