

Portsmouth, Ohio: Small City Balances Big Beautification Budgets and Large Park Development Despite Many Hurdles

Despite being in fiscal watch, being an epicenter for addiction, and losing most of the jobs the city depended on decades prior, groups like Main Street have leveraged private and public dollars to keep the downtown and county seat a place that continues to see development and beautification.

The organization Main Street Portsmouth is a National Main Street Program in Ohio, where it serves a city of approximately 20,000 people, with an intensive \$30,000+ annual maintenance budget for beautification.



“Beautification is important because it says that someone cares,” Master Gardner, Tree Commissioner, and Beautification Chairwoman Sue Burke explained. “Plants and trees soften public spaces and give pleasure to people who crave a connection with nature in their lives. The appeal of a clean city with flowers and trees that are cared for also attracts tourists and businesses.”

It is for these reasons that Burke says she works to achieve a greener city. She has been trained for the job and feels a duty to make the citizens of Portsmouth feel better through her volunteerism. She explained

that, while things may be bad at times, it is important to keep the face of the community looking nice and composed.

While many Main Street Programs have a beautification budget, many are much smaller than what Burke handles. Not to mention, much of their work is done through in-kind donations and work, so the value of the program is much, much higher. She also dedicates equal time throughout the seasons, decorating giant steel pyramids with themes, urns along the amazing floodwall murals of over 2500 linear feet, and flowerpots throughout the downtown.



“I obviously love and enjoy decorating our downtown spaces,” Burke said. “Once the summer flowers die and the Christmas decorations come down, it gets pretty dreary. Seasonal displays add a brightness to the area and something for the community to look forward to.”



Burke’s work has won her many awards and the love of a whole community, who are used to seeing her in her old white pickup, wearing a polo and rocking a sun visor.

While the work keeps the group busy as it is, they also work on many larger projects, from developing a Christmas display that is currently invested to the tune of \$50,000 to developing new parks entirely.

“I think it is important to provide the community with parks, because it creates affordable or even free days out for families who may need a little help,” Executive Director Joseph Pratt said. “Also, it is good for the health of the community. Not only the physical health by assisting people in continuing healthy habits, but the mental health of the community, since it allows people a safe way to get out of their homes and spend time with friends in the fresh air, in a town that looks beautiful and with parks that foster pride.”

The group’s effort with parks started early on, when it remodeled the oldest park in town, making it the most visited park today, for people to get out and meet or share lunch. Since then, they’ve created a pocket park with the façade of a collapsed building where flowers bloom, water features pour, and a soothing environment attracts people of all ages to celebrate, propose, marry, and more. Recently, they’ve raised \$110,000 to build a new playground on the riverfront and a companion site with exercise equipment for adults.

The group is juggling projects big and small and never forgets the reason they all follow Sue Burke into action. They believe in their town and want others to feel empowered to love their home.

Before & After Photos

Before



After

