

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

Ashland: The Corner Spot 'reinvigorating' downtown

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ASHLAND – Children climbed brightly colored tires and posed for pictures in an Adirondack chair many times their size. Teens swayed on shaded swings and adults laughed over lunch on square tables.

A mobile coffee shop brewed and poured for the first time in its new, temporary home – a one-story shed about as long as two parking spaces.

The scene that played out on a dry, sunny Wednesday couldn't have taken place mere months ago – at least not in downtown Ashland, where 100 people gathered to celebrate the opening of The Corner Spot.

In less than one year, the town converted an unused lot occupied only by a weathered old home into a grassy gathering place anchored by a tiny storefront for small businesses.

"This has truly been a community-built project," Town Manager Michael Herbert said.

"Changes are happening here in downtown Ashland," he said. "People said we couldn't do something like The Corner Spot, and yet we're doing it."

Five small businesses are scheduled to rotate through the pop-up storefront between now and mid-August, including a barbecue restaurant, a ceramics garage and a homemade soap company.

Tables, swings, lawn games, and plantings occupy the remainder of the 0.4 acres. The town is planning regular family game nights, open mic events and other family-friendly activities throughout the summer.

"In 11 months we built this great place where our community can come together, where people can just hang out and chat and talk about the selectmen meeting the night before," said Economic Development Director Beth Reynolds.

The Ashland Affordable Housing Trust purchased the property at 6 Cherry St. in 2013 with Community Preservation Act funds. The trust plans to build affordable housing there, but has so far struggled to find an interested developer, Herbert said.

The town combined \$38,000 in community contributions with a \$25,000 grant from MassDevelopment's Commonwealth Places program to fund the project. Many residents also donated their time and professional skills.

"It's not just the dollars, it really is the number of people that were engaged in this effort," MassDevelopment President and CEO Marty Jones said. "Both with contributing their cash, small and large, but also their time and their sweat equity to make this happen."

In its first year, the Commonwealth Places program provided matching grants to 20 place-making projects in Massachusetts. Jones announced Wednesday that MassDevelopment would continue the program for a second year with increased funding.

Ashland officials have stepped up efforts to revitalize the downtown in recent years. Last week, the town signed a contract with a consultant to develop the preliminary designs for a long-awaited "facelift" to the area.

"A few years ago, the Board of Selectmen made a commitment to reinvigorating downtown Ashland. We're getting there a little bit at a time, and this is a major part of that," said Selectmen Chairman Carl Hakansson said about The Corner Spot.

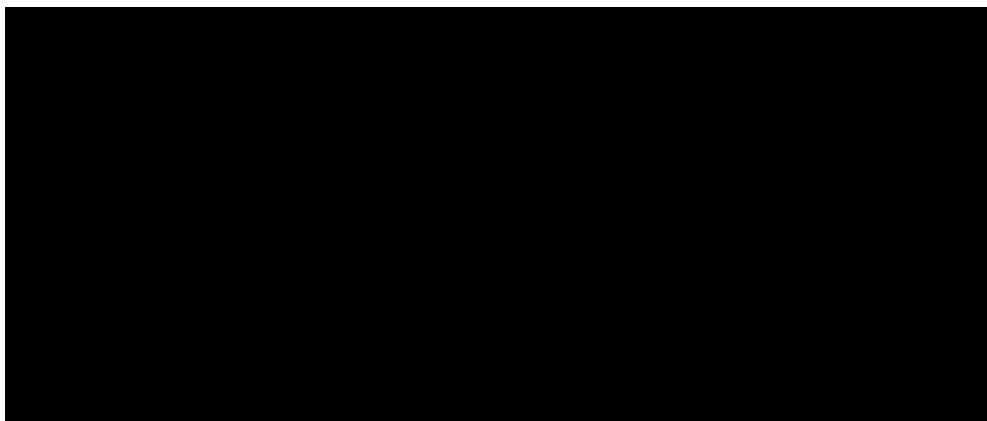
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