



IMPACT100 TRAVERSE CITY 2026 FINALIST

Focus Area

Arts & Culture

The Bay Community Theatre Organization

thebaytheatre.org

INITIATIVE

Live at the Bay!

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(from Meet the Finalists)

This proposal is not about the movies, live concerts, or comedy shows. The Bay Theatre is about you, me and strengthening our community.

A movie theater is never just a place to watch movies, it's a community hub that brings people together to create memories, to enrich each other and strengthen the fabric of our community.

Beyond entertainment, The Bay Theatre supports our growing afterschool program for middle and high students, giving them an outlet to explore critical thinking skills, public speaking, engagement with peers, and expanding their understanding of the world around them. It also supports our monthly programming aimed at seniors, where lively discussions engage and enrich patrons in a communal setting.

It's about the 17,000 people who visit The Bay each year. It's about the marquee that welcomes everyone everyday and it's about the 450 members, 100+ volunteers, and over 1,000 generous donors.

The following sections contain 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

The Bay Community Theatre will be a premier entertainment venue featuring a variety of live performances, film screenings, and shared community experiences. While retaining its historic charm, the building will be modernized with top-of-the-line technology and ADA-compliant facilities to provide an exceptional, accessible environment for all.

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 Theatre served the region for 70 years before its impending closure was announced in December 2018. In response, community members came together with a rallying cry to "Keep the Lights On"—successfully launching a nonprofit, signing an operating lease, and beginning its life as the Bay Community Theatre on New Year's Day 2019. The Bay Community Theatre has been open nearly every day of the year since, welcoming up to 17,000 visitors annually. In December 2019, the nonprofit purchased the theatre building, securing long-term control of its operations. Thanks to broad community support, The Bay has made needed infrastructure upgrades including a new motorized movie screen, stage lighting, state-of-the-art cinema sound equipment, fire detection system, and new theatre seating. These improvements were made possible through local donations, grants, sponsorships and membership support. The Bay Community Theatre 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. Volunteers contribute over 5,000 hours of service each year. The organization is also a membership organization with more than 400 paying members enjoying benefits such as discounted tickets and early access to special events. The Bay Theatre is open 364 days per year and serves a broad and inclusive audience across Leelanau, Grand Traverse, and Benzie Counties. The total local population served is approximately 150,000 residents plus many more seasonal visitors. Programming is designed to be accessible and welcoming to all from young families, to seniors, and a broad demographic of vacationing visitors. Specialized offerings at The Bay 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 Theatre is known for its cinematic programming—including new-release 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.

INITIATIVE SUMMARY:

Live at the Bay!

This initiative is to add full live event capabilities to The Bay Community Theatre. Our proposal will have significant impact on the community in two important ways: 1) it will enable The Bay to bring joy, learning, and connection to many (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, 5,000 screens nationwide have gone dark, including the Bijou in Traverse City. Across the country, ticket sales at movie houses are down 16% since 2019. The Opportunity: Unlike many movie theaters, The Bay Theatre has a full performing arts stage so it has the potential to expand its impact in the community by offering more and better quality live events. In addition to the physical stage, the theatre also has backstage “green rooms” and excellent acoustics for live events. Recent experiences have proven that, on average, our live performances are many 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 Theatre has a full stage, the theatre lacks the full sound, lighting, and other auditorium equipment needed to execute top quality live events 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. Renting sound and lighting equipment requires 3-5 hours of staff time per event and does not always offer the quality we need. Furthermore, to ensure a quality patron experience, we are also including in this project a new heating & A/C system to replace an unreliable nearly 30 year-old system. Our existing system has required costly repairs and professional inspections indicate it must be replaced soon. So why not just use the sound system 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, sound monitors for the artists on stage, microphones, and mixing and control interfaces. We also do not have a full lighting setup for live events nor equipment to stream in content such as guest speakers to accompany films or community events. The Impact: The Bay will continue to be a popular place for movies but with enhanced live event capabilities, we can expand our schedule of live performances, improve the quality of the shows, and reduce the operating costs and complexity of

our operation. This shift to more live events will benefit many (thousands) of people in our community each year and enable us to reach a wider variety of community groups. As one of the only year-round performing arts venues in Leelanau County, The Bay Theatre is an important anchor bringing the community together with shared experiences. Importantly, The Bay Community Theatre can not survive financially on movies alone so the addition of profitable live events are key to remaining viable for our future. Growing our audiences with profitable live events is a key strategic priority in the 2026-2030 Strategic Plan of the Bay Community Theatre.

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. The Bay Theatre is a truly meaningful community service to our older, year-round community who seek enriching activities and ways to connect with others. This initiative will enable us to reach more of the community by enhancing the theatre experience through more high quality live events, improved sound and lighting, and greater programming capacity. As we pursue more accessibility and inclusion, The Bay Theatre will expand its 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 financially viable center 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 casual music offerings at some wineries and bars). As the only movie theatre and one of the few performing arts centers, The Bay Community Theatre 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-one interviews , 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 important 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 have been unable to host them as frequently or as cost-effectively as we would like. This proposal will enable us to host more events, at higher quality, and at lower cost. By upgrading our sound and stage systems, we will transform The Bay into a flexible and fully equipped venue capable of hosting a wide array of live events year-round.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE

This grant will fund long-term infrastructure improvements that will benefit the theatre for years to come. The expected life of the proposed equipment is roughly 15 years. 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 viability. 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 demonstrated our ability to incorporate and maintain new technology. Since taking over The Bay as a non-profit, we have successfully integrated a new state-of-the-art 4K laser movie projector (valued at \$120,000), a new movie screen, a new ticketing system, and new concessions equipment. These projects have been successful, with reduced maintenance costs and a significantly improved patron experience. The Bay regularly holds service agreements with equipment specialists to ensure updated technical support and maintenance. 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 not only meets an immediate need but also positions The Bay to thrive in a changing entertainment landscape, serving the community for years to come.