

Main Streets Across Oakland County Share Successes and Challenges at **Annual Summit**

By Crystal A. Proxmire, Editor and Publisher (March 30, 2024) Ferndale, Michigan | Reprinted with permission of Oakland County Times



Oakland County, Mich. – It’s easy to look at a downtown, and get it. The close gathering of shops and restaurants, places for people to stroll and to gather, and a sense of community that can’t be replicated in strip malls or big box stores. Whether they’re urban or rural, bustling or quaint, traditional or eclectic – the Main Streets of America are places that people want to be.

But behind what people see when they visit places like Ferndale, Holly, Royal Oak, Lake Orion, Auburn Hills, and Rochester is a network of people – staffers, businesses, and volunteers, that all work together to shape the character and drive the success of these community hubs.

There are 28 organizations that work together with Main Street Oakland County. Most are traditional downtowns with a history to build off of, while others are areas in communities designated for growth – like in Madison Heights where officials are working to develop 11 Mile in a conscientious way, or Oak Park where an industrial area is blossoming into a walkable space, or in Auburn Hills where new construction is creating a modern downtown where the mantra of “live, work, play” is strategically coming to life.

These organizations have structures that are proven to work, organizing leadership and committees to attain goals at the local level. Plus they come together with each other to learn and grow together. The Main Street Summit is one such opportunity. And on March 19 there was plenty of learning, celebrating successes, and sharing of challenges among the organizations in attendance.

John Bry, who is the Administrator of the Main Street Oakland County Coordinating Program, started the summit off by sharing stats from the previous year.

Across the county, Main Street areas were home to 185 net new businesses, and a net of 249 new full time jobs were accounted for.

There was \$88,266,167 in new investment both public and private, including infrastructure projects and investment in properties.

123 buildings were rehabilitated.

252,558 square feet of new floorspace was constructed.

44 new housing units were created.

And 15,291 volunteer hours logged.

“It’s more than just making things look pretty. It’s more than just events,” Bry said of the work put in by Main Street organizations. “It’s an economic development strategy.”

The Main Street Approach has four components: economic vitality, design, promotion, and organization. And using those focus areas has brought all kinds of successes.

In Ferndale, for example, The Woodward Moves project has slowed traffic and added bike lanes. In Farmington, pocket parks and streetscapes have helped to shape the community feel. In Lake Orion the purchase of a lumberyard means an opportunity to turn a large property into development that adds housing, business, parking, and community space at a visible location.

In Holly a recently awarded grant is helping them replace trees and touch up streetscaping, and plans are in the work for relocating the historic train depot. In Lathrup Village they're excited about getting MDOT approval for a pedestrian walkway – with two more in the works. In Highland it's new wayfinding signage that is helping to make their version of Main Street stand out, along with facade grants that help businesses put their best face forward. And in Auburn Hills a new popup public square will enhance the downtown with more space for events and gatherings.

The work of Main Street management is never done, as there are always new challenges.

One symptom of successes is that as Downtowns become more prosperous, landlords tend to raise the rent, pushing out the unique “mom and pop” stores that helped create a community vibe in the first place. The market determines how rental prices go, but engaging with property owners can be one way of getting them to buy into the bigger picture of maintaining a community's charm by being selective about their tenants.

The capacity for Main Street organizations to invest themselves varies by community, but as they are able to, such investments can mean a more thoughtful approach to growth. The lumberyard property in Lake Orion is one example. Another is in Wixom where properties are being purchased and bundled in hopes of attracting larger, mixed-use developments.

For other communities, it's not about what to build, but how to use existing buildings. Repurposing of existing spaces is a consideration whether discussing rehabilitation of historic sites or creatively using the space afforded by office buildings that are no longer packed with the cubicles of 9-5ers.

And for some the challenge is simply how to educate the public on what their organization is and what it does. “Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.” said Bry. “You have to get in the habit of telling that story to educate your stakeholders. Others would gladly take the narrative and tell the story for you.”

Main Street Oakland County is there to help with those types of challenges and more. In 2023 they had 6,143 interactions between Main Street liaisons and member communities.

Oakland County Executive Dave Coulter, along with several County Commissioners, attended to learn more about the needs of downtowns and main streets.

Coulter applauded the Main Street program, saying “This program is designed to make you successful, so the county can be successful... The Governor has a task force for how we grow our population. How do we attract people here? They want a sense of place, they want to know people, and have a place to gather.”

Other tools for success have been the county's annual Property Showcase which recently was revived following the pandemic. Main Street Oakland County has also launched an online shopping platform for businesses in participating downtowns, and they've begun working with Visit Detroit to give the suburban downtowns more exposure as the city gears up for the NFL draft. MSOC also helps local communities find sponsorships and grants, while also offering services to help with planning, development, place-making, and promotions. They also work with other organizations, such as Oakland Thrive, to provide resources and support to small business owners.

“We are here to help,” Bry said.

Learn more about Main Street Oakland County at
oakgov.com/community/community-development/main-street-oakland-county

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