



Better Places

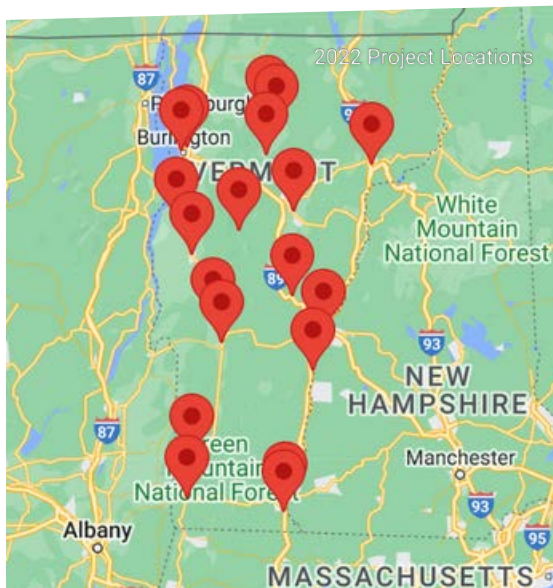
Empowering Vermonters to Create Vibrant Public Places

PROGRAM CASE STUDY

VERMONT BETTER PLACES GRANT PROGRAM



PROGRAM OVERVIEW



The Better Places program looks to activate and revitalize public spaces to build vibrant communities across Vermont, while empowering residents to play an active role in shaping their community.

The program seeks projects that build inclusive and welcoming spaces for social connection, health, and recreation and others that increase integrity of and equitable access to green spaces. These projects stimulate the creative economy and provide **equitable access** to the arts while spurring entrepreneurship, partnerships, and public and private investment. These quick-build projects boost community confidence and local pride and connect viable projects to individual contributors and matching funds.

PROGRAM MISSION

Better Places is a non-competitive, community matching grant program empowering Vermonters to create inclusive and vibrant public places serving Vermont's designated downtowns, village centers, new town centers, or neighborhood development areas. The program supports community-led projects that create, revitalize, or activate public spaces that bring people together to build welcoming and thriving communities across Vermont.



“At the heart of economic development is creating places where people live, work and play. **The Better Places program helps communities create and revitalize public places to build new economic opportunities for residents and visitors alike.** Vermonters have responded to the program already, with more than 1,000 pledging financial support to help get projects over the finish line. From public art to pop-up parks to outdoor seating, we’re excited to see these community-driven efforts reach their fundraising goals, and ultimately, add vibrancy to our communities.”

- VERMONT GOVERNOR PHIL SCOTT



St. Johnsbury, VT



Barre, VT



Bennington, VT

PROGRAM FUNCTIONALITY

Better Places uses a method of grantmaking called "crowdgranting". Crowdgranting combines crowdfunding – the practice of funding a project with small donations from a large number of people – paired with a matching grant from the State. Crowdgranting builds local awareness, excitement, and shared investment in community-led placemaking projects. Better Places applicants must first complete a pre-flight check, then apply, and receive project approval. They then work with a Patronicity project coach to build, strategize, and launch a crowdfunding campaign and raise their 33% local match. Successful campaigns receive a 2:1 matching grant from the State of Vermont and can begin to implement the project and celebrate its success.



The **COMMUNITY** crowdfunds
\$15,000



The **SPONSOR or GRANTOR** awards a matching grant of
\$30,000



The **TOTAL INVESTMENT** in the community is
\$45,000



FUNDING SOURCES

The Better Places program is funded through state dollars allocated through the Vermont Legislature and Governor Phil Scot during the passage of Act 74 in 2021 with the intent to support community-led projects that create, revitalize, or activate public spaces that bring people together to build welcoming and thriving communities across Vermont.

"I was intimidated by the fundraising process, but came to appreciate it. **[T]he number of contributions coming in from our community helped bring the project more into the community, instead of just our little group of people working on it.**"

- SARAH DANLY
Town of South Royalton



South Royalton, VT

A YEAR OF BETTER PLACES

HERE'S WHAT WE ACCOMPLISHED IN 2022



**18 LOCAL
PROJECTS
SUPPORTED**



**1,257
UNIQUE
DONORS**



**OVER
\$201,000
CROWDFUNDED**



**\$340,000
MATCHED BY
THE STATE**



**SAW \$522,000
IN PRIVATE
INVESTMENTS**

ADDITIONALLY, BETTER PLACES HAS RECEIVED OVER 100 PREFLIGHTS AND PROGRAM INQUIRIES, REPRESENTING 84 VERMONT COMMUNITIES SETTING A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR 2023!

JUNE 2021

Better Places legislation and \$1.5M funding allocation

FEB 2022
Program **LAUNCHES!**
First program webinar has 230 participants

MARCH 2022

First project launches crowdfunding campaign

OCT 2022
Second program webinar has 70 participants

2022
ends with a bang with a **100% campaign success rate and 18 fully funded projects!**

FALL 2021

Partnerships formed with VT Community Foundation, VT Health Department, and Patronicity

BY APRIL 2022

60+ projects are already in preflight consultation

DEC 2022

Better Places has its 18th successfully funded project



Guilford, VT



St. Johnsbury, VT



White River Junction, VT



PATRON IN THE CITY

GILLIAN SEWAKE, ST. JOHNSBURY, VERMONT

Gillian Sewake, the Director of Discover St. Johnsbury, has a love for her community that has been the driving force behind many initiatives in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. In May 2022, Gillian launched a successful crowdfunding campaign for a free, outdoor, music event series. One of the first Better Places Vermont projects to launch a crowdfunding campaign through Patronicity, #GetDowntown St. J raised over \$4,000 to fill the downtown with art, community, and fun.

By reaching their crowdfunding goal, the project unlocked a 2:1 matching grant from the **Better Places Vermont** program, empowering Vermonters to create inclusive and vibrant public places serving Vermont's designated downtowns, village centers, new town centers, or neighborhood development areas. The program, led by the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) in partnership with the Vermont Department of Health, the Vermont Community Foundation, and Patronicity, supports community-led projects that create, revitalize, or activate public spaces that bring people together to build welcoming and thriving communities across Vermont.

At Patronicity, we believe that passionate individuals can spur change in their communities. We refer to those individuals as Patrons in the City, dedicating their time, sweat, and tears to building vibrant communities. We recently spoke with Gillian to learn more about her passion for community and how she serves as a Patron in the City.

Patronicity: Tell us about yourself. What is your role in the community?

Gillian: My name is Gillian Sewake and I am the Director of Discover St. Johnsbury, which works to stimulate and promote the vitality of St. Johnsbury's cultural, commercial, and community resources.

The intersection of those three “c’s”—culture, commerce, and community—is where I get the most excited about my work. Whether that’s creating a new event series that centers free and accessible arts experiences downtown, or helping new businesses connect and thrive, or telling the story of what makes our town unique, I love to work on projects that improve civic engagement, economic development, and community pride.

I grew up here, and I remember a time when stories that celebrated St. Johnsbury were hard to come by. It has been a joy to return and see so much energy and momentum, and to be a part of fulfilling the promise that St. Johnsbury has always held, that of a creative, vibrant, and unique community.

Patronicity: Why do you love where you live?

Gillian: St. Johnsbury is a very small town of 7,500, located in a hyper-rural community called the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. And, we are also a hub for creativity and ingenuity where you can spend a long weekend eating, drinking, shopping, and taking in the sights. Here in St. J, you can find both quaint, rural charm and cosmopolitan experiences side by side. People care about each other, and our community, and that shows in a downtown that’s filling up with creative, independent businesses, eateries, and shops.

Patronicity: Tell us about your community and why your project is important to the community.

Gillian: In the last few decades, St. Johnsbury has faced the same challenges that you’ll find in many other rural downtowns: loss of small businesses, outmigration, and blight. But we’re a resilient community, and slow, deliberate efforts to turn things around all started to tip the needle in the right direction.

Still, community members and visitors had gotten out of the habit of gathering downtown. In September 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a unique partnership formed between my organization, the Town of St. Johnsbury, and our regional arts organization Catamount Arts to bring people together to experience arts and community, within the strict social distancing requirements of the time. The experience working together to create that series was so positive that once the pandemic eased, we were ready to take it up a notch.

Cut to summer 2022 and the launch of the St. J Final Fridays event series, supported by Patronicity crowdfunding. These events took place on the final Friday of each summer month, and were full-on street fair with free food, fun, and amazing arts experiences, culminating in a Levitt AMP St. Johnsbury Music Series event that turned the street into a pop-up concert venue in the evening.

Although we used ideas from other communities’ First Friday arts events, our Final Fridays totally changed the game for what downtown events could look like in St. Johnsbury, particularly with the efforts we put into making it welcoming and inclusive for all.

Patronicity: What inspired you to get involved and build this project?

Gillian: It's really all about the collaboration. Our team brings different organizational capacities and assets to the table. We all put so much hard work into making this series a success. From the early prototypes in 2020, we got hooked on working together to achieve this positive change for the town. And, the town has responded with so much positivity! We can't wait to do it again.

Patronicity: How has the community responded to the project and your efforts to build a vibrant community?

Gillian: Like I said, it has been an overwhelmingly positive response. To quote an Instagram commenter responding to the event: "Made a core memory last night! Thank you for all your hard work and dedication to making these wonderful days and nights a reality!" We're riding that great momentum and already planning the next series in 2023.

Patronicity: If someone wanted to become more involved in their community, what advice would you give them?

Gillian: If there's something you care about in your town, find out what organizations or community groups are working on it and just reach out! Do you know how thrilled I would be to get a cold call or email offering to volunteer for an event, or serve on a programming committee? Go on, make that call and make someone's day.

Patronicity: What could other cities learn from your community or project?

Gillian: Make sure you remove as many barriers as possible to ensure that all community members can participate. I know that not all events can be free, but if you are trying to make something free and inclusive, really invest the time to make it so.

Look at whether some activities at your free event cost money, and try to cover those costs. Look at what transportation barriers exist, and try to make sure your event lines up with a time that everyone can get there, whether or not they have a car. Look at cultural barriers that keep people from different racial, ethnic, or political backgrounds from feeling safe and welcomed at your event, and try to remove as many of them as possible. In a time with increasing polarization and inequality, it's imperative that everyone who works in community and economic development work as hard as we can to create reasons for people of different backgrounds and experiences to share space and share joy.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

Become a patron to *your* city by launching your project today or donating to a project in your area at www.Patronicity.com. View this story online at resources.patronicity.com.

BETTER PLACES CASE STUDY

BRATTLEBORO HIGH STREET MURAL

Brattleboro, Vermont



THE NEED

Jamie Mohr, the Executive Director of Epsilon Spires, an arts gallery and venue on Brattleboro's Main Street, first identified a space in need of activation and meaningful change when her community brought concerns about the dilapidated and neglected entrance to Brattleboro's downtown to her attention. Having recently played a large role in the conversion of the First Baptist Church into an arts and culture hub, Jamie was ready to tackle a new project that would continue to bring life to Brattleboro, further the arts in the city, and make for a more welcoming entrance to town.



THE PROJECT

In order to tackle the eye-sore on High Street, Jamie worked with her team to determine what it would look like to create a beautiful, community-centered mural on the almost 100-yard long wall. At the core of this project was a collaboration between local designers and recently resettled Afghani refugees—all passionate about making Brattleboro a better place to live and visit. Epsilon Spires was intentional about conducting outreach events in order to engage the community in the process of designing and fundraising for the mural, ultimately ensuring that community members felt a sense of ownership over the project.



"Participating in the Better Places program has been an incredible experience for Epsilon Spires and for Brattleboro as a whole. Through this grant, we have been able to successfully replace a neglected stretch of wall in our downtown with a vibrant mural representing our town. The community response has been OVERWHELMINGLY positive and we have been flooded with messages conveying joy, inspiration, and pride around the mural." - JAMIE MOHR

THE IMPACT



**\$8,411
RAISED**



**\$16,000
MATCHED**



**94
DONORS**



**\$25,000
TOTAL COST**

"[E]veryone who donated really feels like they are a part of the project, and are incredibly emotionally invested in it. It remains a vibrant symbol of pride and inspiration of what we the citizens of Vermont can accomplish together if we combine our talents and resources! The completion of this large, multi-tiered public art project has exceeded my high expectations for civic engagement and placemaking. We successfully worked together to transform a neglected public space into something everyone is proud of and thankful for, I see visitors taking pictures of the mural throughout the day, I hear other citizens express their inspirations as to how this work can continue to improve other spaces. It has created economic opportunities for the artists to paint other projects. I have seen elected officials who were at first skeptical, begin enthusiastically documenting the progress of the mural and cheer us on. Through the scope of the project the artists themselves built lasting friendships across cultures and plan to work together again in the future. This beautiful and inspiring success really could not have been possible without the matching support of Better Places."

- JAMIE MOHR, EPSILON SPIRES



ABOUT BETTER PLACES

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