



## The Value of Public Open Space in Town Centers



**MICHIGAN ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

### *What you will learn:*

*Multiple benefits of public  
open space*

*Ways to achieve open space  
in your downtown*

A public space in a town or neighborhood center, whether it's a park or plaza, a retrofitted and improved alley, or a simple bench, makes it possible for people to be outside of their own home or business, and experience community. These spaces are an anchor or centerpiece for a neighborhood or downtown not just visually, but civically and socially. They are places that everyone can access and that everyone has in common. It is a place to meet.

Public open space in a downtown serves many purposes, often at the same time. They contribute to individuals' well-being, physically, emotionally and mentally, and sense of belonging, all while benefiting community health socially, economically, culturally and environmentally.

*“A town needs public squares; they  
are the largest, most public rooms.”  
-- A Pattern Language*

As early as the 1850's, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted justified the purchase of land for New York's Central Park by noting that the rising value of adjacent property would produce enough in taxes to pay for the park. By 1864, Olmsted could document a \$55,880 net return in annual taxes over what the city was paying in interest for land and improvements. By 1873, the park, which cost approximately \$14 million, was responsible for an additional \$5.24 million in tax revenue each year.

Parks typically have a positive effect on nearby residential property values. In downtowns, parks and public squares or plazas not only

## State laws that may also apply:

Michigan Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, Public Act 451 of 1994

Michigan Zoning Enabling Act, Public Act 110 of 2006

Michigan Drain Code Act, Public Act 40 of 1956

Michigan Recodified Tax Increment Financing Act, Public Act 57 of 2018

Principal Shopping Districts and Business Improvement Districts, Public Act 120 of 1961

Brownfield Redevelopment Financing Act, Public Act 381 of 1996

Michigan Planning Enabling Act, Public Act 33 of 2008

create a more desirable setting and atmosphere for the surrounding properties, but also increase the economic benefits to surrounding property owners. Public spaces in town centers provide a setting for events and organized gatherings. Often the cost of these events is bore by the municipality, allowing concerts, farmers' markets, festivals, plays, and art fairs to be offered to the public free of charge. Not only do the number of visitors increase the economic activity in the surrounding businesses, but the events—these shared experiences - instill a mutual sense of pride and ownership among participants. As physical connections between people are increased in these public, open spaces, trust in the place is increased, as well as a sense of safety.

Public open spaces in built up areas like downtowns and commercial centers are also good for the environment. According to the City Parks Alliance, trees in urban parks remove up to about seven million tons of toxins from the air annually. A park's trees store water, reducing the rate at which it flows into a

*“Without common land, no social system can survive.” -- A Pattern Language*

city's stormwater treatment facilities. Parks increase the amount of a city's pervious surfaces, which allow rainwater to infiltrate into the ground. In addition,

## TERMS:

**Tactical urbanism** is a methodology used to implement quick-build projects aiming to demonstrate through a proof of concept the transformative power of interventions in the public space. Some projects provide small enhancements such as placing seating at key locations throughout neighbourhoods and at bus stops (“chair bombing”), or “depaving” projects that change unused parking and asphalted areas into green space or parklets, or the “Little Free Library” book dispensaries that support a culture of sharing and social cohesion. More intense tactical urbanism projects involve creating temporary plazas; pedestrian crossings and paths; or cycling routes along street corridors with paint, bollards, and other features.

**Park** is an area of naturally occurring, semi-natural or planted space set aside for human enjoyment and public recreation or for the protection of wildlife or natural habitats.

**Plaza** is a public square, marketplace, or similar open space in a built-up area.

**Frederick Law Olmsted** (1822-1903) is regarded as the founder of American landscape architecture, and is best known for designing the grounds of New York City's Central Park, the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., and Belle Isle in Detroit.

## Resources:

Project for Public Spaces

City Parks Alliance

*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces.* By William Whyte. Conservation Foundation, 1980

*The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking.* By Jay Walljasper. New Society Publishers. June 1, 2007.

Smaller Legacy City Toolkit

*Tactical Urbanism: Short Term Action, Long Term Change.* by The Street Plans Collaborative. 2012.

*The Economic Benefits of Open Space, Recreation Facilities and Walkable Community Design.* Active Living Research. May 2010.

“Infrastructure That Does More: Investing in Public Spaces for a Resilient America.” by Bridget Marquis. *Strong Towns*. November 24, 2020.

“In a Post-Pandemic World, Parklets Should Stay Parked.” by John J. Metro. *Strong Towns*. July 23, 2020.

The Park(ing) Day Manual: A Primer on User-Generated Urbanism and Temporary Tactics for Improving the Public Realm.

*Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century.* American Academy of Arts and Sciences. 2020.

“Infrastructure: Building the World We Deserve. How a new approach can create a more resilient, equitable, and prosperous society.” Siegel Family Endowment. October 2020.

“Green spaces and mortality: a systematic review and meta-analysis of cohort studies.” *The Lancet Planetary Health*. November 2019.

*Can Parks Help Cities Fight Crime?* by D’Lyn Ford. NC State University. June 25, 2019.

*A Pattern Language.* by Christopher Alexander et al. Oxford University Press. 1977.

plants, particularly trees, help control soil erosion, and generate oxygen. Green spaces in cities also help cool our cities, reducing the heat-island effect.

“There are very few spots along the streets of modern towns and neighborhoods where people can hangout comfortably, for hours at a time.” -- *A Pattern Language*

Communities with a natural water feature, such as a river, lake, or pond near their town center can leverage it to not only provide stormwater

management, but a downtown gathering place as well. Fountains are engineered water features, which are expensive to run, but offer an attractive centerpiece to gather near, particularly during summer’s warm days.

More than a hundred studies have shown that parks and greenspaces are associated with better mental health and lower mortality. People with lower incomes living in communities with greater access to green space have reduced income-related health inequities. These studies indicate that increasing the amount of green space should be considered a public health intervention.

## **WHAT COMMUNITIES ARE DOING THIS?**

### ***Parks in Downtown:***

Kellogg Park in Plymouth | Riverwalk in Detroit | Downtown Plaza in Muskegon | East Park in Charlevoix | Bay View Park in Alpena | Mill Pond Park in Brighton

### ***Recent street closures to provide additional pedestrian areas in downtowns:***

Ann Arbor | Dearborn | Brighton | Detroit | Traverse City

### ***Tactical Urbanism in Michigan:***

Detroit in 2017: Greg Mangan's Bus Parklet project on Michigan Avenue

Lansing in 2017: Park(ing) Day, "Convert Capitol Avenue Week"

Chelsea in 2020: Chelsea Pop Project

More recently, having space outside has been crucial to our physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

Downtowns and commercial centers without a park or plaza have converted streets into temporary plazas or squares to allow room for pedestrians and businesses in a less crowded setting. This tactical urbanism approach provides quick solutions to problems. Relatively fast changes like narrowing a street with paint or temporary curbs; closing streets for pedestrians; or placing benches and other street furniture in parking spaces, creating parklets - allow communities to try out a gathering place without

committing to a final design and investment. These short term changes may lay the groundwork for reinventing our town centers in a more permanent way that not only allow greater pedestrian access, but economic and health benefits as well.

Public open spaces in town centers are an important aspect of not just the urban experience, but also the small town experience. They contribute to the well-being of users of the space, increased economic investment and property values, civic pride, and enhanced experiences in the space. The shared experiences in these special places instill a mutual sense of pride and ownership among diverse groups—residents, business owners, and visitors. The more connections people make in physical space, the more trust is built, and the better communities can weather challenges in the future.

### ***TIP***

If your community wasn't lucky enough to have a platted town square from the start, community leaders still have options to plan for a town center. Determine if any streets are good candidates for closing or narrowing (temporarily or permanently). Perhaps there are some vacant or underutilized parcels near your town center that the community can purchase. This may be expensive and take many years to accomplish. Be patient and follow your master plan.

Once the street or parcel is available, begin with intentional, but low cost treatments and programming (see Tactical Urbanism). Remember to set aside funding for design, engineering, construction, programming, and maintenance in your annual capital improvements plan and budget.

This tear sheet was developed by the Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) for the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC). The Michigan Association of Planning is a 501 c 3 organization, dedicated to promoting sound community planning that benefits the residents of Michigan. MAP was established in 1945 to achieve a desired quality of life through comprehensive community planning that includes opportunities for a variety of lifestyles and housing, employment, commercial activities, and cultural and recreational amenities.

