



A PLACE FOR EVERYONE – AT FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN SPRINGFIELD, VT. A NEW GREEN GATHERING SPACE ON MAIN STREET HAS BEEN DEVELOPED THROUGH THE HOPE GRANT AND BETTER PLACES, A VERMONT MATCHING GRANT PROGRAM.

Our story begins in the summer of 2023 with a six foot tall weed growing through the crabapple tree in the corner of the church yard. The weed showed us how overgrown and raggedy the bushes and shrubs had become in this underused and largely unknown green space in the middle of downtown Springfield.

We invited a landscape architect to help us design a plan for this area. He met with a few of us and we all wanted the space to be for everyone; a place that invites you to come in, sit and find a bit of peace in a busy world.

A basic plan was drawn up which got us to the first step of the plan, the removal of all the old bushes, shrubs, taking down a dying crabapple and limbing up the maple next to the sidewalk to let in more light.

Our church budget had no money for such a project and many members were doubtful that we could pull it off without using church assets. The search for grants began. The HOPE FUND was very accessible with the application form and timely responses. We received a HOPE grant for the bush removal phase that covered a quarter of the cost. With that in hand, many members contributed to the project and it was completed in the fall of 2023. It was that seed money from an aptly named grant that brought us the energy to go to the next phase of the plan.

We were lucky, or there was divine guidance, to search on the internet and find Better Places, a Vermont 2:1 matching grant program through the Vermont Community Foundation and their partners. Better Places was funding “Vermonters to create inclusive and vibrant public places serving Vermont’s designated downtowns”. Better Places used a method of funding called “crowdgranting” and provided coaches to help set up the funding platform and support our funding drive.

We went live on the internet in January of 2024. We needed to raise \$20,000 in order to receive the matching grant of \$40,000 within three months. Our project cost was estimated at about \$65,000.

Our simple green space design was taken on by a landscape architectural firm in the next town. A CAD (Computer Assisted Design) was completed in order to provide the contractor with specific details for ordering supplies and marking off the areas for a walkway and patio and for the construction of the project. Our plan included a new walkway to the side door of the church. We eliminated a step from the

town sidewalk and created a ramp with a wide turning circle at the entrance from the sidewalk to our green space. We used pavers to allow rain water to soak into the ground. We planned gardens with native and sustainable plants and shrubs. We planned for an ADA picnic table with space for a wheelchair and four benches made from recycled plastics. We planned for a serviceberry tree to provide shade for the patio.

Our community responded with donations both large and small. We had support from businesses, town government and organizations. There was a lot of enthusiasm for something new happening downtown that would bring a vibrancy and faith in a slowly re-developing town. Across the street was a building with subsidized apartments for the older and disabled adults.

As our funding period got closer to the end period, there was a bit of anxiety about reaching our goal to receive the matching grant. If the goal was not reached in 90 days, we would only have what we had raised at that point...not enough to go forward with the construction. We had about \$11,000 in hand and about three more weeks to the end of our funding period. We once again turned to the HOPE FUND for a grant to help push us over the top. They responded rapidly and a sigh of relief was heard as the countdown neared the end of our funding period and we reached our goal. By the time our funding and matching grant was secured, most landscape contractors were booked up through the summer. The construction did not begin until September of 2024. It was finished a few days before Christmas when the benches that were donated by members and Rotary were secured on granite blocks. We had a warm fall which gave all the plants, shrubs and tree time to get settled. There was a definite feeling that God was part of the

construction team. The pieces went together so well, even the sod could be cut and laid down in November.

We have not forgotten that building the space for everyone is not the end. Maintaining the gardens for everyone is critical. Funds remaining will be used to have professionals care for the gardens. Now, we all look forward to spring to see what the Lord has wrought... and it was good!