

City of
Ishpeming
Local Economies
Opportunity Report



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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 Ishpeming?

The League and MML Foundation were excited at the opportunity to collaborate with the City of Ishpeming on this project, as the city is experiencing growth and opportunity, with particular momentum occurring in its highly engaged network of local entrepreneurs.

Historically rooted in the region's iron mining industry, Ishpeming's local economy today is supported by a more diverse mix of small businesses, tourism, and outdoor recreation. Like many Upper Peninsula communities, Ishpeming faces challenges related to population trends, workforce attraction and retention, housing shortages, and commercial reinvestment. At the same time, the city benefits from a deep sense of community identity, significant historic assets, and an expansive downtown with plenty of room to grow into.

The local small business community has demonstrated remarkable initiative in promoting and supporting one another through efforts such as the "Rooted in Ishpeming" network. Recent investments by the City and partners, particularly the creation of the Small Business Navigator and part-time Downtown Development Authority position, have helped connect small business entrepreneurs to the resources they need to succeed.

Building additional organizational capacity and expanding participation in these efforts will be critical to sustaining momentum, supporting downtown revitalization, encouraging housing development, and positioning Ishpeming for long-term economic resilience and growth.

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 Ishpeming on April 21, 2026.

This Opportunity Report is intended to serve as a resource for Ishpeming 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 four opportunity areas for the City of Ishpeming, its small businesses and local support organizations, and other regional stakeholders to strengthen Ishpeming's small business ecosystem in the coming years.

In addition to the recommendations presented in this report, the City 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: Small Business Marketing and Networking

Overview

The Ishpeming small business community is already working together in partnership to help one another, promote their community and small businesses, and work with the City. The “Rooted in Ishpeming” Facebook page, which was created a few years ago, is a great source of information for businesses and community members. Furthermore, some Ishpeming small businesses have self-organized monthly business gatherings to network and support each other.

This grassroots energy could be built upon with a few more dedicated resources and an intentional effort to “expand the tent” of those organizing and implementing programs. This will accelerate momentum, help avoid volunteer burnout, and diversify business offerings over the long term.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Partner with small businesses to offer programs and events to direct customer energy. These could include passport-style booklets that businesses add stamps to, Small Business Shopping Days in the summer and/or fall, or incentives such as a small free item or coupon if a customer shows a receipt from a participating Ishpeming small business.

Offer e-commerce assistance to small businesses to help address winter slowdowns. Coordinate registrations to trainings on digital marketing and online retail from SBDC or other business support organizations—or bring in those organizations to advise entrepreneurs on developing online shops using existing storefront platforms (e.g., Shopify, Toast). The DDA or Small Business Support Hub can potentially also design small grant programs for initial investments required. These platforms could both increase local sales (e.g., for restaurants or coffee shops) and support shipping products nationally.

Conduct a “mapping” of existing businesses downtown. Mapping exercises, which can include both downtown and key business corridors, catalogue what exists, identify gaps and needs based on community input during previous visioning efforts, and help paint the business case for demand. This effort could build on the informal survey done on the Rooted in Ishpeming Facebook page last year. Sharing results of these exercises with community members, economic development organizations, regional trade schools and universities, and other relevant partners might help generate interest from potential entrepreneurs.

Long Term (1–4 years)

Participate in the Recast City program to develop small-scale manufacturing opportunities in the downtown and other key business districts. Many attendees at site visit meetings noted the presence of a latent maker and fabricator culture in the community. These include members of the RUMBA trails group or other community organizations, vendors at seasonal markets, and mining retirees and hobbyists. Helping these craftspeople explore business opportunities could spur both economic development and placemaking. Review product-based business resources from [Recast City](#) and consider engaging in a future cohort program.

Conduct a business target market analysis. This can quantify where consumer demands are going unmet, which sectors have enough demand to support new local retail and service businesses, and what sectors are overperforming by drawing customers from other markets. This could be a step sponsored by local banks—especially those with a CRA mandate—and the findings could be used in an open house education and networking event for entrepreneurs, existing businesses in the region, and financial institutions.



Opportunity 1: Case Study

ExploreOwosso:

The City of Owosso started [#ExploreOwosso: A Passport Adventure](#), which used a scavenger hunting approach to introduce people to different parts of the city. People shared photos they'd taken on social media and tagged #ExploreOwosso, which earned them stamps from local businesses (on their “passport”) to earn prizes. The initiative generated a lot of interest from both residents and visitors and helped drive customer traffic to the city’s small businesses.

Opportunity 1: Resources

1. [Recast City and Recast Leaders cohort program:](#)
2. [SBDC Michigan Online Trainings \(scheduled and on-demand\)](#)

Opportunity 2: Place Management and Governance Supports

Overview

In recent years, Ishpeming has proved its responsiveness to—and investment in—the small business community. More than ever, small business owners and entrepreneurs feel connected to the technical support and resources needed to help them arrive, stay, and thrive in Ishpeming.

The Small Business Navigator and part-time DDA position have positively transformed the relationship between small businesses and the City. Given the immense return on investment, the City should work with the LSCP to continue to fund this role. In future years, the City may also consider seeking out additional capacity through interns or fellows coming out of LSCP itself, or programs such as the Rural Redevelopment Fellowship Program, AmeriCorps/VISTA, Community Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM), or Northern Michigan University (NMU).

The scale of investment needed downtown is quite large, however, and won’t be achieved with a single staff member or initiative. As it builds additional capacity, the City can incrementally pave the way for downtown revitalization through a combination of thoughtful communication, strategic partnerships and relationship building, and DDA-led programming and policies that make it easier and more affordable to live, work, and do business downtown.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Improve online access to development information and resources. While local business owners consistently praised the city’s building department for their help in navigating permit and regulatory requirements, a more comprehensive and visible guide for new business owners would be helpful. The City’s Development Guide is difficult for users to locate among the many resources available on the website. The City and DDA should collaborate on creating a one-stop online shop of information on starting and managing a small business in Ishpeming. This could

include the existing Development Guide, information on City and DDA resources (e.g., façade grants and downtown events), lenders, training opportunities, and small business technical assistance. These updates would reduce barriers for local entrepreneurs while preserving limited capacity within the Building Department by easing the volume of routine questions.

Set restaurateurs up for success. A common request—from community members and business owners alike—is for an upscale dining restaurant downtown. To work towards this goal, the DDA should explore its ability to secure DDA-sponsored non-transferable redevelopment liquor licenses and, in conjunction with available DDA grants, market this opportunity to potential investors and business owners. Additionally, Ishpeming should create a Social District to increase downtown foot traffic and patronage of bars and restaurants. This could complement existing programming such as the Ishpeming seasonal markets and spur new community walkabouts, perhaps tapping into the nostalgia of “Thursday nights” of yesteryear in downtown Ishpeming.

Invite students into housing solutions. Ishpeming has already leveraged its public high school’s Career and Technical Education (CTE) program to construct retail huts for its Christmas Market. The City should look to expand this partnership to include the construction of homes, as is done in Manistique High School’s CTE Building Trades program through the Build UP CTE Partnership. Ishpeming could explore using City-owned land as a pilot location; it could also consider working with place-based economic development organizations, such as InvestUP, to secure start-up land acquisition costs. These experiences provide real-world training for students within lucrative, in-demand trades—while contributing to much-needed housing stock within their hometown.



Long Term (1–4 years)

Build on RRC Certification to access pre-development assistance. Downtown Ishpeming currently lacks a supply of turnkey spaces for commercial uses, with a huge upfront investment needed in some of the oldest sites; the ever-climbing price tag on renovations can be enough to turn first-time business owners away. To increase access to financial support needed for redevelopment, Ishpeming recently achieved RRC Certification, which is already attracting the attention of developers and economic development organizations. The City should continue this positive trajectory engaging with MEDC's Redevelopment Services Team, on pre-development technical assistance options, such as site design and engineering, environmental assessments, marketing and RFP/RFQ development. This technical assistance could be applied to important development properties downtown, such as the historic Stone House Building (212 N. Front Street) or Nicolet Bank (100–106 S. Main).

Foster working relationships with small developers.

Through strategic partnerships, Ishpeming could uplift the next generation of small-scale, UP-based developers while garnering much needed investment along key downtown and neighborhood nodes. City representatives should explore marketing key properties to and networking with emerging developers at meetups, boot camps, workshops, and conferences, including those run by organizations such as the CEDAM and the Women's Sustainable Development Initiative. In collaboration with neighboring communities and economic development organizations such as MEDC, Ishpeming could host Small Developer Visit Days to educate outside developers on the community and its opportunities.

Opportunity 2: 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. michiganbusiness.org/reports-data/success-stories/argall-real-estate-group

Opportunity 2: Resources

1. [MEDC's Redevelopment Services Team](#)
2. [CEDAM Small Developer Boot Camp](#)
3. [Build U.P. CTE Partnership Program](#)
4. [Allegan County Developer Day Showcase](#)
5. [Downtown Alpena's Vibrant. Artsy. Growing. website includes statistics on the downtown market and housing, information on businesses and events, resources for business owners, and updated information on the DDA programs: \[downtownalpenami.com\]\(https://downtownalpenami.com\)](#)

Opportunity 3: Downtown Building Improvements

Overview

Ishpeming's newly updated Master Plan appropriately identifies downtown as both one of the city's largest assets and one of its major challenges. The expansive area of the historic downtown includes many vacant and underutilized buildings—many with significant capital maintenance needs—and vacant lots where buildings have already been lost. Rehab and re-occupancy of downtown buildings will only happen with a strategy of regulatory (zoning) updates and targeted financial incentives to clear a path to economic use, combined with blight enforcement to address the worst properties.

Downtown building rehab can support housing needs—but only with more flexibility in zoning. The downtown footprint is too large to fill the first floors of every building with commercial businesses, meaning that the Central Business District's restriction of residential use to upper stories is likely inhibiting the reuse of buildings. A first-floor commercial requirement should be applied only to a limited "retail main street" area, with buildings off those key frontages allowed to be fully used for residential purposes. Consider designating Main Street from Hematite to Division—and potentially the first blocks of Pearl and Division on either side of Main—as these principal retail corridors with required active commercial first floors and allow buildings facing other streets to have residential frontages.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Update the Central Business District to allow flexible reuse. Enabling first floor residential uses off the principal corridors should be an early step to unlock possibilities for property owners and developers. Additionally, consider making residential uses permitted, rather than conditional, and evaluate the downtown parking inventory to determine whether the residential parking requirement is necessary. For all uses, require a Main Street-appropriate form, including a front build-to line (maximum setback) and minimal or no side backs.

Identify available financial tools to support investment. Developers will likely need to use a blend of local and state financial incentives to make major rehab or new construction economically feasible. The City should identify available options and be ready to use combinations of sources such as Michigan's Obsolete Property Rehabilitation Act (OPRA), housing or brownfield TIF, residential payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT), and MEDC's Community Revitalization Program.

Focus outreach on restaurant grants. The DDA's restaurant startup grant is significant but will still require an entrepreneur with a solid business plan. Consider engaging NMU's hospitality program, the UP Food Exchange, and existing regional restaurants to identify opportunities and market Ishpeming's building stock and grant support. Explore opportunities to double-up use of an expensive commercial kitchen by matchmaking restaurateurs (e.g., a breakfast and lunch café with a dinner-only operation) or by identifying startup retail food producers who can use a restaurant kitchen during off hours.



Long Term (1–4 years)

Apply available code enforcement tools to address property deterioration. Once tools are in place to support rehab and reuse of properties, Ishpeming can step up enforcement of its nuisance, property maintenance, and dangerous building ordinances to more proactively address public health and safety concerns. Consider implementing a vacant property registration and inspection ordinance that can serve as a monitoring tool to prevent properties from deteriorating and becoming dangerous.

Coordinate pop-up business events in vacant buildings. Work with willing owners of vacant storefronts to allow for pop-up retail or community activities. This can be a way to expand existing downtown events with an indoor component, show off the potential of these buildings, and activate some of the “dead zones” within downtown.

Opportunity 3: Case Study

Allegan PlacePOP Pop-Up Retail:

The City of Allegan engaged owners of some long-vacant downtown buildings to host pop-up holiday market events as part of its Festive Fridays retail markets. The events were a successful way to showcase available spaces, provide vendors with an additional opportunity to meet customers, and build positive relationships between property owners and the city. All four spaces used were occupied by permanent businesses within a few years. See the [League's PlacePOP report](#) for more details.

Opportunity 3: Resources

1. [Enabling Better Places: User's Guide to Code Reform. Published by the League, MEDC, and other partners, offers best practices and a model Main Street zoning ordinance.](#)
2. [Revitalization in Michigan: A Guide to Transforming VAD Properties Through Code Enforcement](#)
3. [Michigan Obsolete Properties Rehabilitation Act guide](#)

Opportunity 4: Placemaking Investments

Overview

Businesses, local officials, and other stakeholders at our site visit raved about how welcoming and engaged the Ishpeming community is. They cited Ishpeming's many cultural and recreation assets and emphasized that while tourism is a big part of the local economy, placemaking amenities serve the needs of visitors and residents alike.

The City has made great strides investing in placemaking in recent years and there are significant assets to build on, e.g., downtown events, multi-use trails that run right through downtown, the Carnegie Library, the historic Mather building, and the new skate park.

There are some key opportunities to build on the momentum that would help make downtown Ishpeming more walkable and would energize business areas, particularly in the Central Business District.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Create a recreation-focused pocket park at 118 East Canada Street (across from the Mather). The City and its partners should seek grant funding to make this a gathering spot targeted at recreational users of the surrounding Iron Ore Heritage and RAMBA Trails. A small pocket park with amenities like picnic tables and chairs, bike repair station, drinking water, and electricity for charging equipment would activate this key connection point between the northern part of town and downtown, creating a wonderful spot for people using the trails to get downtown.

Develop and deploy branded wayfinding. Ishpeming's large downtown is bisected by the busy and wide Hematite Road. As a result, it can be challenging for visitors unfamiliar with Ishpeming to discover local businesses on foot. Consider adding improved wayfinding signage, with consistent branding, throughout the downtown, major roadways to west, and other key tourism areas (e.g., lakes and recreation sites) to better connect these dispersed assets.



Long Term (1–4 years)

Make streetscape improvements in the Central

Business District. Ishpeming's downtown is historic and has great architectural merit, but smaller and newer assets could further beautify it and give a sense of vibrancy. Decorative items such as planters, murals, public art, and seating areas would improve the experience of spending time downtown and drive momentum for business growth.

Work with MDOT to create pedestrian crossings.

To improve walkability and connectivity downtown, add crossings at Hematite and Main, and Hematite and either 2nd or 3rd. These improvements could be a HAWK (High-Intensity Activated crosswalk) beacon or other appropriate mechanism to facilitate a safer and more engaging pedestrian environment.

Make improvements to the walkway along Hematite between First and Main Street.

These improvements could include landscaping and hardscaping, art, beautification efforts along the backs of the businesses that front the trail in this segment, or other creative placemaking solutions. Enhancing this walkway would improve conditions, better demarcate the trail, and create a more attractive separation between uses.

Opportunity 4: Case Study

Enterprise Pocket Park:

In 2022, the City of Farmington used MEDC's Public Spaces, Community Places program and the Patronicity platform to fund a new pocket park. The park transformed a gravel lot between buildings into a new community gathering space. The community successfully raised \$80,000 through private donations and received a \$75,000 match through the program. The park includes universally accessible elements, lighting, seating, and greenspace. secondwavemedia.com/metromode/devnews/Enterprise-update.aspx

Oak Park Nine-Mile Redesign:

The City completed a redesign of a stretch of Nine Mile Road and included several pocket parks and streetscaping elements to improve non-motorized access and improve the experience of connecting with their businesses along the corridor. The project earned them a finalist position in MML's Community Excellence Awards in 2024. metromodemedia.com/oakparkseptember

Opportunity 4: Resources

1. [Trust for Public Lands Pocket Park Toolkit](#)
2. [MDOT Tools for the Planning and Design of Pedestrian Crossing Enhancements](#)
3. [Public Spaces, Community Places crowdfunding initiative](#)
4. [Main Street Best Practices for Downtown Management](#)

Conclusion and Next Steps

Ishpeming is blessed with many assets, both human and infrastructure: A highly engaged, self-directed small business cohort; an open, welcoming community; and a large, historic downtown.

The City should recognize the strength of its human assets and ease the way for entrepreneurs of all kinds (including makers, fabricators, and local craftspeople) to start, build, and grow a small business in Ishpeming. This includes creating a modern online "one stop shop" of key information for local entrepreneurs, aiding in the rehabilitation of building stock to make spaces "move-in ready," and providing opportunities for a wider array of business types, such as e-commerce and pop-up shops.

Ishpeming residents have deep roots in the area and love where they live. At the same time, the community is friendly, open, and welcoming to newcomers. The City should embrace these positive vibes by creating more opportunities for residents and visitors alike to get out and connect with one another through special events, improved wayfinding, connectivity for nonmotorized traffic, and a social district. (and—of course—a restaurant.)

Finally, Ishpeming's large downtown is both a great challenge and a great opportunity. Internally, the City should consider adding and strengthening building ordinances to combat deterioration and blight. Externally, the City and its partners should engage regional and state resources to secure funding for building rehabilitation and reuse, for both commercial and residential.

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 Ishpeming over the next few years.

Small-Scale and Short-Term Interventions

- Partner with small businesses to offer programs and events to direct customer energy.
- Offer e-commerce assistance to small businesses to help address winter slowdowns.
- Conduct a "mapping" of existing businesses downtown.
- Improve online access to development information and resources.
- Set restaurateurs up for success.
- Invite students into housing solutions.
- Update the Central Business District to allow flexible reuse.
- Identify available financial tools to support investment.
- Focus outreach on restaurant grants.
- Create a recreation-focused pocket park at 118 East Canada Street (across from the Mather).
- Develop and deploy branded wayfinding.

Large-Scale and Long-Term Interventions

- Participate in the Recast City program to develop small-scale manufacturing opportunities in the downtown and other key business districts.
- Conduct a business target market analysis.
- Build on RRC Certification to access pre-development assistance.
- Foster working relationships with small developers.
- Apply available code enforcement tools to address property deterioration.
- Coordinate pop-up business events in vacant buildings.
- Make streetscape improvements in the Central Business District.
- Work with MDOT to create pedestrian crossings.
- Make improvements to the walkway along Hematite between First Street and Main Street.

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

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