



# Historic comeback

**BY** R.J. WEICK

The wheels of economic development often turn slow and require years of continuous dedication sown before the fruits of labor begin to bloom. In many metropolitan—and rural—areas in the midst of newfound revitalization and sustainable economic growth, which is typically driven by fundamental principles such as innovation, collaboration, talent, and infrastructure, the path to prosperity began with a foundation laid years prior with an investment and a vision.

The same can be said for the historic village located on the eastern shore of Walloon Lake in Charlevoix County. At the turn of the 20th Cen-

tury, Walloon Lake Village was a thriving community with robust offerings for guests and residents alike, attracting tourists as far as St. Louis, Chicago, New York, and Cincinnati. With restaurants, hotels, passenger steamers, and marinas lining the miles of sandy shoreline and freshwater, visitors were entranced by the northern destination where the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad would deliver them right onto the village docks.

Walloon Lake Village experienced many prosperous years from the late 1800s and early 1900s, and while there were several decades in the mid-1900s to early-2000s where popularity waned—na-

tionwide economic downturn, decline of the railroad, and the advent and popularity of automobiles—the community is flourishing once more in 2017. Yet, the seeds of the revitalization began nearly five years ago when a developer, who had grown up in the area, purchased a number of lakefront and village properties with the goal of redeveloping Walloon Lake Village with the community and history taken into consideration.

Jonathan Borisch, co-founder of Walloon Development LLC and former owner of Borisch Manufacturing Corporation or Amphenol Borisch Technologies, said while the village had once been a thriving tourist destination, as time went on the people who were the driving force behind the business growth in the community retired or passed away.

“Every time that happened, another part of it died,” Borisch said. “By the time it was 2010 [Walloon] had a year-round grocery, it had a gas stop that was open part-time, and the property on the lake had gone down in value and not recovered from 2008.”

Noting there had been roughly five developers in the last three decades who approached Melrose Township with development plans, which in one instance ended in legal contention, Borisch said his goal was to revitalize the Walloon Lake Village while ensuring the process united the community.

“I wanted to make sure the process brought the lake people together with the village people, not divided them, which was the routine,” Borisch said. “That was the

game plan and somehow I was connected with a national Urban Planner by the name of Robert Gibbs.”

Robert J. Gibbs, AICP, ASLA, CNU-A, is the president of Gibbs Planning Group, which is an urban retail planning consultancy located in Birmingham, Michigan. The firm specializes in community-oriented and sustainable town planning in urban design, and was recognized for its work on the Walloon Lake Village master plan by the Michigan Association of Planning with the 2015 Planning Excellence in Urban Design award.

Gibbs, who was involved early on in the planning process, provided valuable input and worked with Greg Presley, principal architect of Presley Architecture, to create numerous iterations of the master plan village layout, according to Borisch. Presley Architecture is a boutique firm with an emphasis in historic preservation, small-town planning, commercial, and residential projects with two locations in Petoskey and Northville.

“We had very talented professional people involved at the beginning helping us, and everybody in the village was involved helping us,” Borisch said.

Throughout the planning process, Borisch met with local planning and zoning committees, township supervisors, and community members to learn their specific wants and needs, while taking into account the local master plan and zoning ordinances laid out by the village.

“The people at the Township Hall, Plan-

ning Committee, Township Board, and the lady at the grocery store: everybody had their input and had good ideas,” Borisch said. “Some of the ideas were my wife’s or my kids’ or mine, but a large percentage of it is people who are professional who could weigh in with their pen and the township people.”

The development plan ultimately reflected Walloon Lake Village’s historic character while incorporating walkable mixed-use, white clapboard buildings, public spaces and parks to anchor downtown, repurposed structures, and relocated historic cottages from the lake to add a distinctive atmosphere. Beginning with installing gas and public docks, and landscaping the public multi-use park, Borisch said the redevelopment began “one small step at a time.”

An existing building along the shoreline was extensively renovated from its dilapidated state into a two-story, mixed-use building, which now houses a marina and the second-floor Barrel Back Restaurant. Inspired by its eastern seaboard kindred, the restaurant features an unparalleled view of Walloon Lake from its vantage point and patio alongside of the building. It also was opened with the help of Gregory S. Gilmore of The Gilmore Collection in Grand Rapids through his test kitchens and team members interviewing for a head chef for Barrel Back.

“[Gilmore] was a huge help and extremely generous,” Borisch said.

From there, the Redwood building was renovated to provide retail and office space,



as well as a location for pop-up retailers to accommodate the increase in tourists who began returning to the village. The idea was to provide a variety of shopping venues without investing large sums of money, while offering businesses an opportunity to lease space in the structure itself. The pop-up retailers were inspired in-part by a similar setup in Florida and the Christmas markets in Germany and Chicago. Located adjacent to Redwood, the curved-roof Talcott was repurposed from its existing state as a non-winterized facility into a boat showroom for the marina initially, and then more recently an event space accommodating up to 200 people.

The redevelopment also called for relocating two cottages along Walloon Lake several miles into the village, extensively renovating the interiors and exteriors, and converting the residences into commercial or retail spaces.

“Everybody is thrilled, because we saved two cottages from being destroyed,” Borisch

said. “Gibbs told me on day one not to get rid of any buildings, keep them as original as I can, and make them as original as I can. I’ve been following that advice.”

While the threads of history are evident in small touches throughout the community’s walkable downtown area, from the early 1900s photography lining the walls at Barrel Back to the renovated cottages, Borisch noted it would have been nice if the historical elements influenced the overall process more.

“There are limitations to bringing a railroad into town,” Borisch said. “There was a lot of photography done back then, so in that respect we were trying to incorporate it and bring the history in.”

The project that most notably reflects the vintage elegance of the past was the 32-room, boutique hotel designed by Borisch with collaboration from Jeff Visser of J. Visser Design, an award-winning firm located in Grand Rapids, and Kathryn Chaplow, Allied ASID, principal designer and founder

of Kathryn Chaplow LLC. Visser provided interior and exterior elevations for the hotel after Borisch completed the floorplan, and Chaplow served as the interior designer for the project.

With a floorplan intentionally created to cater to the guest experience, and visual aesthetics capturing the turn of the century charm, Hotel Walloon was inspired by the quintessential northern Michigan hotel during Walloon Lake Village’s tourism peak nearly 100 years ago. The team also toured other notable hospitality destinations in the region and drew inspiration from old photographs of the five hotels that previously existed around Walloon Lake.

“I wanted a small hotel that is a cross between a high-end bed and breakfast, and the Ritz-Carlton Club Level: that is what I’m looking for here,” Borisch said. “I want people to be able to sit in a lot of public spaces and meet new friends; I want people to feel like they are going back in time; and I want it

to have every modern convenience.”

When the Hotel Walloon debuted for its inaugural season, it was with a veteran of the Ritz-Carlton brand at the helm to help open the hotel. The experienced hospitality professional had opened nearly 40 Ritz-Carlton hotels throughout his career and had a summer cottage in northern Michigan. Despite the continued functional challenge staff are faced with since the layout was designed with the visitor in mind, Hotel Walloon has since earned the AAA Four Diamond Award for its combined high-level of service, quality, amenities, and attention to detail.

“From the time people walk in, it should put a smile on their face and the design should be so functional that everything they do while they are on the property should be more enjoyable, because of the design,” Borisch said.

To complement the casual, family-friendly Barrel Back Restaurant, Matthew Borisch, owner and operator of the restaurants and



co-founder of Walloon Development LLC, purchased the Walloon Lake Inn shortly thereafter. Located across a small paved road from the shore of Walloon Lake, and a short walk from the hotel, Walloon Lake Inn offers a slightly different experience than the Barrel Back.

Chaplow, who provided design services on the interior of the restaurant, said Walloon Lake Inn had been an existing restaurant—and local favorite—that was reinvented significantly when the Borisch family took over ownership.

“It is always a little tricky, because you are attached to things even if they are not updated or not perfect. It was a risk to redo something everybody knew and loved,” Chaplow said. “They created a fine dining restaurant with a wine bar and outstanding cocktail menu.”

The more than 100-year-old structure was transformed into a high-end restaurant complete with a newly installed commercial-grade kitchen, bar and cocktail lounge, and dining area. Complete with dark wood paneling and richly textured wall coverings; vibrant, red leather chairs lining the circular wooden bar; and a baby grand piano; the lounge greets visitors with a step back into a bygone era.

Decadent light fixtures, leather banquettes and chairs, a collection of vintage and antique silver trays, and a built-in wine vault with glass walls continues in similar bold fashion. Functionally speaking, the dining room was intentionally designed without built-in booth seating to provide flexibility for events. Instead, table tops were selected to accommodate large groups.

“It was really designed to feel moody and dramatic,” Chaplow said. “It is really about creating that sense of story, escape, charm, and warmth.”

More recently, Walloon Lake Village’s

redevelopment also spans the length of the Michigan Route 75 within the community with the completion of a nearly \$750,000 road and streetscape project in late 2016. While Borisch worked with civil engineers to help the design and right-of-way of the roadway, the collaborative initiative was made possible through the work of local businesses, Melrose County Downtown Development Authority, Charlevoix County, Michigan Department of Transportation, and a Federal Transportation Alternatives Program grant.

New asphalt was laid under Melrose Township DDA’s management, while new sidewalks, crosswalks, landscape enhancements, brick pavers, and streetlights were included under the approximately \$200,000 Federal TAP grant.

Borisch said when it comes to the financial aspect, he noted based on the increase in the assessed valuations appropriate to the increased property values just on the lakes in the last four-to-five years since investing in the redevelopment, it would have provided enough tax benefits to the townships to do it five times over again.

“One commercial area of a lake that has 900 houses that are \$1 million plus homes and there is a grocery store,” Borisch said. “It was waiting to happen.”

Now as the community once again bustles with energy and tourism—there are busy days in the summer where boaters have to wait to park in one of the 60 public slips—Borisch noted if one looks around, the village is filled with people enjoying themselves and that is probably what he enjoys most about the entire process.

“I like to design things, like the input into the hotel and see it constructed, and see people enjoy it,” Borisch said. “Design should bring joy to the users. If it doesn’t, then you missed the mark.”

