

BWB Micro-Grant Application

Merced Community Building Blocks

Merced, California

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Relevant weblinks--

Merced City Arts and Culture Advisory Commission:

https://www.cityofmerced.org/depts/cityclerk/boards_n_commissions/arts_and_culture_advisory_commission/default.asp

Merced County Arts Council: <http://www.artsmerced.org/>

Playhouse Merced: <http://www.playhousemerced.com/>

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funding request \$1080

total project cost \$3046

No previous BWB or BM grants

Project Information

To build our community, we want to create a set of giant blocks, decorated by community members, to engage residents in a “Jenga”-type game at local events for shared fun. Blocks would be available for community gatherings of all sorts, encouraging people to interact with each other in joyful ways and bond with their neighbors.

The City of Merced is experiencing a large influx of affluence and gentrification of downtown. We have a new University of California which is spurring fast growth, maybe faster than the community can adapt. Our population is diverse and segregated, with wide income gaps and language barriers to overcome. The purpose of this project is to bring people together in interactive play to experience shared fun to connect neighbors and improve intergroup relations in the community.

The project will begin at the announcement of funding. We will collect estimates and order materials right away in August with the debut of the finished product on December 7, 2019, at the Annual Christmas Parade. Insurance estimates Parade attendance is up to 30,000 people and about 10,000 stay afterward for a Tree Lighting ceremony. These events occur on Bob Hart Square, in the center of downtown.

The Community Building Blocks will be created by the community and for the community. The blocks are sized for a “Jenga”-type game but can also be used to build various structures. Grant funds will be used to purchase materials only. Everything else will come from the community. Blocks will be cut by the set building crew at Playhouse Merced Community Theater. Then, community volunteers will paint the blocks in any way they like. We expect to recruit volunteers from the general population and from local organizations. We are prepared to accommodate up to 500 volunteer decorators for these blocks.

The blocks will be setup in the center of Bob Hart Square and available for play as a “Jenga” type game throughout the day of the Annual Christmas Parade until the Tree Lighting is done. We expect at least 5,000 people will experience the game as players or as observers. In addition to observational measures, participants and observers will be surveyed on their community attitudes.

The blocks will be stored and managed by the local Arts Center and offered for use by other towns throughout Merced County. We expect the game to appear at many local events and become a favorite. Through the interactive participation and shared fun, we hope to strengthen the sense of community in Merced.

“Merced is a City on the Rise” according to our Mayor, Mike Murphy. Merced is a medium sized City of about 85,000 residents. We have a new University of California campus in town bring lots of new investment throughout the City. Social class divisions have widened significantly. We are also the County seat hosting about 325,000 residents in in California’s agricultural Central Valley. Merced County is underserved, especially in our unincorporated towns. About 42% of the population do not speak English, and about half (47%) are on welfare benefits for poverty.

Our local community is struggling both socially and economically. Our diverse population is splintering. Students dislike the Townies who dislike the students. The large Latino population (46%) is isolated on the wrong side of the freeway through town. The Hmong and Lao populations (13%) are equally isolated by language barriers. Our small Black population is completely disenfranchised. The expensive new area of town near the University is separated from the rest of the City by large suburban expanses and lots of gates. Larry Harvey claimed that communities are not born out of sentiment, they emerge from shared struggles. Merced has struggles but we are not sharing to overcome them. Our community is suffering for it. Interactive participation in a game setting would help us to get acquainted across our divisions. Shared fun will soften negative impressions. The Merced community needs such opportunities. The current project would begin to fill that need and build resilience into our community.

The game produced by this project, although spearheaded by the City, would be shared with communities throughout Merced County. The blocks are easily transported and durable. Administration of these “gifts” would be handled by the Merced Multicultural Arts Center office and easily accessible to other community groups and towns.

Projected Timeline:

August, if funding is received, lumber and paint quotes will be collected and compared. Accounting processes established. Materials purchased. Recruit volunteer carpenters to cut the blocks. Arrange necessary equipment and supplies.

September, collect all materials and cut the blocks. Book facilities for decoration at the Merced Multicultural Arts Center. Begin promoting the project.

October, organize community volunteers to paint the blocks. Recruit organizations and individual community members. Begin painting sessions at the Multicultural Arts Center.

November, finish painting sessions. Promote project launch at the Annual Christmas Parade.

December 7, 2019, launch the project at the Merced Christmas Parade gathering. Blocks will be setup in Bob Hart Square on Main Street, the City's main gathering space, for residents to play while waiting for the Parade and Tree Lighting. Evaluations will be solicited.

December, schedule other events for the blocks and arrange transportation to those events. Establish procedures for sharing blocks across Merced County.

2020 and Beyond, Share the blocks at many local events in communities within the City and across the County.

Community members are engaged at every step through the Community Building Blocks project. Volunteers will paint and decorate the blocks in their own ways. Painting will occur in small groups to encourage social interaction. The finished blocks will be available for play in the community at large. Players interact with the art and with each other to succeed in the game. The game is fun to watch so observers are also engaged in the play, encouraging more participation.

Collaborators: The City of Merced Arts and Culture Advisory Commission, Merced County Arts Council, Playhouse Merced and the Merced Multicultural Arts Center are collaborating on this project. Community participants will be recruited from the general population and from groups such as the Hmong Center, The Lao Association, the Rescue Mission, Boys and Girls Club, Senior Center, the Merced Soccer Academy, the Rotary Clubs, Lions Club, the Greater Merced Chamber of Commerce, the Merced Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and others.

The Community Building Blocks will last many years, given solid construction and minimal care. We will make extra blocks to replace those that may go missing to retain a full "Jenga" set of 54 blocks. The blocks will be managed by the Merced Multicultural Arts Center and will be available for local events in Merced City and shared throughout Merced County. We expect regular use to continue for years into the future.

When we hear laughter and people talking to one another while playing with Community Building Blocks, we will feel the glow of success. Observers will rate the level of laughter in the crowd on scales, from 1-10. We will track the number of people actively playing the game, and the number of passive observers in the crowd to indicate community engagement. We will record comments we hear about the game. And distribute a brief survey at the launch event, the Annual Christmas Parade, to assess community attitudes and positive feelings toward neighbors.

The 10 Principles of Burning Man are embraced by this project in several ways. Most importantly, shared Communal Effort through organizational and individual Participation will be necessary to create the blocks. The resulting games are Participatory and interactive. Everyone can be involved as creators and as players, consistent with the Principles of Radical Inclusion and Radical Self-Expression through art. The game is clean and leaves no MOOP behind. The game experience is Immediate fun for both players and observers. The result is a warm and joyful feeling which bonds people together and builds our community. The “Jenga” game provides our community with a shared struggle (of less significance than the pressing challenges we face) to build community out of division and encourage a sense of belonging together that we hope will grow and endure.

Project Leads:

Monika Modest, MFA, will lead the project. Monika has successfully led 14 different community-engaged art projects around Merced since 2009. One recent project involved 1400 community member volunteers who painted ceramic poppies to decorate the entrance to Bob Hart Square (the City’s downtown gathering space for community events). Monika has the experience and talent to successfully complete the current project.

Colton Dennis will provide support and access to facilities at the Merced Multicultural Arts Center to house the project. Colton is Executive Director of the Center and heads the Merced County Arts Council. Colton has worked successfully with Monika in the past on many projects.

Alyse Neubert, Artistic Director at Playhouse Merced will facilitate construction on their premises. Colton enjoys excellent relations with the Playhouse, being their former Director for many years.

Budget

Materials:

Lumber to cut 75 blocks (size 2” x 4” x 10.5”), 54 for game, plus replacements)

9 each 2” x 4” x 8’ planks	\$ 300
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Sandpaper (120-180 grit)	\$ 20
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Platform base for the game structure

1 each 2" x 4" x 6' plank	\$ 20
18" x 18" x 3/4" plywood board	\$ 30
4 each threaded feet	\$ 50
15 kreg screws	\$ 10
Paint (many colors!)	
Interior/Exterior high-gloss enamel (25 quarts)	\$ 600
Unforeseen costs (about 5%)	\$ 50
Subtotal materials	\$1080
Tools, rental equivalents:	
Orbital sander	\$25
Drill kit	\$20
Miter saw	\$50
Circular saw	\$50
Kreg jig	\$15
Tape measure	\$ 1
Pencil	\$ 0
Safety gear (e.g. goggles)	\$ 5
Subtotal tools	\$ 166
Labor (estimated at \$20 per hour):	
Construction of blocks	\$ 100
Painting of blocks (463 surfaces)	\$ 400
Administration for sharing blocks	\$ 500
Transportation of blocks	\$ 200
Subtotal labor	\$1200
Venue for construction at Playhouse Merced	\$ 100
Storage at Multicultural Arts Center	\$ 500
Subtotal	\$ 600

Total project cost

\$3046

Grant funds will only be used to buy materials to construct the building blocks. All other needs of the project will be donated by collaborators. Tools and workspace will be provided by Playhouse Merced. Labor will be done entirely by community volunteers. Blocks will be stored and managed by the Merced Multicultural Arts Center. And the overall project will be managed by the City Arts and Culture Advisory Commission, with the City of Merced.

We are going to make the biggest blocks we can afford that are also reasonably easy for anyone to lift and place. If we have more money, we make bigger blocks (more lumber and paint). If we have less money, we make smaller blocks (less lumber and paint).

I am a Burner. I learned about this opportunity on the Burning Man Volunteer Announcements email list and later in the Jackrabbit Speaks. I also saw it on the Burners Without Borders/San Francisco page on Facebook.