

Forsyth Township

Local Economies Opportunity Report



Table of Contents



2	Introduction
3	Why Forsyth Township?
4-5	Opportunity 1: Formalize Relations Between Forsyth Forward and Forsyth Township
5-7	Opportunity 2: Get Residents Excited with Visible Momentum
7-9	Opportunity 3: Open Doors to Investment—And Be Ready When It Comes
10	Conclusion and Next Steps

Introduction

In 2026, the Michigan Municipal League (the League) and Michigan Municipal League Foundation (MML Foundation) partnered with the Lake Superior Community Partnership (LSCP)’s Small Business Support Hub program to bring our Local Economies program to the central Upper Peninsula. We collaborated with LSCP, four central Upper Peninsula communities and their small businesses, and regional economic development stakeholders to better understand their small business environments and connect them with tools and resources to strengthen their local economic ecosystem.

Since 2022, the Local Economies program has explored entrepreneurship and small business support systems in specific Michigan communities. The goal of the initiative is to consider gaps in resources; e.g., space, capital, technical assistance, and networks that could be filled by local government and community stakeholders to support more equitable local small business environments.

In each community, we met with local small business leaders and stakeholders for daylong workshops to explore the resources available to entrepreneurs, as well as the challenges and opportunities unique to each community. Following these workshops, we provide tailored feedback and recommendations through community Opportunity Reports.

Why Forsyth Township?

The League and MML Foundation were excited at the opportunity to collaborate with Forsyth Township on this project, as the township boasts many opportunities for growth and redevelopment. The emerging partnership with Forsyth Forward—a new, energetic, and engaged local economic development organization—creates potential for the township, and was a catalyst for our site visit.

Comprised of four communities—Gwinn, Little Lake, Swanzey/New Swanzey, and K.I. Sawyer—Forsyth Township is an expansive municipality once defined by the presence of K.I. Sawyer Air Force Base, which was de-commissioned in 1995. Now the home of Marquette Sawyer Regional Airport and a handful of local manufacturing companies, the site offers great, if challenging, potential for future redevelopment.

Additional assets to the economic development of Forsyth Township include the charming downtown of Gwinn, a committed and highly knowledgeable group of small business owners, and a deeply rooted community eager for an opportunity to celebrate itself.

What is an Opportunity Report?

This report is a summary of what the League and MML Foundation heard and observed during our local economies site visit in the Gwinn neighborhood of Forsyth Township on April 20, 2026.

This Opportunity Report is intended to serve as a resource for Forsyth Township and other local and regional partners who play a role in supporting its local economy. It describes areas for potential improvement, short- and long-term opportunities, resources to consider, and inspiration from other communities doing similar work.

Below are short and long-term recommendations across three opportunity areas for Forsyth Township, the township's small businesses and local support organizations, and other regional stakeholders to undertake to strengthen the township's small business ecosystem in the coming years.

In addition to the recommendations presented in this report, the Township and its partners may find further inspiration in our [Microbusiness Best Practices Playbooks](#), which offer additional strategies and examples for fostering entrepreneurship and strengthening local economic development efforts.



Opportunity 1: Formalize Relations Between Forsyth Forward and Forsyth Township

Overview

The relationship between Forsyth Forward and Forsyth Township presents an opportunity for municipal leadership and local entrepreneurship to join forces to serve the best interests of the community. As it currently stands, the two entities are widely perceived to be operating independently—at times, at odds with one another.

Forsyth Forward characterizes itself as “a dynamic combination of a chamber of commerce and a visitors’ bureau,” working to support local businesses, enhance infrastructure, and engage residents in the future of the community while addressing capacity gaps at the Township. Comprised of business owners, community leaders, and regional economic development players, the organization brings energy and creativity that complement the Township’s formal regulatory role.

Both entities have much to gain from working with each other. Together, Forsyth Forward, Township staff, and Township Board members should craft a shared narrative of collaboration, mutual support, and ambition to strengthen public confidence and excitement in the short term, and to strategically co-plan for the long term. Effectively meshing the private energy, business expertise, and contact networks of Forsyth Forward with the legal authorities, regulatory responsibilities, and infrastructure management of the Township will require clear communication and formalized commitments.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Identify shared short-term goals. Forsyth Forward is still a young organization, and Forsyth Township has a new long-term Master Plan and will have a new Township Manager this year. The two entities should engage in some intentional goal-setting and short-term strategic planning to ensure they can move forward together collaboratively and with clarity—rather than working at cross purposes. This discussion can cover the recommendations made in this report and serve as an opportunity to identify additional partners.

Formalize roles and responsibilities. Clearly defined roles will not only support the Township and Forsyth Forward in meeting expectations but also present a united front to outside partners and funders. This can be done either contractually or via a Memorandum of Understanding. One immediate opportunity is the local interest in joining MEDC’s Redevelopment Ready Communities program, where transparency could support coordinated engagement with MEDC and other partners.

Long Term (1–4 years)

Create a Unified Economic Development Plan, presenting Forsyth Forward and Forsyth Township as equal partners. This could balance immediate local projects with sustainable, long-term regional growth to maximize limited staff and financial resources. In the near term, the United Economic Development Plan may target hyperlocal small business support, downtown programming, and placemaking. Over the longer term, it could attract township-wide businesses, recreational tourism, housing, infrastructure, and workforce development. Operationally, Township staff would manage zoning, and land use, while serving as formal representatives with state and regional organizations; Forsyth Forward would steer tourism, technical assistance, and small business advocacy. Ultimately, the Plan would cohesively coordinate community stakeholders and channel the energy of Forsyth-Gwinn’s passionate residents to prevent burnout, while involving small businesses, developers, and regional partners in ongoing progress assessments.

Establish Forsyth Forward as a small business “welcome wagon” and convening space. In addition to its excellent tourism-focused offerings, the Forsyth Forward office could also support both local business veterans and new entrepreneurs taking root in town. The space could be reimagined as an entrepreneurial hub, with co-working spaces, networking events, and marketing support. While the Township would remain responsible for supporting businesses through permitting and regulatory processes, Forsyth Forward could offer information and technical assistance around grants, loans, and educational opportunities. By serving as the community’s economic development champion and primary business advocate, Forsyth Forward can foster a culture of business friendliness and progress in the communities of Forsyth Township.



Opportunity 1: Case Study

City of Ypsilanti's Economic Development Action Plan:

Updated annually, the Economic Development Action Plan lists Ypsilanti's economic development partners across marketing, workforce development, and business services, and clearly describes which partner is responsible for each of the City's economic development goals.

tinyurl.com/5y8uv6xb

Connect Macomb Steps Up:

During a Local Economies site visit with the League, Utica's small business owners expressed a desire for an informal business-to-business network to share information, better partner with the City on events and downtown placemaking, and connect with regional economic development partners. In response, regional stakeholder Connect Macomb agreed to serve as host for the city's small business alliance group—organizing meetings and serving as a liaison with the City. Supported by a small grant, this growing partnership is successfully helping to create a more organized and transparent local business ecosystem. connectmacomb.com

Opportunity 1: Resources

1. [Livingston Business Hub/Chamber of Commerce co-working space](#)
2. [Grayling Corner Collaborative](#)



Opportunity 2: Get Residents Excited with Visible Momentum

Overview

Economic development can feel overwhelming due to its scale and complex challenges like housing, business retention, and redevelopment. While big-picture planning for the entire Township can generate long-term energy, community members are often eager to see immediate hints of progress and momentum.

Placemaking—through short-term, low-cost investments in public infrastructure, beautification, and events programming—shows behind-the-scenes creativity and collaboration, making residents feel like “things are finally happening.” These conspicuous wins, especially those involving community participation, help shift the narrative about Forsyth-Gwinn toward local innovation and positive change while acknowledging the hard work of Township staff, Forsyth Forward, and local volunteers.

There are some wonderful examples of placemaking already happening across Forsyth-Gwinn. Events like the Alumni Softball Tournament and the Gwinn Ice Races bring unique excitement to the community, while the public seed catalog at the library and the summer concert series are lovely community resources. However, sustaining this momentum also requires compelling storytelling. Forsyth Township must make an effort to amplify these tales of progress to residents, peer communities, and regional outlets alike to truly cement its reputation of renewal and innovation.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Activate downtown Gwinn with seasonal, temporary, and pop-up programming. Forsyth Forward's new office location—nestled adjacent to Peter Nordeen Park, the public library, and the Gwinn Launderette—is ideal for catalyzing downtown placemaking. The Township should explore low-cost opportunities and grant funding for public art installations, decorative lighting, plantings, signage, pop-up programming, and seasonal events to drive foot traffic downtown, enhance local character, and strengthen community connection. An expansion of Nordeen Park's existing events like the Modeltown Market, 4th of July Street Dance, and Gwinn Fun Daze could promote small businesses and create space for new entrepreneurs. By partnering with local businesses for fun co-uses (e.g., a micro art gallery) and co-sponsoring library events like book clubs, family events, and career fairs, the Township–Forsyth Forward partnership could breathe new life into Forsyth-Gwinn while fostering vital partnerships for future programming and economic development.

Celebrate completed projects and small business

investments. Forsyth Forward and Forsyth Township should make progress “louder” by conspicuously celebrating smaller investments like business expansions, new openings, and public space enhancements. Upon completion of economic development projects (even minor ones, like façade improvements at a small business), both entities should organize and widely promote photo-ops, ribbon-cuttings, or launch parties. Additionally, publicly recognizing individuals, businesses, nonprofits, and community organizations through awards, press releases, and formal recognition at public meetings is crucial. Highlighting successful business collaborations or private sponsorships demonstrates collective progress and encourages others to get involved, while uplifting individual “community champions” makes people feel seen, prevents burnout, and inspires others to lend a helping hand.

Engage in strategic local and regional storytelling.

To ensure initiatives don’t fly under the radar, Forsyth Forward should work with Township staff and local business owners to identify opportunities for storytelling about its ongoing economic development work. A monthly newsletter could disperse bits of good news, project status updates, small business spotlights, event invitations, and resource opportunities, while promoting local businesses and sponsors. Sharing these newsletters with residents, regional partners, and a formalized “Gwinn-Forsyth Alumni group” could generate excitement and re-engage community members interested in moving back or investing. Additionally, Forsyth Forward should leverage existing community social media pages and local media outlets—e.g., the Mining Journal and MyUPNow—to share these stories of progress and position Forsyth Township as a community actively investing in the future.

Long Term (1–4 years)

Expand school-based workforce development and entrepreneurship programs.

Fostering young local talent is crucial to the future of any community. To that end, Forsyth Forward should consider partnering with Forsyth Township Public Schools to connect students in trades programs with public-facing projects involving civic infrastructure, business upgrades, and housing rehabilitation. By pairing students with trained professionals for hands-on placemaking, the Township can help stimulate workforce development while giving young people a direct role in their hometown's economic growth. Field trips, mentoring opportunities, and internship programs can serve to introduce these students to public service and entrepreneurship, build capacity for Forsyth Forward, and inspire the next generation of Forsyth residents to reinvest in the future of their community.

Build stronger public–private partnerships.

To support annual events, redevelopment, and long-term investment strategies—and to maximize funding—Forsyth Township and Forsyth Forward should create a coordinated sponsorship and investment program that engages local businesses, major employers, philanthropic organizations, developers, and regional partners. Targeting priority placemaking and redevelopment projects—e.g., downtown beautification, trail connections, public art, event programming, and the revitalization of underutilized properties—will better position the Township to compete for grants while leveraging matching funds, private sponsorships, and crowdfunding grants that foster community ownership. As the community implements a Unified Economic Development Plan and pursues Redevelopment Ready Communities certification, these partnerships will strengthen grant applications, sustain popular local events, and create long-term champions for the Township's economic vision.



Opportunity 2: Case Study

Macomb Business Awards:

This fun, energetic annual awards show celebrates local businesses and organizations across a number of categories, including “Best Place to Work,” “Hidden Gem,” and “Excellence in Manufacturing.” There are also categories for Nonprofit of the Year, the Placemaker Award, and individual entrepreneurs and residents. The awards both generate community excitement and showcase the county’s economic development progress. tinyurl.com/29n4sasj

Build UP CTE Partnership Program:

This workforce development program teaches local students to build high-quality homes, preparing students for in-demand careers in the trades. Meanwhile, the community benefits from affordable, student-built housing stock. The program is the product of a collaboration between Build UP (a program under Invest UP) and the Delta Schoolcraft Intermediate School District. Today, Manistique High School’s Career and Technical Education Building Trades program has broken ground on three homes on City-owned land, serving as a model for communities building a skilled workforce and addressing housing shortages. tinyurl.com/4m6bxk4f

Opportunity 2: Resources

1. [MiPlace Winter Strategies for Downtowns and Business Districts](#)
2. [Michigan MainStreet Story Series](#)
3. [MI Funding Hub, “one-stop shop” for Michigan and federal grant opportunities](#)



Opportunity 3: Open Doors to Investment—And Be Ready When It Comes

Overview

Forsyth Township is writing a new story, with concerted efforts to reinvigorate its downtown core and to clarify and market its vision for a renewed identity across Gwinn, K.I. Sawyer, and the Township as a whole. Together, Forsyth Forward and Forsyth Township—among other stakeholders—have relentlessly sought out the right investors to help spark economic development across the various township communities with new industry, expanded power, and housing.

These lofty aspirations for the future can become muddled by the challenges of small-scale development. At the hyperlocal level, small business owners often struggle with the lack of turnkey spaces to begin a business, as well as the complexities and confusion of navigating the processes of business development and permitting.

Forsyth Township must attack this issue from both ends. On one end, by engaging in inclusive long-term planning; on the other, by grabbing the “low-hanging fruit” of becoming more business-friendly and redevelopment-ready.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Streamline and clarify processes for small businesses.

Entrepreneurs in Forsyth-Gwinn are eager to abide by regulations but voiced their struggles navigating the many layers of licensing, permitting, and approvals. First, Forsyth Forward and Forsyth Township should conduct a “business friendliness” audit that examines application processes, the clarity of provisions, and the time and expense associated with each step. Then, consider amendments to these procedures to ease the burden on business owners.

Following this audit, create a “How to Open a Business in Forsyth” guide that clearly outlines development procedures, costs, and expected timelines. Include visual tools like flow charts and checklists, as well as fillable application forms and updated fee schedules. Host the guide on a dedicated “Opening a Business in Forsyth” webpage, with links to small business support resources such as grants, technical support, and programs from economic development organizations like the SBDC and Accelerate UP.

Pursue Redevelopment Ready Communities (RRC)

certification. This will allow Forsyth Township to grow its network with peer communities and economic development organizations while unlocking additional financial and technical support. Once a community is on the path to certification, RRC often offers funding to support the updating of plans, zoning ordinances, and other economic development resources. This dovetails with Forsyth-Gwinn's short-term efforts to streamline development approval processes. RRC-certified communities gain



access to MEDC's Redevelopment Services Team, which offers pre-development assistance including site design and engineering, environmental assessments, and RFP development. These resources can help lower the upfront capital needed to rehabilitate and construct new housing developments—both priorities in Forsyth-Gwinn.

Per MEDC guidelines, the Township must be the entity formally leading the charge of pursuing RRC certification. However, Forsyth Forward can lend its capacity to the certification process, e.g., creating a Public Participation Plan or supporting marketing efforts of priority redevelopment sites. Forsyth Forward staff members can take RRC training, too.

Long Term (1–4 years)

Create a community-led redevelopment vision for

K.I. Sawyer. The K.I. Sawyer residential area is split across West Branch and Forsyth Townships, making it central to neither's strategy despite having roughly 1,000 residents (a small majority of West Branch) and 2,000 residents (nearly a third of Forsyth), respectively. The community is also home to members of the Sault Tribe, who serve as developers of Sawyer Village, alongside large swaths of undeveloped county-owned land. This jurisdictional division inhibits effective resident services, workforce leverage, and efforts to tackle past stigma. Engaging residents, property owners, and stakeholders across township lines can establish a shared strategy for economic development, placemaking, housing, and transportation. This collaboration can come to pass using legal tools—e.g., a joint planning or recreation commission across both local government units—or, potentially, through the incorporation of a unified village government for K.I. Sawyer.

Market Forsyth Township's redevelopment sites.

The airport industrial area has substantial excess water capacity and an enviable combination of road, rail, and air infrastructure capacity, but has been hampered by lack of sufficient energy sources, challenges with federal ownership of some properties, and the need for infrastructure upgrades. Engaging MEDC's MI Sites Program and other business development services could support Forsyth Township in finding those larger businesses. The site readiness step is the ideal time to identify and address critical concerns. Priorities during this phase could include evaluating an industrial user's ability to access or generate electrical capacity, establishing community benefits if tax incentives are granted, and making necessary ownership or land management adjustments.

Opportunity 3: Case Study

Pre-Development Assistance in Negaunee:

Local developer Ben Argall worked with MEDC's Redevelopment Services team and was awarded pre-development assistance to renovate a blighted historic building in downtown Negaunee into a modern commercial headquarters. The project, at 209 Gold Street, received a \$236,021 grant through MEDC's [Build MI Community \(BMC\) Grant Initiative](#). Paired with funding from the Marquette County Brownfield Redevelopment Authority and DDA façade funding of \$25,000, these stacked funding sources helped make a pricy renovation possible and helped Downtown Negaunee continue to flourish. tinyurl.com/m4bz96t6

Loring Air Force Base Redevelopment in Limestone, Maine:

Situated in northeastern Maine, the Loring Air Force Base was officially closed in 1994 during the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, completely rewriting the local economy of Limestone, which now has a depleted population of around 1,500 residents. The Loring Development Authority created an Economic Development Plan for this subarea and has been transforming the 3,800-acre site to attract agricultural and food processing, aerospace, forestry, and other manufacturing businesses. tinyurl.com/55th5rk2

Brunswick Naval Air Station Reuse Master Plan in Brunswick, Maine:

In the process of creating the Reuse Master Plan for a decommissioned air station, the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority led a comprehensive community engagement process to gather the visions and aspirations of residents and stakeholders in reconnecting the base with the surrounding community and community Master Plan. The planning process will include an extensive, open, and inclusive public participation program, including community visioning sessions and other opportunities to provide input. tinyurl.com/45afd8a3

Opportunity 3: Resources

1. [Michigan Municipal League's Microbusiness Best Practices Comprehensive Playbook and fillable "How to Open a Business" Guide](#)
2. [MEDC's MI Sites Program Summary](#)



Microbusiness Best Practices

THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAYBOOK
FOR MUNICIPALITIES TO
SUPPORT MICROBUSINESSES



BUILDING OUR COMMUNITY. TOGETHER.

The Forsyth Forward Hiring & Workforce Portal connects job seekers with local opportunities and supports employers in building a strong, thriving workforce.



Conclusion and Next Steps

The very first step is to solidify the working relationship between Forsyth Township and Forsyth Forward, finding shared goals as well as explicit roles and responsibilities aligned with each entity's strengths and capacities. A common narrative that speaks to this formal collaboration can build trust and excitement among residents, and this narrative can be accelerated by the creation of a formalized Unified Economic Development Plan.

Moving forward, the Forsyth Township–Forsyth Forward partnership should prioritize specific focus areas, beginning with the creative activation of key downtown hubs through local art and events. Expanding student workforce development programs to prepare the next generation of young tradespeople and community development leaders will foster local talent, unlock career opportunities, and deliver high returns on investment. Additionally, Forsyth must tell and publicly celebrate compelling regional stories about business investments, community projects, and shared progress. These visible milestones communicate to residents, visitors, and investors that remarkable things are happening in Forsyth Township—and that they can be a part of it.

Finally, Forsyth Township should remove barriers to business development and investment wherever possible, including by clarifying the development process and pursuing Redevelopment Ready Communities certification. In the long term, redevelopment aspirations can be captured through a community-led plan for K.I. Sawyer. This initiative will reimagine the area's identity to improve community well-being, expand economic opportunities, and reconnect the base with downtown Gwinn and the rest of the township.

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 Forsyth Township over the next few years.

Small-Scale and Short-Term Interventions

- Identify shared short-term goals.
- Formalize roles and responsibilities.
- Activate downtown with seasonal, temporary, and pop-up programming.
- Celebrate completed projects and small business investments.
- Engage in strategic local and regional storytelling.
- Streamline and clarify processes for small businesses.
- Pursue Redevelopment Ready Communities certification.

Large-Scale and Long-Term Interventions

- Develop a Unified Economic Development Plan.
- Establish Forsyth Forward as a small business “welcome wagon” and convening space.
- Expand school-based workforce development and entrepreneurship programs.
- Build stronger public–private partnerships.
- Create a community-led redevelopment vision for K.I. Sawyer.
- Market Forsyth Township's redevelopment sites.

Acknowledgements

The Michigan Municipal League would like to acknowledge our partners who were integral to this exploration: Lake Superior Community Partnership, Central Upper Peninsula Small Business Support Hub, Forsyth Forward, and Forsyth Township for their enthusiastic engagement, local knowledge, and deep community connections, as well as McKenna for consulting support to our team.

We would also like to thank the dedicated Forsyth Township entrepreneurs, small business owners, and support organizations (both local and regional) who participated in our stakeholder workshops in Forsyth Township, as well as a regional partner convening at the end of our site visit week.

We extend our deepest gratitude for your support and partnership in this effort!

Contact

Shanna Draheim

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

Richard Murphy

Senior Program Manager, Policy Research Labs
Michigan Municipal League
rmurphy@mml.org