360 Degree Community Development

The Owosso Story

Nestled along the Shiawassee River, Owosso is home to 15,000 residents who have countless opportunities to take part in their community. From Curwood Castle and the Lebowsky Center for the Performing Art to the city’s historic & active downtown and the Polar Express train, the city has made incredible strides in overcoming challenges such as manufacturing decline, state revenue sharing reductions, and negative perceptions to emerge stronger than ever.

How did the city manage to become what it is today? In a nutshell, by harnessing the power of residents, business owners, city officials and external partners to access the full value of state initiatives. Thanks to the city’s efforts, its best days are yet to come, but its story so far can help many other communities head down the same path.

Accessing Resources

Community development is a long-term endeavor which requires countless factors to fall into place ranging from community policies and city responsiveness to cultural attitudes and investment support. The end goal is a vibrant, diverse and sustainable community that can provide a high quality of life and opportunities for everyone to prosper. To build a foundation for community-driven economic development efforts, the city has engaged in two state level technical assistance initiatives: Michigan Main Street (MMS) and Redevelopment Ready Communities® (RRC).

The city’s journey in Michigan Main Street began in 2009 when it joined to promote existing business and activity in downtown Owosso, as well as encourage the development of new businesses and physical spaces downtown. The city formally joined the RRC program in 2017 and has been working diligently to incorporate the six best practices into its everyday processes. The city and its Downtown Development Authority (DDA) are working hand-in-hand on both these programs to promote positive outcomes for the city as whole.

Owosso joins about 20 communities in the state who are leveraging the resources of both MMS and RRC, allowing it to turbocharge its outcomes. For example, the city is currently updating its master plan to better incorporate its downtown development efforts into the overarching vision for the city. This includes actively engaging members of the DDA and local business in meetings, draft review, and general engagement efforts. The plan also stretches beyond a typical master plan to include strategies for economic development, marketing and redevelopment opportunities.

In addition to the master plan joint effort, Owosso has used RRC and MMS to identify priority redevelopment sites that have the potential to be truly catalytic projects such as the Matthews and Anderson buildings. While some communities opt to focus on industrial sites, Owosso is focused on creating a vibrant downtown which can provide a strong financial base for the city. The city’s selection of downtown priority sites aligns with its Main Street strategy to bring in more housing in the downtown area, thus increasing its vibrancy.

Successes

By leveraging both Michigan Main Street and Redevelopment Ready Communities to build consensus as a community and integrate fundamental principles for effective community development, the City of Owosso and Owosso Main Street have seen incredible success occur downtown. “We have really taken advantage of the MEDC’s 360 degree service through the Community Assistance Team providing incentives to local communities, RRC working with the City to prepare for...”
farmer's market, artwalk, and glow market and weekly downtown owosso concert series, an annual moonlight owosso. many unique downtown and implemented a new brand for downtown motional efforts. owosso main street has continue to work to heighten their projects occurring downtown, the city and owosso main street have also completed a streetscape project and are working to make updates and improvements. one recent improvement has been the installation of wayfinding signage and new gateways into and throughout the downtown. the city and owosso main street continue to work to heighten their promotional efforts. owosso main street has implemented a new brand for downtown owosso. many unique downtown and community events, such as a summer concert series, an annual moonlight market and weekly downtown owosso farmer's market, artwalk, and glow owosso, a lighted parade and 5k run that kicks off the holiday season, bring thousands of visitors to downtown. the events are promoted and hosted through a robust partnership between many community organizations including the owosso historical commission, downtown owosso farmer's market, lebowsky center for the performing art, shiawassee regional chamber of commerce, and shiawassee arts center. in order to continue building of their success, the city and owosso main street realize the work is never done and recognize they cannot let their efforts get stagnant. in order to do so, the city and owosso main street are working on some new initiatives. the first is to continue the redevelopment of upper-floor housing within downtown. currently 100% of the available residential units downtown are occupied and there is an effort to work with property owners to redevelop the remaining available space for new residential units.

the second new initiative is an entrepreneurial ecosystem. by utilizing existing partnerships, the city and owosso main street will build a system for entrepreneurship assistance, training and resources. as part of this initiative, the city and owosso main street have collaborated to dedicate almost $1,000,000 for a local revolving loan and grants program to support local business startups, expansions, and technical assistance. owosso main street handles applications and loan agreements while the city handles the financials (payouts, record keeping, invoices, etc.). creating an entrepreneurial ecosystem will ensure that existing and new small businesses downtown continue to thrive in downtown owosso.

key takeaway

so many successes have occurred within downtown owosso through a dedication to constant collaboration between the city, main street, the chamber of commerce, owosso historical commission, downtown owosso farmer's market and other community organizations. in addition, the city of owosso has created a strong vision for their community and downtown and this vision has robust buy-in from community stakeholders. a strong vision supported by the community has allowed the city of owosso to change within their community by implementing projects and facilitating redevelopment, and because of this, the future is bright.

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christopher germain, aicp, is a senior planner with redevelopment ready communities, working directly with communities primarily in the up & thumb/i-69 regions to incorporate best practices into their planning and development processes. a native michigander, christopher graduated from northern michigan university with a bachelor's in public administration before detouring to the ohio state university for his master's in city and regional planning. in 2016 he ventured back home to pure michigan and loves the chance to travel across the state and see michigan's amazing communities, big and small.