



## IMPACT100 TRAVERSE CITY

### 2024 ENVIRONMENT, RECREATION AND PRESERVATION: THOMPSONVILLE AREA REVITALIZATION PROJECT

<https://allaboardville.org/>

#### INITIATIVE: THOMPSONVILLE JUNCTION TRAILHEAD PROJECT

##### OVERVIEW OF INITIATIVE – IN THE APPLICANT’S WORDS

The mission of TARP is to undertake projects which will enhance the quality of life for all people in the greater Thompsonville area.

TARP’s keystone project is the creation of a bicycle trailhead, and an ADA compliant visitor’s pavilion and campground at the historic Thompsonville Junction. TARP’s vision is that this project would initiate a transformational change to the Thompsonville area community. With the successful completion of the trailhead project, Thompsonville would become an important node on the recreational trail map that is evolving in Michigan and attract runners, wheelers, walkers, bicyclists and bicycle campers. The pavilion could be utilized as an outdoor education setting for students in the local preschool and learning center and the Benzie Central school system, as well as a venue for programs of other non-profits, and public outdoor meetings and functions. By commemorating Thompsonville’s past, this project would establish a path for the community’s future.

*The following sections contain certain key information from the application, as written by the applicant. While detailed financial information has not been provided here due to its confidential nature, each applicant submitted an initiative budget and supporting financial documents as part of their application. Each proposed initiative and the supporting financial documentation has undergone a thorough financial review by our Financial Review Committee and the initiatives proposed by our finalists have met our standards for moving forward.*

#### ORGANIZATION’S VISION STATEMENT

Create an attractive and historically compelling trailhead on the Betsie Valley Trail, near the site of the historic Thompsonville Junction, for bicyclists, walkers, and visitors to relax, enjoy, and appreciate the history of a once robust town and rail crossing that played a significant role in the growth and development of Benzie County and Northwest Michigan.

## **ORGANIZATION'S MISSION STATEMENT**

The mission of TARP is to undertake projects which improve the quality of life for all people in the greater Thompsonville area.

## **DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATION AND ITS HISTORY**

The Thompsonville Area Revitalization Project (TARP) began in late 2020 as an outgrowth of efforts to relocate the 1900 era Ann Arbor railroad depot from Glen Arbor, Michigan to Thompsonville, Michigan to be restored and utilized as a historical exhibit and visitor's center for the southeast end of the Betsie Valley Trail in Benzie County. Motivated leaders and residents of Thompsonville, Weldon Township, and Colfax Township, members of the Betsie Valley Trail Council, and leadership of Crystal Mountain Resort began having informal discussions as to how to make this goal a reality. The conversation enlarged conceptually to building a visitor's and historical interpretive center from the ground up and to restoring the caboose that is situated adjacent to the historic Thompsonville Junction (diamond crossing) and the State of Michigan historical marker placed in 2020. The George P. Sharp Park, owned by the Village of Thompsonville, encompasses the Thompsonville Junction project. Ten camping sites, which are primitive in nature, will be enhanced as a significant improvement to the park.

Effective 2021, the TARP group was formally recognized as a 501(C) (3) non-profit and a board of directors was elected, and by-laws were adopted. Prior to being formally recognized as a 501(C)(3), TARP obtained a USDA Rural Development grant through a fiduciary arrangement with the Friends of the Betsie Valley District Library. The grant provides funding for the design and engineering study of the project. In 2022 RFPs were distributed to five firms with Mansfield Land Use Consultants being retained for the design/engineering work along with project management of future construction. The conceptual design process and masterplan of the George P. Sharp park and trailhead were undertaken by the consulting firm Beckett & Raeder, Inc. This was funded by a \$10,000 seed grant from Rotary Charities of Traverse City and additional contributions from individuals and businesses in the community. In a short three year period, TARP has established the appropriate working relationships and memorandums of understanding with key players: Village of Thompsonville, Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail, and the Friends of the Scenic Manistee Aea Recreational Trail. The Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) awarded TARP a Revitalization and Placemaking 2.0 (RAP 2.0) grant in the fall of 2023. The MEDC and TARP will have the necessary land use agreement and grant agreement signed in 2024. TARP has been actively pursuing additional funding through the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) land trust grant with an application submitted April 1, 2024. TARP has been successful with grant opportunities from various area foundations such as the Seabury, Towsley, Schmuckal, and Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundations. Recognition and support of these area foundations who have a history of impact in the region demonstrates the need of a transformational project in the southeast corner of Benzie County.

The population to be served by Thompsonville Junction is local, regional, and statewide. The connection of the Thompsonville Junction Trailhead to Frankfort, Beulah and Manistee is already bringing an increasing number of ridership to Thompsonville restaurants and lodging. The connection to the more urban areas encompassing Cadillac, Big Rapids and Grand Rapids will

serve to further increase use of the trail, and by default support those adjacent businesses. Thriving businesses help build resilient communities.

Since its inception in three short years, TARP has accomplished many steps in bringing the project from dream to reality. In keeping with the railroad theme, the unofficial motto of TARP stems from the children's book "The Little Engine That Could" to TARP's belief of "the little engine that can".

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF INITIATIVE**

At the pinnacle of its existence, between 1900-1915, Thompsonville, Michigan was a thriving and expanding Village which proudly marketed itself as the "biggest little town in Michigan." The success of the Village was predicated on its location as a rail hub connecting the Chicago and West Michigan Railroad (later the Pere Marquette and then the Chesapeake and Ohio) and the Toledo and Ann Arbor Railroad, and the close proximity of the abundant hardwood forests by which the Village was surrounded. The harvesting and subsequent disappearance of the virgin forests, which sparked its growth, and the eventual decline and discontinuation of rail transportation through the Village resulted in an inexorable decline financially, with the resultant loss of jobs and population. Today, the Village remains challenged and searching for a sense of identity and pride.

In an effort to address these issues the Thompsonville Area Revitalization Project was created as a 501(c) (3) non-profit in 2021. The mission of TARP is to undertake projects which improve the quality of life for all people in the greater Thompsonville area. TARP's Thompsonville Junction Trailhead, Visitor's Center, and George W. Sharp Park Campground Improvements Project is a community-based effort to bring a transformational change to the Thompsonville area community by focusing on the rich rail history of the Village and harnessing that legacy into a positive force for community pride by attracting new visitors, encouraging further infrastructure improvements, and attracting new residents and business. The Village of Thompsonville has demonstrated its support for the project by completing a DNR approved Parks and Recreation Plan and subsequently submitting a DNR Trust Fund grant application, in collaboration with TARP, to help fund the project.

With the close proximity of Crystal Mountain Resort, the improvements planned for the Betsie Valley trail by other non-profits, such as the Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail, Friends of SMART Trails of Manistee County, the interest in creating an affordable work-force housing project nearby, and the demand for more avenues of non-motorized transportation and outdoor recreational activities, the time is ideal for the TARP project. The potential for success is palpable as evidenced not only by the interest and financial support of area residents, businesses, and philanthropists, but also numerous regional foundations including the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation, Rotary Charities of Traverse City, and organizations like the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and the Office of the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development. The Village has a Department of Public Works whose employees oversee the maintenance of the Village Parks. The Village will be signing an agreement with the DNR accepting responsibility for the maintenance of the DNR land included in the project. Income from use of campsites will assist generating the funds necessary to sustain the project. The design of the project incorporates the use of long lasting and low maintenance materials. TARP will continue

to raise funds as needed to help sustain the Trailhead. Once construction is completed TARP will undertake the task of establishing an endowment fund for the long-term maintenance of the Trailhead.

By transforming a deteriorating park in a struggling community into an attractive trailhead, boasting a pavilion with state-of-the-art amenities, would bring hope for the future. It would create a major point of pride and interest in southeast Benzie County bringing visitors from the county, the region, and the state. The impact would be transformational for the Village of Thompsonville and the townships of Weldon and Colfax which surround the Village. Simply stated; TARP's goal is to help Thompsonville and the Thompsonville area community rediscover itself as a major transportation intersection; however, not one of rails but rather of recreational trails.

Impact100 Traverse City funds will be applied specifically to our efforts to restore the pavilion which includes restrooms and showers, accessible to the campground users, trailhead users and the general community

## **COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED**

On cursory review it might appear that the proposed upgrades to George W. Sharp Park, the bicycle trailhead, and pavilion would serve only the Village of Thompsonville and the adjacent townships of Weldon and Colfax. The population of Thompsonville in 2021 was 429, the median income was \$42,045 and the poverty rate was 23.8 percent. On further study; however, considering the collaboration of TARP with the Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail, SMARTrails of Manistee County, the State of Michigan DNR, the letters of support from Benzie Senior Resources, Benzie Bus, TART Trails, the Benzie County Parks and Recreation Commission, and Benzie County Schools the proposed upgrades will serve all of Benzie County and the adjacent counties of Manistee, Leelanau, and Grand Traverse. Indeed, this project will create potential recreational opportunities for people from the entire State of Michigan and beyond.

Crystal Mountain Resort is 2 miles from the center of the village and brings many tourists including bicycle enthusiasts to the area. Crystal Mountain guests and Betsie Valley Trail users from around the region would be attracted to Thompsonville to the new Trailhead as an access point to the Betsie Valley Trail. The campground would encourage long distance bicyclists from outside Benzie County to overnight in the village on their way either to or from Frankfort. In addition to tourists, those living locally will be able to use the trailhead and connecting trails for recreation or to travel to work or school. Regional running or bicycle clubs would be able to utilize the trailhead facilities for activities. The newly arrived Whistle Stop Learning Center could utilize the park as a destination for walks from the preschool. The Benzie Area Historical Society's summer village historical walks and outdoor history lectures would be enhanced by the project. Joy 2 Ride Community Service, Benzie County, has expressed an interest in utilizing the Visitor's Center as a place to store some of their riding equipment and to bring handicapped riders to the trailhead facilities.

## **NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED AND GAPS IN EXISTING SERVICES**

With the historical financial and population decline that has occurred in Thompsonville, it has been difficult for residents to celebrate their past and to have a vision for the future. The village council

has had to occupy itself with meeting the requirements of the day-to-day management of the village and has had little time, interest, or resources to expand on services or address redevelopment needs. There has been a failure to recognize what the potential of improvement in the George W. Sharp Park and the Thompsonville Junction would bring to the Thompsonville community. Historically Thompsonville was once a thriving community with a boundless optimism evidenced by the volunteer citizen group named the “Thompsonville Improvement Association.” In 1901 this group published a brochure which proclaimed Thompsonville as the “Biggest Little Town in Michigan”. One could argue that there is a need today for something that would instill that same sense of pride, optimism, and a vision for the future in the community.

With regards to the proposed project there are a number of glaring deficits in existing services which confront the community. The restroom facilities are “volcano” style pit toilets. The external structure covering one of those toilets was recently destroyed by vandals. Access within the park is limited to a rutted unimproved dirt drive. The area of the historic rail junction is not universally accessible in its current state and thus not available for historic appreciation by everyone. There is no universally accessible visitor’s pavilion or picnic area. There is no improved trailhead celebrating the legacy of the Thompsonville Junction which would attract users from the county and from afar. The opportunity for improvement in this area has long gone unfulfilled because of a lack of funding or lack of vision. The opportunity to recognize Thompsonville as an important node on the evolving non-motorized recreational trail map of Michigan has, until now, gone unfulfilled.

The Trailhead project would immediately be transformative for the Village of Thompsonville. It would be an example of what is possible for a community to accomplish. Its creation would attract users and visitors from within the county and beyond. The trailhead building and park campground has been designed with universal accessibility as a priority concern. The restroom facilities in the new pavilion will be built to ADA standards, offering facilities not previously available in the park to handicapped individuals or campers. The proposed trailhead design calls for universally accessible pathways that will allow for ease of mobility devices. A planned 6 foot wide universally accessible pathway will address this deficit and allow access for all.

With the increasing emphasis on outdoor recreation, community redevelopment, appreciation of historical legacy, and universal accessibility this project addresses many of the needs, gaps, and most importantly, the opportunities for growth and improvement which exist in the Thompsonville area community.

## **SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE**

TARP has undertaken the responsibility for planning the project and for raising the funds necessary. As envisioned, the mechanisms and resources put into place for this project will help to maintain it into the future. The Thompsonville Parks and Recreation Plan will allow the Village to apply for future DNR funding. Weldon Township already has a Parks and Recreation Plan in place, and also has the ability to apply for DNR funding. As a non-profit, TARP is working on diversifying the funding streams by building relationships with individual donors and area foundations. Proceeds from camp site rentals will be an ongoing source of income to sustain the park. Hardscape building, materials, a metal pavilion roof, and native plantings are being selected for low-cost maintenance and longevity.