Michigan Rural Council Community Assessment

City of Evart

Julie Hales-Smith and Jamie Schriner-Hooper

January 24, 2017

The Michigan Rural Council (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. The MRC representatives in attendance were Julie Hales-Smith from North Coast Community Consultants, and Jamie Schriner-Hooper from Community Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM).

Although Evart is small in population (1890, 2013)¹ and small in size (2.27 sq mi), it is BIG in assets. In fact, it has assets unlike any other small town of its size in Michigan. The Muskegon River runs through the middle of town providing not only a beautiful backdrop to the several parks that border it, but many recreational opportunities such as canoeing, kayaking and fishing. Also running through town is the Pere Marquette State Trail. Now completed, the 56-mile east-west State Trail cuts through Michigan’s mid-section on the former CSX Railroad line traveling through quintessential small towns (like Evart) all the way from Baldwin to Clare. The trail brings thousands of people through town, plus provides a wonderful opportunity for townsfolk to walk and bike in beautiful surroundings.

¹ https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml; retrieved Feb 7, 2017
Evart is also the home of Evart Spring, an underground aquifer that produces water for the Nestle Company under the brand of “Ice Mountain.” It sits on a major east-west roadway, US Highway 10, which makes it easily accessible from the US 127 expressway. It has a high-quality airport that is classified as a General Aviation airport. It can handle a range of aircraft from gliders to corporate business jets, and serves the manufacturing facilities in the area. The city operates its own water and sewer systems, and has built in extra capacity anticipating additional business and industry. It is surrounded by beautiful lakes and affordable lake front properties that attract families and retirees.

Impressive, yes? BUT...although Evart’s assets are unique, it does share one characteristic with many other communities throughout Michigan – it used to be a thriving manufacturing town and now has lost many of those jobs. And, the quality of the housing stock has suffered from this loss. So much so, that the rental rate is 50% and many of these rental properties are substandard. And, the downtown has suffered as well. Vacant and/or underutilized properties are scattered throughout the downtown district. Many of the buildings are quaintly historic, but not so quaintly in need of rehabilitation.

THE TOUR

The Michigan Rural Council (MRC) assessment started with a tour of the community lead by Mark Wilson, DPW Supervisor. We headed north past several beautiful, historic homes but abruptly entered a neighborhood with older, run down housing stock. We learned from Mark that many of these houses are rentals and typically swaths of houses are owned by the same landlord. Although there were a few well-kept homes, many of houses were dilapidated with debris-filled yards.

We then went to one of the city parks that borders the Muskegon River. The park, where folks can camp, has recently been updated and In fact, as we gazed out over the flowing river we saw a bald eagle flying upriver (that goes in the unique asset category for sure!)

Next, we drove by the Airport Terminal which also houses the LDFA office, and some of the industrial complexes still in operation in the community. Finally, we headed back downtown and saw the outdoor ice skating rink that was promoted and executed by a very passionate community member who raised the funds for the park and worked with the city to make it a reality. Apparently on a typical winter evening you will find a wide variety of folks on the rink – all enjoying this great community-building asset.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK²

Small Group #1

² See Community Feedback Tables for detailed listing of comments.
The first small group of the assessment included elected/appointed officials and community/city employees. The top problem areas/barriers fell into two broad categories: quality of housing and loss of jobs. Of mention, however, was the complaint heard from several members that even when there are jobs available, people from town don’t have a strong work ethic and can’t necessarily be counted on for sustained employment. The mentioned that after a short training period, they generally don’t come back after receiving their first pay check.

Members bemoaned the fact that the city doesn’t have the “tools” to require landlords to bring their properties up to code. And there isn’t a financial incentive for landlords to do it themselves. Due to the poverty in the community, landlords can only charge minimum rents. Why should they upgrade their properties willingly if they can’t increase their rents as a result? They mentioned that several landlords own large numbers of the low quality rental units and these landlords are not in favor of investing the money to bring these units up to code; which makes it a more difficult to sell a rental registration ordinance to council.

As they listed all the groups that are working to improve the community, they proudly mentioned the Federation of Women’s group that works on National Night Out that brings more than 1,000 people to town to celebrate law enforcement and other emergency personnel. It is a very festive, free event that brings families to Evart each year to enjoy food, games and prizes.

Small Group #2

The second group was made up of business owners, community economic developers and churches. Their top concerns/issue areas echoed those expressed in the first group – low quality housing and lack of jobs. The following quote sums up much of the discussion: “The average income of the families is $19,000, so most families can’t afford to buy (and fix up) a house. Because there’s such a demand for housing and no housing code, there are many homes in very poor conditions. High demand and low quality supply.”

The members of the group feel that losing the Dean facility and other manufacturing jobs dealt a crushing blow to Evart. Although they aren’t taking it lying down; there are new business owners in the downtown who are eager to update their properties and are passionate about bringing the downtown back. They just need some additional tools. And, The Friends of Evart are fast tracking an Evart Promise program to support Evart school kids with scholarships for college. Although the fire of optimism might have been dampened by the loss of manufacturing, it was not completely doused!

Town Hall Meeting

The Town Hall meeting was very well attended by a broad cross section of Evart residents. Their vision for Evart included crowded sidewalks in downtown with many restaurants and stores. Strong, active collaboration across the many entities that are working to revitalize Evart – the DDA, LDFA,
City and Township governments, churches, schools and other civic organizations. They want an Evart with little or no poverty and opportunity for all; a community where people pitch in to help their community and each other.

Recommendations

The City of Evart is already taking very pro-active steps to improve the business climate, the downtown and housing situation. It is hoped that the programs and other resources listed below might augment the great work that is in process.

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<th>ISSUE</th>
<th>PROJECT/INITIATIVE</th>
<th>RESOURCE</th>
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| Downtown: vacancies, beautification | Initiate/support Lighter Quicker Cheaper Events | Michigan Municipal League  
PlacePOP is a low-cost, high-impact service that demonstrates the power of place. We develop engaging, temporary improvements to a public space that can catalyze development, strengthen community connections, and make an area more attractive. PlacePOP projects can test creative ideas like:  
- Use art, lighting, wayfinding, and landscaping to improve walkability between two areas  
- Activate underutilized space with people-centered improvements  
- Gauge demand with pop-up retail in a vacant storefront  
- Build a temporary pocket park with outdoor furniture and family-friendly activities  
Luke Forrest, Director  
Civic Innovations  
Michigan Municipal League  
(734) 669-6323  
lforrest@mml.org  
Allegan Place POP  
• [http://placemaking.mml.org/2015/12/10/allegan-popup-festivefridays/](http://placemaking.mml.org/2015/12/10/allegan-popup-festivefridays/) |
| Create a “shop local” program | Muskegon provides an example of a buy local campaign with a memorable message, utilizing kids to promote buying local. Put out by the Muskegon Lakeshore Chamber of Commerce, this campaign has a clear message: “We love Muskegon!” The full video clip can be found on the chamber’s website: [http://www.muskegon.org/whats-happening/202-a-new-kind-of-buy-local-message](http://www.muskegon.org/whats-happening/202-a-new-kind-of-buy-local-message)  
• Keys to Successful “buy local” campaigns: [http://www.amiba.net/buy-local-campaigns/](http://www.amiba.net/buy-local-campaigns/)  
“Old Town 4-3-50” is an ongoing community project aiming to support neighborhood businesses, and keep money right here in the community where it makes a real difference.

How it works:
- Old Town shoppers are given a 4-3-50 stamp-card each 4-month period of the year
- Over that 4-month period, each time a shopper spends $50 at one time in a participating Old Town business they receive a stamp from that business
- Shoppers must collect stamps from 3 different participating Old Town businesses at the end of the 4-month period
- If this goal is met, shoppers bring their stamp-card into the Old Town office to be entered into a raffle to win a $100 gift card they can spend at any participating Old Town business!

http://iloveoldtown.org/4-3-50-project

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<tr>
<th>Need a broader range of housing options</th>
<th>Need to attract business and create more jobs</th>
<th>Need to improve housing stock</th>
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<td>Dean site has great potential for redevelopment</td>
<td>Business and Industry Loans and Grants</td>
<td>Housing rehabilitation assistance</td>
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<td><strong>Conduct a Charrette and develop a design for the space:</strong></td>
<td>USDA Rural Development Business &amp; Industry loans and grants. Specifically the RBDG grant that is for non-profits or public entities. Or contact Joanna Dunn at <a href="mailto:Joanna.dunn@mi.usda.gov">Joanna.dunn@mi.usda.gov</a></td>
<td>The City or service agency should catalogue and promote home improvement grant and loan opportunities.</td>
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<td>• MSU Small Town Design Initiative/ Community Design Initiative</td>
<td><a href="http://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/programs-services-businesses">http://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/programs-services-businesses</a></td>
<td>• USDA Rural Development Single Family Home Repair Loans and Grants can help very low income applicants remove health and safety hazards, make essential repairs or make accessible for residents with disabilities. Learn about all the</td>
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<td>Description: The Small Town Design Initiative (STDI)/ Community Design Initiative (CDI) is a resource that offers physical environmental design assistance in community development and land use for small communities in Michigan, aimed at improving quality of life and addressing environmental challenges. The objectives of the initiative include:</td>
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<td>• Working with communities to develop environmental design ideas that address local issues and opportunities; Consensus building; Generating ideas; Attacking a challenging environmental concern;</td>
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<td>• Acting as a bridge between communities and consulting design professionals; and</td>
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<td>• Providing for in-community student learning, as well as a creative and scholarly work outlet.</td>
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<td>• Examples of design projects completed by STDI are downtown streetscapes, parks, bikeways and trails, open space systems, industrial/commercial development, beautification, land use, signs, agricultural land preservation, ecosystem management, and residential development.</td>
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<td>• Audience: Communities with a population ranging from 500 to 15,000 qualify for STDI services, as well as non-profit organizations and local citizen groups.</td>
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<td>• Partners: Administered by the Landscape Architecture Program.</td>
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<td>For more information: (517) 432-0704 <a href="mailto:rauhe@msu.edu">rauhe@msu.edu</a></td>
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<td><a href="http://msustatewide.msu.edu/Programs/Details/1714">http://msustatewide.msu.edu/Programs/Details/1714</a></td>
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<td>Federal Home Loan Bank of Indianapolis programs: In partnership with their members, FHLBI offers three grant programs designed to address the affordable housing needs:</td>
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<td>o the Homeownership Opportunities Program (HOP) to help first-time homebuyers with down payment assistance;</td>
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<td>o the Neighborhood Impact Program (NIP) to assist low-income homeowners with home repairs;</td>
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<td>o and the Accessibility Modifications Program (AMP) to aid seniors and households with disabled family members with home improvements that will allow them to remain in their current homes. Learn more here. <a href="https://www.fhlbi.com/products-services/communities-and-housing">https://www.fhlbi.com/products-services/communities-and-housing</a>.</td>
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| Assistance for blighted rental properties as well as upper story units in buildings downtown |
| The City should work with partners like the County Housing Program and Community Action Agency to publicize the availability of repair financing options for landlords. |
| o MEDC offers Community Development Block Grant resources for Rental Rehabilitation, a program that partners with landlords to provide safe, decent affordable rental housing. [http://www.michiganbusiness.org/cm/files/fact-sheets/cdbg.pdf](http://www.michiganbusiness.org/cm/files/fact-sheets/cdbg.pdf) |
| o MSHDA, through participating lenders, offers a Property Improvement Program loan for rental properties. The PIP loan can provide landlords with the funding needed to make repairs up to $25,000 for single-family homes. More information about this program: [http://www.michigan.gov/mshda/0,4641,7-141-45866_49317_50740---187373--00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/mshda/0,4641,7-141-45866_49317_50740---187373--00.html). |

| Blight ordinances |
| Center for Community Progress, a partner in the Michigan Vacant Property Campaign, might be willing to do a cursory review of blight ordinances to ensure that they are strong enough to deal with the unique blight issues in Evart. If interested, follow up with Michigan Rural Council. |

| Need to capitalize on the rail trail and consider becoming a Trail Town |
| Need bike paths/trails to connect rail trail to parks throughout the community |
| Connection to resources and technical assistance: |
| • MSU CES: Mary Bohling [bohling@anr.msu.edu](mailto:bohling@anr.msu.edu) or 313-757-7356 x 101. |
| Michigan Department of Transportation, Transportation Alternatives Program |
| • 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 choices, promoting walkability, and improving the quality of life. The program uses Federal Transportation Funds designated by Congress for these types of activities. |
| • 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. |
| • [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) |

| Becoming a trail town |
| Complete guide to becoming a Trail Town using the Main Street 4 points approach as the organizing model. |
Michigan Township News  
September 2012  
Harry Burkholder, AICP, Community Planner,  
Land Information Access Association, Burkholder can be reached at (231) 929-3696  
or [burkholder@liaa.org](mailto:burkholder@liaa.org).  
- [The Path to Trail Town Nirvana](http://www.planningmi.org/downloads/rick_brown_article3_trailtowns.pdf), Michigan Planning Association |
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<td>Organize volunteers/service groups</td>
<td>Identify a centralized entity to organize volunteers; Main Street program could serve this function. Contact Laura Krizov at <a href="mailto:krizovl1@michigan.org">krizovl1@michigan.org</a></td>
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| Community Grants Awards: Rural Partners of Michigan | 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.  
**Eligibility Criteria**  
- This RFP is open to all nonprofit organizations working within or on behalf of rural Michigan.  
- Grant funds should be used to directly benefit rural communities.  
- A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, municipality or governmental entity must act as the fiduciary/grantee.  
- Awards are limited to one per community per grant period.  
- Projects should commence within the next six months  
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. [http://rural.cedam.info/communityawards/](http://rural.cedam.info/communityawards/) |
Summary

Evart stakeholders are already working hard to improve their community. Participating in the Redevelopment Ready and Main Street programs, for example, are vital to assessing, organizing, planning and implementing change in Evart. The following are suggested next steps in tandem with the current work of the Project Rising Tide Action Strategy:

1. Institute a Rental Registration program; roll out slowly with plenty of upfront notification and education of landlords; research the MSHDA PIP low interest loan for rental properties and provide landlords with this information.
2. Work on clear, honest, continuous communication across all entities who are working to revitalize Evart.
3. Pull together the group that signed up to work on the Dean property; capitalize on their enthusiasm and put a plan together for the redevelopment of that property; be sure to involve the community in planning for the site. A win such as redevelopment of that property will be a huge – and very visible- morale boost for the community.

Appendix

1. Case Examples

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

3 From Local Success Stories, 2013 Michigan Association of Mayors Summer Workshop, Frankenmuth
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

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, tbalacityofwayland.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

**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

**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 Jim Berryman, jberryman@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