

DETROIT LAKES

CREATIVE ENERGY PLAN



SPARK TOWNS

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CONTEXT

The Detroit Lakes community received a grant to support the development of its Arts & Culture Commission, a new advisory body to the City. The Arts & Culture Commission used a portion of that grant to bring in Spark Towns to identify potential projects and to suggest structural and operational practices to support those projects.

Spark Towns visited Detroit Lakes from July 25 - 30, 2022, attending events, touring the community, and interviewing stakeholders to inform this report. In total, Spark Towns connected with more than 50 people including local business leaders, Council members, artists, shop owners, trail builders, and more.

This proposal sketches out a path forward both for projects with high potential for impact and organizational structure to build the capacity to see that impact through.





Envision creative places. Empower creative people.

STEP 1: SEE YOURSELVES AS A PLACEMAKING COMMISSION

Placemaking is the most obvious point of connection between the City of Detroit Lakes and the Arts & Culture Commission. The City is regularly planning and (re)developing specific locations within the community that would benefit from an Arts & Culture filter prior to implementation.

STEP 2: WORK WITH THE CITY TO IDENTIFY PLACES

Work with City staff to identify high-priority places that are ideally a few years out from development so that proper planning can occur. Think of place at all levels: regional positioning, neighborhoods and commercial districts, site specific projects like buildings, roads, parks, etc.

STEP 3: DEVELOP VISION GUIDES FOR THOSE PLACES

Work as a commission to assemble vision guides that focus less on specific projects and more on feel, vibe, tone, etc. Include projects in other communities that accomplish objectives similar to the outcomes you hope to achieve. Integrate the goals and priorities of diverse demographic groups. Think of placemaking within these guides in three categories: branding & storytelling, beautification & public art, and events & experiences.

MAKING A VISION GUIDE

IDENTIFY THE ZONE

Focus on centers of action instead of their borders.
Good Energy radiates.

MOOD BOARD IT

Think Vibe. Find pics and quotes and colors and textures that feel the way you think this area could feel. You don't have to agree. This is about sparking ideas. The more the merrier!

USE THE POWER OF 10+

The Project for Public Spaces says a thriving place needs at least ten things to do or reasons to be there. List what exists. Brainstorm what could.

THINK COMPLEMENTS

What kind of housing makes sense here? What commercial buildings? What amenities?
Development affects culture!

FIND ORPHANED SPACES

Look for green spaces, nooks, blank walls, walking paths, etc. that have potential. Catalogue these. Find your community some canvases!

BORROW IDEAS

Research projects in other communities that accomplish similar goals. Be careful to avoid direct replication. No one visits the second community to do something. Focus on the impact, but encourage your residents to make up their own concepts.

PUT TOGETHER CALLS

Take these ideas and put them into a sharable invitations that challenge (and support) members of your community to dream up and run with their own ideas!

FRICITION ZONES



THE NORTHSIDE

The neighborhoods and commercial districts north of Hwy. 10 and the tracks are ripe for placemaking. Generally green-space and culture deserts, this section of town has been overlooked for investment and is attached to stigma that is no longer relevant, if it ever was. In many ways, its distance from the lake, its underdeveloped land, and its existing infrastructure provide the opportunity to grow a neighborhood attractive to younger professionals and artists with more affordable and higher density housing. A Vision Guide that maps out opportunities would help people see potential here. Leverage Art Project 605 and look into incremental development and gentle density as concepts of value.

THE WATERFRONT

The City is actively exploring redevelopment opportunities for both the baseball park and pavilion. Both of these projects have significant implications for arts and culture along the waterfront. Additionally, these projects may impact the beach, the bandshell, and other existing infrastructure. Done well, you will gain a cohesive civic space that brings people together. Look into the Project for Public Spaces or Re-imagining the Civic Commons as you develop recommendations for these spaces and keep the triangle-shaped park between Lyndale and Roosevelt on your radar as an opportunity for placemaking.

WEST LAKE DRIVE

Reconstruction of West Lake Drive may start as soon as this fall. A consulting firm will be in the community starting in August to finalize recommendations for that rebuild. Historically the mile-long public beach has been the heart of community energy, but it feels under-activated in its current format. The Power of 10 is applicable here: a great place should have at least ten things to do. You may also want to look at Edmonton Canada's Winter City Design Guidelines to think about four-season use of this space. Color would help. A public fire place/pit or two might encourage use at night or in colder seasons.

DOWNTOWN & DETROIT MOUNTAIN

Downtown Detroit Lakes and the area around Detroit Mountain are two additional zones that should stay on the radar of the Arts & Culture Commission. Downtown Detroit Lakes is doing well. As such, it is in need of less attention than other areas of the community. Still, it is a high-impact location and may serve valuable to the commission as a place to model projects and build buy-in. The recent investment in Detroit Mountain means it will continue to be a draw (and in other seasons of the year). Leveraging the mountain as a cultural center similar to the lake will expand opportunities for new friction zones to grow.



Downtown Detroit Lakes could be known for its cool alleys and parklets!





Detroit Lakes has great live music, but increased collaboration may see higher-caliber performers and bigger audiences at a lower overall cost.

STEP 4: GROW REPRESENTATION & RELATIONSHIPS

Expand the power grid by connecting various demographic groups ideally through representation on the Commission itself or through intentional relationships if appointments aren't possible. Position the Arts & Culture Commission as the body that knows what all groups in the community need to feel seen, safe, supported, and celebrated.

STEP 5: ADVERTISE AND ADVOCATE

Use those Vision Guides to communicate opportunities with the community. Enlist small groups, artists, entrepreneurs, etc. to come up with their own specific projects that meet those visions. Put out calls and develop selection protocols when appropriate. Advocate on behalf of good-fit projects.

STEP 6: MAKE CONNECTIONS

Help people with good ideas connect to the resources necessary to implement those projects including funding, city approvals, volunteer support, partnerships, etc. Adopt a Rule of Three that requires projects to benefit at least three groups/objectives to earn the endorsement of the Commission.

STEP 7: REPEAT

DETROIT LAKES & WHITE EARTH

Improved relationships between Detroit Lakes and White Earth came up often as a rich opportunity for impact. At the same time, those conversations often put responsibility for the disconnect onto the shoulders of White Earth. There are undoubtedly resources more specific to Detroit Lakes, but Scene On Radio's Season 2 Episode 5: Little War on the Prairie (sceneonradio.org/seeing-white/) offers context regarding the treatment of indigenous groups in Minnesota's early days of statehood/colonization and the types of betrayals that still challenge relationships today. That context is essential to the work of reconciliation, and reconciliation is one of the most powerful opportunities at the fingertips of the Arts & Culture Commission.



CityLab just put out a great article on trauma-informed placemaking and its capacity to heal communities that are dealing with the legacy impacts of oppression: ([bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-08-04/-trauma-informed-placemaking-gives-cities-space-to-heal](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-08-04/-trauma-informed-placemaking-gives-cities-space-to-heal)). Our short time in Detroit Lakes brought forward so many projects that align with this type of placemaking:

- Integrating Ojibwe and Dakota languages into signage at all public buildings
- Growing native plants and teaching native cuisine within existing high school programs
- Working with White Earth artists to place public art in high-visibility locations
- Supporting the launch of an Ojibwe restaurant or food truck

The most immediate opportunity, however, would invite White Earth members to develop exhibits in partnership with the new History Museum. One interview talked about the unique circumstances of border towns and the increased generational trauma that develops in communities tasked with keeping groups of people separate. Bringing awareness to these circumstances through devoted resources would establish a foundation on which other reconciliation efforts could build.



The Mémorial Alsace Moselle in France is a great example of a museum devoted to border trauma.

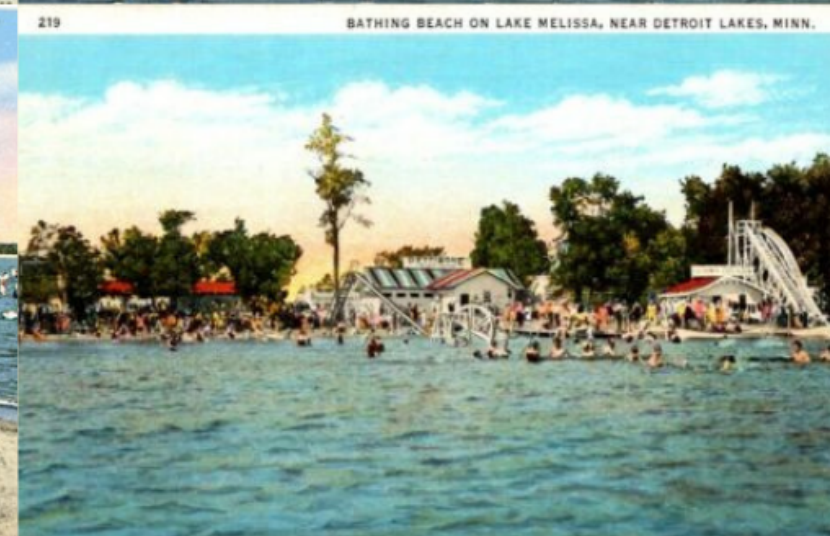
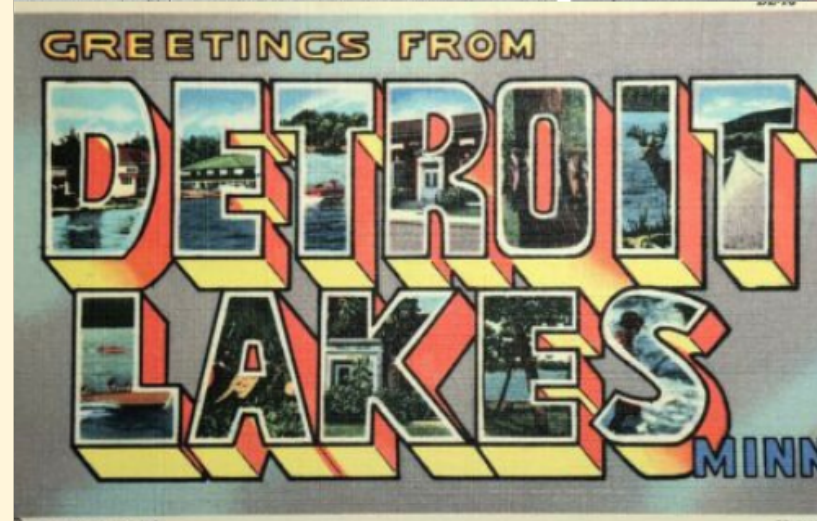
1980s Detroit Lakes came up often in conversation, usually with pride about how Detroit Lakes has improved its reputation over the decades. This conversation may be more complicated, though. Yes, improvements to Detroit Lakes since that time are valuable, but there is a connection between the '80s and your current economy that is worth noting.

In 1980s Detroit Lakes, it was affordable to buy a home. It was affordable to buy a commercial building on or near the lake. It was feasible to start a new business from scratch. Detroit Lakes also attracted the people likely to do those things. It was a place of adventure, and that adventurous spirit drew in young people who grew up to become business leaders at the heart of your current vibrancy.

Along with the economic barriers making it more difficult for the next generation to accomplish similar impact, it is worth thinking about ways to reintegrate that adventurous spirit into the Detroit Lakes brand. This doesn't have to mean losing control of the beach. It can mean more mountain biking, a more diverse line-up of community music, or better storytelling about the entrepreneurship that is a rich part of your history.

The Arts & Culture Commission can live its mission by letting others lead, be they members of the White Earth Nation or young professionals, and helping those leaders make connections both to City projects and to other resources that exist within the community.

1980S D L



Wrapping electrical boxes would connect high school art students to graphic design careers while beautifying neighborhoods and improving wayfinding for tourists.



Detroit Lakes has beautiful flowers. Different plants in different zones with color schemes and complementary banners would give zones shape and improve wayfinding.

You have great walls for murals. The JCPenny wall would make an ideal location for instagram-able downtown entrance art.



Advocating for open public intoxicants on the beach on limited days and at limited times would spread energy and support local restaurants.

Increasing the maximum reimbursement for your facade improvement grants would support bigger projects that will have noticeable impact.



Creating walking maps that connect local artists' work across Detroit Lakes will help visitors move from zone to zone.



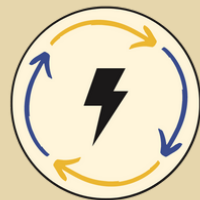
METER READING



The Spark Towns Meter Reading is a unique asset-mapping tool that evaluates how energy flows through communities. We use *energy* because it makes fourth-wave, entrepreneur-led economic development and its smartest investments visible to the dozens of people we get to know through our process. We then use that visibility to design tangible, achievable strategies that have immediate impact.

Our Meter Reading focuses on four flows of energy: *current* looks at how new ideas flow into your community; *bright spots* identify where your energy is already strong; *leakages* catch where you are paying for energy from other places; and your *power grid* looks at who is and isn't connected to community power.

Our Meter Reading showed that the energy in Detroit Lakes is strong. Consider our recommendations through the lens of a community whose accomplishments and culture are already quite impressive. We saw nothing to "fix" but rather opportunities to be more strategic, tightening up systems so that the impact you are already achieving is maximized.



CREATIVE ENERGY:
STRONG

CURRENT

Transplants to the Detroit Lakes area shared the ease with which they made connections to, got involved in, and had an impact on the community. In many ways, this may be your best asset. There is a healthy competitiveness in Detroit Lakes that wants to keep up with other vibrant communities and is not just open to new ideas, but seeks them out. You can see that in completed projects like the 150th sailboats and in conversations about expanded mountain biking trails, wrapped electrical boxes, and other pending projects.

While Detroit Lakes is very comfortable with newcomers, especially given the role of tourism and vacation homes, Detroit Lakes will get even more out of its eagerness to keep pace by complementing that drive with attention to the shifting demographics in the community and putting effort into broadening the definition of who lives here. This opportunity was made evident in comments about the food scene. Almost every interview referenced the limited food options and the over abundance of bar food. At the same time, almost every person prefaced those comments by saying they were likely the only person who felt that way. Recognizing the common goal for more visible/accessible diversity and putting resources into that work will both yield immediate results and open up doors for new impact in the future.




DL is accomplishing cool projects, but many are ideas borrowed from other communities. What can the Arts & Culture Commission do to spark more original placemaking?

BRIGHT SPOTS

Detroit Lakes is both philanthropic and feisty. So much of what is working in your community is the byproduct of a small group or single individual who got an idea, took ownership of that idea, and leveraged the generosity around them to make that idea happen. While this plan recommends actions to improve strategy and cohesion, we want to be clear about the value we see in the agency people feel to take on projects in this way.

The Arts & Culture Commission can improve the creative energy in Detroit Lakes by investing in strategy and improving systems, but both of those efforts should prioritize this existing strength. Avoid anything that adds bureaucracy or oversight that might tamp down ownership and enthusiasm. Instead, cultivate this creative ownership by improving connections and awareness, and looking for programs and partnerships that can sustain this community investment where it is having impact.




The DL community regularly comes together to rally behind cool projects. How can the Arts & Culture Commission make it easier for new or lesser connected people to access those support networks?

LEAKAGES

Like many small towns, Detroit Lakes is experiencing workforce challenges. The fight to attract and retain young professionals is real, especially given national trends encouraging these young people to move to bigger and warmer places.

Detroit Lakes' circumstances, however, are atypical. Attracting young professionals appears to be less of a challenge. We met a number of people in their twenties that moved back to DL shortly after graduating from college, and our tour of Lakeshirts revealed an average employee age that is also quite young.

We heard bigger challenges around retention. The young people we interviewed are excited by the quality of life that Detroit Lakes has to offer, but accessing that quality of life (be it a nice place to live, support for a startup, or a romantic relationship) often proves more difficult than they expect, encouraging them, after a few years, to move either to a nearby community that is more affordable or to a larger city that has more options.



DL is attracting young professionals excited to make a life there. How can the Arts & Culture Commission advocate for what they need to make that happen?

POWER GRID

Detroit Lakes has no shortage of creative ideas and people with those ideas are regularly finding the resources they need to succeed. But there are structural gaps in the way those projects come to fruition that can drain people and projects of their best energy. The biggest drains we heard about were exhaustion, exclusion, and duplication.

Gaps in formal structures and processes for community art projects often mean that what is getting done is falling on the same shoulders both in execution and in funding. People with a reputation for getting work done find themselves invited by the community to take on more work. When that work is successful, expectations grow faster than the resources needed to sustain that success.

The other side of this exhaustion is a feeling of exclusion present in people with ideas and aspirations, who feel outside of the circles moving projects forward. Leveraging the Arts & Culture Commission to expand and shift power and to formalize processes for determining, announcing, and selecting public art would improve equity and access and achieve greater diversity in outcomes.

You have the human resources in place to accomplish this. We connected with young professionals, Haitian-American community leaders, LGBTQIA+ business owners, and members of the White Earth nation who all had exciting ideas for expanding cultural offerings in Detroit Lakes in our short time there.



The ice castle is a great project but needs to be sustainable to have long-term impact. How can the Arts & Culture Commission advocate for the resources to sustain smart placemaking efforts?





Spark Towns is a new approach to entrepreneur-led economic development that is energizing small and rural communities. Applying emerging research in zoning, social capital, placemaking, and ecosystem building, our four-step program puts power into the ideas already moving through these towns, strengthening tech entrepreneurship, attracting stronger workforces, reviving historic downtowns, supporting remote work, and growing maker movements, all through the simple approaches communities learn as they become Spark Towns!

