

the review

the official magazine of the  michigan municipal league

May/June 2011

COVER STORY:
**DOWNTOWN
FERNDALE**

Destination Downtown



**PICTURESQUE
PLYMOUTH**

**DOWNTOWNS
OF PROMISE**

**MASON LIVING
IN THE MOMENT**

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The official magazine of the Michigan Municipal League

Features

6

Downtown: The Heart and Soul of a Community

By Sara Folland

10

Gaslight Village “Re-Ignited” Downtown East Grand Rapids

By Steven J. Van
Steenhuysen

14

Capital Conference Recap

16

Paving the Way Complete Streets Myths Debunked

By Scott T. Clein, P.E.,
LEED AP

20

Downtown Plymouth: Not Just a Walk in the Park

By Tony Bruscatto
and Shawn Keough

24 COVER STORY Beacon of Hope

By Christine Walden Hughes

28

Destination Mason

By Marco A. Broggio

30

Losing a Retail Anchor

By Christina McKenna

34

Promising Downtowns Renewing Michigan’s Distressed Communities

By John Iacoangeli, David
Campbell, and Angela Fortino,
Beckett and Raeder, Inc. and
Joseph Borgstrom, MSHDA



On the Cover:

Ferndale Mayor Dave Coulter and Ferndale DDA Executive Director Cristina Sheppard-Decius stand in front of the “Fantastic Ferndale” mural in the downtown district. The mural represents the diversity and creativity that exists in the community.



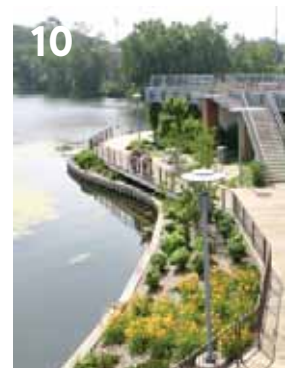
Columns

5 **Executive Director’s Message**

33 **Legal Spotlight**

38 **Northern Field Report**

46 **Municipal Q&A**



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the review

The official magazine of the Michigan Municipal League

Volume 84, Number 3

Better Communities. Better Michigan.

The Michigan Municipal League is the one clear voice for Michigan communities. Our goals are to aid them in creating desirable and unique places through legislative and judicial advocacy; to provide educational opportunities for elected and appointed officials; and to assist municipal leaders in administering community services. Our mission is that of a non-profit, but we act with the fervor of entrepreneurs to passionately push change for better communities and a better Michigan.

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Please recycle this magazine

Placemaking Matters

There's been a lot of talk lately on why we need to cut taxes to boost the economy and grow more business in Michigan. There's no denying that business owners would love to pay less in taxes—it might even encourage them to invest more in an expanded workforce and infrastructure. We're not arguing the point that Michigan needs to create a more business-friendly climate as part of the overall strategy.

But let's set all that aside for a moment to answer two simple questions:

1. How many of us know a young person—maybe even your own son or daughter—who has recently moved or is planning to move to Chicago?
2. How many of us know someone who has recently moved or is planning to move to Sioux Falls? (In case that doesn't ring a bell, it's the largest city in South Dakota.)

I'm willing to bet a whole lot more fingers were counted for Chicago. Yet, Illinois is currently ranked 23rd on the State Business Tax Climate Index by the nonpartisan Tax Foundation, while South Dakota tops the chart at number one. Michigan, incidentally, is currently sitting at 17th. So what's going on here? Shouldn't the Index ranking mean our young people are flocking to the high plains to fulfill their American dreams?


Not a fair comparison, you say? After all, Chicago is a cosmopolitan city with world-class shopping and dining, an endless array of theater, museums, art galleries and music in an incredibly vibrant downtown—and with fast and easy mass transit to enjoy them all. Who wouldn't rather visit or live in Chicago?

Exactly. Today's young people don't choose a place to live and work based on the tax base. Time and again, studies have shown our most talented workers choose where they want to live first, and get a job. They choose a place where they can enjoy a particular lifestyle that's built on the core assets they value. Increasingly, that high quality of life has come to mean things like great physical design and walkability, cheap and efficient mass transit, quality schools, arts and culture, sustainability...Is all this starting to sound familiar? That's what our Center for 21st Century Communities concept is all about.

That's also what rebuilding our downtowns is about: creating a sense of identity and community, making a place where people want to work, live, and play. This issue of *The Review* focuses on communities that realize place matters. You'll find articles about celebrated downtowns throughout our state.

But you can't build an environment like that out of thin air. Love 'em or hate 'em, taxes exist for a reason: to pay for the services and amenities we share as a community, a state, and a nation. Sure, we can all get a little smarter on how we spend public money. We can all find innovative ways to streamline and become more cost-effective.

If you were at the League's Capital Conference in April, you know how important these issues are, and how hard the League is fighting for our downtowns and all they stand for. We brought in experts to talk about smarter ways to fix the state's budget mess not just for today, but for tomorrow and on toward the future. We talked about how to work with less and what we can do to hang on to what we have.

It's a conversation that will still be going on this fall, when hopefully you'll join us at the 2011 Convention, Oct. 4-7 in Grand Rapids. It's never been more important to show our solidarity as the leaders of Michigan's municipalities. In the meantime, remember to get involved at your upcoming Regional meetings too, in May and June. This is the time to present that innovative municipal program or project for the League's annual Community Excellence Awards. It's the chance to share your successes with your peers, in making place matter. 

THE PROSPERITY AGENDA RADIO SHOW

The Michigan Municipal League is taking its message to one of the largest radio stations in the Midwest—News/Talk 760 WJR. Throughout 2011, League Director & CEO Dan Gilmartin will host the “Michigan Prosperity Agenda” radio show that challenges listeners to help make Michigan a better place to live, work, and play by creating vibrant and prosperous local communities.



The show is sponsored by the League and the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) and is scheduled to air at 7 pm on the fourth Wednesday of every month. We encourage all our members and friends to tune in for each show. For those outside the WJR listening audience, you can hear segments of the show at mml.org by clicking on the Prosperity Agenda logo you see here.

Daniel P. Gilmartin
League executive director and CEO
734-669-6302, dpg@mml.org







By Sara Folland

DOWNTOWN: THE HEART AND SOUL OF A COMMUNITY

The image of downtowns was immortalized in the classic Petula Clark song, “Downtown”: “You can forget all your troubles, forget all your cares, so go downtown. Things will be great when you’re downtown...everything is waiting for you downtown.” Those hum-worthy lyrics conjure pleasant images and memories of downtowns. While the song was a No. 1 hit way back in 1965, the words resonate even stronger today. Across Michigan, downtowns are integral parts of communities both large and small, and their revitalization efforts provide benefits to the greater region.

Why are downtowns so important? “Downtowns represent the historical and authentic ‘self’ of the community,” said Patricia Fitzpatrick, director of Downtown Development in the city of Holland. “They are the heart and soul of the community.” Downtowns are often the centers for not only commerce, but also for parades, festivals, and community events. As Kim Musolff, director of the Sturgis Downtown Development Authority notes, local residents often have fond memories associated with a downtown, its businesses, and events. Many downtowns are also the historic commercial center of the area.

A vibrant downtown is a benefit to the entire community and its surrounding area. The Michigan Downtowns Association (MDA) was formed to encourage good development, redevelopment, and improvement of communities throughout Michigan, with special emphasis on downtown areas. The downtowns pictured at left represent MDA board members’ communities of Marquette, Holland, Sturgis, Milford, and Alpena.

Milford's Main Street, located in western Oakland County, serves as the "public square of the community," says DDA Director Ann Barnette. "It's where neighbors meet, business owners mingle and the town comes together." Citizens take pride in their downtown, and understand that the central business district often serves as the face of the community.

However, several decades ago, many downtowns were faced with a variety of challenges. In response, Downtown Development Authorities (DDA), Principal Shopping Districts,

"These projects are part of the overall connectivity plan for Marquette's downtown that provided an impetus for over \$40 million in downtown properties. Interest in rehabilitation and reuse of downtown properties is at an all-time high. The taxable value of downtown Marquette's properties has tripled over the last 20 years," said Mona Lang, executive director of the Marquette Downtown Development Authority.

In Sturgis, the DDA purchased and renovated three downtown buildings, two of which had been vacant for years. "We

IT'S WHERE NEIGHBORS MEET, BUSINESS OWNERS MINGLE AND THE TOWN COMES TOGETHER.

Business Improvement Districts, and other entities were created to encourage economic development, historic preservation, and the revitalization of downtowns.

The projects and plans for development in each community are unique and tailored to meet its individual needs. In downtown Marquette, for example, completed projects include infrastructure, parking lot improvements, streetscape, the development of the Marquette Commons, the creation of pedestrian walkways to connect rear parking lots to the business area, and the extension of bike and pedestrian pathways to connect the downtown to existing citywide paths.

have realized many benefits from these projects," noted Musolff. "They were in a block that was pretty desolate, but thanks to these efforts, it is now a thriving retail block." Two of the three buildings were sold and are currently occupied by successful businesses; the third is still owned by the DDA, but occupied by the Open Door Gallery, an artist cooperative.



The Sturgis DDA purchased and renovated three downtown buildings; the once desolate area is now part of a thriving retail block.

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Downtown Alpena's revitalization efforts included a façade grant program, a new rental incentive program to support new businesses, participation in the Michigan State Housing Development Authority's rental rehabilitation program, development of a business support team and a downtown gift card, redevelopment district liquor licenses, brownfield incentives, and a Neighborhood Enterprise Zone in the downtown to encourage investment in older properties.

"Much of our growth can be attributed to the programs the DDA and the city of Alpena provide to make such investment in our downtown area desirable. The DDA Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds have made this possible, as we have clearly demonstrated that public improvements and support lead to private investment," commented Lynn Kolasa, executive director of the Alpena DDA.

The success of a downtown relies upon the support of downtown businesses, property owners, and the community as

MICHIGAN DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATION (MDA)

The MDA was formed to encourage good development, redevelopment, and improvement of communities throughout Michigan, with special emphasis on downtown areas. One of the driving forces in the recent interest in Michigan's downtowns, the MDA boasts over 200 members and holds quarterly conferences throughout the state.

GOALS OF THE MDA

- To provide a forum for its members on revitalization issues.
- To educate its members, the general public, state legislators, and other public officials about the best tools for the improvement of communities.
- To promote and encourage the implementation of effective, comprehensive legal and financing instruments to further such improvement.
- To study current legislation and develop new legislation strategies.
- To perform studies on the effectiveness of revitalization efforts.
- To assist member communities in interacting and networking with one another.
- To work cooperatively with other statewide agencies to further downtown development.

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a whole. According to Fitzpatrick, components of a successful downtown include "healthy retailers, residential units, and offices and services. Commitment to quality, detail, and collaboration among stakeholders are also essential." She also noted that, in Holland, "a public-private partnership has helped secure the most innovative projects that are unique to our downtown, such as our Snowmelt system."

Lynn Kolasa agrees. "None of this works without the support of the city, the property owners, and the business owners who want to participate in its continued improvements. Additionally, our partnerships throughout the county reinforce the value of the downtown to the entire community with the recognition that our revitalized downtown is a critical part of the growth of the community as a whole."

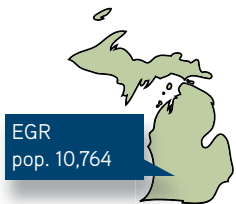
"The success of a downtown can be measured in both tangible and intangible ways," commented Lang. Increases in property values, residential population, traffic, retail and

restaurant sales, and decreases in vacancy rates measure the tangible effects of investment in downtown districts. Intangible results such as community pride in the downtown and sense of place are more difficult to measure, but are evident in the willingness for the community to invest in their downtown."

A vibrant downtown is a benefit to the entire community and its surrounding area. "A vital downtown center helps keep property values strong and enhances the quality of life for the whole community. The downtown has a direct impact on retaining and recruiting business and investment not only in the city, but the region," noted Lang. 

Sara Folland is the executive director of the Michigan Downtown Association. You may reach her at 989-660-0409 or sfolland@michigandowntowns.com.

GASLIGHT VILLAGE “RE-IGNITED” DOWNTOWN EAST GRAND RAPIDS



SUCCESSFUL SUBURBAN DOWNTOWNS FLOURISH when they provide an alternative to typical suburban commercial areas. Downtowns that cater to entertainment, dining, and services in a vibrant, mixed-use environment attract not just the young creative class, but also families and older citizens who enjoy walking, dining, and shopping in an active downtown center. The city of East Grand Rapids, about four miles east of downtown Grand Rapids in Kent County, is a prime example of how small business districts can be “re-ignited” with a vision for a more vibrant downtown, and a partnership with private developers who share that vision.

EARLY 20TH CENTURY PLACEMAKING

East Grand Rapids is the perfect example of the streetcar suburb—it was the Grand Rapids Street Railway Company, in 1897, that built the Ramona Park amusement park on the shores of Reeds Lake, bringing people from nearby Grand Rapids to enjoy the park and lakefront. The streetcars first brought people to play, then later to live. The village (later city) of East Grand Rapids grew around Reeds Lake and Ramona Park to become an affluent and desirable location as the Grand Rapids area grew and prospered in the 20th century.

Although Ramona Park was demolished in 1949, the small business district across from the park had established itself as the downtown area for East Grand Rapids. This small center, known

locally as Gaslight Village because of its gas fueled street lights, contained several small stores and businesses serving the growing nearby neighborhoods and visitors to the parks and beaches at the Reeds Lake shore. In the 1960s, East Grand Rapids High School and the city hall/community center and library were built near Gaslight Village, further cementing the district’s status as the central focus area of the city. In 1966, the Jacobson’s Department Store chain built an upscale store that anchored the district and brought shoppers from a wide area.

A DEVASTATING LOSS

Like many small downtowns, however, Gaslight Village declined in the 1970s and ‘80s as shoppers began choosing malls

and “big box” retailers. Vacancies were common and the business mix failed to bring shoppers to stores other than Jacobson’s. The city adopted a master plan in 1999 that recognized the decline of downtown and suggested ways to encourage new retail and services, provide convenient parking, and encourage pedestrian interconnection with neighborhoods and the Reeds Lake parks. In 2002, however, the Jacobson’s chain declared bankruptcy and the store was closed. With a large, vacant shell dominating the streetscape, many wondered if this devastating loss would lead to further decline in Gaslight Village.

“Reeds Lake had always been an economic engine for East Grand Rapids,” said Brian Donovan, city manager since 1993. “All of the planning was done with



The redevelopment plan for Gaslight Village included a mixed-use environment to attract not just the young creative class, but also families and older citizens who enjoy walking, dining, and shopping in an active downtown center.



Public festivals bring thousands of visitors to Gaslight Village. (right) Gaslight Village is now a pleasing mix of old and new—a vibrant and charming downtown.

the idea of connecting the lake, parks, and business district into one walkable area, just like in the Ramona Park era. All that was needed was a developer to see the vision and turn it into reality.”

JADE PIG COMES IN WITH A VISION

However, a local developer saw the potential in Gaslight Village. Jade Pig Ventures, a Grand Rapids firm that had developed several commercial centers in the Grand Rapids area, had a vision for a revitalized Gaslight Village. In 2004, Jade Pig submitted a Planned Unit Development (PUD) rezoning request to demolish the vacant department store and a nearby medical office and construct new,

pedestrian-oriented shops and offices. These businesses would be bolstered by the construction of four new condominium buildings, ranging from five to twelve stories high. Jade Pig hoped that bringing new residents to Gaslight Village would provide a larger core market for the planned new stores and restaurants and bring vitality and safety to the area. This strategy had been successful in suburban downtowns elsewhere in Michigan, such as in Royal Oak and Birmingham.

Although the city initially supported the project, opposition to the high-rise element quickly materialized. The SaveEastGR coalition vociferously argued against the project at planning commission and city commission hearings. During the course of review, the developer agreed to reduce the height of the tallest building to seven stories. The PUD ordinance for the Jade Pig Redevelopment was finally passed on October 18, 2004.

“This is perhaps a classic example of a private/public partnership,” said Scott Wierda of Jade Pig Ventures. “The city manager, city staff, mayor, planning commission, and elected city commissioners understood the importance of working together with the private investment community to bring about reinvestment and change. Without their willingness to be open to fresh ideas and engage in conversation about the importance of Gaslight Village to the city, the level of reinvestment likely would not have happened.”

CITIZENS WEIGH IN

The East Grand Rapids city charter allows citizens to circulate a petition to force a zoning decision to go before the voters in a referendum. The SaveEastGR coalition gathered the requisite number of signatures, and the approval of the Jade Pig Redevelopment was placed on a referendum for the next election. The next several months saw a spirited campaign between the SaveEastGR coalition and the Re-Ignite Gaslight group that had formed to support the project. On February 22, 2005, 58 percent of the eligible voters came to the polls (for an election at which there were no statewide or nationwide races). The project prevailed, with 56 percent of the vote favoring construction of the approved project.

GASLIGHT VILLAGE IS RE-IGNITED

The retail/office phase of the project was completed in 2007. Several new two-story retail buildings evoke the character of a small, village downtown. The façade of one of the new buildings was salvaged from an old bank building that had been demolished in downtown Grand Rapids. The result is a pleasing mix of old and new, that encourages strolling and window shopping.

The development includes reuse of the old two-level Jacobson’s parking structure, now set off by a striking sculpture. Public art and sculptures adorn the streets. With its fountain, the plaza on Bagley Street provides a focal point as well as an attractive area to sit or stroll.

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Today, the revitalized Gaslight Village (complete with new gas-fueled lamps) has several new restaurants, upscale shops, and offices. Existing businesses on the south side of Wealthy Street have rehabilitated their buildings and existing businesses have expanded, leading to a vibrant, charming downtown.

This redevelopment has leveraged other improvements as well. Working with Jade Pig and other Gaslight Village property owners, the city completed a \$2,500,000 streetscape plan on Wealthy Street in 2006. This project included a snowmelt system, intersection improvements, new sidewalks, street furniture, street trees, and landscaping. New gaslight street lamps add to the ambiance. In 2006, the community center/library was replaced with a new LEED-certified building, with a green roof, solar energy system, and water-conserving plumbing. A dramatic deck overlooking Reeds Lake behind the new community center is completely pervious, preventing runoff that affects the lake's water quality.


REDEVELOPMENT ENCOURAGES NEW DEVELOPMENT

In 2006, the city revised its master plan for Gaslight Village, to recognize the redeveloped downtown and to encourage further development. This plan encourages more residential development near Gaslight Village and recommends allowing a mix of densities in the nearby neighborhoods, and also allowing a mix of small scale businesses and dwelling units adjacent to the business district. The plan further encourages pedestrian access and interconnectivity with Reeds Lake and area trails.

Although the downturn in the housing market has stalled development of the condominium buildings, the Gaslight Village redevelopment has thus far been a success. Public festivals, such as the East Grand Rapids Clothesline Art Fair and the Reeds Lake Run, bring thousands of visitors to Gaslight Village. Football at East Grand Rapids High brings out legions of fans who pack the restaurants and shops before and after games.



Outdoor concerts are held on the Reeds Lake deck, and the library/community center hosts numerous public events.

With the ultimate addition of new housing to the area, Gaslight Village and East Grand Rapids have positioned themselves for a strong future. As such, Gaslight Village can serve as an example for how other communities can work with the private sector to “re-ignite” their downtowns. 

Steven J. Van Steenhuyse, AICP, is a senior planner at LSL Planning, Inc. in Grand Rapids. You may reach him at 616-336-7750 or vansteen@lsplanning.com.

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Tough News from Our Capital

Local officials from all over Michigan gathered to hear the latest news from the state: "The Future of Revenue Sharing—Is There One?"; "How to Fix the State's Budget Mess"; "Tax Reform: A Look at Long-Term Budget Fixes." On a triumphant note, the League recognized the extraordinary lobbying efforts of Hamtramck Mayor Karen Majewski, Kentwood Mayor Richard Root, Miller Canfield Attorney Mike McGee, and the city of Howell.





Cautious Optimism

The room was packed when attendees had the opportunity to address Bill Rustem, director of strategy, office of the governor, in the session on "Cost-Saving Reform Legislation." The new emergency manager legislation, the battle to keep road funding dollars, Complete Streets, and "Economic Development Tools for the 21st Century" were also highlighted. The Expo Hall offered scores of vendors ready to help municipalities with their service needs, and to cap off the event, the League's Lansing staff delivered a message of cautious optimism in the closing general session of the 2011 Capital Conference.



PAVING THE WAY



{ Complete Streets Myths Debunked }

By Scott T. Clein, P.E., LEED AP

Pedestrian-friendly...walkable... You've most likely heard, and used, these terms when describing the future vision of your community. You've also likely heard about Complete Streets and assumed it was the same thing.

Technically you're right...and wrong. While Complete Streets initiatives do improve the walkability of roadways, the concept includes so much more. Before your community takes a dive into the Complete Streets waters, you need to understand whether or not you'll need a life vest.

In 2010, Michigan joined a growing list of states that enacted legislation related to Complete Streets. Two bills passed that added the phrase to the legislative vernacular and requires the Michigan Department of Transportation to create a Complete Streets policy that serves as a model for communities.

But what is the concept really all about? Below are common definitions that should be considered during Complete Streets planning and discussions.

COMPLETE STREETS is a movement that designs and operates roadway corridors promoting safe access for all users. Roadways, therefore, should accommodate vehicles, transit, bicyclists, and pedestrians of all ages and abilities.

UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY emerged as an offshoot of barrier-free design. It's the idea that good design must take into account the age and ability of all users from the beginning, even if it means exceeding minimum standards to allow for a better use of space.

GREEN STREETS encourages sustainability in the design and construction of roadways by using the latest best management practices, such as rain gardens for improving stormwater quality.

LIVING STREETS states pedestrians must be properly included in transportation designs. It goes beyond simply adding sidewalks to include active use of the corridor, such as outdoor dining and sales, and neighborhood festivals.

With a clearer understanding of Complete Streets improvements, here are five common myths that may get in the way of planning and implementation.

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1 Myth 1: It's expensive.

Designs in line with Complete Streets philosophies don't have to cost a lot, especially when included in annual capital improvement projects. Most communities have existing funding for road maintenance and related upgrades. When resurfacing a roadway, for example, implement bike lanes for little to no added cost.

This piece-by-piece approach may seem out of place when attempting to promote connectivity, but it mimics road maintenance approaches and allows the largest benefits from shrinking budgets.

2 Myth 2: On-street bike lanes are unsafe.

On the contrary, studies show that on-street bike lanes, when properly marked and signed, are safer for bicyclists and pedestrians than sidewalks.

The Transportation Research Board published a study by William Moritz at the University of Washington referencing the Relative Danger Index, which measures bicycle-accident frequency to distance traveled. A higher number represents a greater danger. Sidewalks have an RDI of 5.30 while streets with dedicated bike lanes have an RDI of 0.50.

Clearly, it's a misperception that bicyclists are at greater risk on roadway bike lanes. This on-street myth is also perpetuated by the notions that drivers won't change their driving habits in the presence of a bicyclist and that roadways are only built for vehicles.

3 Myth 3: It's only for urban communities.

Urban areas will undoubtedly benefit the most from Complete Streets improvements because of dense pedestrian activity. However, let's imagine a rural suburban community that has, during the last 30 years, shifted from primarily agricultural land uses to single-family residential developments.

Typically, these developments are islands surrounded by farmland with intermittent access to an open-shoulder country road. They are not truly connected with other neighborhoods and do not allow residents to safely walk or bicycle outside of their subdivision.

Now imagine the same two-lane country road with a paved bike lane along the shoulder. Then add a large shared-use pathway beside the right-of-way line for pedestrians and less-accomplished bicyclists. The result is safely linked subdivisions and a community that is making a dynamic statement about its values.

4 Myth 4: It negatively impacts traffic flow.

Well...yes, it might. Accommodations for pedestrians and bicyclists may increase driver delay or reduce vehicle speeds. But this is not always a bad thing.

Pedestrian spaces and dedicated bike lanes can create an inviting atmosphere. In addition to promoting a healthier lifestyle, this can help foster the spirit that cool communities seem to have. This so-called "it" factor entices people to live in a neighborhood or city center and directly translates into positive community economic development and financial sustainability.


While there can be repercussions, such as altered traffic patterns that negatively impact surrounding streets, transportation engineers must look at their network holistically and reconsider pavement geometry to encourage safe driving.

5 Myth 5: "We ARE a walkable community, so this won't change our plans."

Some communities have embraced the Complete Streets concept. Still, disagreements between planning and engineering staffs continue largely because of these myths. Simply being

walkable does not make a Complete Street. What about ADA compliance and other street amenities? Significant opportunities spring from combining the power of the planning, engineering, and economic development areas of local government.

Consider an engineering department that actively promotes the construction of smaller roadways to incorporate bike lanes, wide sidewalks, and universal design principles. What if the planning department aligns these improvements with zoning ordinances to encourage mixed-use developments with outdoor dining and pedestrian-scale amenities? Now, the economic development director has added firepower to actively recruit businesses and developments. Uniting these groups can unleash the powerful potential to positively impact a community.

This last point is the overarching benefit that must be understood about Complete Streets. When properly infused into a community, a Complete Streets mentality can help unite economic development, land planning, and transportation engineering for bettering the overall quality of life. All community leaders would benefit from understanding the definitions and implications, but also keeping in mind the myths discussed. With the proper perspective and conviction, Complete Streets can make every Michigan community a better place to live. 

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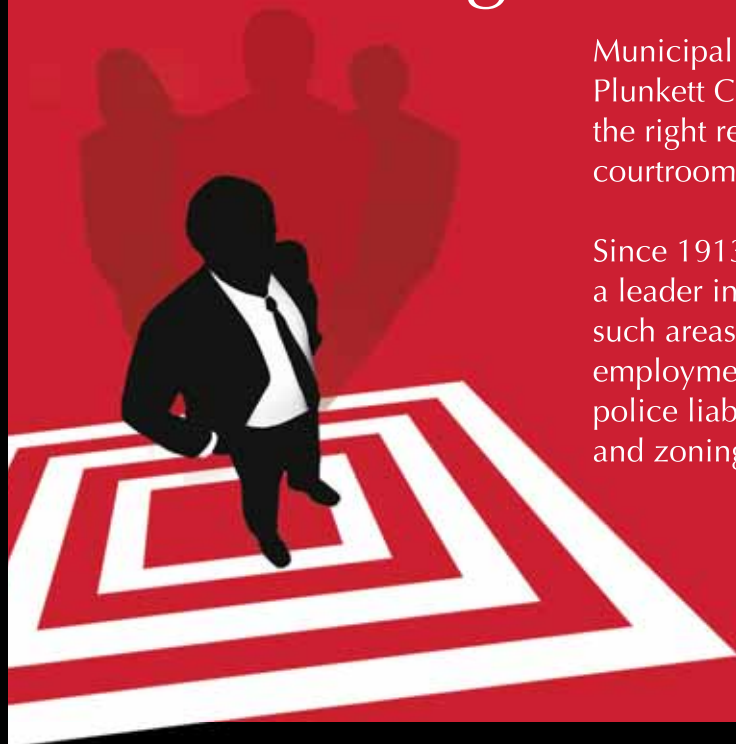
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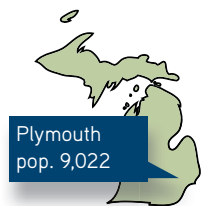


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DOWNTOWN PLYMOUTH:

NOT JUST A WALK IN THE PARK



Downtown Plymouth's picturesque town square has drawn residents, businesses, and visitors for years. Host to a diverse mix of retail shops, restaurants, and more than 100 annual special events, the downtown has also been featured in two major motion pictures and numerous commercials generating significant community buzz and pedestrian traffic for businesses. Behind the scenes, the city of Plymouth and its Downtown Development Authority (DDA) share a long history of working together to create, maintain, and promote their downtown as a destination.

CREATING A GATHERING PLACE

In the 1990s, the city and its DDA implemented a major streetscape project to set the stage for growth and to encourage businesses to locate downtown. Taking its cue from the popularity of Kellogg Park, a green space located in the center of downtown that features mature shade trees and a fountain, the streetscape was intended to spread the park's attributes through the rest of the downtown. Just as Kellogg Park was recognized as a natural gathering place for local residents and events, the intent was to promote downtown Plymouth as a gathering place for the southeast Michigan region.

"We want people to think of our downtown as a fun place to spend their free time," says City Manager Paul Sincock. "Events like our summer concert series in Kellogg Park have become part of many families' afternoons and evenings."

The number one priority was to make residents and visitors feel comfortable and safe. Improving the area's walkability was key. A median was installed in Main Street to provide a mid-block crossing and calm traffic through the corridor. Bump-outs were added to extend the sidewalk area and improve visibility at intersection corners, and brick paver crosswalks were installed to better define crossings and improve aesthetics.

Landscaping elements such as trees and planter boxes were added to expand the green space of Kellogg Park throughout the downtown. The green additions were strategically placed to help buffer the hard infrastructure of downtown like road entryways and parking areas. Replacement of utility poles with decorative lighting provided the finishing touches to the downtown's historic charm.



The growth and economic development that followed affirmed Plymouth's strategic efforts. New businesses and restaurants moved into the downtown, diversifying the former retail-dominated mix and extending downtown activities well into the night. Annual special events like Art in the Park and the Plymouth Ice Festival, grew beyond their traditional limits of Kellogg Park to other downtown areas increasing exposure for other businesses. Families flocked to the community's quiet neighborhoods and lively downtown, slowly changing the residential mix.

Nearly 20 years later, the city and its DDA are focused on protecting their initial investment. A multi-year streetscape, utility, and safety improvement program was planned and designed by Wade Trim to encourage people to explore more of the downtown area on foot and reinforce the city's placemaking elements. In 2010, the asphalt intersection of Main Street and Ann Arbor Trail was rehabilitated to concrete and other upgrades were made within the corridor. The project recently received a Michigan Concrete Association Award of Excellence for the use of decorative concrete.

PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

Pedestrian safety remains at the forefront of the downtown area's functionality. Brick crosswalks were widened to standard widths and realigned to give pedestrians a more consistent visual line of sight for street crossings. Countdown crosswalk signals were installed to make pedestrians aware of the time remaining for a safe crossing, and truncated dome ramps were added to comply with Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

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"Details matter a great deal to us. We took this opportunity to refresh what is great about our downtown and improve the things that could be better," says Paul Sincok. "Some of the bricks had settled unevenly and there were cracks in the concrete. When it comes to safety, we are proudest of the things you don't notice."

Changing the main downtown intersection to concrete will lower maintenance needs and enhance aesthetics. Because the city and DDA were jointly involved from the planning stages of this project, the intersection improvements also provided the opportunity for the city to improve underground water main and storm sewer utilities.

AESTHETIC IMPROVEMENTS

In addition, a decorative "compass" feature was installed in the intersection to serve as a new downtown landmark. The relatively inexpensive element is normally just part of the roadway but it takes center stage when downtown streets are closed during special events like the Memorial Day Parade and Green Street Fair. It is a new piece of Plymouth's identity that helps differentiate it from other area communities.

Aesthetic improvements merged with sustainability when traditional span wire traffic signals were replaced with LED mast arm signals. LED technology reduces operating costs while looking good; the mast arm signal poles match the existing downtown street light poles. A backup battery system with a generator hook up was also added to the lights to maintain traffic if electrical power is lost.

Construction of improvements will continue in 2011 at the intersection of Main Street and Penniman Road. Similar in nature, the improvements will extend the corridor's safety, functionality, and aesthetics.

The success of this project can be attributed, in part, to the willingness of the city of Plymouth and its DDA to work together. They implement projects efficiently by minimizing duplication of efforts, developing cohesive project plans, and allowing members of each group to voice ideas and concerns early. Determinations are also made about whose funds should be used for which improvements. They consider themselves partners who try to do what's right for the city. While what's right is not always the same answer for residents, business owners and visitors, downtown improvements are one common thread that continues to tie all.

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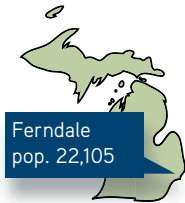


Downtown Ferndale is known for being 'quirky'—the DIY Street Fair, the Ferndale Funky Art Fair, Green Cruise, Fido Does Ferndale, Ferndale Blues Festival, pub crawls, prohibition parties—just about anything that is fun and interesting contributes to the city's personality and brings to it more and more friends.

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DOWNTOWN FERNDAL TRANSFORMS FROM DESOLATE TO DESTINATION

If you haven't been to Downtown Ferndale lately...

Once a forlorn gateway to the suburban sprawl of metro-Detroit, downtown Ferndale is now a destination of choice for consumers across the region. With its lively mix of 350-plus businesses, enviable geographic desirability with easy access to major roads and service by mass transit; and an open-minded ambiance that invites participation without prejudice, downtown Ferndale today is 3.9 linear miles of proof that hard work, determination, and a plan will produce positive change.

SEVENTY-FIVE PERCENT REHAB RATE

That change is no small change, either. When the Ferndale Downtown Development Authority (DDA) released its 2010 statistics, it included a remarkable 10 year total—\$57 million in public and private reinvestment, illustrated repeatedly in the before and after stories throughout the district. Over the past 10 years, nearly 75 percent of the district's buildings have been rehabbed and/or historically preserved; redesigned streetscapes and a narrowed West Nine Mile Road created a user-friendly environment with plentiful bike racks, park benches, and places for socializing.

Eventually, the aggressive reformatting attracted a creative class of entrepreneurs who today dominate the district.

"When I moved to Ferndale 20 years ago, the downtown vacancy rate was very high and it was mostly wig shops," said Ferndale Mayor Dave Coulter. "You could have rolled a bowling ball down the sidewalk in Ferndale and not hit anybody. Today, it's lively, it's crowded, which brings its own challenges. For example, parking is an issue now. But those are good problems to have."

ROAD DIET

Coulter, a former Oakland County Commissioner, explained that changing Nine Mile from four lanes to two lanes and allowing parallel parking was the catalyst for the positive changes that followed.

"It was a controversial issue at the time to slow traffic down and make it two lanes, but that was really the beginning in bringing people and foot traffic back to downtown Ferndale," Coulter said. "We have to get passed this mentality that the roads that go through communities like Ferndale are mini-expressways to get you some place quickly. Instead we have to realize these roadways really are a fabric of the community and that they can be a source of recreation and community."

From upper story ad agencies and film production companies to street level green gardeners and tea room psychics, Ferndale's downtown district is a healthy and ever-changing mix of savvy businesses. Ten years ago, the vacancy rate peaked at 30 percent. Now, it hovers around 6 percent. In 2010, 40 (40!) new businesses opened their doors. Sure,

some replaced others (a net gain of 26), but each closing is now viewed as an opportunity for a stronger business to bring new product, new consumers, and new energy.

NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION AWARD

Citing these facts and others, the National Trust for Historic Preservation recognized downtown Ferndale in 2010 with its highest honor—the Great American Main Street Award (GAMSA). Only two other Michigan cities have ever won before (Bay City—1999/Holland—1997), and downtown Ferndale became the first in the Main Street Oakland County program to win, validating the revitalization program instituted in 2000 by Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson.

Patterson praised downtown Ferndale for overcoming its past and charting a brighter future. “Through the leadership of the Ferndale DDA, its volunteers and community partners, downtown Ferndale has transformed into a strong creative, economic center in our county, unrivaled by others in Michigan and nationwide.”

Then-Governor Jennifer Granholm was equally effusive. “Downtown Ferndale is a beacon of hope in this challenging economy and is a prime example for cities across Michigan desiring to revitalize their own downtowns.”

In recognizing downtown Ferndale, the GAMSA judges cited the district’s remarkable statistics, turnaround vacancy rate, and the DDA’s unwavering commitment to the National Trust’s trademark Main Street Approach to economic redevelopment. Bottom line: The Ferndale DDA’s determination to stay the course saved a downtown once considered destitute.

“The Ferndale Downtown Development Authority’s story is about not quitting when everyone has,” said Doug Loescher, director of the National Trust Main Street Center. “From the quirky twists that it has put on its events to its commitment to sustainability projects...it is a true national model for revitalization.”

MAIN STREET PROGRAM KEY

The Ferndale DDA was instituted in 1980, five years after Michigan Public Act 197 legislated the mechanism to address the state’s deteriorating downtowns. DDAs were empowered in a number of ways, most notably to use tax increment financing to pay for improvements in the district. In 2001, the Ferndale DDA was accepted into the Main Street Oakland County program and became a nationally accredited Main Street program. Under the direction and determination of Executive Director Cristina Sheppard-Decius, the transformation began in earnest. A Certificated Main Street Manager and distinguished as one of *Crain’s* “40 under 40,” Sheppard-Decius assembled a game plan that followed the rules of the Main Street Four-Point Approach®, and then found the stakeholders to implement it. An army of volunteers populated four committees—Economic Restructuring, Organization, Promotions, and Design. They brainstormed and tasked out ideas, they created a synergy, and they started to make downtown Ferndale and its programs the place to be if you wanted to be part of the change.



The National Trust for Historic Preservation recognized Downtown Ferndale in 2010 with its highest honor—the Great American Main Street Award.

“Our volunteers had a huge impact on downtown Ferndale and are integral to our success story,” said Sheppard-Decius. “They are hard working, visionary, and dedicated. We would not have won the GAMSA without their continued support and determination to keep moving ahead.”

DOWNTOWN IS QUIRKY

Downtown Ferndale today is dotted with dozens of quirky retailers, convenient services, and 60-plus bars and restaurants. The day-to-day business economy is infilled with a variety of events, large and small. The Ferndale Woodward Dream Cruise is a marquee weekend in August, as is the art fair combo weekend in September—the DIY Street Fair and the Ferndale Funky Art Fair. Green Cruise, Fido Does Ferndale, Ferndale Film Festival, Ferndale Blues Festival, pub crawls, prohibition parties and, well, just about anything else that is fun and interesting contribute to the city’s personality and bring to it more and more friends. Though slightly taken aback by the departure of the highly popular Motor City Pride (to Detroit), downtown Ferndale responded with a new event, organized and staged by the city’s loyal and enthusiastic gay community.

The leader of the effort was the state’s first openly gay Mayor of Ferndale Craig Covey, now an Oakland County Commissioner, who credited a united community for the GAMSA win and the overall success of the downtown. “By bringing together key elements such as walkability, diversity, ecofriendliness, the city and the DDA together have built a downtown that people are proud to invest in—emotionally and financially.”

Going forward, the DDA is poised to keep up the momentum. “We complete projects and meet goals, but the work is never done,” said Sheppard-Decius. “You can’t stop looking ahead and figuring out how you are going to get to the future. What has happened over the last 10 years proves that. Now we are looking to the next 10, and beyond.”



Christine Walden Hughes is communications and marketing manager for Ferndale Downtown Development Authority. You may reach her at 248-546-1632 or chughes@downtownferndale.com.

As a unique economic development tool, the Main Street Four-Point Approach® is the foundation for local initiatives to revitalize their districts by leveraging local assets—from cultural or architectural heritage to local enterprises and community pride.

The four points of the Main Street approach work together to build a sustainable and complete community revitalization effort.

ORGANIZATION

Organization establishes consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among the various groups that have a stake in the commercial district. By getting everyone working toward the same goal, your Main Street program can provide effective, ongoing management and advocacy for your downtown or neighborhood business district.

Through volunteer recruitment and collaboration with partners representing a broad cross section of the community, your program can incorporate a wide range of perspectives into its efforts. A governing board of directors and standing committees make up the fundamental organizational structure of volunteer-driven revitalization programs. Volunteers are coordinated and supported by a paid program director.

PROMOTION

Promotion takes many forms, but the goal is to create a positive image that will rekindle community pride and improve consumer and investor confidence in your commercial district. Advertising, retail promotions, special events, and marketing campaigns help sell the image and promise of Main Street to the community and surrounding region. Promotions communicate your commercial district's unique characteristics, business establishments, and activities to shoppers, investors, potential business and property owners, and visitors.

DESIGN

Design means getting Main Street into top physical shape and creating a safe, inviting environment for shoppers, workers, and visitors. It takes advantage of the visual opportunities inherent in a commercial district by directing attention to all of its physical elements: public and private buildings, storefronts, signs, public spaces, parking areas, street furniture, public art, landscaping, merchandising, window displays, and promotional materials. An appealing atmosphere, created through attention to all of these visual elements, conveys a positive message about the commercial district and what it has to offer. Design activities also include instilling good maintenance practices in the commercial district,

enhancing the district's physical appearance through the rehabilitation of historic buildings, encouraging appropriate new construction, developing sensitive design management systems, educating business and property owners about design quality, and long-term planning.

ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING

Economic restructuring strengthens your community's existing economic assets while diversifying its economic base. This is accomplished by retaining and expanding successful businesses to provide a balanced commercial mix, sharpening the competitiveness and merchandising skills of business owners, and attracting new businesses that the market can support. Converting unused or underused commercial space into economically productive property also helps boost the profitability of the district. The goal is to build a commercial district that responds to the needs of today's consumers.

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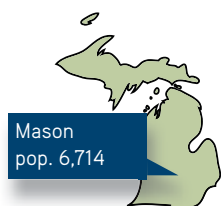


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LIVE IN THE MOMENT. LIVE IN MASON.
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BY MARCO A. BROGGIO



What is a destination? A destination is a place that is unique, and has a charm that cannot be duplicated. A destination is where you go for new experiences, and to get away from it all. Sometimes, destinations are halfway across the world. Other times, they are right in your hometown.

Downtown Mason is a destination. It is the hub for business conducted by the county, and is also home to an array of boutique shops and restaurants. By day, downtown is bustling with business people on the way to their next appointment while music entertains patrons enjoying a coffee. By night, the county

courthouse stands tall, romantically illuminating sidewalks and open store fronts. Whether you're in town for business, or simply visiting the antiques district, one thing is certain: this destination—downtown Mason—cannot be duplicated.

On May 14, 2009, the Mason Downtown Development Authority (DDA) adopted a Marketing Analysis, conducted by McKenna Associates, Inc. The focus of the study was to identify the most appropriate business types for downtown. The study also provided strategies for attracting new business and retaining existing business. One of the main things the study discovered was that Mason has a tremendous potential to become a regional destination. Because of these findings,

the Mason DDA took a creative approach to becoming a regional destination, and organized a community event.

On August 28, 2010, the DDA hosted the first annual Mason Sun Dried Music Festival. The community event showcased a variety of musical performances ranging from rock, jazz, blues, salsa, and country. The Sun Dried Music Festival



The Mason DDA took a creative approach to becoming a regional destination, and organized a community event. The first annual Mason Sun Dried Music Festival attracted nearly 8,000 people

Downtown Mason is a destination—it is the hub for county business and home to an array of boutique shops and restaurants.


attracted nearly 8,000 people from within the region. People from as far as Grand Rapids and Howell came to Mason for the first time. Businesses and members of the community sat together on the courthouse lawn and enjoyed the sights and sounds, while the smell of barbeque guaranteed that they wouldn't leave on an empty stomach. There wasn't a frown in the crowd.

The Sun Dried Music Festival supported the DDA's development plan and attracted thousands of people. It also embodied the recommendation made by McKenna Associates. Most businesses in the district were very busy that day, but the residual effect or "buzz" that the event created was the goal. Locals and first-time visitors realized that this city is "pretty cool," whether to live in, or just to visit.

Your hometown may not be a regional destination, but by using your Development Plan as a road map, and updating it when necessary, you can guarantee that your captured tax dollars will be well spent. The Sun Dried Music Festival is simply an example of how a dedicated DDA board used statistically validated information to promote the district as a regional destination.

Downtown Mason is unique, and is only minutes from Lansing. It's the type of place that is rooted in the past and growing towards the future, but most importantly, it is mid-



Michigan's regional destination for boutique shops and restaurants. So, the next time you're planning a day trip (or a place to live), live in the moment, and consider Mason as your destination. 

Marco A. Broggio is the director of the Mason Downtown Development Association. You may reach him at 586-676-9155 x 299 or marcobroggio@hotmail.com.

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LOSING A RETAIL ANCHOR

BY CHRISTINA MCKENNA

DOWNTOWN GROSSE POINTE PROVES WHEN ONE STORE CLOSSES, A WINDOW CAN OPEN



Anyone looking for proof that the loss of a major downtown tenant is a survivable event, need only look as far as Grosse Pointe where public officials and planners were forced to confront head-on the loss of Jacobson's Department Store that for generations anchored the retail district and helped shape the very identity of Grosse Pointe's downtown.

The progressive strategy they followed in the wake of the closure not only put Grosse Pointe on course for a new era of success, but provides a model for other Michigan cities looking to not only survive, but thrive after the loss of a major downtown business.

"When something like this happens, the immediate inclination is to fix the problem the way problems were fixed in the past," said Grosse Pointe Mayor

Dale Scrace. "But almost immediately it was clear that we needed a whole new approach to tackle a problem of this size."

The "problem" was the vacancy created almost overnight when in late 2000 Jacobson's announced the closure of several Michigan stores, including the one that had for decades occupied 135,000 square feet on Kercheval Avenue in the heart of Grosse Pointe's downtown core, known as the Village. The loss was enormous, both in terms of its physical space and symbolism.

"For many people, Jacobson's epitomized downtown Grosse Pointe—it WAS the Village's identity, and served for generations as the anchor for all of the Grosse Pointe community," said Scrace. "To see it disappear almost overnight was frightening to a lot of people."

While in the past the city might simply have turned to a waiting list of quality developers eager to snap up the space "as is," this time there was no such list. The vacant property was a testament to the toll suburban malls and strip shopping centers had taken on the viability of a downtown department store. If the city were to fill the gap in its downtown core, it would need to be proactive.

INCENTIVE-BASED ZONING ORDINANCE

The city's first step was to draft and pass incentive-based text amendments to the zoning ordinance to allow for the addition of up to two more floors atop the two-story building—a change likely to appeal to developers seeking to repurpose the space for a range of uses. The amendments also permitted residential use—a first for the Village.



The revival of the old Jacobson's site created enough buzz to motivate other long-time village businesses to reinvent themselves too. The most significant is the \$12 million makeover of the village Kroger store.

"The benefit of residential is that it automatically populates the downtown district, bringing 24-hour activity and a constant sense of vibrancy," said John R. Jackson, AICP who is vice president for McKenna Associates, Grosse Pointe's planning consulting firm and a life-long Grosse Pointer. "By allowing residential use and permitting the addition of two more floors, we were off to a good start, but had a long way to go."

KNOW THE MARKET-MARKET STUDY

In providing planning services, Jackson helped guide the city through the process of creating a new master plan, beginning with a market study to determine what actual uses of the former Jacobson's space would be viable.

"The market study was key, giving us a realistic picture of where we stood," said Jackson. "It made clear that at best the market would support perhaps half or a third as much retail as we

had in Jacobson's, and that the strategy should be mixed-use compact downtown development."

MASTER PLAN BASED ON REALITY

With that in mind, Scrace, Jackson, the city council, and the planning commission led the city through the process of creating a new master plan for the entire Village that supported mixed-use and identified key development sites. The city reached out to the community through a series of workshops designed to draw public input. Wanting new development but not wanting to change the character of the Village, the team also crafted design guidelines to ensure that new projects adhered to the Village's traditional look.

With the master plan, market study, and design guidelines in hand, city leaders were prepared to describe the sort of quality projects and investments they knew would enhance the Village. But

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they knew they would need to go further if they were to plug the hole left by Jacobson's.

DEVELOPER RECRUITMENT AND PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

"For the first time, we entered into public-private partnerships where the city was prepared to share in the risk to make investment in our community more appealing to developers," said City Manager Pete Dame. "It was a chance we took, but it paid off."

The biggest public-private partnership was in demolishing the obsolete Jacobson's parking garage and replacing it with a modern, multi-story automatic structure, sized to accommodate the future uses detailed in the master plan. By upgrading the old garage, the city freed up two nearby surface lots for future development and provided a key amenity to help attract modern tenants to the Jacobson's site.

The parking strategy quickly proved worthwhile. The modernized garage drew in Trader Joe's, and soon the specialty grocery store was sharing the old Jacobson's site with neighbors like Ann Taylor Loft, Joseph A. Bank, and Coldwater Creek.

DESIGN GUIDELINES AND FORM-BASED CODE

The revival of the old Jacobson's site took on the name "Kercheval Place," and soon created enough buzz to motivate other long-time Village businesses to reinvent themselves, too. The most significant of these upgrades has been the \$12 million makeover of the Village Kroger store—the second largest storefront in the Village.

In adherence to the Village's form-based code and design guidelines, the grocery chain factored location into its design, respecting the upscale, traditional, downtown neighborhood. The building's façade incorporates street-level windows with awnings to create a more gracious, human-scale streetscape and further enhance the pedestrian experience.


BUILDING ON THE MOMENTUM

Just a few blocks away, another major redevelopment project mirrors the Kroger upgrade. The Neighborhood Club, a longtime Grosse Pointe institution, has partnered with Beaumont Hospital to plan a new wellness center and fitness club. The project promises to draw even more people to the Village for activities, in addition to those already drawn by shopping, dining, and offices.

APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED

Grosse Pointe's successful rebound from the potentially devastating loss of Jacobson's is providing a model for redeveloping large vacated retail spaces—including in Grosse Pointe itself.

Earlier this year when Borders Books announced its 19,000 square foot Grosse Pointe store would be among those closed as the national chain restructures, Grosse Pointe's decision makers saw the change less as a setback and more as an opportunity.

According to Mayor Scrace, "With lessons learned from Jacobson's, they're already strategizing about how the city might work with the property owner to retrofit, repurpose, and reinvent the Border's space to bring new relevance and vibrancy to yet another downtown property—and to the Village itself." 

Christina McKenna is communications director for McKenna Associates. You may reach her at 248-596-0920 or cmckenna@mcka.com.

Is a Contract Formed When a Municipality Accepts a Bid?

Facts:

The Bishop International Airport Authority issued a bid package that included or incorporated all of the documents associated with constructing an air freight handling facility and with bidding on the construction project. The bid package included proposed form American Institute of Architects construction agreements. The package also included a bid form that provided:

The undersigned...agrees to fully perform the work within the time stated and in strict accordance with the proposed [bid documents], including furnishing any and all labor and materials, specified allowances, and to do all of the work required to construct and complete said work in accordance with the [bid document] for the following sum of money.

Plaintiff contractor submitted a bid along with the necessary bid documents. The Board of the Airport Authority passed a unanimous resolution accepting the plaintiff's bid on the project. The resolution indicated that its architectural firm that had prepared the bid documents reviewed the bids and recommended that the plaintiff's bid be accepted. The resolution further provided that staff had reviewed the bid and recommended accepting the bid. According to the resolution, funding was available. The board then accepted the bid and authorized the airport director to execute the necessary construction contracts to carry out and complete the project. The contractor was so advised. One month later, the board rescinded its acceptance.

Question:

Under the facts as presented, was a binding contract created even though the construction agreements were not executed?

Answer According to the Trial Court:

No.

Answer According to the Michigan Court of Appeals:

Yes. The court noted that the essential elements of a validly enforceable contract include an offer made by an offeror (contractor) and acceptance and communication of the acceptance of the offer by the offeree (airport authority). In this particular case, the contractor asserted that 1) the submission of the bid was, in fact, a valid offer, and 2) the resolution of the airport

authority accepting the bid constituted a valid acceptance resulting in a binding contract. The airport authority argued that a binding contract did not exist since the underlying construction agreements contained within the bid package had not been executed by the parties.

The court held that a binding contract had been entered into upon passage of the resolution of the airport authority accepting the bid proposal of the contractor. As a consequence, the airport authority had no legal ability to "rescind" its acceptance.

The court relied heavily upon the facts of the case itself. The bid package contained language which required the contractor to agree to the provisions of the construction agreements upon submission of its bid. The court further found that the airport authority had necessarily agreed to the construction agreements by making them available to bidding contractors and mandating that they be part of the bid documents. The court found that the act of formally executing the construction contracts was not a step that had to be completed before a valid contractual relationship arose between the parties.

Note: This case emphasizes the importance of municipalities to carefully review their bid process and the language in bid documents, even if that process is contracted out to a third party. The best course of practice is to specifically and clearly state in the bid documents that a validly binding contract is not created until all parties execute underlying agreements.

Garrison Company v Bishop International Airport Authority, No. 293415. Nov. 18, 2010 (unpublished). 

This column highlights a recent judicial decision or Michigan Municipal League Legal Defense Fund case that impacts municipalities. The information in this column should not be considered a legal opinion or to constitute legal advice.

Sue Jeffers, retired League associate general counsel, now serves as a legal consultant to the League. You may reach her at sjeffers@mml.org.



PROMISING DOWNTOWNS

Renewing Michigan's Distressed Communities

By John Iacoangeli, David Campbell, and Angela Fortino, Beckett and Raeder, Inc. and Joseph Borgstrom, MSHDA

Distressed cities have similar stories. Their once prosperous industrial areas have declined and deteriorated, and they are now faced with a multitude of ailments: disinvestment, crime, poverty, vacancy, "at risk" youth, limited services, and financial crisis. In 2006, the state of Michigan created the Cities of Promise Initiative to help with the redevelopment efforts in eight of Michigan's most distressed urban cities. The initiative assists in blight elimination and works to increase community and economic development. The Cities of Promise program allows the state to engage in unprecedented partnerships with these cities to address their concerns and prioritize their needs using existing state resources.

Growing from the Cities of Promise Initiative, the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA), in conjunction with the Michigan Municipal League, created the Downtowns of Promise Program. The program focused on creating action-oriented strategies to push forward revitalization efforts in the traditional downtowns of seven Cities of Promise: Benton Harbor, Flint, Hamtramck, Highland Park, and Muskegon Heights, as well as the Old Town commercial district of Saginaw and the Joy-Southfield commercial corridor on the west side of Detroit.

Announced in February of 2010, these planning efforts are now complete and many actions suggested for the



Downtown Benton Harbor

communities are underway. Through the Downtowns of Promise planning process, it became clear that the communities had zeal, a clear position on their wants and needs, and an understanding of the existing challenges. What was missing,

however, was a cohesive vision and strategy to provide guidance in overcoming what seem like impassible barriers to revitalization and stability.

A Familiar Story & Need for a Road Map

Many of the key elements needed for revitalization within the Downtowns of Promise already exist. Demand for local retail market, budding arts and cultural centers, existing private investment, and historic preservation activities provide strong bases for the communities to build upon. We will use the three cities of Benton Harbor, Hamtramck, and Old Town Saginaw, as examples. For all, taking advantage of existing efforts while improving communication and management is integral for the revitalization of their downtowns.



Benton Harbor—Emerging Arts Scene

Recent private investment within the northern portion of downtown Benton Harbor has resulted in an emerging Arts District. This vibrant and budding area has created a lively community featuring art, music, and dance. The character of the downtown was retained through the reuse of historic buildings for art studios, galleries, restaurants, bars, offices, and upper story development. A second and controversial development—Harbor Shores—is located north of downtown. This private development is separated from the traditional downtown by rail lines, creating a barrier that if not addressed may result in disjointed development.

While such developments serve as assets for the city, concerns arose during the community visioning session that, “there needs to be a greater focus on strategies for not only developing the downtown, but for leveraging downtown development to the benefit of Benton Harbor residents.” For many, current redevelopment efforts do not appeal or cater to local community members.

Benton Harbor is working towards creating a unified vision for the city, and a functioning, financially stable DDA. However, the key is not to restructure the DDA but educate both elected officials and their operating authorities on



Recent private investment within the northern portion of downtown Benton Harbor has resulted in an emerging Arts District. This vibrant and budding area has created a lively community featuring art, music, and dance. The character of the downtown was retained through the reuse of historic buildings for art studios, galleries, restaurants, bars, offices, and upper story development.

how they can work together to successfully revitalize the city. With the assistance of MSHDA’s Downtown & Community Services

Division, the importance of opening lines of communication will be stressed, along with aligning priorities, and how to harness funding opportunities and state/federal incentives. Inclusion of the area’s art organizations, as well as neighborhood groups, with training sessions will help ensure that all voices of the city are heard. Improving functionality while acknowledging and including all citizens will provide a strong foundation for balanced and sustained revitalization.

Old Town Saginaw—Harnessing its Historic Character

A strong core of independent business owners has sustained a unique, diverse, commercial district within Old Town Saginaw. Physically, Old Town’s buildings



Saginaw’s visioning session educated the city, DDA, and community members in strategies to assist in downtown revitalization.

have retained much of their historical integrity. If one wants to experience the ambience of a historic warehouse district, Old Town Saginaw fits the bill. This combination of locally owned businesses, involved property owners, and historically intact buildings creates a major asset for Old Town: a strong sense of place. However, no matter how strong this sense of place is, finances have impeded on property owners’ abilities to renovate and properly maintain their buildings. Meanwhile, other property owners are “sitting” on their properties *waiting* for the right moment, rather than harnessing existing incentives to *make* development occur.

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The buildings in downtown Saginaw have retained much of their historical integrity. The combination of locally owned businesses, involved property owners, and historically intact buildings creates a major asset for Old Town: a strong sense of place.

marketing, promotions, public relations, code enforcement, safety and security, and other uses. Paired with the establishment of the PSD, the DDA would engage community members, volunteers, and groups with the Main Street Program.

For many, Hamtramck is still a hidden gem. Another key strategy for downtown Hamtramck is to improve branding and downtown identity. Branding will help Hamtramck reach residents of surrounding areas that are currently missing the unique setting Hamtramck has to offer. This strategy is dependent on the successful establishment of the PSD and stabilized DDA. These two entities' ability to work together aiming for the same goal for downtown is integral for the successful implementation of rebranding Hamtramck.

Need for Training and a Unified Voice

Benton Harbor, Old Town Saginaw, and Hamtramck prove that even small steps in revitalizing communities can occur without a common vision and strategy. However, imagine if community members, business owners, organizations, and investors had a clear understanding of what the overarching vision is and the

and property owner assistance; seek expanded representation on the city-wide DDA; and participate in city-wide master planning and TIF process. It should also take advantage of the Michigan Main Street Program so that the city, DDA, and community members can gain knowledge and strategies that will assist in downtown revitalization.

Hamtramck-Niche Businesses

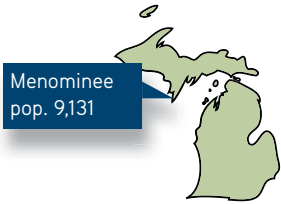
Downtown Hamtramck is full of culturally diverse businesses that would be the envy of many Michigan downtowns; however, the lack of regular maintenance of the area and perceived issues of safety and financial stability impede further development of the downtown business district. The businesses within downtown Hamtramck cannot tackle these issues alone; they need the support of the DDA and other governing bodies and authorities. Two key elements of the revitalization strategies for Hamtramck are 1) to establish a Principal Shopping District (PSD) and 2) prepare for the second level of the Michigan Main Street Program. The PSD is outlined in the municipality's recently completed master plan. Once the PSD is successfully established, funding through the PSD would be used for infrastructure and maintenance improvements,

To aid in redevelopment, key recommended actions for Old Town Saginaw are to establish a Business Improvement District (BID) to secure a funding base and create mechanisms for business district improvements; ensure that future streetscape improvements programmed by the city do not impact the historic character of the district; improve the development environment through programming



Downtown Hamtramck is full of culturally diverse businesses, but is still a hidden gem. One strategy is to improve branding.

Menominee: Where the Best of Michigan Begins



The saga of a small community historical waterfront downtown

The city of Menominee is the Menominee County seat and fourth-largest and southern-most city in the Upper Peninsula. Interestingly, Menominee is part of a twin-city/county community with Marinette, Wisconsin—separated by the Menominee River and joined by an interstate bridge. Hence, Menominee’s popular slogan—*Where the best of Michigan begins*.

Wild Rice

The city is named for an indigenous Native American tribe, now located in nearby North Central Wisconsin. Menominee means wild rice, which was harvested in autumn by the tribe. Gazing upon the emerald waters of Lake Michigan’s Green Bay and the shorelines of sandy beaches interspersed with gracefully waving marsh grasses—the area’s natural beauty is breathtaking.

Lumbering Prominence

The city gained prominence as a lumber town, known in its heyday according to Wikipedia, for producing more lumber than any other city in America. Many of the structures from this time, built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries exhibited fine architecture and the Upper Peninsula’s trademark red sandstone. Many of the buildings have been restored, and today the city is blessed with all the scenic beauty of the waterfront married with the charm of an historic downtown. In fact, the downtown district is on the National Register of Historic Places and in 2000, Menominee was a semi-finalist in the Great American Main Street Awards.

The L-shaped district follows the Green Bay shoreline which also features the Spies Public Library, built in 1905 with donations from local philanthropist Augustus Spies, reflecting the grandeur and style of the Carnegie libraries. The library overlooks the Menominee Marina which is a deep water harbor and international shipping port, watched over by the Menominee North Pier Lighthouse.

Marina Serves as Open Arms of a Welcoming Downtown

I spoke with two of downtown Menominee’s biggest fans recently, DDA Chair Darrell Eland, owner of Eland Drywall Service and Timeless Treasures antique shop, and good friend Joe Peacock, financial advisor at the local Edward Jones office, located in a prime First Street location.

I’ve been to Timeless Treasures in the old Lloyd’s Theatre where they still provide popcorn from the theatre popper. There’s a map placed on the wall in 1998 to track visitors. “The marina has 20 percent local boaters,” explains Eland. “The other 80 percent are visitors who love to follow the lake around and come up to Michigan from Wisconsin’s Oshkosh, Neenah, Appleton, and Green Bay.” And indeed, nearly every country in the world is now represented with a visitor pushpin. “We try to give the boaters a hug,” says Peacock, “by preparing welcome packets with downtown maps and discounts. And the yellow bike



Many of Menominee’s structures, built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, exhibit fine architecture and the Upper Peninsula’s trademark red sandstone.



program to help them take full advantage of downtown.” The marina definitely serves as the open arms of a welcoming downtown, featuring a fantastic modern boater’s lounge that used to be a pump house. The Waterfront Festival is a very successful four-day event, as are the major fishing tournaments. A free summer concert series provides music in the marina park band shell Thursday nights. All of this water attraction occurs downtown.

“We’re currently completing a wi-fi system throughout downtown, including the parks,” says Eland. And while Menominee’s downtown struggles like most these days, they’re making progress. Like wi-fi, an enhanced web presence (www.menomineedowntown.com) and downtown image radio ads, not every improvement is visible, but they matter, concur the two downtown supporters.

In 2005, HyettPalma prepared a Blueprint Program for the downtown. Peacock ticked off a number of recommendations they’ve implemented, such as creating a lighted walkway from the marina to Berg’s Landing Restaurant. They rebranded the waterfront, as the “historic waterfront,” and created pedestrian-friendly crosswalks downtown. Another recommendation was the creation of a winter event, which occurred this February as the River City Community Pool Association led the first annual Yooper Polar Bear Plunge in the marina, with an added touch of zaniness—a two-block run afterwards to “warm up.” The event drew 200 participants and more than 500 spectators.

Holding Steady

Peacock admits they’ve hit some rough seas, but encourages other municipalities in the same boat to hold steady. For example, a TIF expired and it took a year and a half to pass a new one. They also grappled with a derelict building of historic nature that was beyond saving. It’s a tough decision facing almost every community. “It was a decayed tooth in a beautiful smile,” says Peacock. And like most communities now, Menominee has big projects with great potential that are currently stalled.


Following HyettPalma’s recommendations, Menominee rebranded its waterfront as the “historic waterfront,” and created pedestrian friendly crosswalks downtown.

Did you know?

- In the 1910s Menominee manufactured a cycle car known as the Dudly Bug.
- Menominee features a cairn marking the 45th parallel, one of six in Michigan.
- To diversify manufacturing after the lumber decline, Menominee attracted inventor Marshall Burns Lloyd who manufactured wicker baby buggies. He later created an automated process for weaving manmade wicker; the process is still used in Menominee today for producing lawn furniture at Lloyd Flanders.



Menominee is blessed with all the scenic beauty of the waterfront married with the charm of an historic downtown. The downtown is growing by ones, twos, and threes—and counts the growing farmers market as a recent success.

It's worthy to note as was said in the beginning that Menominee is part of a twin-city/county community. Menominee shares a hospital, community foundation, newspaper, and chamber of commerce with Marinette. There is an incredible amount of collaboration among the different groups such as the chamber and arts council that truly serve both cities as one community; perhaps even more surprisingly so because the cities are in different states. 

Photos courtesy of Mike Desotell

Silver Linings

Downtown renovations include Table Six, an Italian restaurant that opened last year in a former Elks building. Murray O'Sullivan's Irish Pub and Grille and Banquet Facility is another success story, as is the growing farmers market. Other renovations have provided space for gift shops, a bookstore, beauty salons and day spas, antique shops, galleries, and a variety of essential services. The Menominee Area Arts Council is also working with the downtown and recently provided a lovely "fish pole" sculpture.

Caroline Weber Kennedy is manager of field operations for the League. You may reach her at 906-428-0100 or ckennedy@mml.org.





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Explaining TIFs and DDAs

League Answers Questions on Some Taxing Issues

Q. Can you explain a TIF to me—in simple language?

A. TIF stands for Tax Increment Financing. In the simplest terms, TIF is the capture of the increase in property tax revenue levied by certain taxing units in a defined district for development purposes in that district. For example, if a building in your downtown undergoes renovations, the taxable value on that building will increase to reflect the improvements. This will result in increased tax revenues on that building, for not only the city or village, but also for the school district, the county, and any other local unit of government levying a tax on that property. If that building is in a certain designated area, a downtown development district, for example, the difference (increase) between the property tax paid on the building prior to the renovation and the property tax paid after the renovation can be “captured” by the Downtown Development Authority to be used for additional improvements.

The League website contains a One Pager *Plus* fact sheet on Economic Development Financing Tools (www.mml.org/resources/publications/one_pagers/opp_economic_development_tools-financing.pdf).


Q. We've been told that if we establish a Downtown Development Authority (DDA), the property owners in the DDA district can “opt out” of the district. Is this true?

A. No. The properties within the boundaries of the designated district are part of the district and cannot choose to be removed. “Opt out” is a legitimate phrase, but it is used to designate the ability of certain local taxing authorities to not participate in the TIF capture. At the time an authority is created, the local units have the option of retaining the increasing property tax revenue generated by the district—thus “opting out” of the capture. If the boundaries on a district are enlarged, a similar “opt out” period occurs, but only for the new area.

Q. Our city has several developed commercial areas. Can we have more than one DDA?

A. No. The Downtown Development Act (legislature.mi.gov/doc.aspx?mcl-Act-197-of-1975) states that unless a municipality had more than one DDA prior to 1985, they can only establish one. Having said that, however, there are a number of economic development tools you may find useful in strengthening various commercial areas in your city. For example, a Corridor Improvement Authority may be created to redevelop a commercial corridor and to promote economic growth. (2005 PA 280 MCL 125.2871). And yes, we do have a One Pager *Plus* fact sheet on that. It is available at www.mml.org/resources/publications/one_pagers/opp_%20corridor_improvement_authority.pdf.

Q. With the proposed reductions in revenue sharing, what do we have to do to return to the millage allowed under our charter? Due to Headlee, our allowable millage has been reduced significantly.

A. What you are referring to is called a Headlee override. A Headlee override is a vote by the electors to return the millage to the amount originally authorized via charter, state statute, or a previous vote of the people. In accordance with your charter, a proposal will need to be put on the ballot. There is sample ballot language available on the League's website at www.mml.org/resources/publications/one_pagers/opp_headlee_override.pdf. 

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The League has developed several new fact sheets in response to Governor Snyder's budget proposal. Please visit www.mml.org for these titles:

- *Revenue Sharing Keeps Our Economic Engine Running*
- *Personal Property Taxes Fund Essential Community Services*
- *One Pager Plus: Local Government and School District Fiscal Accountability Act (Emergency Manager)*



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