



# *Milan Redevelopment*

WITH A VISION OF  
BUILDING A STRONG  
DOWNTOWN CORE, DAVE  
SNYDER MAKES GOOD  
INVESTMENTS IN MILAN

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Photos and Story by Phil Eich,  
Storyville Social, as part of the  
Michigan Main Street Story  
Series

## **Kickstarting Development in Milan**

“Well, let’s start 14 years ago. I was asked by a family member to help buy a business he wanted to manage; there was a bakery for sale here in town, and we bought the bakery. I helped him a little bit after that, but it was largely his enterprise. A few years in, he said that the building the bakery was in went into foreclosure.

At the time, he was using one storefront of the eight that were in that block, but all of the other storefronts were vacant. I checked it out and eventually agreed to purchase that block of buildings.

Before we continue, let me say that I didn’t have any experience in development before this project in Milan. I had just retired from 21 years of managing a tour company where we planned school group tours in Lapeer.

I had sold the company and had time to pursue something else when this bakery opportunity and then the buildings became ‘Well, OK...maybe that.’

It was a long process—the purchase process, working with the bank, and working with the city to figure out what the future of that block of buildings could be—but in 2011, I officially purchased those buildings. They are old buildings, so I started working with the city and the state of Michigan to figure out how the sort of work the buildings needed could be done, and that’s the beginning of the story.

Why Milan and what made me think that something like this could work? I looked at the communities around Milan. I wasn’t from here at the time;

I lived in Okemos after having lived for 30 years in Lapeer. I looked around at the communities around Milan and there were lots of healthy downtowns:

Dundee and Tecumseh and Adrian and Saline and Chelsea and Dexter and Howell and Brighton—all these places with really vibrant downtowns.

So, I didn't understand why Milan's downtown wasn't like those downtowns. It seemed to have everything going for it: fine schools, a park system that was as good as any around, and a faith community that was really strong. We're close to Ann Arbor, a terrific community with a lot of opportunities, but we have a small-town feel. Housing prices are reasonable here. There were so many good things here in town, but it didn't have a strong downtown.

I felt—and I know that there were other people in the city leadership at the time who felt the same way—that there wasn't any reason we couldn't have one, too.

So, we set to work figuring out how to make this redevelopment project happen and it was a big undertaking. As a matter of fact, if I had to do it again, I wouldn't have started with a project this large, for sure. One piece of advice for others considering anything like this would be to start with a manageable project, to start small.



I think these downtown rehabilitations are really good for the community, and it's turned out to be pretty good business for me, too. But do it because you love it. Do it because you see signs of possibility around the town and start out with something small.

Remember, there were eight storefronts in this project, and only one of them was operating. There were also spaces above all the buildings, probably eight apartments up there. None of them were occupied during the last couple of years, most of them were not even possible to occupy, and as the architect worked with it, he found there were spaces that had been abandoned for 80 years. In the plans for redevelopment, the architect was able to make space for 15 apartments.

And it worked. Since the development was completed, I have not had a single residential vacancy since August 1, 2016. All 15 apartments have been filled for the last six years—not for one day has any apartment been empty, and keep in mind the population of Milan is only 6,000 people. The market that's interested tends to be young professionals or people who maybe had kids who've moved out of the home and now they're looking for something smaller.

In the time since that development, we've had other people who've followed a similar route here in Milan, and they've made a success of their buildings, and that's great to see."

—Dave Snyder, Developer in Milan, Michigan



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## Vibrant Downtown Today

“I live downtown here in Milan and my car remains parked for most of every week. I drive to Ann Arbor maybe once a week to go pick up food from a local farm kitchen, but other than that, my car stays parked. Everything is within walking distance—the park, the lake, the coffee shop and bar called The Owl here in town. The Life is Sweet bakery, recognized two of the last three years as the best bakery in southeastern Michigan, is here as well. There’s a variety of craft shops. You want to go scuba diving? The scuba diving place for this part of Michigan is here. Two blocks down the street is your original Gravity Brewing Company. I can walk to my dentist. I can walk to my chiropractor or to whatever I need. It’s here.

One of the decisions I made early on in the redevelopment process was that as people came to me for space in my buildings, I would only take people who were interested in putting in retail businesses. There’s a place for the professional offices downtown, and like I said, I go to some of them, so I want them here, too.

But to really strengthen Milan’s downtown, we needed more retail business, so that became the focus. We started looking for businesses that would really be draws to the community, like the bakery and The Owl and a variety of places like that. I also told tenants they had to operate at least five days a week and a certain number of hours. That way, we helped ensure that we were building a critical mass of businesses that people could come here and enjoy and that those businesses were open long enough to really help the community.

As the impact the development has had on the community is concerned, the impact is not really just about our project, but the fact that other people followed suit with their own projects as well.

The Owl did work on rebuilding their building, and my development helped them move their project along because they were able to show that others were making large investments in the area. There’s Digital Brewery—there was extensive work done on that. There’s a building further down that was a fire-damaged shell that had the interior built out beautifully on both the first and second story. Then there’s this building on the corner here. The Hungry Howie’s owner just spent something like \$100,000 on tuckpointing the building, so it will be in fine shape.

The space next door here has been redeveloped for the optometrist’s office that will go in there a few months from now, and then there’s a building on the far end of the town that has a hair salon and the prospective Park Apartments up above too. On top of all of those, we’ve got a couple of other projects of our own going on here over the course of the next couple of years.

It’s the confluence of all those people’s efforts that has made a big difference in what we see downtown.”

—Dave Snyder, Developer in Milan, Michigan

### Why Become Part of the Main Street Program?

“Besides the developments, the Main Street program has been so important to the growth of Milan’s downtown. I chaired the committee that explored and then applied for Main Street membership in 2015 and got our downtown awarded Select status in 2016. Since then, because of Executive Director Jill Tewsley’s stewardship, the Main Street program has really made a tremendous impact.





For example, last night during our Third Thursdays event there were hundreds of people on the streets of Milan, and we'll have crowds here for concerts, too. Jill coordinates billboards out on the expressway to draw people into town and puts together the marketing materials that promote holiday shopping here. Between the efforts to dress up the downtown to make it ready for another 100 years of service to the community and the Main Street program, we've just made this place into a really dynamic downtown with great possibilities for the future.

Thinking about every community, I think that we all think we know a little bit about how to make our downtowns better. But the Main Street program has a comprehensive approach to any downtown in the country and gives a process and plan to bring back vitality.

I had a little bit of awareness of the Main Street program before the process of becoming part of it began. I'd seen newspaper articles about what they had done in Portland, for instance, or the success of the program in Old Town Lansing. I didn't have an awful lot of experience with the program, but the mayor of the town at the time invited me to participate in the Main Street National Convention in Detroit in 2014.

I went to that convention with a city council member, and we were just wowed by what we saw there. I came away thinking that I had been to professional conventions for 30 years and this is the most focused, organized organization that I've seen as far as supporting communities and making good things happen in the country.

I want people to just imagine what this community was like in the 1890s: between 1890 and 1910, virtually every building in this downtown was built and became such a vital part of the community, and it remained a fairly vital place until probably the 1950s.

Then in 1962, the US-23 bypass was completed. Before that, US-23 went through here. That means that all those people stopped coming through Milan. Similar things with expressways have happened in other communities, along with shopping malls pulling businesses and people away from downtowns. A lot of these downtowns just sort of curled up and died, and seeing that, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the entity that created the National Main Street program, created a plan for helping communities fight back.

I think these programs will outlive those big box stores. And the willingness of the State of Michigan and the federal government to invest in small, historic downtowns is a part of what makes the Main Street program such a powerful force in making communities like Milan healthy.

They've created something that helps communities survive and thrive. It gives it a reason for being."

—Dave Snyder, Developer in Milan, Michigan





# Michigan Main Street Story Series



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