Challenge or Opportunity:
The City of Laconia has been looking to revive its downtown for several years now. Many merchants have closed their shops due to the lack of visitors. The downtown also has a legacy of negative perceptions: from a rough biker town to folks with drug problems; challenging traffic patterns and no parking, and an overall underwhelming public space. The City started a campaign about a year ago called *Re-Imagine Laconia*, to engage the community and take back its downtown along with two other key areas of the City. Using the adage “if you build it they will come” the City looked to first find ways to draw visitors to the area, and then once they were here make them comfortable, and hopefully they would visit the shops and restaurants. At the same time the City was vying for the pumpkin festival in hopes to get an event that would draw families to the downtown; the City enlisted Loureiro Engineering Associates, Inc. to assist with the planning, design and engineering to revitalize a section of the downtown and make it inviting.

Approach or Solution:
The area along Main Street known as "Water Street Extension" was commonly referred to as the "concrete courtyard" by local merchants due to its lack of plantings and expansive areas of concrete pavement. Over the years the concrete developed cracks and settled leaving a very unappealing impression. The area became prone to puddling and icing. Accessing store fronts became hazardous leading to an even greater aversion by visitors. Because the area was viewed as so unsightly, the City began using it as the main snow stockpiling area for the downtown sidewalks.
Loureiro worked with the Re-Imagine Laconia group by first drawing on the ideas and needs of the merchants. A charrette session was held that allowed folks to express their ideas: likes and dislikes. Soon a vision was forming where folks would gather to a park like space, whimsical displays of art would dollop the landscaping and a musician would be filling the streets with a welcoming melody. *Bring the people to a place where they want to stay, buy an ice cream, window gaze in the shops and sit and take in the great City of Laconia* was the theme that we heard from the merchants. We also heard the need to make it a great place for all seasons, *so it can be a winter wonderland too.*

No one wanted to talk about or even really understood the mishmash of utilities underling the area, except for the DPW. They knew that no matter how pretty the pictures looked on the board nothing was going to happen until someone sorted out the mess out. So Loureiro met with the DPW and researched the underground river path and myriad of water, stormwater, gas, electric, and telephone crisscrossing each other many times.

Since its inception in 1974, Loureiro has developed a knack for retrofitting municipal systems. Whether its stormwater, wastewater, buildings or roads, Loureiro has always found a solution that exceeds our client’s expectations. Retrofitting is a challenge not many engineers have the patience for and would just rather “blow it up” and start new. With the pressures the group was getting from the council to keep costs low and the demand by the merchants to bring back the customers, and then hearing news that Laconia won the bid to host the Pumpkin Festival in 4 months; Loureiro knew it had to work its retrofit magic and deliver something Great!

Loureiro’s solution included enhancing the landscape with several native and ornamental perennial plantings, improving the drainage and management of stormwater, sorting out the utility conflicts and then providing a focal point for visitors to be drawn within the downtown Main Street business district. A series of "drainage gardens" bounded by walkways was designed to address these issues and put an end to the puddles and ice that was keeping customers away. Knowing that Laconia is the *City of the Lakes*, water quality had to be
an issue that was addressed. By sloping the pavement of the walkways the flow of water is directed to multiple drains placed among the plantings. The water is filtered by the plantings prior to being carried away by an underground stormwater pipe and into the underground river. Benches as well as a table with seating for four and a pergola were also included along the planted islands creating an inviting environment for pedestrians to gather. As a last minute idea, the Re-Imagine Laconia found an old mill stone and it became the focal point as a water feature.

Impact:

The new Drainage Gardens collectively sustain the spirit of the Re-Imagine Laconia group by providing an innovative solution to the dilapidated infrastructure while at the same time providing a welcoming space for residents and visitors to gather and enjoy downtown Laconia.