



Michigan REALTORS® Create “Sense of Place” in Workforce Housing

“More and more people are saying they look for a *place* to live, first, and look for a job second,” says Beth Foley, 2012 president of the Michigan Association of REALTORS® [MAR]. “As REALTORS®, we have been all about land use planning for a long time, but now we clearly need to focus on placemaking, specifically, as the real key to reversing the fortunes of the housing market here in Michigan.”

Placemaking is a progressive movement that creates improved and distinctive public spaces by involving the input and vision of the community itself. It starts with small, doable projects that build places where people gather – be it a farmers market, a space for live music, or strategically placed park benches – and leads to safer communities that attract more people, more vitality, more commerce, and ultimately, more economic stability.

When MAR received a major Ira Gribin grant from the National Association of REALTORS® a few years back, it used a substantial portion to fund a statewide initiative to study the benefits of placemaking in workforce housing. It was only natural that when Governor Rick Snyder announced his own support for placemaking policies to help spur the state’s flagging economy, state leaders reached out to MAR to lead the way.

The Association was ready. In February, using a \$15K Smart Growth Action Grant it requested from NAR as seed money, it hosted “MI Great Places,” the state’s first Placemaking Leadership Forum. The intensive two-day seminar generated great excitement and forged connections among the local government officials, policy makers, financial institutions, residents, architects and REALTORS® that it brought together to learn about the compelling concept of placemaking. The forum’s co-sponsors included the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, the Council of Michigan Foundations, the Michigan Municipal League, the Michigan Environmental Council, and the Michigan State University Land Policy Institute.

The program was spearheaded by Gilbert M. White, MAR Past President and consultant to MAR on land use issues, and Nigel G. Griswold, an economic strategist and placemaking expert. It was run by the Project for Public Spaces [PPS,] an international pioneer in revitalizing spaces through placemaking strategies. Discussion centered in part on what’s described as “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper,” an approach that provides both the impetus and the tools for participants to begin implementing projects in their own communities and neighborhoods. “Building convention centers and using tax incentives to attract big corporations or new business isn’t working,” explained PPS Vice President Ethan Kent. “Instead, placemaking emphasizes smaller, inexpensive improvements: Adirondack chairs to watch the sunset, a great public square for a festival, or temporary incubator retailers with lower overhead costs. These can be the kinds of things that make people call a city or town, ‘home.’”

“MI Great Places” sponsors and participants are keeping a lively conversation going on a Facebook page maintained by MAR social media coordinator Jason Heinrich. The Michigan Municipal League, which has published a book called *Economics of Place: The*



Value of Building Communities Around People, has established a contest awarding \$2,000 prizes for projects that will best make Michigan communities more vibrant. In the spirit of “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper,” MAR, along with the Greater Lansing Association of REALTORS, is also developing a pilot program that will make micro-grants of \$500-\$2,500 to fund projects at a neighborhood level that community groups, led by local REALTORS, can “get their arms around,” says Kathie Feldpausch, MAR Senior Vice President. The hope is that a strong body of small successes will become a model for other funders to support.

An ideal candidate for placemaking success, cites Feldpausch by way of example, is the small Michigan town that boasts a bridal store that attracts wedding parties from around the state – and beyond. “If even modest efforts were made to create a real sense of place in the area around this wedding industry institution, it would lift the whole community and maximize its attractiveness as a destination.”

MAR’s support for placemaking in Michigan communities is fundamental: “Our role as REALTORS® is much greater than simply helping folks buy and sell houses,” MAR President Beth Foley says. “We owe it to our clients to help them find or keep their homes in cities, towns and rural communities that have appealing and sustainable plazas, efficient and convenient transportation, walkable main streets, green spaces, thriving shops and cultural amenities. Those are the qualities of placemaking that are driving demand in today’s real estate marketplace.”

As one of the states hardest hit by home foreclosures, Michigan has seen signs that its housing market is stabilizing, and the “MI Great Places” forum is part of MAR’s initiative to build momentum from this positive news. Although placemaking is a priority of Michigan’s new governor, it is essentially grassroots-driven, rather than government-driven. As Foley explains, “MAR’s interest is in getting the word out and helping members implement placemaking in their communities; it’s not part of our legislative agenda -- although we couldn’t be happier that Governor Snyder has placed placemaking so high on *his* agenda for Michigan.”

There are times, though, she concedes, when it will be necessary for placemaking advocates to tackle policy. “When zoning dictates that a road must be four lanes wide with street parking, and that prevents a café owner from offering sidewalk seating, that is a placemaking opportunity lost.” And MAR and its partners will be prepared to advocate on the side of *place*.