



Great Hometowns: One Vision

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Marshall County Crossroads Announces LED Sign Construction in Each Town
Communications Around COVID-19, Local and County Events to be Much Improved
OCRA, Tourism, Town and Private Dollars Come Together

The REES Theatre Marquee is the “Marquee” Project

January 26, 2021 -- Marshall County Crossroads, the volunteer regional planning group who brought the Stellar designation to Marshall County, announces the construction of new LED electronic signs to improve communications with local residents and visitors to Marshall County.

Among the signs is an updated marquee for the historic REES Theatre in Plymouth, where the vintage “electric tiara” neon and chaser lights will remain, and LED boards will take the place of the current hand-posted letterboards.

“The idea of the marquee being the site of a community message board seemed almost natural” says Randy Danielson, co-chair of The REES project committee. “It has assumed that position over the past four years as it has proudly congratulated, encouraged and informed.”

The need for improved emergency communications clearly emerged from the pandemic, and last Spring Indiana’s Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) went looking for ways to help make that happen. Just months before, OCRA had awarded Marshall County their Stellar Designation, and as part of that the Crossroads team had already been working on the idea: common electronic message boards in each of Marshall County’s six hometowns. Ginny Munroe, town president in Culver and a Crossroads team member, sprang into action, submitting a successful grant application virtually overnight awarding \$150,000 for the signs.

All of Marshall County's great hometowns – Argos, Bremen, Bourbon, Culver, LaPaz and Plymouth – will have a new sign. The signs will be used to deliver COVID-related information from the County offices: emergency declaration status, closures, testing sites and vaccination news. Local quarantine and mask requirements, locations of pop-up food pantries and promotional and marketing help for reopening businesses are also envisioned. Post pandemic, county information would include such things as Amber alerts, snow emergencies and other important news to be simultaneously broadcast in each town. Public service messages from Crossroads, Marshall County Economic Development and the Community Foundation will also be included.

The signs will also be populated with common messages uploaded by Marshall County Tourism, as well as local messaging added by the towns. Marshall County Tourism contributed \$20,000 to the project.

“We at Visit Marshall County are excited for this investment in our communities,” says executive director Cori Humes. “The electronic message boards are to assist in communicating with the public, residents and visitors alike. These boards will promote events within one’s community, but also those same events all around the county to attract residents from neighboring communities. It’s another great avenue for promotion in sharing why Marshall County is a great place to live, to play, and to visit.”

The County accepted public bids on the signs and the contract was awarded to Graycraft Signs out of Warsaw, Indiana. Graycraft will begin installing the signs sometime towards the end of February / first of March, though initial construction on The REES canopy has already started. The hope is that all signs will be 100% installed and ready for use no later than March 15, 2021.

The reception at the hometown level is also strong. The towns will pay the cost of installation and of running electricity to their chosen location.

“The sign will enable Bourbon to showcase the quality of life events throughout the year, such as Food Truck Friday, Farmer’s Market, Bourbon Summerfest to name just a few,” said Ward Byers, town council president. “The quality-crafted sign will also enhance the beauty of the north entry streetscape into Bourbon, and present a wonderful way to display the town’s new logo.”

“We are excited to bring this message board project to Culver and work with Marshall County, Marshall County Tourism, and OCRA to make it happen!” says Jonathan Leist, Culver’s town manager. “The sign will help all of us share key information throughout the county, including emergency alerts, as well as programming and event information for our schools and the community at large. By selecting a location with good traffic exposure at the edge of town, we hope to be able to catch the eye of people who might not normally stop in Culver as frequently, and encourage them try out our shops, restaurants, and community events.”

According to LaPaz President Roger Ecker: "When things get back to normal we will add school events such as the Bi County event that just concluded. For business we will include seasonal products selling at Mac's Market -- the oldest business in LaPaz. We'll also include updates on blueberry season for Tillman farms, and promote other local business and fire department events. Trick-or-treat hours for Halloween too."

Says Trend Weldy, Bremen's director of operations: "The sign will give us a way to notify people of all the upcoming events both in town and out of town. This is something that's been missing for years. I think it will be very helpful."

And Mark Van Der Weele, economic development director for the Town of Argos adds: "Argos is ecstatic to participate in a county-wide project and believes that this is the strength of our communities: to make things happen. It is these types of projects that make Marshall County stand out above the rest."

The city of Plymouth chose The REES Theatre marquee as the site for their sign. The REES Project Committee, in designing the sign, took great care to preserve the vintage appearance of the current marquee.

According to Danielson: "The REES Project Committee was not quick to approve -- and in fact rejected two design options that would take away from its historic look. They settled for only a custom installation that would complement the upgrades in technology taking place inside the theater. All of the glitz of neon and chasing lights will remain. When the display boards are lit, special software can mimic the old time look of three rows of letters hanging on a metal grid, but also have the capability of doing much more. This extra attention to detail was only possible through the generosity of two families. We ask the community to join us in thanking Art & Lisa Jacobs and Brad & Patty Serf."

Donna Pontius, Danielson's co-chair on The REES project committee, notes that with the advent of the new marquee board, two long-time REES volunteers will no longer have to change the sign by hand, ending an era. "Often not seen is the immense amount of effort, as a labor of love, that has been devoted to this and on many occasions more than once in a day. The dedication of Jack Davis and Denny Bottorff in the scheduling and then hanging each individual letter in creative form has been inspiring. Most of this takes place on a 10' ladder that no one is holding. We have been most fortunate that no limbs have been broken, just a piece of neon now and then."

The electronic signs were originally to be funded as part of the Stellar Award given by OCRA to the Crossroads team. The project became an even bigger win when the funding was approved under the emergency COVID grant, freeing up \$150,000 of Stellar funding and creating the ability to add another Stellar project for early completion. Stellar projects are scheduled for completion over the next four years in all towns and surrounding Marshall County. They cover the gamut from health to housing, bike trails to works of art. All the projects have two things in common: they are geared toward improving the quality of life in Marshall County, and there are many hours of volunteer work behind each one.

Marty Oosterbaan, chair of the Crossroads communications and marketing team, says there is an unsung hero behind the electronic sign project. “Shannon McLeod of Priority Project Resources, Inc. is a professional for grant administration. She has been involved in this project since the beginning on a volunteer basis and has worked on point with each town and the sign manufacturer, as well as with the federal and state agencies involved. The value of these services is well over \$5,000, and the Crossroads team is deeply grateful to Shannon for her gratis work here. She’s been invaluable and allowed us to put 100% of the grant funding into the signs themselves.”

About Marshall County Crossroads:

Marshall County Crossroads is a collaboration of leaders from across the region that engages with and inspires our communities to connect, collaborate, and create high-quality hometowns. This is accomplished by creating healthy, livable, thriving, and sustainable communities that provide current and future residents of all ages, races, and genders the best hometowns in the Midwest to live, work and play.

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