



ARTS & CULTURE, RESIDENTS,
BUSINESS OWNERS, AND
REDEVELOPMENT HAVE
THINGS LOOKING UP IN...

OLD TOWN LANSING

Narrative by Ben Dowd, President of the Old Town Commercial Association (OTCA), and Jamie Schriener, Former President of the OTCA, and Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

Old Town Lansing, a wonderful neighborhood

“Old Town is a place I was drawn to when I first moved to Lansing not only because it’s beautiful, or because of the shops and restaurants, but the people! Old Town Lansing has just the coolest people.

We self-identify as the arts district of Lansing. Thinking of the events that have been hosted in Old Town for decades, they really center around art in many forms. Allowing a space for folks to be creative and do what they love has really been what this area is all about. That sense of community and culture has been so important in making Old Town what it is today.

When people make their first trip to Lansing, they have to stop by. It’s just one of those places that you really have to experience. Get out of your car, walk around, go down to the fish ladder, check out the river trail, and come walk through some of the shops. It truly is a destination in Michigan.”

“Old Town is this giant, weird, crazy, fun family, and it is this incredible community. As Ben said, it’s the people here that make the place. We’re all a little off.

We're a little crazy. It's a great combination of very diverse and different people. But it works!

Art is such a part of who we are, and a great thing about Old Town is you don't have to go into a gallery to see art. There are murals everywhere. We have public sculptures from our festivals and events. Even the buildings down here, the historic buildings, I see them as art. It's just a wonderful neighborhood."

—Ben Dowd, President of the Old Town Commercial Association and Jamie Schriener, former president of the OTCA

Lansing's two Main Street districts

"We're fortunate to have two main street communities in Lansing, one in Old Town and one Downtown. That's because, even though they're about a mile apart, they are two very different areas with different needs.

There is a lot of collaboration, however. We work closely together, and Downtown Lansing has been just wonderful. We cross-promote events, we sit down and talk regularly about how we can enhance one another's districts, and we partner on community safety efforts. Collaboration is so key.



"Collaboration is so key."



"Thankfully, as Ben mentioned, the relationship between Downtown and Old Town is amazing, and there are even a number of us who hope to see additional Main Street programs here in Lansing. There are really unique places in the city with their own identities and cultures, and when we all work together, everybody can benefit."

—Ben Dowd, President of the Old Town Commercial Association and Jamie Schriener, former president of the OTCA

Main Street moves things forward

"When we started the Main Street program, we had a 90% commercial vacancy rate.

Today, we're nearly 100% full.

It's phenomenal. We could make a wait list right now of folks who want to bring their business into Old Town. That's because the people here have really valued the community, invested in it, and keep their spaces looking great. If you move into this neighborhood, that comes with a responsibility to maintain it. Everybody pitches in to make this place great and that's our strength.

We are really good at making things happen and that creates a place people want to be part of."

"Main Street helped us 'herd the cats'. Before Main Street, we had lots of great people with wonderful ideas, then we'd have a meeting and talk about all this stuff we were going to do..."



"We could make a wait list right now of folks who want to bring their business into Old Town."



but nothing would get done. Main Street helped get us organized and to a point where we could do and complete the things we wanted to do. We didn't lose our identity as a district and it helped us to move things forward."

"Main Street has done the work to figure out the best process for us. It embraces studied and proven tools and resources and then presents it to your community with a nice little bow. But it's NOT just abiding by some set of guidelines that will turn you into a cookie-cutter community—you can really make it your own."

—Ben Dowd, President of the Old Town Commercial Association and Jamie Schriener, former president of the OTCA

Old Town improvement and pride

"In the future, I'd love to see our boundaries and borders expand a bit, to see our diversity expand, and see us keep the same strengths and sense of community as we grow. As Ben mentioned earlier, there's a waiting list of businesses who would love to get down here, and I really hope we keep that scrappy sense about us as we grow.

If you want to see something get done, don't wait for someone else to do it, just get it done. Pick up the piece of trash you see on the sidewalk. If you see a storefront that needs some work, ask what you can do to help improve it.

That's the spirit so many people have in our community: just get out there and do things that make it better. Old Town Lansing is the place it is because of the hard work of all the people here.

It's the community coming together and doing things."

"Soon, we're going to be starting community visioning and strategic planning with all of our stakeholders in the community. I'm excited to understand what the community is looking forward to. We all have great ideas, but my great idea might not be what's best for everybody else.

However, just like what Jamie said, we need to keep the sense of community that has been so pivotal and has brought so much success to the neighborhood. We can do new things, have different initiatives, work with different people, but if we stay true to Old Town's identity, I think we will win."

—Ben Dowd, President of the Old Town Commercial Association and Jamie Schriener, former president of the OTCA

Old Town General Store

"The Old Town General Store is this great little store with tons of Michigan-made products. It's the place to go if you're on your way to a party and you need a bottle of wine or a six-pack of beer and some snacks. It's the place to go if you need to get a gift for someone who's coming into town and you want something Lansing-based or Michigan-based or just unique. They have a beautiful courtyard in the back where, pre-pandemic, they hosted all kinds of concerts and events, and we're hoping to see that again in the future. They have a beautiful mural painted by a local artist. It's very cool. Check it out."

—Jamie Schriener, former president of the Old Town Commercial Association

"Everybody pitches in to make this place great and that's our strength."



Temple building

“The Temple building is a gorgeous historical building that has sat vacant for years, and actually the third building built on the site. It was originally a church. They started very small, outgrew it, knocked it down, built a bigger one, outgrew that and knocked it down, then built a bigger one. Then they moved to a larger facility in probably the early 2000s, and then it sat empty.

There was a drugstore that wanted to raise the entire block and put a store there. Thankfully, some local folks didn't want to see it get knocked down. The property owners held out, and, at the same time, other property owners said, 'We're going to renovate this, and we're going to turn it into a nightclub.' And there were actually some pretty big acts who came through.

It did really, really well whenever MSU students were in session, but then in the summertime, it just kind of faltered. Unfortunately, in about 2007, it shut down. Eventually, some local folks purchased the building, cleaned it out, and tried to get it set up as an event center, but it just continued to sit.

Then Michigan Community Capital started looking at the building and slowly decided to take on the project. It's going to have commercial space on the first floor, beautiful apartments upstairs, and a great new coffee shop coming in. And all these wonderful new residents will be in our neighborhood. The Temple has sat vacant for years, and the result of this project will be absolutely amazing. We could not be more excited. I'm loving the transformation. To see an organization come in and fix it up, I smile every time I go by it.”

—Jamie Schriener, former president of the Old Town Commercial Association





Michigan Main Street Story Series



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