

Enriching downtown traditions with a new gathering space

The City of Whitehall's North Mears parking lot transforms into a community plaza

Local gathering spaces are crucial to any thriving community, but are especially vital to smaller cities where community spirit is strong and yet adequate venues to connect may be scarce. The City of Whitehall is one example of a flourishing small city with community enthusiasm.

Residents have an established tradition of parking downtown at the North Mears Avenue lot—located behind Colby Street—to access the hill at North Mears as a place of seasonal recreation.

In the summer, both residents and visitors gather at the hill to watch the community's annual Independence Day fireworks show and to enjoy views of White Lake and the White River. In the winter, the hill at North Mears is a popular sledding destination for families. The proximity of the parking lot makes this local sledding hill easily accessible.

The City of Whitehall and Prein&Newhof Project Manager Dan Sorek, PE saw these traditions as a perfect opportunity to enhance an already bustling community gathering place. The North Mears Avenue parking lot needed overall repair, and this instigated conversations that led to transforming the site into a community space named, North Mears Plaza, full of added amenities.

"The community was already gathering in the parking lot for events, from food and beverage festivals to sledding, so it was important to utilize this location for community placemaking as a recognized destination. The features were added to provide comfort and attractions for an already popular location," said Sorek. The transformed gathering space would serve as a community and pedestrian-friendly link between the downtown's main corridor and the community's popular hill, without sacrificing any of the available parking spots.

The City of Whitehall worked with Prein&Newhof to design the parking lot's reconstruction and the Plaza's creation. Prein&Newhof provided numerous professional services, including: survey, geotechnical investigation, design, bidding assistance, permits, plan review meetings, and construction administration. McCormick Sand of Twin Lake, MI constructed this project.

The project included a complete removal and reconstruction of the parking lot, adding some electric charging stations and new curbs north of downtown near Mears Avenue. The Plaza features a circular gas fireplace and ample seating, new LED lighting to match the downtown streetscape,

and eye-catching branding and landscape architecture designed by Prein&Newhof's Matt Levandoski, PLA and his team. The design specified the relocation and reuse of the existing community holiday tree, and adding an overlook deck, a large seat wall at the crest of the sledding hill, and four landscaped islands that are engineered to collect stormwater and to add enticing greenery to the space.

To successfully complete this project and to make these improvements possible required new irrigation, storm sewer, gas and electrical service, sidewalk and crosswalk connections, landscaping, and site restoration. Challenges included shielding and working around existing electrical cabinet infrastructure and keeping options open for further future development near the northeast and southeast corners of the parking lot.

After many years of planning and construction, the new North Mears Plaza celebrated full operation with a ribbon cutting ceremony in June 2021, and a holiday tree lighting ceremony in November 2021. The Plaza now links the parking lot to Lions Park and creates a bridge between the popular hill with waterfront views and the shops and restaurants lining downtown Whitehall.

The North Mears Plaza is the latest downtown improvement effort funded by the City's Tax Increment Financing Authority, which uses increases in property taxes from downtown properties for improvement projects like streetscapes, burial of utility wires, and an ongoing business grant program. Further exemplifying commitment to community growth, the Montague-Whitehall Rotary Club made a \$10,000 donation to purchase a fireplace to further enhance the Plaza with a new attraction. Consumers Energy also provided a grant for the installation of the electric vehicle car charging stations. The result of all of these combined efforts is an exciting new gathering space that will serve the community of Whitehall for years to come.

Contact **Matt Levandoski, PLA** at 616-364-8491 for placemaking ideas to enhance your community.



The plaza offers convenient parking near downtown.

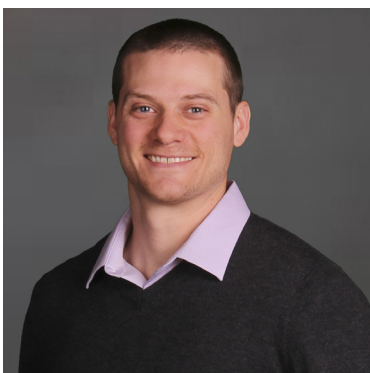


The sledding hill is a popular after-school activity.



The fireplace and seating area provide comfort while taking a break from sledding.

Prein&Newhof's Zac Culbert earns PE License



Prein&Newhof congratulates Zac Culbert for earning his Professional Engineer (PE) License this year. The PE licensure demands an extensive process of experience and testing to ensure competency in the profession.

Culbert works from our Kalamazoo office on a range of road improvement, water supply, lead service line replacement, wastewater collection system expansion, and stormwater management projects.

He joined Prein&Newhof as an intern before graduating from Western Michigan University in 2018, with his Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering. Prein&Newhof then hired Culbert as a full-time Engineer-in-Training. He is also a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers—Michigan Section.

Seeing Farther



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Energy Efficient Replacements at WWTP Saves Community Money

As part of the Stormwater, Asset Management, and Wastewater (SAW) Program, Prein&Newhof’s team helped the Grand Haven–Spring Lake Sewer Authority (GHSLSA) assess the condition and capacity of its wastewater treatment plant and lift stations in order to generate a Capital Improvement Plan. A top priority identified in this process was the installation of a new high–efficiency turbo blower for overall improvement of the wastewater treatment plant’s aeration process.

GHSLSA had four older centrifugal blowers, the newer of which is smaller and was installed about 15 years ago to address a decrease in loading (treatment demand) after an industrial user shut down its operations. This smaller blower operated most of the year, and one older, larger blower supplemented the process in the summer when treatment/aeration demand was higher. The smaller blower was oversized for winter aeration requirements, yet undersized for increased summer needs, and the older, larger blower was oversized for the summer demands. Due to the seasonal inconsistencies in demand, the aeration tanks often received more air than needed for treatment, wasting energy and money.

“Our goal was to ensure that a replacement blower could accommodate as much of the loading as possible with a greater operating range to realize maximum efficiency and savings,” said Prein&Newhof Project Manager Nate Ver Heul, PE. “We recommended installing a new, more efficient dual core turbo blower that operates exclusively more than 90% of the time.” Now the smaller centrifugal blower is only needed to supplement the aeration treatment process during maximum loading conditions. GHSLSA also kept one of the three older large centrifugal blowers as an emergency backup.

Prein&Newhof helped GHSLSA get a \$30,000 rebate from Grand Haven Board of Light and Power through its Energy Smart Program. So far, the efficiency of the turbo blower has resulted in a savings of approximately \$6,000 per month. This savings will increase as the wastewater treatment plant addresses some remaining issues that affect its current aeration requirements. “We expect the overall payback period for the blower to be as soon as five years,” said Ver Heul.

If your community’s wastewater treatment plant has older equipment and you would like to find out how to improve efficiency and save on energy costs call **Nate Ver Heul, PE** at 616-364-8491.



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