



**MAIN STREET HELPS TO FILL  
VACANT STOREFRONTS,  
INCREASE WALKABILITY, AND  
VIBRANCY THROUGHOUT  
DOWNTOWN...**

# LAPEER

Narrative by James Alt, Executive Director of the Lapeer Main Street DDA, and Tony Stroh, City Commissioner and board member for the Downtown Development Authority and Lapeer Main Street, and Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

## **Role of Michigan Main Street**

“Six years ago, downtown Lapeer was averaging around 60% to 70% occupancy in our buildings.

Since then, we've been able to fill a lot of our storefronts and businesses in the downtown district and have a 95% occupancy rate. That's just in six years! That's taken a lot of work and being consistent with what we're offering in events, entertainment, walkability, and adding new features. We've recently added a pocket park, a dog park and other things for families in the community.

Michigan Main Street has played a variety of roles in this transformation through education, technical assistance, and funding. Becoming a Main Street gave us access to the Michigan Main Street staff and network. Being able to reach out to them or other Main Streets and ask, 'This is what we're looking at, how do we go about doing it? What are some ways to make this happen?' has been great. Their feedback has been so valuable. It really has been an educational opportunity and helped us to move forward. In the last five years with the program, we've learned so much just by having that network there.

Early on, their help with structuring our organization was so important. We have subcommittees that were created by not only board members, but by community members, focused on organizational development, communications, economic vitality, or marketing. We have five subcommittees that actually do a great deal of work, and then the board gets together and helps structure that work. That structure, in and of itself, helps our organization become more sustainable and effective, and it helps us focus on what we need to accomplish.

Working with Michigan Main Street has made it so we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We're able to look at the wheel and go, 'How can we make it a little better?'

The MEDC and all of their financial support has also helped us add vibrancy and revitalization in the community we couldn't have done ourselves. It's also helped take other organizations and businesses within our community to the next level.

We are rebuilding and revitalizing the historic component of Lapeer and the downtown area. That means driving commerce, attracting visitors, and supporting dining and entertainment.



"We are rebuilding and revitalizing the historic component and the downtown area."



All of those things really play a key role in the development of a stronger, more vibrant community—for both the Main Street area and the rest of Lapeer.”

—James Alt, Executive Director of the Lapeer Main Street DDA, and Tony Stroh, City Commissioner and board member for the Downtown Development Authority and Lapeer Main Street

### Projects Coming Down the Pipeline

“There are going to be a lot of exciting projects happening here in Lapeer over the next few years, and a good number of these projects are happening organically because of the excitement that the Main Street program has created. Michigan Main Street has created an energy and vibe where property and business owners are excited and say, ‘We want in.’

For example, we’ve got multiple developments in the works. We’re working very closely with the MEDC through Main Street and their Redevelopment Ready Community program. We think people are really going to be surprised when they look at our downtown two or three years from now. It’s going to be exciting, but it’s not going to happen overnight.

We also have some more placemaking projects, where we’re looking at adding more murals and public art to the area. We want to add some vibrancy and get a pop of color down here, as well. Those are things you’ll start seeing in the next few months.



**"Michigan Main Street has created an energy and vibe where property and business owners are excited and say, 'We want in.'"**



The number of things that are going to be happening is sort of astounding. But we also want to make sure that it's sustainable, that this growth and this hype is something we know we're going slow and steady with, and that the things we're planning are achievable. We need to keep talking with our community partners, residents, and business owners to see what they are thinking, too, to make sure we're heading in the right direction."

—James Alt, Executive Director of the Lapeer Main Street DDA, and Tony Stroh, City Commissioner and board member for the Downtown Development Authority and Lapeer Main Street

### Why Are Main Streets Important?

"Our Main Street areas are the center of life in our communities. When people are looking for a place to live, raise their families or get a job, they want to make sure they're in a place they can enjoy outside of work. People are attracted to downtown areas because of the quality of life, entertainment and dining options they can provide—things that make life more enjoyable.

But then from a workforce standpoint, if you look at your traditional downtown and the small businesses that make it up as a single employer, more people are employed in the traditional Main Street district than you would find at a single major employer or big box store you might find outside downtown.

Take a downtown like ours, where you have about 200 businesses; some of those businesses have one or two employees, others have up to 20 employees. If you do the math, that's a lot of people working in a small area. But those employees are spread across numerous businesses, making the community more resilient by being less dependent on a single employer while also making for a more vibrant and interesting community.

If an employee enjoys living in that community, they're going to stay, so vibrant downtown environments help with employee retention across the board, and that's true even if a company isn't located downtown. If the employees of an industrial business outside of downtown love it here, that business has less reason to pick up and move to another community because employees are happy where they're at."

—James Alt, Executive Director of the Lapeer Main Street DDA, and Tony Stroh, City Commissioner and board member for the Downtown Development Authority and Lapeer Main Street

### Historic Preservation as Economic Development, Growth through Preservation, Harnessing Historic Potential

"I grew up here and left for 30 years. During that time, I lived all over the country in various communities, took on various levels of management in art nonprofits and also worked with municipalities in cultural art. In that experience, I was able to see other communities and what they were doing.

"More people are employed in the traditional Main Street district than you would find at a single major employer or big box store you might find outside downtown."



When I decided to move back home to Lapeer about six years ago, I quickly saw that the downtown, historic downtown Lapeer, had some gaps. We weren't full. Our occupancy was low, averaging 60% to 70%, and I wanted to get involved.

It takes a lot to improve those gaps. It takes listening to the constituents, listening to the community and educating people. We still have a lot to do when it comes to the education of our community. For example, some people will question the historic designation. Some people think that it might prohibit growth, opportunity, expansion and creativity, but that couldn't be further from the truth. It's a foothold to understand where we come from, to understand where the community is, and allows us to expand on it. Our historic characteristics make our downtown such a unique place and help us stand out from other communities.

We have done some different community surveys and focus groups, and one of the common themes in the responses we get is that people are attached to the history of this area. There is a love for historic preservation, even if people don't use that phrase. There is some much character in these buildings and we want to see that maintained.

There also is an economic benefit to it as well. Achieving the historic designation at the federal level opens up our property owners to tax benefits, as well. If they work to restore these buildings and follow best practices, they can receive a federal tax credit, and potentially a state tax credit, as well. So, you have the beautification and character that comes with it, plus the economic benefit that takes place with it as well. Those layers all kind of work together.

Today, we've been able to fill a lot of our storefronts and businesses in the downtown district. Right now, we're at a 95% occupancy rate, and that's just in five and a half or six years. It's taken work and being consistent with what we're offering in terms of events, entertainment, walkability, and adding new features. We've recently added a pocket park, a dog park and other things for families in the community, to sort of rebuild the neighborhood and walkability within our community."

—Tony Stroh, City Commissioner, City of Lapeer, board member for the Downtown Development Authority and Lapeer Main Street





# Michigan Main Street Story Series



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