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## 'It's About Place' Contest

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INTRO: The Michigan Municipal League is holding a contest for anyone around the state. It's called "It's About Place." Choose a patch of land, or a small structure that needs help but has potential. Enter it in the contest and you might win a cash prize and the adoration of your community. The first deadline is April 6. Here's Michigan Now's Chris McCarus with more.

First of all, what is placemaking? Sounds fake doesn't it? Urban planners and some city officials will tell you that Michigan needs placemaking. Car culture damaged the places that grew up organically. So, groups like the Michigan Municipal League try to undo the damage.

"So we're standing alongside the river in downtown Lansing."

Sarah Szurpicki is organizing the "It's About Place," contest.

"We're on a lovely trail. There's people jogging, walking, biking. It's a beautiful day so there's a lot of people out."

Human beings have settled next to water for thousands of years. It's used to drink, get food, transport goods, generate power and provide recreation.

"Wow. Was that a fish? It was an enormous splashing sound."

"That wasn't some one throwing something out of a building..... I don't think so no."

In the last decade, the City of Lansing has begun to reclaim the Grand River. One on side, the convention center, got new patios and cabanas. On the other side, is the old electric power station. It's art deco bricks reach 170 feet in the air. They almost got torn down. Now they're an insurance company headquarters with its own terraces and walkways by the river. The "It's About Place" contest is asking citizens to try this on a teeny scale.

"It's about place is our placemaking contest. What we're trying to do is use just a little bit of money to leverage creativity in a lot of our communities to create more welcoming and inviting spaces like this."

These are spaces where you won't get hit by a car. You might have live music or a little league sports event. Sarah Szurpicki says,

"Whatever you can do with a couple thousand dollars. So it could be one little patio area. It could be one vacant lot. It could be one alley."

There's an alley on Saginaw's west side. It's next to the Old Town Skate shop. Someone recently painted a mural on the alley wall. It's a man with a vested suit and hat, 1920's style. He's painted 10 feet tall in black and white. Skateboarders do manoeuvres in front of him.

The "It's About Place" contest is for public spaces. You can try the river that runs through your town. Michigan is filled with them. The Grand River starts south of Jackson, then cuts through Lansing on its way to Lake Michigan.

"The Grand River is one of the landmarks of our city. The city is called Grand Rapids."

Tim Mroz works at the Right Place. It's a non-profit group that promotes economic development.

"Having a major river like this running through downtown, having a river that is fishable. You know we're looking across the river and we see 15 fishermen there right now. And in a couple years from now we're gonna have the rapids back in the river and you can kayak down the river, that all adds to quality of life."



Skateboarding near alley off of Michigan Ave. in Saginaw



Skater happy after getting on his board in 80 degree weather in March



Old Town Skate Shop, 406 Hancock St. Saginaw, MI, next to the alley where a mural was painted



Sarah Szurpicki is holding the 'It's About Place' contest. You can email her with your idea for fixing up a cool place at [sarah@letssavemichigan.com](mailto:sarah@letssavemichigan.com).

There's that river again. An easy target for placemaking. But dry land, even concrete, can work too. It takes dirty hands. If you're trying to beautify an abandoned park, you can't avoid picking up trash and used tires. But the strength of a community is found in different layers of people and groups. Tim Mroz explains the Grand Rapids version.

"The term public/private partnership gets thrown around a lot. And in Grand Rapids it really works. It works at the higher levels with the philanthropists and angel investors. It works at the lower level like the downtown urban market. So it's really the community working together. And when you come to Grand Rapids you can feel that. You can feel that heartbeat of the city."

So what place touches your heart that's neglected right now? It's scuffed up or blocked off. Take another cue from Sarah Szurpicki. She grew up in the suburbs. Went to Harvard University and then moved to Lafayette Park, a couple minutes from the Detroit River.

"You need to come up with an idea... a space where you want to build a project and your plan for that. You need to submit a letter of intent to my email which is Sarah at Letssavemichigan.com by April 6."

That's Sarah with an h at lets.savemichigan.com.

For Michigannow I'm Chris McCarus.

### Leave a Reply

Name (required)

Mail (will not be published) (required)

Website

Submit Comment



*Szurpicki along the Grand River, opposite the Ottawa Power Station was built by the Lansing Board of Water & Light in 1939. It became the headquarters for the Accident Fund Insurance Company in 2011.*



*The bricks used at the base of the building are dark like ash. They get lighter in color as they move upward. It was meant to appear like a flame burning hottest at the top.*



*Fisherman on the Grand River at Grand Rapids.  
(Photo courtesy of photographer known as Maryland Route 5)*

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