



EMERGING and LEADING

Backyard Shelby Emphasizes Engagement

By Symone C. Skrzycki

It's evening at the Riverfront Taproom in Shelbyville. Originally the site of a supermarket, it's now part of the newly created Riverfront District.

The occasion is a "Summer Sunday" event hosted by Backyard Shelby, a group of young professionals that is passionate about promoting, growing and enhancing Shelby County.

The action isn't inside, where I'd expected to encounter a typical "working dinner."

The reality is just the opposite. And it's quite refreshing.

Everyone's on the outdoor patio. Young people — many of them millennials — converse, sip drinks and shake newcomers' hands.

The irresistible aroma of nacho cheese, baked, soft pretzels and potato skins fills the air.

Shelbyville Mayor Tom DeBaun sits at a cocktail table. No suit and tie. He's wearing a Hawaiian shirt.

Therein lies the theme of the night — and Backyard Shelby — casual. Laid back. Naturally evolving.

"We just ordered the beer. You got here just in time," he quips. Beside him is Amy Haacker, executive director of Blue River

Community Foundation.

Backyard Shelby launched in summer 2018.

"The driving force behind it, when Tom and I had this idea, was positive promotion of the community by and for this demographic — young professionals," Haacker observes. "This (outing) is actually one of the projects of the group — social events to welcome people who maybe aren't from here."

Impetus

Like many other areas, Shelbyville's fastest-growing demographic is senior citizens. That elicited a pressing question: What will happen to the workforce when they retire?

Projections and U.S. Census data reveal a distressing answer: By 2040, the city will lose half of its workforce.

Not without a fight.

One strategy to prevent that outcome revolves around infrastructure enhancements and downtown revitalization.

The Blue River Trailhead, completed in 2017, honors the community's railroad heritage. Multiple endeavors, such as a \$19 million residential downtown development (part of a larger undertaking involving redevelopment of the Old Methodist Hospital building), focus on repurposing.

In addition, the East Washington Street project features decorative concrete, outdoor plaza areas and more. It's slated for completion this fall.

Despite steady progress with various projects, there was an obstacle.

"We were doing all of these things that we know attract people to live in a community, but there was that more human element that we needed as well," Haacker explains. "This (Backyard Shelby) is part of that."

Initially, DeBaun and Haacker recruited nearly two dozen young, emerging leaders in the community

"We had several meetings and said, 'What we want to do is promote the community in a more organic way,'" Haacker comments. "... It's really you guys promoting it to the people you know through social media in that organic way that changes the perception of a community and gets the word out."

Connections and coordination

Kathryn Woods, project manager at Knauf Insulation, has lived in Shelbyville for a decade.

"When we had our first (Backyard Shelby) meeting and everybody went around and introduced themselves, I had no idea what half the organizations were that everybody said they were a part of," she confides.

Chuckling, she adds, "I was like, 'I lived here and apparently I've lived under a rock for 10 years!'"

Julia Polston, manager of talent development at Indiana Constructors, seconds that. She recounts an experience participating in Leadership Shelby County (a program of the local chamber) last year.

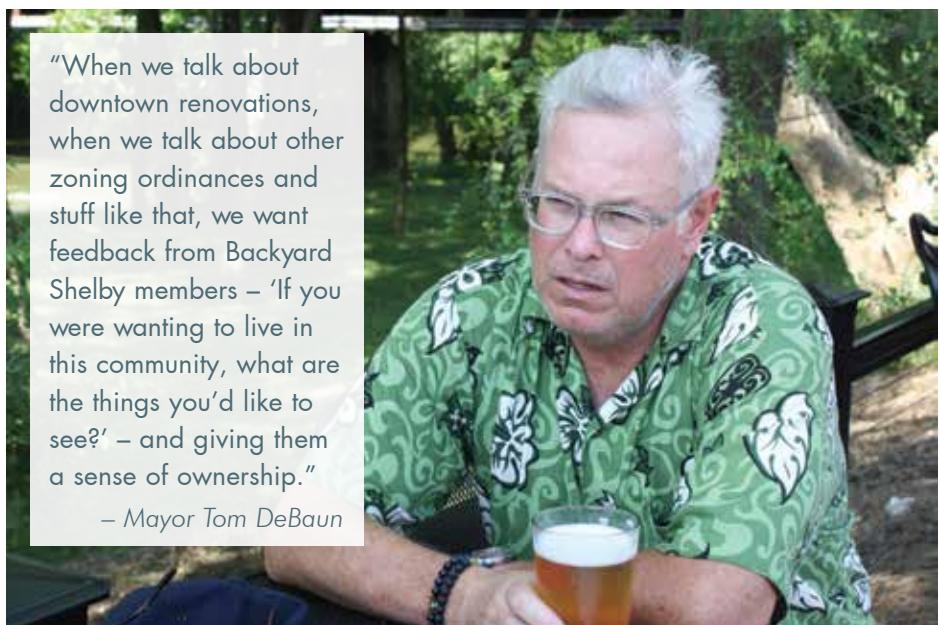
"I'll tell you what," she says intently. "I'm from Shelby County. I thought I knew a lot (about the area). I didn't know anything! After going through that, I learned so much."

That's part of what makes Backyard Shelby so valuable — raising awareness of what's taking place in the community and linking people to those activities.

"The way we envision it is, we're kind of the catalyst that helps connect people," Woods remarks. "We're like a third party. We want to get out there in front of people to say, 'Hey. If you want to know something,

"When we talk about downtown renovations, when we talk about other zoning ordinances and stuff like that, we want feedback from Backyard Shelby members — 'If you were wanting to live in this community, what are the things you'd like to see?' — and giving them a sense of ownership."

— Mayor Tom DeBaun



go to Backyard Shelby and we'll point you in the right direction.'

Keyen Macklin, program coordinator with the Shelby County Drug-Free Coalition, interjects, "This (social gathering) is a big part of it. Getting more things for our generation to do to want to live here, have something to do after work and meet friends. When you move somewhere new, that's one of the toughest things to do — meet a friend."

What's cooking?

Ricca Macklin, owner of YourBox Catering (and Keyen's sister), sits down across the table.

She exudes warmth and enthusiasm — for her business as well as Backyard Shelby.

"I always knew I wanted to own a restaurant," she reflects. "Honestly, I thought

it would be in Chicago! I went off to school and came back in 2013 and started it a couple years after that. In mid-August (these interviews took place just a few weeks prior), we're opening up a restaurant at the River's Edge Golf Course. It will be YBC at River's Edge."

Kyle Beaty, project manager at Beaty Construction and campaign drive chair at the Shelby County United Fund, values Macklin and others that choose to locate in the community.

"You obviously want small businesses to achieve and 'make it' so more businesses will come and more people will move (here)," he asserts. "It's a ripple effect. You don't think that the small things are mattering, but they keep cascading out. The next thing you know, you've got houses being built here."



The Blue River Trailhead stands at the entrance of the Riverfront Development District and downtown.

You've got more industry coming in."

Woods describes current Backyard Shelby initiatives.

"We're doing two big things right now. We're creating a web site that we're going to link into some of the other organizations here in town and also link into an initiative the (Shelby County) chamber is doing. They're creating a site called Serve Shelby that's basically helping people find where they can volunteer."

A place to call home

Keyen chairs the Healthy Shelby County Diversity Action Team.

"I approached them and said we want to do a diversity action team," she notes. "Bring more cultural aspects to the county. Have more different events, fun events we could do. Just make everybody feel at home here in the community."

The Taste of Shelby County, for instance, included questions about different countries and traveling. An upcoming October event will feature the diversity of downtown businesses and encourage interaction with food and more as part of the Shelby County Chamber's First Friday gathering.

Tyson Conradty relocated from Syracuse to Shelbyville eight years ago for a job with Giant FM/Real Radio, where he's the program/music director.

"I'm not from here, but I'm immersed in this community," he imparts. "Yeah, we can love our big cities. But there's something



Breaking ground on Greenleaf Foods, SPC in Shelbyville (April 2019). It will be North America's largest plant-based protein manufacturing facility ([H2O Design photo](#)).

about being able to walk the streets and everybody knows who you are. ... There's value in that."

Polston commutes to her job in Indianapolis but has no desire to leave Shelby County.

"It's that hometown feel you get here," she stresses. "Being from here, you want to see where you came from; you want it to thrive. We have the potential and we have the people that want this community to thrive. And it's not that we want to become a Carmel or one of those bigger cities; we just want to become better versions of what we already are."

Brittany Zimny also grew up in Shelbyville. She and her husband lived in Indianapolis for five years but returned to start a family.

Zimny, promotions chair at Mainstreet Shelbyville, is a stay-at-home mom to a 4-year-old son and 2-year-old twins.

"I'm super grateful to be a part of this. ... It's so important for our generation to get out there and promote Shelbyville and all of the wonderful things (that are happening). I wouldn't have moved my family back here if I wouldn't have believed in this town and where we're moving and all of the downtown projects coming up."



The annual BBQ and Brewfest hosted by the Shelby County Tourism and Visitors Bureau and Mainstreet is among the community events bringing people together. The 2019 version is September 21 in downtown Shelbyville. ([H2O Design photo](#)).

RESOURCES: Backyard Shelby at www.cityofshelbyvillein.com/tag/backyard-shelby | Mayor Tom DeBaun, city of Shelbyville, at www.cityofshelbyvillein.com | Amy Haacker, Blue River Community Foundation, at www.blueriverfoundation.com