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City of Belleville

Opportunity Report



Table of Contents

2-3	Introduction
4	Strengthening the Small Business Ecosystem
4-5	Opportunity 1: Placemaking and Infrastructure Enhancements
5-6	Opportunity 2: City Planning and Process Improvements
6-7	Opportunity 3: Partnerships for Greater Business Support
7-8	Conclusion & Next Steps



Introduction

Since 2022, the Michigan Municipal League (the League) and Michigan Municipal League Foundation (MML Foundation), with support from the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, have been working on a local economies initiative to explore entrepreneurship and small business support systems in southeast Michigan. Specifically, the goal of this initiative is to consider gaps in resources, like space, capital, technical assistance, networks, and more, that could be filled by the local government and community stakeholders to support more equitable local small business environments.

Over the next two years, the League and the MML Foundation will collaborate with small and/or rural southeast Michigan communities to learn more about their small business environments and connect them with potential tools and resources to strengthen the local economy ecosystem. In each community, we will partner with local small business stakeholders to hold one-day workshops that will delve into the resources, barriers, and opportunities each community has for entrepreneurs. Following stakeholder workshops, we will provide tailored feedback in the form of opportunity reports. The culmination of these collaborations will be a Microbusiness Ready Communities guidebook that will draw from our learnings in each community and provide resources and inspiration to communities across the state.

Why Belleville?

The League and MML Foundation were excited to collaborate with the City of Belleville on this project because the community is experiencing growth and opportunity while navigating capacity issues that so many communities face right now. The City of Belleville is a small community that sits at the western end of Wayne County. Belleville has seen some significant investment and growth in the past decade, including several new small businesses and additional downtown housing and amenities. Belleville also has some significant natural and geographic assets, including Belleville Lake and a location with easy access to larger regional economies such as Ann Arbor.

While the city has seen some growth in its local economy, many small businesses and entrepreneurs there have been disconnected from support networks in the city and region (such as the Small Business Development Center or the Chamber of Commerce) that could help them grow and thrive, and the city has had some regulatory and administrative challenges that have stifled local business growth.

New leadership at the City, the Downtown Development Authority, and the Chamber of Commerce—who are focused

on downtown vitality and collaboration with the city's business community—as well as recent engagement in the state's Redevelopment Ready Communities program, offer huge opportunities for the community to leverage its assets and support a growing and robust local economy.

What is an opportunity report and what is it meant to do?

This report is a summary of what League and MML Foundation staff observed and heard during the local economies stakeholder workshop in Belleville on June 11, 2024. It outlines areas for potential improvement, details short- and long-term opportunities, shares resources to consider utilizing, and highlights inspiration from other Michigan communities doing similar work. The objective of this opportunity report is to serve as a resource for the City of Belleville and its staff.

The League and MML Foundation would like to thank the City of Belleville, Belleville Downtown Development Authority, participating stakeholders, local businesses, and others who helped contribute to this “deep dive.”



Strengthening the Small Business Ecosystem

In Belleville, the small business ecosystem is robust and full of potential. In this section, we will highlight three main areas of opportunity we feel would maximize the sense of place in Belleville while creating physical and social infrastructure for more dynamic entrepreneurship in the downtown area.

Broadly speaking, these areas of opportunity are: placemaking, planning and process, and leveraging partnerships for greater impact. Each area of opportunity includes a brief overview of how Belleville is already succeeding in this sphere, a set of short- and long-term recommendations for ways to further growth, and peer community examples to serve as inspiration.

We acknowledge that there are no “one size fits all” solutions for communities, so we strongly encourage local stakeholders to continue working together to create resources and opportunities that celebrate the unique spirit of Belleville and foster an inclusive local economy.



Opportunity 1: Placemaking and Infrastructure Enhancements

Overview

During our visit to the city of Belleville, we were impressed by the city’s recent focus on prioritizing economic development and streamlining processes to bring in new businesses. Projects the city is pursuing to develop vacant land will help connect the downtown to adjacent areas. The city is also clearly interested in finding tenants for vacant commercial spaces, especially in the “empty block” between the old CVS and recently closed Bayou Grill. This interest extends to exploring the use of development sites for small business activation like converting the DDA-owned storefront (former hardware store) into an entrepreneurial incubator space.

Strategies that can help the city of Belleville continue to improve the success of the small business environment include addressing infrastructure challenges, engaging in façade and signage improvements, and creating cohesion between the waterfront and downtown. These activities all have the potential to contribute to the growth and improvement of Belleville for its residents, business owners, and visitors.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

1. Evaluate retail pop-up or incubator space on Main Street. The DDA’s recent acquisition of the hardware store offers an important and timely opportunity to reactivate the 400 block in the face of recent vacancies. Consider how the space could be used in the short-term for events, such as holiday markets in late 2024, and evaluate the feasibility of a more dedicated co-retail or incubator space in the future, including identifying funding and management of the space.

2. Continue to offer local events that drive local and visitor foot traffic to Belleville’s businesses. The Belleville Central Business Community already hosts several events a year that bring people downtown to connect, shop, and enjoy Belleville’s downtown experience. The CBC should continue to partner with the city and other regional organizations to host events downtown to help support small businesses. Partners should annually evaluate the impact of those events, looking for ways to improve them, coordinate with similar events in the region, or offer new types of events that might draw different people downtown.

Long Term (1–4 years)

1. Consider street design for safety and shopping experience. An upcoming Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) road safety audit on Main Street is an opportunity to consider street design elements that improve driver and pedestrian safety. These discussions are an opportunity to look at elements that could both improve safety and make strolling downtown more pleasant, such as sidewalk bumpouts at intersections, “parklets” for outdoor dining in parking areas, and street trees that offer shade.

2. Strengthen water and trail connections to and through Belleville. The city’s identity is closely tied to Lake Belleville, and some businesses, parks, and events already engage the lake well. With the Huron River “Water Trail” established, and the long-term development of the Iron Belle trail underway, Belleville can be a destination and waypoint for paddlers, hikers, and cyclists. The city can coordinate with Van Buren Township and the stewards of these trail networks on wayfinding and marketing to these visitors, whether for a one-time meal or overnight lodging, or as a place to plan a return visit to.

Case Study: Shared startup retail space in Lansing

Lansing’s “[Middle Village Micro Market](#)” is a multi-vendor co-retail space in the storefront in front of the Lansing DDA’s offices. The DDA recruits entrepreneurs from [LEAP’s One-and-All training program](#), Michigan Small Business Development Center (SBDC) referrals, or grassroots conversations. The shared storefront model offers these retail startups a lower cost and lower risk way to test their products and marketing with customers and provides a space for synergy and camaraderie among the entrepreneurs. The co-location with the DDA’s offices also makes it a natural venue for introducing the microbusiness owners to developers, landlords, and other actors in the downtown network, streamlining the path for businesses to graduate into dedicated storefront space. In late 2024, the DDA plans to expand its incubator programs to include food vendors with an incubator kitchen in the new Macotta Club, a food hall that will be located a block away in the historic Knapps Building.

Resources

- [NACTO Urban Street Design Guide](#)
- [Huron River Water Trail](#)
- [Middle Village Micro Market](#)
- [LEAP’s One-and-All training program](#)

Opportunity 2: City Planning and Process Improvements

Overview

We heard from city leadership that they are working to make permitting processes more transparent and effective, and that the city had begun the Redevelopment Ready Communities process. Small-scale businesses often have limited capital and little to no experience navigating permitting, meaning the proposed changes to permitting in the city can help prevent regulatory delays and barriers that damage small business stability.

This does not mean that the city should eliminate regulations blindly: its role in administering fire, building, and zoning codes is an important part of securing public health and safety, as well as supporting a successful business environment. However, the zoning code can be examined for opportunities to remove requirements that are duplicative or conflicting, such as attempting to regulate the operations of businesses that are already regulated by county or state agencies, and opportunities to clarify and make accessible the required process that a new business needs to follow.

In particular, the Main Street area is quite large for a community of Belleville’s size and should be prioritized as the location for retail, restaurant, personal service, and entertainment/assembly visits in order to build a critical mass. Outlying commercial spaces in the community may be more appropriate for small-scale goods production or professional services that do not rely on customer traffic to the site.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

1. Provide clear guidance on all required steps to open a business. New business owners may not understand what zoning allows, or what a certificate of compliance is, until too late; an enforcement action is an unfortunate introduction to city hall and can provide a significant or even terminal setback to a new business. Creating guidance materials that provide as comprehensive a view as possible of potential permitting needs and contact people can help entrepreneurs avoid these pitfalls. Circulating copies to partners like SBDC, TechTown, and the Chamber, as well as posting at willing venues like the library and downtown cafes, can offer the best chance of entrepreneurs encountering it early, when it will be the most use to them.

2. Use upcoming developments to stress test existing codes and processes. The large parcel at Main and Third that is expected to be developed soon is an opportunity for staff to self-evaluate the city’s development process, as well as to orient that project in a way that supports business development. Some options for updating the current zoning include:

- a. Allowing new development in the CBD to include residential uses behind shallow storefronts, creating additional opportunity for small shops, rather than requiring apartments only above full-depth business uses.
- b. Allowing residential uses along the frontage as long as the building is “retail ready” with the first floor at sidewalk grade, high first floor ceilings, and open floor plans.
- c. Reducing or eliminating on-site parking requirements for ground-floor businesses where public parking is available.

3. Ensure that Belleville’s volunteer boards and committees are made up of people with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints and have a mix of long-serving and newer members. During our site visit we heard a real or perceived concern that some of the city’s boards—who play an important role in making recommendations to Council on policy and program issues—have had the same membership for a long time and that there is a lack of diverse experiences among those serving. Volunteers are such a critical part of a community, especially in smaller cities, and we know the city is grateful to all those serving on its boards. In the coming year or two, being intentional in setting term limits and recruiting for and filling those positions with people who represent different ages, professional backgrounds, race and ethnicities, abilities, economic positions, and more will help bring fresh perspectives to community development. This can be an important way to broaden the engagement of residents in municipal programs.

Long Term (1–4 years)

1. Join the Michigan Main Street Program. The city already has the Belleville Central Business Community organization dedicated to keeping the downtown area vibrant and thriving. The city is also engaging in the RRC program and rolling out some new DDA and Chamber programming in the coming year. As these programs and changes move ahead, the city should consider joining the state’s Main Street program to bring additional resources (tools, technical help, access to grant funding) and support to the community over the long term. The Michigan Main Street framework has a strong record of economic development resulting from helping communities with business attraction and retention, customer

attraction, preservation and revitalization, and downtown beautification. Participation in the program could help the city, small businesses, community members, and other partners focus infrastructure investments and programming to support a thriving small business ecosystem in Belleville.

2. Review zoning and other ordinances for microbusiness barriers and opportunities. As Belleville is undertaking the Redevelopment Ready process, it can consider what zoning updates might be appropriate to support entrepreneurship. Some items to consider include:

- a. Limiting site plan requirements for changes of use in existing buildings and considering what additional situations could be handled with a staff-reviewed sketch plan rather than a full site plan approval process.
- b. Reviewing ordinances related to home-based businesses and considering whether additional in-home businesses should be permitted, subject to conditions that limit nuisance.
- c. Remove local dimensional standards, zoning conditions, or licensing requirements for uses that are adequately regulated under state law. For example, businesses like home day cares or massage therapists often face local requirements that duplicate or conflict with state requirements, adding to the regulatory burden of both the business and municipal staff.
- d. Scale dimensional requirements in zoning to floor area. Very small commercial uses are typically much more limited in the vehicular traffic, noise, and other potential nuisances they may generate than larger commercial uses: applying the same setback and screening requirements to a 1,000 square foot neighborhood café as to a 20,000 square foot Walgreens, for example, places a substantial burden the small business that is likely unnecessary.

Case Study

The city of Eastpointe, Michigan, developed a [brief how-to flyer for small businesses](#) seeking to open in the community. This one-page document provides an overview of the basic steps any business needs to take before opening, including zoning review, business license, and building permits, and provides contact information for the relevant city staff in each step. Providing this information in a clear, attractive, and low-jargon fashion helps the business move forward more confidently, and then reduces the likelihood that a new business begins its life as an enforcement case.

Resources

- [Enabling Better Places: User’s Guide to Code Reform](#)
- [Michigan Main Street Program](#)
- [Equitable Zoning for Home Occupations, APA](#)
- [Main Street America](#)

Opportunity 3: Partnerships for Greater Business Support

Overview

On our visit to Belleville, it was clear that there was a lot of enthusiasm by city staff and regional small business support partners to work together in providing guidance and resources for the city's small businesses. As a smaller community, the City and DDA do not have a lot of extra staff capacity to provide all the help small businesses need. But the city's new leadership has been evaluating how to be most effective in this area and is committed to working with partners to make Belleville a great place for small businesses.

Many of the regional business support organizations have already been doing work in Belleville and are poised for even more proactive assistance and partnering with the city. The recommendations below are focused on proactive efforts to support Belleville small business creation and growth by leveraging state and regional resources, facilitating institutional collaboration, and helping network and educate local small businesses about resources.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

1. Regional small business support partners such as the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), SBDC, and Tech Town's Small Business Support Hub team could proactively connect with Belleville small businesses/entrepreneurs by hosting regular "in-town" office hours and programming (perhaps at a local coffee shop or other small business or at the library) to provide easy access to help and coaching. At our meeting with small businesses owners, most had some limited familiarity with regional program offerings for entrepreneurs but were not substantively taking advantage of these resources. And when we met with regional stakeholders, several noted that they have existing programs that meet some of the needs identified by small businesses (e.g., business plan development, legal assistance for reviewing building leases, financing tools). In other words, there is a gap between small business needs and perceived availability of help.

Bringing this kind of technical assistance to the community—with a level of frequency that it is seen as a knowable and accessible resource—could improve entrepreneurs' utilization of business management and marketing tools, financing options, growth planning, and more. Local partners such as the city, DDA, or Chamber of Commerce—who are known and trusted locally—could partner with regional partners to promote program offerings and help provide meeting space.

2. Provide user-friendly, up-to-date information on small business resources. The city, DDA, and Belleville Central Business Community should create an online (and printable) resource for local businesses that provides a one-stop shop of information on starting and managing a small business in Belleville. This could include information on city requirements/resources as well as local/regional lenders and financing opportunities, training opportunities, business planning, small business bootcamps, and other tools that could support small businesses. This resource could be maintained by the DDA or Belleville Central Business Community organizations and updated regularly with relevant events.

Long Term (1–4 years)

1. Continue to build a stronger relationship with Van Buren Township—both with municipal and Chamber of Commerce teams—on economic development and small business support. During our meetings with stakeholders, we heard that the two communities have been working a little better together recently and that there are synergistic opportunities for regional economic development. For example, Belleville Lake is a great natural asset for downtown Belleville, but it is owned and managed by the Township. Cooperating on some joint infrastructure investments or events could be beneficial for both communities.

Case Study

Downtown Alpena has an engaging and informative website for both visitors and business owners. The site includes statistics on the downtown market and housing, information on businesses and events, resources for business owners, and updated information on the DDA programs (www.downtownalpenami.com). They have an active email newsletter for downtown businesses and provide an online and printable Business Welcome Packet. The Welcome Packet is a centralized source of information on the DDA, downtown events, parking, business resources (e.g., facade grants), and other regional business resources. While this resource kit is focused on downtown Alpena, the model is applicable for a broader city-wide business "welcome" or resource kit in Belleville.

Resources

- [Tech Town Detroit Small Business Support Hub](#)
- [Michigan SBDC](#)
- [MIPlace Community Assistance Team Map](#)
- [City of Florence, SC, Small Business Resource Center](#)
- [City of Ypsilanti DDA/Downtown Business Resources](#)
- [Downtown Alpena Website](#)



Thank you to the City of Belleville, its small business community, and all its supportive partners for giving us your time and attention.

We look forward to seeing Belleville thrive in the years to come.

Conclusion & Next Steps

The Belleville community has worked hard to revitalize its downtown, and several recent developments have added new small businesses, housing, and other amenities that are helping drive economic growth. There is an increasingly strong small business and local developer community that is catalyzing new opportunities.

In addition to great amenities in the city like Lake Belleville, there are numerous geographic assets to leverage that also contribute to the city's opportunities, including proximity to the Ann Arbor–Ypsilanti market, Lower Huron Metropark, and Detroit Metro International Airport.

Like many small communities, though, municipal capacity to support small business growth and development is limited. At our site visit meetings, we heard many great suggestions for events and programs that could help support businesses and drive traffic downtown. For the community to be successful in taking some of those steps, it must partner with all local and regional stakeholders. The city, Chamber of Commerce, Belleville CBC, DDA, small business owners themselves, and regional economic development partners must all play a role in creating a robust, inclusive, and growing small business ecosystem in Belleville.

What follows is an overview of the recommendations presented in this report, starting with opportunities that can be implemented within a relatively short timeframe, are less labor intensive, and are relatively inexpensive. These small-scale interventions are shown alongside large-scale interventions that are more oriented toward creating new long-term infrastructure and resource development within Belleville over the next few years.

Small-Scale Interventions

- Evaluate retail pop-up or incubator space on Main Street that would lower the cost/burden of entry for new entrepreneurs in the city.
- Continue to offer local events that drive local and visitor foot traffic to Belleville's businesses, including markets, festivals, music, "shop local" days, and more. Considering partnering with surrounding communities to

create a regional event(s) that would bring people to the communities from further away.

- Provide clear guidance on all required permitting and regulatory steps to open a business and share with partners who work with entrepreneurs in the region and posted in other local businesses or public venues.
- Use upcoming developments to stress test existing codes and processes and identify areas of improvement for better supporting small business development.
- Ensure that Belleville's volunteer boards and committees are made up of people with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints and have a mix of long-serving and newer members.
- Host regular "in-town" office hours for regional small business support partners such as MEDC, SBDC, and Tech Town's Small Business Support Hub team to provide easy access to help and coaching for local entrepreneurs and small businesses.
- Create an engaging online resource that provides user-friendly, up-to-date information on small business resources and tools.

Large-Scale Interventions

- Consider street design for safety and the pedestrian shopping experience such as sidewalk bump-outs, parklets, or other features.
- Strengthen water and trail connections to and through Belleville to help make the city a destination and waypoint in regional and statewide trail systems.
- Join the Michigan Main Street Program to get access to technical assistance, tools, and funding opportunities for downtown improvements.
- Review zoning ordinance for microbusiness barriers and opportunities and make necessary updates to better support the local economy ecosystem.
- Continue to build a stronger relationship with Van Buren Township—both with municipal and Chamber of Commerce teams—on economic development and small business support.

The Michigan Municipal League and MML Foundation would like to acknowledge the partners and community stakeholders involved in this exploration:

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation

The City of Belleville

Belleville Downtown Development Authority

Belleville Area Chamber of Commerce

Belleville Central Business Community

Michigan Small Business Development Center

Michigan Economic Development Corporation

Tech Town Detroit

Comerica Bank

**And all of the dedicated Belleville entrepreneurs and small business
owners who participated in the stakeholder workshop!**

We thank you for your support and partnership in this effort!

Contact

Shanna Draheim

Director, Policy Research Labs
Michigan Municipal League
sdraheim@mml.org

Rachel Skyllis

Program Officer
Michigan Municipal League Foundation
rskyllis@mml.org