



**MAIN STREET ORGANIZATIONS  
CAN FIND SUCCESS WHEN  
THEY FOCUS ON BUILDING  
STRONG COLLABORATION AND  
PARTNERSHIPS, SUCH AS THE  
CASE IN DOWNTOWN...**

# MILAN

Narrative by Jill Tewsley, Executive Director Milan Main Street, and Jade Smith, Milan DDA board member and former City Administrator, and Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

## **Moving a Community From What it is to What it Could Be**

“During the process of renewal here in Milan, we’ve been fortunate to have so many who have been part of this community for so long. That’s probably true of many communities, but the stories and history in our community have never diminished. People continually share stories of Milan, and that connection to our stories has been vital to understanding our history, respecting that history, and then moving forward. We also have all sorts of new people coming in and it helps create a connection between this place, those people, and our longtime residents.

When you look at a community like Milan, and you talk about renewal, you have to look at what traditional downtowns have gone through. Downtowns were decimated when malls and the creation of the highway pulled people and businesses away from downtown areas.

To bring that back, you need to have a committed administration that says, ‘Downtowns are the heart of our community.’

That commitment is what will bring back the entire community. From there, you have to get all sides of the community at the table to decide how to move forward. You have to listen to the people, and you can't wait for the people that come to you. You have to go out to them."

—Jill Tewsley, Executive Director Milan Main Street, and Jade Smith, Milan DDA board member and former City Administrator

**Development Incentives and Partnerships**

"Working with our partners at the MEDC and other state and federal agencies has been very helpful to the renewal of Milan. Renewal is a collaborative effort and especially in a community of 6,000 people with mom-and-pop businesses, we have to get creative with how we can support them.

Michigan Main Street and their programs have really helped with that support, especially with the facade grant program. These buildings are old, need a lot of work and need to be brought up to code—but that's a lot of expense for these new business owners. We were able to partner with the MEDC and get some of that done through grant funding.



**MILAN**  
*Main Street*

Someone wanting to open a bookstore knows books. A coffee shop owner knows coffee. But small business owners don't know about grant funding. It's just not what they're thinking about or have any experience in, so we have to help them get there and Michigan Main Street and the MEDC really help with that.

The Chamber of Commerce and Milan Main Street also share an office. We think two minds are better than one and that partnership is a way to better promote business growth and improve the overall economic vitality of the community.

Retention is just as important as recruitment and now we're getting to a happy place of 90% occupancy in our buildings downtown. We don't want that to ever decrease, so when there's a business that is struggling or may need some ideas to improve, they know they can come to us. We will brainstorm with them and try to help them however we can, whether it's a business plan or with social media. That level of assistance is not common in many cities because it's easy to say, 'That's not our role.'

But we pride ourselves in being approachable and collaborative. If I had to give one piece of advice to anybody that is involved in a community like ours, it's that collaboration has got to be the biggest piece. You have got to work together and support each other. It is not a one-way street. Getting the business owners and the city government to solve issues together is key. You've got to work together.



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Traditional government does not operate that way, but that's something we take very seriously."

—Jill Tewsley, Executive Director Milan Main Street, and Jade Smith, Milan DDA board member and former City Administrator

### What Makes Placemaking Successful

"Placemaking is about falling in love with a place. Controversy happens as a result of change and anytime there's change, there's going to be a little pushback because it's something different. But once people begin to experience, connect, and then fall in love with a place—that's when you see the power of placemaking.

I can't overstate how important the creation of Tolan Square was to our community. It created a central location that people could connect and gather in, a place to fall in love with and experience our community in a way that we hadn't experienced before.

We have somebody sitting on the Main Street board who was absolutely against the closing of the road. She now says she has a love/hate relationship with it. It's an inconvenience for her, but she loves what it does for Milan and now she's part of the organization that supports what we're doing downtown.

Then there are some third and fourth-generation people in town, who are residents that also didn't like it, because it's never been that way. Now, they're down here and active, and that has been great to see.

You have to overcome controversy if you want to create a sense of place. You also then have to make sure you are using that place in a way to show success, and then invite people who were opposed to it and say, 'Hey, come be a part of this. We need your help. What else would bring you here?'

You have to sell it and you have to continually sell it. It's not just about creating something and walking away from it—you can't rely on "if you build it, they will come." You have to continually do things after that to get people to want to go and experience the space. We have live music every Friday night, all summer long. We have our Third Thursdays event where there are hundreds of people walking downtown. Hundreds of people might not be a big deal to larger communities, but we're a community of 6,000. If you're pushing close to 10% of your community that is down here using the space, that's a big percentage and you're doing something right.

Sometimes there are 25 people there in Tolan Square on our closed road, sometimes there are 200 people there. It doesn't matter, because it contributes to the vibrancy and to the feeling that your community is alive.

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Sure, we have people from outside the community from other towns come and visit and we love that. But when our own community comes out to support it, that's huge! That speaks volumes for us. When you can point at a picture and think, 'Look at all those people on what used to just be a road,' that's your success story right there!"

—Jill Tewsley, Executive Director Milan Main Street, and Jade Smith, Milan DDA board member and former City Administrator

### Value to a Community Becoming Part of Michigan Main Street

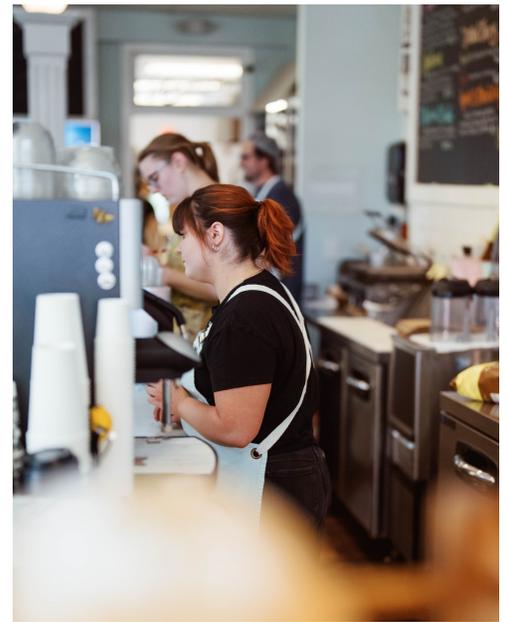
"Becoming part of Michigan Main Street helps define your downtown. Nearly every community has a DDA, right? 'DDA' is a word that's used in every community from Detroit and Grand Rapids to Lansing, and even in small communities like ourselves.

But the Main Street program brings a different perspective to our community. It defines it on a different level, along with support from the state funding opportunities to help do things that you may not have been able to do on your own.

It also brings ideas to the table that people haven't heard of before. Placemaking has been around a long time in the world of urban planning. However, it has not been a word that's been used very much with local government. Six to eight years ago, if you said to someone on a city council, 'We are going through this placemaking effort,' they would have looked at you confused.

It's a very common concept, but no one had heard of it. But today, everybody's doing it. That's something that Michigan Main Street does well: taking your ideas, affirming them, and then calling you into action. Not that we weren't an action-oriented community before—we were. But affirmation is important—that your ideas are not just ideas, they're not crazy, they are working in other communities, and that they are proven methods for economic development, historic preservation and community growth."

—Jill Tewsley, Executive Director Milan Main Street, and Jade Smith, Milan DDA board member and former City Administrator





# Michigan Main Street Story Series



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