



## Michigan Rural Council Community Assessment

### Milan

Julie Hales-Smith and Jamie Schriener-Hooper

February 10, 2015

*The MRC community assessments provide an affordable opportunity to assess a community's problems and challenges, identify assets and kick-start the development of projects and goals for the future. The community assessment process is intended to empower communities by giving them the tools to plan for the future in the manner of their choosing. The process is locally led from the beginning, and consists of multiple listening sessions in which everyone in the community has a chance to voice their opinion. This particular assessment was focused on the downtown. The city requested this because they are in the process of establishing a Main Street program, and wanted input regarding the community members' vision for the downtown.*

Milan is a **small** town with **big** possibilities. Just 26 minutes from the center of the University of Michigan campus, Milan has a lot going for it – great location, good schools, affordable housing prices (\$117,000 in 2014 vs \$249,000 in Dexter<sup>1</sup>), an historic downtown with enviable architecture, wonderful parks, a lake, and great community fabric. It is poised on the verge of several great opportunities to “put it on the map” as a destination for families, seniors, and young professionals. A mixed use development of almost an entire block of historic buildings downtown will produce fifteen very desirable apartments and six storefronts that, if marketed to their best advantage and the best advantage of the entire downtown, will draw businesses and residents that will help to develop the area as a destination.

In addition, Milan leadership and community members understand the importance of not only a laser focus on the downtown but the role that community volunteers must play in the redevelopment and sustainability of that downtown. They recently applied and were accepted into the Michigan Main Street Program as at the Associate Level. During this first year, Milan will be offered opportunities for training on the different aspects of the Main Street 4-Point Approach as well as overall downtown management and improvement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Accessed February 14, 2015. Sperlings Best Places Website  
<http://www.bestplaces.net/housing/city/michigan/milan>

Simultaneously, the city leadership commissioned a place branding and marketing company to walk the city through an assessment of “the essence of Milan” in order to help them develop their own unique brand. This brand and the resulting marketing strategy will provide the basis for the pitch to “just right” tenants for the new mixed use project, and promotion of the downtown as the Main Street program takes root.

### **The Tour**

The Michigan Rural Council (MRC) assessment started with a tour of the downtown lead by David Snyder, DDA member, and Jade Smith, City Administrator. We saw a main street lined with a rich variety of historic structures – variable in architectural style, as well as state of repair. Some buildings were two story, some single story; many sporting authentic brick with old wooden windows, one “wrapped” in siding that hints of the history that likely lies beneath. It appeared that most storefronts were filled with businesses, however likely not the highest and best use if the objective is to create traffic, excitement, vibrancy and a destination in the downtown. On the whole, however, we observed a downtown with GREAT architectural “bones” and wonderful potential for revitalization.

### **Small Group #1**

The first small group interview of the assessment included city staff. When asked their opinions of the biggest challenges, there were two general themes: aesthetics and lack of businesses that attract customers and activity downtown. Some of the building/business owners don’t seem to care enough to keep their buildings up or even clear the snow from out in front of their buildings, and few of the businesses actually “draw” people to the downtown. “We need pubs, food, entertainment...things that make people want to come downtown.” They mentioned that according to a city ordinance, bicycles cannot be ridden downtown, either on the sidewalk or the street. This could certainly put a damper on creating a welcoming, walkable, bikeable downtown that so many people (that they are trying to attract to their downtown) would want.

They did see opportunities in the fun and well attended events that have been occurring downtown, as well as the Wi-Fi that is proposed, and the branding work that is in progress. They were pleased to note the several new, young business owners have recently opened their shops in the downtown. And there was interest in the potential for connecting the downtown to the lake and the park; and turning Tolan Street into a town square, making a permanent space where they can both host events and the farmer’s market, and where community members can gather and visit.

Their vision for downtown is a bustling place with lots to do downtown. Buildings look great and businesses are hip and fun; they appeal to young professionals and families on a middle class income.

### **Small Group #2**

The second group was made up over a dozen downtown business owners and staff. Their concerns echoed much of what the first group identified, but they were also concerned with the heavy truck traffic downtown and the pattern of businesses opening and closing in a short period of time. They felt that Milan has a really nice downtown that is marred by buildings in need of repair and non-sustainable businesses being attracted due to low rent and ease of opening. When asked about the potential for enlisting community members to work on the Main Street Program they had mixed feelings. On the one hand, volunteers have been plenty for some of the new events, but for the older, more labor intensive

events volunteers start out enthusiastic but die off as time goes on. Recruiting and maintaining a group of active volunteers is always a challenge. We reassured the group that the Main Street program will have ideas and recommendations for how to address this problem, including comprehensive volunteer training and work plan creation.

It was obvious by their active participation and their interaction that this group works together well. In fact, they identified this as their greatest strength. Another strength of the downtown is the opportunity to build on the beauty and proximity of the lake and park, as well as to develop additional housing AND properties downtown. Milan is in a great location, close to Ann Arbor and Monroe, and it has room to add to its housing and building stock to accommodate new residents and business.

Their vision for the downtown is a lively destination spot, with a beautiful town square on Tolan Street, safe, walkable streets (no more huge trucks barreling down the street), clean alleys and a theatre! There would be outdoor dining, attractive benches and trash receptacles, and lots of activities for people of all ages.

### **Small Group #3**

The final focus group was made up of DDA members and representatives from various clubs and community organizations. Although the challenges were generally similar to those voiced in earlier groups, there was a nuanced difference. They agreed the downtown needs a new variety of business, but "... businesses that respect 'our culture' and what we are as a community. These types of businesses will have the community surround and support them. Don't want larger chains, but want to be able to know the owner and stay true to ourselves." They said that Milan needs to develop a vision for the downtown, and have everyone work together toward that vision. They also wanted the community to exhibit "pride" in their city – both in the way they keep up their buildings and public spaces, and the way they talk about and market their community. They were concerned about the lack of things for the youth to do downtown and wished for a theatre or other entertainment.

On the positive side, they see energy in all the different groups that are working to improve Milan and they are excited about the Veteran's Memorial, and the new events that are happening downtown and elsewhere. They hope that the groups can work together in a collaborative and coordinated fashion to make a real impact on the downtown.

They are enthusiastic about creating a town square and will work to beautify the downtown to make it a welcoming and attractive place for visitors and townspeople alike. They would also like to pursue connection between the downtown and the many parks throughout the city. A paved trail would be nice, and maybe even a boardwalk around the lake.

### **Town Hall Meeting**

The evening town hall was well attended by a variety of Milan stakeholders. The top challenges were those heard earlier in the day during small group interviews – downtown aesthetics, irritation with big trucks pounding down the Main Street, and lack of destination businesses. During the work session, small groups enthusiastically identified assets and generated several ideas for short and longer term projects that could capitalize on those assets. See attached table for lists of projects as well as volunteers who are willing to help plan and implement these projects.

## Recommendations

A theme throughout the interviews was that people in Milan are very willing to take action; they just need to agree on specific action steps and work together to accomplish them. Based on what we saw and heard in Milan, the following are recommendations for short and longer term action steps. The backdrop for these action steps is the branding initiative currently in progress. The ongoing organizing mechanism is the four point approach brought to the community through the Main Street model.

### Short Term

1. *Promotions Committee*: Pull together representatives from all the different organizations that plan events or activities for the downtown and parks. Develop a strategy to capitalize on these events/grow them by tying in promotion of stores downtown, bringing food in by food cart, incorporating Youth Council with specific youth-focused events. Discuss at that time if it would be beneficial to bring these groups together on a more regular basis (quarterly?).
2. *Design Committee*: Continue to pursue plans and implementation of infrastructure improvements to Tolan Street to create a town square.
3. *Economic Restructuring Committee*: DDA and other interested parties, develop a plan to strategically market the storefronts in Snyder building - go after at least one restaurant/bar and other interesting businesses that fit into the downtown and could become destination businesses.

### Longer term

1. *Design Committee*: Pursue truck traffic bypassing downtown
2. *Design Committee*: Explore and develop a plan for a trail system to link downtown, parks and lake; enhance lake with a boardwalk or other infrastructure that would make it accessible and more attractive.
3. *Economic Restructuring Committee*: During building inventory for Main Street application, think strategically about what property is available for new development or redevelopment; develop a strategy for marketing that property

## Summary

Milan stakeholders appear ready to take the next step for their downtown. This will require that organizations and individuals currently working and planning for improvements in the community work collaboratively and focus their efforts. Embracing the Main Street model and assembling the application is a first, important step in this direction. As an associate level Main Street community, Milan residents have the opportunity to learn from Select and Master Level Main Street communities across the state – learning from the volunteers themselves on what worked and more importantly, what didn't work. Residents and community stakeholders should take this opportunity to heart and attend as many as they are able. Those who attend should share what they learn, as well as complete the "homework" that will be assigned at each training that helps to prepare for and complete the Select Level Michigan Main Street application.

At the Main Street trainings, communities will learn about the four point approach, and how each project falls under one of the four committees: organization, which deals with human and financial resources, design, which deals with historic preservation and aesthetics, promotions, which deals with events and marketing and economic restructuring, which deals with business retention and recruitment.

## Opportunities and Resources

1. **Developing the Farmer's Market (*Promotions Committee*):** There was much discussion about starting a farmer's market in the downtown. The following are excellent resources :
  - a. **Julia Darnton**, Extension Educator, Michigan State University Greening Michigan Institute, Sustainable Community Prosperity, Community Food Systems. (989) 758-2507; [darntonj@anr.msu.edu](mailto:darntonj@anr.msu.edu). Julia is an expert on starting and managing a farmer's market. She is headquartered in Saginaw but serves all of northern and mid- Michigan.
  - b. **Marcy Bishop Kates**, 517-974-8944. Marcy is Chairperson of Holt Farmer's Market (<http://www.holtfarmersmarket.org/> ). Marcy also started Incu-Bake ( <http://incu-bake.com/about-incu-bake/> ) , a small business incubator that combines small business support with rentable commercial kitchen space. When contacted by the MRC Facilitator, Marcy said that she has provided technical assistance and tours of the Holt Market to many communities interested in starting a market, including Dimondale. She would be happy to work with Dimondale to think about ways to grow the market.
  - c. **Allen Neighborhood Center**: The Allen Neighborhood Center Farmers' Market in Lansing is one of the success stories of farmer's markets in this region. It now boasts a food hub on the property, as well as a hoop house in the park across the street. (517) 367-2468
2. **Michigan Main Street Program:** Participating in the Main Street Program as an associate member will assist Milan in multiple ways. Creating a volunteer driven Main Street program will help revitalize and reinvigorate the downtown, systematically work to engage more citizens in community/downtown projects and initiatives, and provide planning and implementation support to the downtown.

### **Benefits of the Michigan Main Street (MMS) Program include:**

- a. Protecting and strengthening the existing tax base
- b. Creating a positive community image
- c. Enhancing economically viable buildings
- d. Supporting business recruitment and retention
- e. Fostering the development of new jobs
- f. Attracting new residents to the Main Street area
- g. Increasing investment in the Main Street area
- h. Preserving historic architectural resources
- i. Providing services tailored to specific community needs

For more information: <http://www.michiganmainstreetcenter.com/>

3. **Additional resources for developing the arts, second story rehabilitation of downtown buildings, small scale rental development, and downtown beautification (*Design Committee*)<sup>2</sup>:**

Tool/Program	Agency	Tool Type	Information
Minigrant Professional Development	MEDC	Grant	MCACA in partnership with 19 regional regrating agencies throughout the state provides grants for organizational or professional development. Applicants must be nonprofit arts and cultural organizations.

<sup>2</sup> See entire Toolbox of state agency resources for Placemaking at [www.miplace.org](http://www.miplace.org)

			<a href="http://www.michiganadvantage.org/Arts/Grant-Programs/">http://www.michiganadvantage.org/Arts/Grant-Programs/</a>
Minigrant Project Support	MEDC	Grant	MCACA in partnership with 19 regional regranting agencies throughout the state provides grants for locally developed, high-quality arts and cultural projects. Applicants must be nonprofit organizations, schools or municipalities. <a href="http://www.michiganadvantage.org/Arts/Grant-Programs/">http://www.michiganadvantage.org/Arts/Grant-Programs/</a>
Capital Improvement Program	MEDC	Grant	MCACA provides support for the expansion, renovation or construction of arts & cultural facilities. Applicants must be nonprofit arts organizations, counties, cities, townships or villages. <a href="http://www.michiganadvantage.org/Arts/Grant-Programs/">Http://www.michiganadvantage.org/Arts/Grant-Programs/</a>
Program for Operational and Project Support	MEDC		MCACA provides support for the operation of or the production, presentation and creation of arts and culture that promotes public engagement, diverse and excellent art, lifelong learning in the arts and the strengthening or livability of communities through the arts. Applicants must be nonprofit organizations, schools or municipalities. <a href="http://www.michiganadvantage.org/Arts/Grant-Programs/">http://www.michiganadvantage.org/Arts/Grant-Programs/</a>
Housing Resource Fund/Rental Rehabilitation Program	MSHDA	Grant /Loan	Targeted rental rehab in single-family residential areas. OCD will consider funding rental rehabilitation in residential areas only when it is part of a comprehensive targeted strategy with substantial local support, and most likely will only be funded with HOME dollars at up to \$14,999 per unit. <a href="http://www.michigan.gov/mshda/0,4641,7-141-5564_46919---,00.html">http://www.michigan.gov/mshda/0,4641,7-141-5564_46919---,00.html</a>
Housing Resource Fund/Rental Rehabilitation Program	MSHDA	Grant/Loan	OCD will consider funding for the rehabilitation of rental property in downtowns and commercial centers: (a) generally CDBG funded, (b) affordability at initial occupancy, (c) \$35K limit all-in for the creation of units in previously non-residential space; (d) \$25K limit all-in for any unit in legal residential use and occupied during the last 5 years. OCD is allowing up to \$40,000 per unit for the creation of new HOME units as part of a downtown rental rehabilitation program. HOME funded projects do have longer affordability requirements than CDBG funded projects. Application deadlines do not apply for downtown rental rehabilitation proposals. <a href="http://www.michigan.gov/mshda/0,4641,7-141-5564_46919---,00.html">http://www.michigan.gov/mshda/0,4641,7-141-5564_46919---,00.html</a>
Community Grant Awards	Rural Partners of Michigan	Grant	This program offers grants of up to \$800 to organizations engaged in rural community development work. RPM, as part of the Michigan Rural Council, seeks to connect and educate community leaders, provide expertise and advocate for policy and projects that impact rural Michigan. <b>Eligibility Criteria</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This RFP is open to all nonprofit organizations working within or on behalf of rural Michigan.</li> <li>• Grant funds should be used to directly benefit rural communities.</li> <li>• A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, municipality or governmental entity must act as the fiduciary/grantee.</li> <li>• Awards are limited to one per community per grant period.</li> <li>• Projects should commence within the next six months</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applications are encouraged to include more than one entity or organization within a community or a larger geographic region. Extra weight will be given to programs or projects that have not been funded in the past and have gone through an RPM Community Assessment. Projects or programs selected to receive a Community Grant Award will be required to submit a brief final report when grant funds have been expended. Grants will be awarded bi-annually each year with deadlines in August and February. The Granting Committee, comprised of Board Members of the Rural Partners of Michigan (RPM), will select up to five proposals to be awarded during each of the two cycles throughout the year. <a href="http://rural.cedam.info/communityawards/">http://rural.cedam.info/communityawards/</a></li> </ul>
--	--	--	---

**Walkable/Bikeable/Trailways (Design Committee):** Recreational trails provide many physical, economic, environmental and social benefits to a community. They can help encourage healthy lifestyles, bring customers into local businesses, protect wildlife habitats and promote a strong sense of community and place. As the number of recreational trails being built increases, it is important to understand how they fit into and shape our community identity.

Resource	Source	Type	Description
Direction and Connection to resources	MSU CES Mary Bohling <a href="mailto:bohling@anr.msu.edu">bohling@anr.msu.edu</a> or 313-757-7356 x 101.	Free technical assistance	For help establishing a community group or exploring the feasibility of creating a trail.
Article: <i>Leveraging Your Trail System for Community Economic Development</i>	Michigan Township News September 2012  <a href="http://www.liaa.org/downloads/mtncover_sept_2012.pdf">http://www.liaa.org/downloads/mtncover_sept_2012.pdf</a> Harry Burkholder, AICP, Community Planner, Land Information Access Association, Traverse City Burkholder can be reached at (231) 929-3696 or <a href="mailto:burkholder@liaa.org">burkholder@liaa.org</a> .	Indepth article	Complete guide to becoming a Trail Town using the Main Street 4 points approach as the organizing model.
Transportation Alternatives Program	MDOT	Grant	The Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) is a competitive grant program that funds projects such as bike paths, streetscapes, and historic preservation of transportation facilities that enhance Michigan's intermodal transportation system and provide safe alternative transportation options. These investments support place-based economic development by offering transportation

			<p>choices, promoting walkability, and improving the quality of life. The program uses Federal Transportation Funds designated by Congress for these types of activities.</p> <p>Eligible applicants include county road commissions, cities, villages, regional transportation authorities, transit agencies, state and federal natural resource or public land agencies, and tribal governments. MDOT may partner with a local agency to apply for funding and implement the project. Other organizations such as townships or non-motorized trail groups may work with an eligible agency to apply.</p> <p><a href="https://www.michigan.gov/mdot/0,1607,7-151-9621_17216_18231---,00.html">https://www.michigan.gov/mdot/0,1607,7-151-9621_17216_18231---,00.html</a></p>
--	--	--	---

#### 4. Case Examples<sup>3</sup>

##### **Fremont**

**(pop. 4,081)**

##### **Yard of the Month**

##### **Newaygo County**

To encourage neighborhood pride and beauty through the upkeep of yards, a volunteer group of citizens (including the former Mayor Pro Tem, the current Mayor and volunteers under the oversight of the Director of Neighborhood and Economic Development), initiated a “Yard of the Month” program for the months of July, August, and September. Yards are nominated by citizens and the “Dead Heads” (volunteers responsible for weeding the four downtown blocks—often while listening to the Grateful Dead) choose a yard for each of the three months. The winner receives a Proclamation from city council, a high-quality bright orange and green sign metal sign for their yard to display for the month, and a picture of the winning family is placed in the local paper. Families get involved and are delighted with the recognition. Cost for the program is minimal, which includes cost of the sign and shirts for the current eight “Dead Head” members.

Contact: Mayor James Rynberg; [mayor@cityoffremont.net](mailto:mayor@cityoffremont.net)

##### **Scottville**

**(pop. 1,214)**

##### **Peer Pressure Property Maintenance**

##### **Mason County**

The city of Scottville decided to handle citizen complaints about vacant and blighted properties with peer pressure instead of tickets. When city hall receives a complaint about a property, the city commission, as a whole, visits the property. The violations are documented, and a “Letter of Concern” is sent to property owners describing the violations. There is no ticketing. The process has resulted in great responses from property owners. The peer pressure, rather than immediate ticketing, is getting results.

Contact: Mayor Richard Maki, [ww8u@rocketmail.com](mailto:ww8u@rocketmail.com)

---

<sup>3</sup> From *Local Success Stories*, 2013 Michigan Association of Mayors Summer Workshop, Frankenmuth



**Wayland**  
**(pop. 4,079)**

**Main Street Building Revitalization**

**Allegan County**

The city of Wayland benefitted from an innovative partnership with Michigan Works, the Michigan Mains Street Program, and the owner of a deteriorated downtown building. Through Michigan's Workforce Investment Act (WIA), low-income 16-21 year-olds get practical experience while learning the construction trade. The crew renovated a building in downtown Wayland with roof repairs, interior repairs, paint job, and handicap accessible bathroom. The young adults earn money and learn construction skills, and the city benefits from the improvements. The building owners paid for the repair costs, and the WIA paid the workers' wages.

Contact: Mayor Tim Bala, [tbala@cityofwayland.org](mailto:tbala@cityofwayland.org)

**Zeeland**  
**(pop. 5,504)**

**Farmers Market/Zeelmania**

**Ottawa County**

Zeeland's farmers market was dying. In an effort to revive it, the city expanded the traditional farmers market to include a craft sale. There is a small fee to participate, and sellers bring their own tables. In addition, nonprofits use the expanded farmers market as an opportunity to sell items and for public outreach. The farmers market coincides with the eight-week Zeelmania healthy street fair. Zeelmania is a downtown attraction offering family-friendly fitness activities and demonstrations. Each week during the summer, a different event is featured—the first week included a balloon drop off a city fire truck.

Contact: Mayor Kevin Klynstra, [kklynstra@ci.zeeland.mi.us](mailto:kklynstra@ci.zeeland.mi.us)

**Battle Creek**  
**(pop. 52,347)**

**Stache Bash/Leilapolooza Music Fest**

**Calhoun County**

In the name of fun and fundraising, the Battle Creek Metropolitan Area Moustache Society holds an annual "Stache Bash." The bash raises money with a sense of humor "changing the face of charity right under your nose." The Bash is held in tandem with Leilapolooza, the Leila Arboretum Music Festival. The Stache Bash includes moustache contests (such as longest, prettiest, and most patriotic), and a homemade raft race (the raft has to float and be able to carry someone). The event raises money for the Arboretum and brings the community out in force.

Contact: Mayor Susan Baldwin, [susanbaldwinbc@gmail.com](mailto:susanbaldwinbc@gmail.com)

**Adrian**  
**(pop. 21,133)**

**First Fridays**

**Lenawee County; MML Region 2**

This monthly event was launched in 2012 to get businesses in downtown Adrian hopping. A collaboration of artists, musicians, performers, businesses, organizations, and volunteers gather to host an artist, or musician/entertainer, and each month has a theme. Twenty-five to thirty businesses stay open late—there is a surge in activity downtown. The cost to the city was minimal to non-existent—the businesses sponsor the event. The city is responsible for communication and marketing, and the Chamber of Commerce and the DDA also participate.

Contact: Mayor Gregory DuMars, [gdumars@adrianmi.gov](mailto:gdumars@adrianmi.gov)

**Hastings****(pop. 7,350)****Riverwalk/Downtown Sculpture Tour/Spray Plaza****Barry County; MML Region 2**

The city of Hastings has a placemaking and walkability strategy. The city constructed a downtown trail, incorporated sculpture into its downtown streetscape, and put a splash pad in a downtown plaza creating a wonderful, active public space. The trail, art, and public plaza space are interconnected and build a healthier community and quality of life. The DDA and the Thornapple Arts Commission hosted their fourth sculpture tour this summer, featuring 23 unique sculptures selected by an advisory committee of residents, artists, art enthusiasts, and art instructors. Two of the sculptures are on lease from local artists, 14 have been purchased and gifted back to the city for permanent display, and seven are on lease from the MidWest Sculpture Initiative. The Spray Plaza is a downtown public space right next to the theater and was built with 85 percent private funds. The Spray Plaza features its own sculpture and mural.

Contact: Mayor Frank Campbell, [fcampbell@hastingsmi.org](mailto:fcampbell@hastingsmi.org)