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Plan NH announces 2018 Merit Award recipients

At its annual Awards evening, held this year on June 28 at the Capital Commons building in Concord, Plan NH revealed this year's Merit Award projects. The projects were selected from a field of nominations by a jury of diverse professionals within the planning, design and development industries.

The Merit Awards program recognizes outstanding building projects that embody Smart Growth principles, Social Responsibility and/or outstanding cooperation or collaboration. These projects also demonstrate how what we build, where we build and how can have an influence on the health and vibrancy of a community.

"It is coincidental," said Robin LeBlanc, Plan NH Executive Director, "that each of these this year is an historic preservation project. Each underscores the impact that a building project can have on its community. Moreover, they each clearly show that when decisions are made around building something (or, in these cases, rehabilitating), it is not just about the economic bottom line, but the social and environmental, too. Financial investments are really about long-term social and community impacts (which we want to be positive!)."

The Franklin Light & Power Mill. CATCH Neighborhood Housing, Owner. Built in 1895, the mill was the first municipal electric power provider in the Granite State. When CATCH Neighborhood Housing purchased the property (which included several other old mill buildings) in 2016, it had been vacant for several years and was in pretty sad shape. But CATCH had a vision, and today the old mill complex is on the National Park Service's register of historic places, and provides 45 beautiful and affordable one- and two-bedroom places to live.

The project exemplifies numerous Smart Growth and Livability principles. One was involving the community in the process, keeping them informed of progress along the way. Coupled with this were the strong relationships developed and nurtured with local community organizations.

In addition, the project fosters the traditional character of New Hampshire downtowns while creating additional choices in affordable places to live by re-purposing an iconic historic landmark. The mill is close to Franklin's downtown as well as on a beautiful spot on the Winnepesaukee River. This project has been a catalyst for the current new investments and revitalization of Franklin.

Jury comments:

- This was an amazing transformation of a decayed shell into a crown jewel, and is a catalyst for the revitalization of downtown Franklin.
- That this is on the Historic Register, that significant tax credits and other creative funding sources were used and that the success of this has led to additional investments in the community make this stand out.

Lakes Region Mental Health Center (Laconia)

The Center, formerly Genesis Behavioral Health, had seen its services increase 55% in ten years, and it was time to consolidate the work happening in four locations within Laconia into one. The goal was “to serve patients where they live and increase access to mental health services.” When a landmark building in the downtown became available, the organization “jumped at the opportunity.”

They could have taken an easier site, rather than address the significant work this old building needed. However, the Center took the long view approach, recognizing that a downtown location would be a greater asset for their clientele: the location is accessible by foot, bicycle, bus or car. The entire building was gutted, and re-designed to separate the program groups - adult services, child and family services, administration, pharmacy and PCP doctor – while still enabling them to work together and efficiently.

Re-purposing an existing building, rather than take more land to build a new one, is a cornerstone of Smart Growth. That it is accessible by foot and bike and public transportation is also key. In fact, the application noted that “easy pedestrian access to the Center has provided a number of new patients and programs.” In addition, this project could be a catalyst for continued revitalization of downtown Laconia.

Most importantly, however, was that this bold step is contrary to decades of stigmatizing and marginalizing people with mental health challenges. As the application asserted: “When a treatment center is woven into the fabric of the community – fully understanding and meeting the needs of patients, and when those patients have easy access to quality care, progress can be made.”

Jury comments:

- A great combination of re-using a downtown building AND providing quality health services
- Combining the services into one building, rather than spread out, is more efficient for those who work there, as well as the clients themselves.
- Liked the incorporation of a community meeting room – community members who are not clients can also appreciate the value of this and for some, overcome their fear and misconceptions

- We hope it WILL be a catalyst for more economic growth in Laconia
- This shows respect for clients who are often marginalized

Frank Jones Brew Yard: Brew House & 1884 House (Portsmouth)

It had been a long, long time. The once-bustling warehouses and brew houses of the Frank Jones Brewery had been sitting vacant since 1990. Tall, majestic brick buildings now had windows open to the elements, graffiti along the walls, and were probably home to bats, rats and all kinds of critters.

Then, in 2014, Chinburg Properties began plans to re-develop the last two buildings. By then, the West End of Portsmouth was beginning a plan for re-development, including mixed-use and affordable price-pointed places to live. These two Brew Yard buildings became 54 residences in the Brew House and the almost-complete 1884 House will have 14 residential units and 8 commercial spaces.

Re-purposing old buildings is a key Smart Growth principle. The sites are easily accessible by foot, bicycle, and public transportation as well as by car. The project supports an existing community while contributing to its economic and social revitalization. Moreover, the project was developed in collaboration with the City as well as local businesses.

Jury notes:

- This is a great example of historic preservation while thinking of the future.
- Its location means that not everyone has to drive to get there.
- This is an example of incremental transformation – and we hope that it serves as a catalyst for future steps in the West End.
- Impressed with the magnitude of this mixed-use project, completed by a local developer, using local consultants.

Village Common Covered Bridge (Wentworth)

Since its incorporation in 1766, the Town had had a covered bridge across the Baker River. However, in 1909, the covered bridge was replaced by a steel truss bridge. A hundred some-odd years later, that steel truss bridge, for foot traffic only (including children walking to the bus stop, as well as locals and visitors) was deemed unsafe, forcing people to walk along the unprotected shoulder of Route 25.

What to do? A project of this scope could reach well above a half million dollars, and this tiny town of 900 souls just could not do that. With no promise of funding, a group pulled itself together to talk with NH DOT to find out what was available and possible. They found a covered bridge in Bedford that was part of a demolition site. It could be theirs – all they had to do was evaluate it, stabilize it, and remove it from the site at no cost to the demolition contractor or Bedford site owner. The Wentworth team was able to leverage funds from the DOT related to the removal of deficient bridges and modification of sites where deficient vehicle bridges are removed. Additional funds needed came from the Friends of Wentworth Parks and Recreation.

Today, children can once again cross the bridge to the bus stop, and the bridge encourages walking in and around Wentworth's Town Common, the Wentworth Historical Society and neighboring businesses. The Town is now a covered bridge destination community.

Jury comments:

- This is a great story of historic preservation to maintain foot and bicycle access (transportation AND recreation)
- A wonderful source of pride for the community: replacing an iconic bridge with another
- Out of the box thinking!
- Creative funding!

Florence Rideout Elementary School – Addition and Renovations (Wilton)

In 2004, when the elementary school in Wilton was found to be in an alarming state of decay and no longer meeting the needs of the students or staff, the first thought was to build a new school. It was then that the community realized how valuable the existing school was.

First, it is a social center of the community – for students and their parents, and also for members of the greater community, the government and others who use the space to come together for fun celebrations, serious deliberations, and more. Because of its location in the center of town, many can walk there.

Second, the original school was built in 1895, and was historically significant. Many beautiful and interesting features had been hidden over the years, including a place in the attic where graduating students, through the years, had put their signatures.

In 2015, the new and improved school and addition were completed. Historic elements and structures were preserved while creating valuable art, music and kindergarten spaces. In addition, the school continues to double as a community center for the town. Smart Growth principles such as preserving open space (by rehabbing on site), walkability and fostering traditional settlement patterns and downtown character are all exemplified here.

Jury comments:

- This has meant a lot to the community. The re-building process itself appears to have brought people together, and the school remains a center for community activities.
- Addressing the challenges of doing renovations while school was in session was amazing.
- This project embodies Yankee ingenuity and perseverance.

Plan NH is an independent organization with a mission to “foster excellence in planning, design and development of New Hampshire’s built environment.” Through workshops, newsletters and more, Plan

NH raises awareness of the impact of the built environment and community design on the health and vibrancy of towns and neighborhoods. The organization shares information about ideas and trends and techniques with planning, design and building professionals, as well as with Granite State communities themselves. For more information about Plan NH and its programs, go to www.plannh.org.

Robin H. LeBlanc, Executive Director, Plan NH

21 Daniel Street, 2nd floor, c/o GPI

Portsmouth NH 03801

R_leblanc@plannh.org

603-452-PLAN (452-7526)