

Placemaking Projects that Inspire Change and Improve Communities for People of All Ages

July 06, 2022

Placemaking is about strengthening the connection between people and the places they share by re-inventing and re-engaging with public spaces so they are once again the central focus of public life. The most successful placemaking projects put people at the forefront of creating change in their community. When residents help identify and solve the challenges that affect their daily lives — whether it's a half-vacant Main Street or roads that make walking or biking unsafe — communities and local leaders are more likely to achieve and sustain success. The sooner communities of all types and sizes experiment with and demonstrate solutions, the quicker their methods can be refined and positive change achieved.

Do-it-yourself community projects ... all have one ingredient in common: they involve community members working together to bring attention to overlooked spaces by addressing neighborhood issues or demonstrating desired improvements within a public or sometimes private space.

For over a decade, AARP Vermont has been fully committed to helping make Vermont towns, cities, and neighborhoods more livable. A livable community is a place where people of all ages can thrive. It's a place with access to appropriate and affordable housing and transportation options, with close proximity to services such as health care, and with desirable features including shopping, gathering places, and outdoor spaces. Such a community enhances personal independence, allows residents to age in place, and engages people of all ages in civic, economic, and social life.

A new facet of our work has been to promote community “placemaking” efforts around the state. Placemaking projects focus on activating public spaces by strengthening the connection

between people and the places they share. It often begins with temporary changes with the goal of leading to permanent, long-term impact that builds social capital and supports healthy, active lifestyles for people of all ages and abilities. From education, workshops, and hands-on projects to public outreach, advocacy, and collaboration, AARP VT has become a leader on this front. Overwhelmingly, older Vermonters want to age in place. Cultivating public spaces in which to gather, socialize, and engage with others is an integral part of a livable community.

Pop-up demonstration projects — also known as tactical urbanism — and do-it-yourself community projects are happening all over the state in a variety of ways. But they all have one ingredient in common: they involve community members working together to bring attention to overlooked spaces by addressing neighborhood issues or demonstrating desired improvements within a public or sometimes private space such as a vacant building or underused lot. This can be done through a pop-up demonstration project, which uses lighter, cheaper, and easily available materials to build interventions that temporarily improve a space. By seeing and doing, local leaders and residents can propel positive community change. After all, when it's possible to illustrate a new idea through a temporary installation or demonstration, a proposed enhancement is better understood, supported, and achieved because people can touch, feel, and interact with it. Pop-up projects can be organized and implemented quickly or over time. The demonstrations can take many forms and can help solve common problems, such as stagnant economic activity, dangerously designed streets, or a lack of community involvement.

The pop-up process can be used to address local issues that, when resolved, will make a community more livable and age-friendly for all residents. AARP and other partners such as VLCT recognize the desire among communities across the state to transform their public spaces through low-cost, high-impact interventions. We have invested in important resources and tools for community leaders including:

- [DIY Community Cookbook](#), a free guide to do-it-yourself projects recently published in collaboration with Community Workshop that offers tools to help you accomplish small projects in your community;
- [Community Grants](#) available through AARP can provide flexible funding options to help move a project forward. We've had the opportunity to work with a number of Vermont communities on their placemaking projects over the years;

- [Placemaking Workshop](#) on October 20, 2020, at the Town Hall Theatre in Middlebury. For more information, contact Kelly at kstoddardpoor@aarp.org. [Editors note: while this workshop has gone by, you can still contact Kelly for more information and you can view more resources and workshops if/when available on the [Better Places program website](#)]

As we grapple with the health and social impacts of COVID-19 on our communities, we will need to find new and creative ways for community members to connect with one another. We will all be at risk of social isolation and what that does to our mental health. It is important to leverage the arts and nature to combat the adverse impacts social distancing and quarantine have on our sense of community. One way to connect with others is to use the recipe in our Community Cookbook to create kindness rocks or inspirational notes and place them on trails and walking paths for people to find, or build a little free library sharing books with neighbors.

AARP is working with our partners to provide these and other resources and ideas to those who want to find creative ways to stay connected, now and in the future.