



**IN DOWNTOWN EVART,  
COMMUNITY LEADERS  
RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE  
OF THE MAIN STREET  
FRAMEWORK IN A BRIGHT  
FUTURE**

## EVART DDA MAIN STREET

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Narrative by Todd Bruggema, Evart DDA Main Street Director, and Alan Bengry, Business Owner and Evart DDA Board Chair, and Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

### **The Responsibility of Business Owners**

"My name is Alan Bengry and I serve on the Downtown Development Authority. I'm also a business owner. My wife and I own a pharmacy on Main Street. We took that store over in October of 1984 and that November, I was appointed to the Downtown Development Authority, and I have served on the board continuously since that time.

It was kind of the thrill of the chase. It was a brand-new organization, just getting started and seen as key to promoting and sustaining downtown businesses and keeping them viable.

It's the responsibility of all business owners to try and make everyone in your community successful and create a place where they can survive. We've worked hard to try and make it a growth environment."

—Alan Bengry, Business Owner and Evart DDA Board Chair

### **Full Circle Leadership**

"My name is Todd Bruggema and I'm the new DDA Main Street Director. I grew up here, moved away for a career



in education, and then moved back. Alan and the board kind of recruited me for this position. I'm really excited about it and it's kind of a unique story. Alan talks about 1984 and being on the DDA board—well my dad was a part of city council and was one of the people that appointed Alan to the DDA. So, it's really come full circle.

I've always called Ewart home. Even when I left for 30 years working somewhere else, my mom lived here all those years and I came back and visited for holidays and in the summer. I just always loved Ewart. It's always been home to me, and I wanted to come back and make a difference in the community I grew up in and that gave me so much support as a young person."

—Todd Bruggema, Ewart DDA Main Street Director

### The Value of Main Street

"Before Ewart became a Main Street community, it was 34 years of the classic community trial and error. Then we were exposed to Main Street—a program that had proof that it worked. It had defined functions and processes and proposed that if you stuck to the plan, it really was going to make a difference. We have found that to be true.

It's a tremendous refocusing process. It refocuses people's time, energy, resources, and gives you a process to follow. Sometimes it seems a little slow and you ask, 'Why are we going through all these steps?' But like most things, once you get through the process, you look back and say, 'Now I know why we had to do it that way.'

One of the many benefits of being a Main Street community is the closeness of the board and working with the community. Then you have the network ability with Main Street itself. All the Main Street directors are very cordial and willing to help. If you have a question, you can shoot it out on a blog or something, and they'll respond to you. Or you can call one of them up, and they'll be more than happy to help you and walk you through various things.

We've been very blessed with some good



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partners in Michigan, as well as the different directors down in Lansing. The MEDC is a wealth of knowledge with a lot of resources, which has been great.”

—Todd Bruggema, Evart DDA Main Street Director and Alan Bengry, Business Owner and Evart DDA Board Chair

### Exploring Evart

“Evart is a small community, but we're very welcoming and friendly. We have some really good quality shops downtown. We have a concern for the environment because we have the Muskegon River running right through town. We have a lot of state land that surrounds us, so we're sort of a destination for hunters, fishermen and people who enjoy the outdoors. We've tried to cater to them somewhat and as we've tried to develop downtown, we've tried to keep those kinds of strengths in mind.

If you're an outsider coming to town, you wouldn't feel like you're an outsider. You'd feel like you're a part of the community. One of the other key assets that we have in town is the Rails to Trails path that goes through town. Right now, that connects Bay City to Reed City, all paved. You can go down all the way to Grand Rapids if you're a biker. In the winter, you can snowmobile on that trail or cross-country ski, so it's a year-round trail, which is a great resource for our area.

It's a quaint town and there's a lot of positives here. We have a lot of employment opportunities, whether it's downtown, industrial, etc. For a town our size, we have quite a diverse amount of employment options for people. We also have a diverse amount of living options. You can live in town, in the country, on a lake. There are many lakes within a 10-mile radius of Evart. Then you have other nearby larger cities you can access, but still have the small town living and feel. You can get almost anything in town here that you need.”

—Todd Bruggema, Evart DDA Main Street Director and Alan Bengry, Business Owner and Evart DDA Board Chair



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## City Hall Train Depot

"There was a push not that many years ago to abandon the Evert Train Depot as the City Hall and build a new facility. The community spoke out against that, and the city leaders at that time took it to heart that people wanted this building to be used. There were some who thought that the building was too far gone to be saved, and if you had seen its condition before they started the renovation, you may have been of the same mind. Now, with the beautiful renovation and the preservation that's been done, it's a designated historic building in the community and a beautiful facility.

This building has a lot to do with why Evert is populated as it is. If you look at the history, the building was built in 1871 or 1872, basically when the town started. The trains started moving, and the founding fathers knew they needed to have a train station here so people would stop and stay. Otherwise, they would pass through and live somewhere else. Once the station was put here, Evert's population grew by about double what it was before.

The depot was owned by the train company and was abandoned when they pulled up the tracks. Originally, the city was looking at tearing it down because it was in disarray. There were some private citizens who had been here a long time and they didn't want to see this depot go away. There was a big push and movement to preserve it, so the city took on the project to get the funding."

—Todd Bruggema, Evert DDA Main Street Director and Alan Bengry, Business Owner and Evert DDA Board Chair

## Pop-Up Retail

"As we tried to get private funding for redevelopment to happen and connect



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A green metal fence with a sign that reads "EVART MICHIGAN". The sign is mounted on a green metal post and features a stylized wave logo above the word "EVART". The background shows a blurred field of tall grass.



private investors with properties, we were finding that we really weren't having much success. We decided if we wanted to have a small incubator for small businesses, maybe the DDA had to take on that role first, and then maybe somebody will follow in our footsteps.

We did that by purchasing a building that had served as a barber shop for years. Over the last two to three years, we've had four or five different tenants inside the building, and we recently just sold the building to a business to use as a permanent location. We've also had another larger building donated to the DDA, and our hope is to get that building outfitted, which will be more accommodating to different types of pop-up businesses.

One of the risks with doing this as the DDA is that if it doesn't go as planned, you're stuck with an empty building and have to try and fill it. The other the thing to be careful of: if you're getting into an older building, you've got to make sure that you're not getting stuck with a money pit. The one building that we just acquired is a good, sturdy building. It's an older building, but it's been well taken care of in terms of upkeep.

The positives are you can help determine what you want to see downtown and try to recruit that type of business to put in that building. If you get someone in there with the incubator or the pop-up and they're doing very well, they might be encouraged to buy the building. You then have the option to sell that building to that person and get a permanent tenant who will own it.

Evart offers a ton of potential. We're around the halfway mark between Midland and Ludington, so a lot of traffic passes through here and it would be a great place for people to invest.

People want to see Evart do well. They want to see it survive, grow and thrive. If this building does happen, it'd be another way to hopefully get an investor in there



to do something with the building.”

—Todd Bruggema, Evart DDA Main Street Director and Alan Bengry, Business Owner and Evart DDA Board Chair

### Community Identity

“The other thing that we are doing is trying to redo the residential upstairs on the second floors of the buildings. We have a few buildings already that have residential up there. But we have some other older buildings with much bigger square footage up above that would be ideal for converting into residential units. Getting people living downtown helps support the businesses downtown. People want to shop where they live. That's really what our goal is here: to have a transformation that satisfies more needs of the community, not less.

In satisfying those needs, another goal should not be to look like 'Community X', the goal should be to look like Evart. That's really what we want to do. We hear a lot, 'Why don't we do what this community is doing? Why don't we do what that community is doing?' Well, it's because we're not that community, and we don't necessarily want to look like them. We want to look like us while continuing to survive and have the things that our people need. We need to have

an identity and it has to be Evart's identity.”

—Todd Bruggema, Evart DDA Main Street Director and Alan Bengry, Business Owner and Evart DDA Board Chair



# Michigan Main Street Story Series



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