

FROM 'EYESORE' TO 'EYE-POPPING': THE MUSKEGON RAILS MURALS ARE FINISHED!

MUSKEGON, MI – Due to the final help of an online crowdfunding effort that raised \$50,000 for this project, qualifying it for an additional \$50,000 in dedicated community development funds from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation's Public Spaces Community Places program, Muskegon's entrance on Seaway Drive now boasts four original hand-painted murals on two rail bridges.

For these four murals to be painted on the sides of two railroad bridges that for years were rusting hulks in the cities of Muskegon, Norton Shores and Muskegon Heights, a remarkable and likely first-of-its-kind community collaboration had to be developed between three cities, the Genesee Wyoming Railroad, individual and corporate philanthropists, and the MuskegonCity Public Art Initiative, a program of the Community Foundation for Muskegon County.

The inspiration for the Muskegon Rails Project began with Norton Shores businessman Jerry Wiersma, president of West MI Power Cleaning Equipment. Wiersma worked for several years to get the approval of track owner CSX and track user Genesee Wyoming Railroad to improve the look of the bridges. "It is so exciting to finally see this project come to fruition," Wiersma said. "This has taken a lot of work from a whole host of people. Of course, this would not have been possible without the

cooperation of the Genesee Wyoming Railroad, who have been so great to work with. When others said that this could not be done, we dug in and said, "Watch Us Go!"

Direct costs for this project, which includes the cost of the cleaning and priming of both bridges, equipment rental, the open call for artists, artist commissions and supply stipends, permits, fees, and the required insurances totaled approximately \$185,000. Of that, 72% was just to get the bridges ready for the artists to paint – no simple feat – and 28% went to the art portion of the project. Of the total funds raised, 52% of the dollars were individual and corporate philanthropic donations and grants; municipal community capital improvement funds accounted for 22% of the costs; and 26% of the funds were the matching funds that the community received from the MEDC PSCP crowdfunding campaign.



“The cities of Muskegon, Muskegon Heights, and Norton Shores are proud to have come together with the MEDC’s support for the value of placemaking in Michigan, reflected in those who have led the growing public art collection in the Muskegon community,” said Muskegon City Manager Frank Peterson. “The creative repurposing of these bridges – what many considered longtime eyesores in each of these cities – is another step toward creating a more beautiful and vibrant community.”

“The rail bridge mural process and project is an undeniably tangible indication of what art can do to bring people and whole communities together,” Muskegon Heights City Manager Troy Bell said. “Through this project we see clearly how in Muskegon, where roads might divide us, bridges can unite us.”

“The Muskegon Rails Project is a fun and exciting initiative to improve some long-standing eyesores in the community,” Norton Shores Mayor Gary Nelund said. “Going beyond just paint and primer, the addition of four new public art pieces is another new and unique way to celebrate our community.”

The four Michigan artists, Jimmy Cobb, Ed Irmen, Ashely Nash, and Dan Parker– were among the 16 entries received during the open call for artists. The Downtown Arts Committee along with the representatives from all three cities narrowed the competition down to six finalists and the final four artists were selected through a public vote. Nearly 2,000 votes were received through both online and in-person voting at three public libraries. The four murals chosen for this project, all located on Seaway Drive, were the top four vote-getters.



Pride and Opportunity by Ashley Nash, a Muskegon High School graduate with a fine arts degree from Grand Valley State University, is now a Grand Rapids freelance illustrator. Ashley’s historic montage of iconic Muskegon images showcases some of the beautiful elements that make Muskegon unique.



Flora and Fauna by Ed Irmen, of Detroit, who has a 2016 degree from Detroit’s College for Creative Studies and specializes in large-scale murals, painting with an abstract flair and lots of color. Ed is inspired by nature and for this piece, was particularly inspired by our own Muskegon River.



Calm and Quiet by Jimmy Cobb a Muskegon freelance artist who graduated from North Muskegon High School and Muskegon Community College and is now studying at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. Jimmy’s inspiration was the beaches and our beloved Big Lake.



Happy by Dan Parker, a Muskegon self-taught artist, who has painted murals in San Antonio and New York City and around West Michigan, created a mural that pays tribute to the beautiful diversity of our greater community showcasing everyday Muskegonites.

“The Muskegon Rails Project is just one more example of the innovative and creative energy of Muskegon these days, and these massive murals now being enjoyed by literally thousands of our Muskegon residents and visitors every day,” said Judith Hayner, Project Director of the MuskegonCity Public Art Initiative. “Muskegon's public art collection has been instrumental in the exciting regeneration that we are experiencing in our community today, and these four works of art are remarkable additions to this collection.”



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A Project of the Downtown Arts Committee and the Community Foundation for Muskegon County