



IMPACT100 TRAVERSE CITY

2025 Arts and Culture: The Bay Community Theatre

thebaytheatre.com

INITIATIVE: Staying Alive! At The Bay

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than 75 years, The Bay Community Theatre in Suttons Bay has been a gathering place where audiences connect and culture thrives. Serving the community as the only movie venue on the Leelanau Peninsula, the Bay is advancing a bold transformational initiative: to equip for full, live event capabilities in order to expand its reach to new audiences. This will deepen its impact and ensure this treasured venue's long-term sustainability.

Like many theaters, The Bay faces challenges. But recent forays into live programming show that music concerts, comedy shows, and even lectures can fill seats, strengthen downtown vitality, and even bring joy.

This initiative will provide professional lighting, sound, and streaming tools to enable The Bay to host more frequent, higher quality events. The aim is to expand live programming by 50% annually, offering diverse cultural experiences, while also being mindful of audiences unable to access the theatre. Live events at The Bay are more than entertainment – they foster shared experiences, build bonds, and amplify new voices.

Sustainability is at the heart of this initiative. Durable equipment designed to last 15 years will reduce waste, avoid costly rentals, and ensure consistent quality.

Ongoing operations will be sustained through memberships, earned revenue, and community support.

With an Impact100 Traverse City grant, this initiative will secure The Bay's role as a cultural anchor. Together, we can preserve all offerings of this Suttons Bay treasure as it continues to pursue its goal of becoming a true hub of creativity, connection, and long-term community building.

The following sections contain 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 review and the initiatives proposed by our finalists have met our eligibility requirements.

ORGANIZATION'S VISION STATEMENT

Our vision is for The Bay to be a historic and state-of-the art film and live-performance venue serving the broad northern Michigan community with diverse entertainment and educational programming everyday.

ORGANIZATION'S MISSION STATEMENT

Our mission is to bring people together through the joy of film and live entertainment while strengthening our community with shared experiences. As stewards of a beloved landmark, we are committed to preserving its history while ensuring it remains a vibrant space for connection, creativity, and celebration.

DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATION AND ITS HISTORY

The Bay Community Theatre is a nonprofit arts and culture organization located in Suttons Bay, Michigan. Originally established as a family-run movie house, The Bay served the region for 70 years before its impending closure was announced in December 2018. In response, community members came together with a mission to "Keep the Lights On"—successfully launching a nonprofit, signing an operating lease, and reopening on New Year's Day 2019. Since then, The Bay Community Theatre has been open nearly every day of the year, welcoming up to 17,000 visitors annually.

In December 2019, the nonprofit purchased the theatre building, securing long-term control of its operations. Since then, The Bay has made needed infrastructure upgrades—including a new motorized screen, replaced outdated lighting, purchased state-of-the-art sound equipment for cinema and installed new theatre seating. These improvements were made possible through local donations, grants, sponsorships and membership support.

The Bay is governed by a volunteer board of directors and operated by a general manager with a small part-time staff and a robust team of volunteers who contribute over 5,000 hours of service each year. The organization also has more than 400 members who support it financially and elect board leadership annually.

The Bay serves a broad and inclusive audience across Leelanau, Grand Traverse, and Benzie Counties. Programming is designed to be accessible and welcoming to all, with a particular focus on children, families, and seniors. Specialized offerings support hearing-impaired patrons, Native American communities, veterans, and local nonprofit partners. The theatre is proud to be

a gathering place that fosters connection, learning, and celebration through film and live performance.

While The Bay is known for its cinematic programming—including Hollywood films, locally made movies, and educational screenings—it is increasingly expanding into live events such as concerts, comedy shows, and speaker series. These events not only draw higher attendance but also generate greater economic impact for downtown Suttons Bay and its small businesses.

Today, the Bay Community Theatre stands as a vital cultural and economic anchor in our rural region, committed to adapting and thriving in a changing entertainment landscape. By combining traditional film programming with vibrant live events, The Bay is building a sustainable future while deepening its impact on the community it proudly serves.

SUMMARY OF INITIATIVE

This initiative is to add full live event capabilities to The Bay Community Theatre. Our proposal will have a significant impact on the community in two important ways: 1) it will enable The Bay to bring joy, learning, and connection to many (potentially thousands) more people in our community; 2) it will make the theatre itself more financially sustainable and viable to serve the community for years to come.

The Bay has been a cherished movie house for over 75 years and will continue to show great movies to thousands of community members for years to come. The reality, however, is The Bay faces the same major challenges confronting all movie theaters. Specifically, the extended impact of Covid, disruptive Hollywood strikes, and the explosion of programming available via streaming have all hurt movie theatre attendance and profitability. Since the pandemic, 5,700 screens nationwide have gone dark, including the Bijou in Traverse City. Across the country, ticket sales at movie houses are down 23.5 % since 2019. Like movie theaters across the country, The Bay has adapted to this changing environment, offering live events as a way to make up for weak movie ticket revenue and attendance.

The Opportunity:

Unlike many movie theaters, The Bay has a full stage so it has the potential to expand its impact in the community by offering more and better live events. Recent experience has proven that on average our live performances are ten times more profitable than our movies and create a real impact in the restaurants and retailers nearby. Surveys, focus groups, and interviews with community members have shown enthusiastic support for more live events at The Bay.

So why do we need this grant if we already have live events? Although The Bay has a full stage (along with green rooms and terrific acoustics for live events), the theatre lacks the equipment needed to attract top performers without hiring expensive contractors and rental equipment. Furthermore, the time and logistics of securing and setting up equipment from third parties requires extra preparation and downtime for the theatre.

We must purchase our own equipment to improve the quality of our events, reduce operating/rental costs, and reduce staff time needed to shift from movies to live events. Transforming our theater from showing a movie to hosting a live show is expensive and time

consuming. Renting the right sound and lighting takes 3-5 hours of staff time to pick up and return equipment. Furthermore, rental equipment does not always offer the quality we need.

The Impact:

The Bay will continue to be a popular place for movies but we expect we can expand our schedule of live events by 50% or more and improve the quality of the shows we offer. This step change in live events will benefit many (probably thousands) of people in our community each year. We also expect our expanded schedule of live events will help us reach a wider variety of community groups.

Importantly, The Bay can not survive financially on movies alone so live events are key to remaining viable for our future. Live events are popular, memorable, and much more profitable than movies. If The Bay is to continue being a beloved source of pride, community, and culture, high quality live events can help make this happen.

So why not just use what we have for movies? Our cinema sound equipment is specifically calibrated and dedicated for movies. Live events require a parallel system for stage sound for the audience and for musicians on stage. We also do not have audio control/mixing equipment nor a full lighting setup for live events.

This grant would also help us purchase the equipment needed to add streaming in/out capability to our live shows. It would expand our ability to host speakers virtually thus adding more value to both our films and live events. With these additional features, we will be able to provide even more reach for us and our community partners, such as the Peshawbeetown youth, out-of-town patrons, homebound residents, veterans groups, local cycling community, and so many others.

It's time for theaters to innovate and compete in today's world. Some cinemas have responded by offering full bars/restaurants, bowling, pickleball and arcade games to get folks back in. But many, like The Bay, are finding live events provide the needed revenue. With the popularity of streaming movies and other content from home, The Bay must adapt to this new reality by becoming a top notch venue for both movies and live events.

COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED

The Bay Community Theatre is dedicated to serving a diverse and vibrant population across Leelanau, Grand Traverse, and Benzie counties in Northwest Michigan. Our theatre is a cultural cornerstone for year-round residents and a welcoming destination for thousands of seasonal visitors who flock to the region each summer. While tourism drives high traffic during warmer months; during the colder season, the theatre is a vital gathering place for the local community to enjoy art, education, and culture.

This initiative will support our growing audience by enhancing their experience through improved infrastructure and programming capacity. With a focus on accessibility and inclusion, The Bay provides services to underserved populations including hearing-impaired patrons, economically disadvantaged families, veterans, and Native American community members. We partner with local schools, libraries, and nonprofits to provide educational programming and outreach events that bring people together through film, performance, and conversation.

As a year-round, seven-day-a-week operation, The Bay is uniquely positioned to meet the cultural and social needs of rural Northern Michigan. The proposed initiative will help us continue providing affordable, high-quality experiences while attracting broader audiences and deepening our connection to the community. By investing in improved live event capabilities and expanded programming, we are ensuring that The Bay remains not only a hub of entertainment but also a space for the community, creativity, and belonging for all.

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

Leelanau county is rich in natural beauty but lacks opportunities for live entertainment (other than smaller events like music at some wineries and bars). As the only movie theatre and one of the few performing arts centers, The Bay fills a vital need for our year-round residents, seasonal visitors, and underserved groups—including seniors, economically disadvantaged families, and members of the Native American community.

Our community has made it clear through surveys, focus groups, and one-on-ones, that there is a strong demand for affordable, inclusive programming—especially for families, children, and older adults. Surveys and direct feedback have highlighted the need for more live entertainment, improved accessibility, and greater cultural variety. While The Bay has made great strides in offering educational screenings, open-caption films, and occasional community events, our ability to consistently deliver high-quality live programming has been limited by the absence of proper audio, video, and technical infrastructure.

Live events hold significant potential to deepen our connection to the community. When we have hosted performances, speaker series, or community forums in the past, attendance has been strong and positive. These events foster intergenerational connections, celebrate local talent, and provide much-needed opportunities for shared experiences beyond the screen. However, due to technical limitations, we're unable to host them as frequently or as cost-effectively as we would like.

This proposal—funding the purchase and installation of permanent, professional-grade live event equipment—will allow us to host more events at lower cost. By upgrading our sound and video systems, we will transform The Bay into a flexible and fully equipped venue capable of hosting a wide array of live events year-round. These improvements will:

- Support underserved populations with accessible and affordable programming.
- Create space for community dialogue, local artists, and educational experiences.
- Reduce dependence on seasonal tourism by offering diverse, year-round programming.
- Strengthen our local economy by drawing visitors to Suttons Bay and its small businesses.
- Reduce payroll, energy, and transportation costs by minimizing load-in/load-out time.
- Allow for more flexibility with events by cutting out transition/changeover time.

The Bay has long been more than just a place to watch movies—it's a shared space where people come together. With this initiative, we will expand that impact, turning moments of entertainment into deeper moments of connection, creativity, and community pride.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE

This grant funds long-term infrastructure improvements that will benefit the theatre for years to come. The expanded use of life of this equipment is roughly 15 years. The Bay Community Theatre is committed to ensuring the long-term sustainability of this initiative beyond the grant period. The purchase and installation of professional-grade live event equipment will not only expand our programming capabilities—it will also create new revenue opportunities and operational efficiencies that strengthen our long-term financial stability.

Live events have the potential to generate significantly higher ticket revenue than film screenings, especially for concerts, comedy shows, and speaker series. Our strategic plan includes incorporating even more live events throughout the year, with scalable pricing based on performer and production costs. By diversifying our programming, we reduce dependence on seasonal cinema attendance and build a more resilient, year-round revenue model.

Operationally, the installed equipment will reduce the need to rent or borrow gear, saving thousands of dollars annually while allowing for consistent production quality and fewer technical barriers. The system will be installed with long-term usability in mind—ensuring compatibility, ease of maintenance, and energy efficiency. We have already demonstrated our ability to maintain new technology through the successful integration of our 4K laser projector, new movie screen, new electronics system, and new concessions equipment. These projects have been successful, with reduced maintenance costs and a significantly improved patron experience.

As with previous capital improvements, The Bay will continue to support equipment upkeep through a mix of earned revenue, memberships, targeted fundraising, and local grants. Our track record shows our ability to adapt, grow, and steward new resources with care and accountability. The installation of live event infrastructure is a strategic step that not only meets an immediate need—it positions The Bay to thrive in a changing entertainment landscape, serving the community for years to come.