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Proposal for 3 new park grills in Spooner wins AARP Small Dollar, Big Impact grant

SPOONER, WI – A proposal by The Friends of the Railroad Park, Inc. (FORRP) to supply the newly developing Railroad Park with three new charcoal grills has been selected to receive an AARP Wisconsin “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant.

The \$1,000 grant will enable FORRP to purchase and install three “Pilot Rock Heavy-Duty Jumbo Steel Park-Style Charcoal Grills” in the park, located in the heart of the historic railyard area just off downtown Spooner.

“I am incredibly excited, honored, and grateful to learn that we have been selected as the June recipient of the AARP Small Dollar, Big Impact grant,” said Terri Reiter, Secretary/Treasurer of FORRP and Chair of the Railroad Park Board (RPB), who submitted the grant application. “I would like to express our sincere appreciation to the entire AARP Wisconsin office for this wonderful opportunity to enhance the quality of life in our community.”

Railroad Park has been transformed by the addition of a new 36-by-48-foot railroad themed pavilion. “The park has become a very important part of our small community, hosting story hours, yoga, class reunions, memorials, wedding rehearsals, and many picnics,” Reiter said. “The addition of the outdoor grills will provide more than a way to make meals, but an opportunity for families, local organizations, and visitors to enjoy spending time together and learning about our unique and beautiful community.”

Small Dollar, Big Impact grants are being awarded once a month throughout 2021 to projects across Wisconsin that are designed to improve communities and make them better places for everyone to live, work and play as they age. Judges selected this project for a \$1,000 grant after reviewing dozens of proposals submitted from all over the state.

“This project fits perfectly with the spirit and intent of the grant program, said AARP Wisconsin State Director Sam Wilson. “Our goal is to support communities as they make positive changes that inspire long-term progress on livable issues. A project like this that brings people together in a newly developing park hits that nail right on the head.”

Reiter said city officials and community residents share a desire to develop this historically significant area into a welcoming, safe green space place for folks to sit, play, walk, and view the area. The addition of the grills is only one piece of a much larger plan for the area.

“The RPB is working together with FORRP to showcase Spooner’s rich railroad history by preserving the rare roundhouse and turntable, develop the area into a railroad-themed park, and offer an educational, culturally rich gathering place for residents and visitors,” Reiter explained. “This park will be the hub of the city, providing a pavilion, walking/biking trails with signs describing the ancient sites crucial to train operation, areas for music and festivals, picnic tables, playground equipment, parking lot, and other amenities.”

Through private funding, FORRP installed a gravel parking lot, renovated the decaying weigh station, and built a picnic pavilion in 2020. The group put up signs describing sites crucial to train operation, installed benches, and begun landscaping. Further plans include installing a railroad-themed playground, bandshell, pickle and volleyball court, walking trails, and more landscaping.

“COVID has dramatically changed the landscape of our lives,” Reiter said. “However, our pavilion has provided a socially distancing, safe place to gather. Installing grills would provide folks with tools to make their food in a safe place as well as be very encouraging to our community.”

The FORRP is made up of community members who raised the necessary funds to create the park. Many people chipped in to provide landscaping skills, donations, planning and development. In particular, Reiter pointed out the City of Spooner crew, the Railroad Park Board, City Administrator Bill Marx, Mayor Gary Cuskey, and two area church youth groups and parents who cleared brush and enlisted help from a forester to identify and cut overgrown trees.

AARP Wisconsin’s launched its “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant program in 2020 and is now in its second year of helping proposed projects move forward in rural and urban parts of the state. All projects must be completed within 60 days from winner announcement.

“These grants are exactly what the name describes – short-term, low-cost solutions that could have remarkable impacts on the shaping of neighborhoods

and cities,” said Darrin Wasniewski, Associate State Director of Community Outreach for AARP Wisconsin.

The grant program is open to some nonprofits and government entities. For more information on the program, visit www.aarp.org/WIsdbi

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