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Appendix A Market Study

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Introduction

BELDING DOWNTOWN ECONOMIC ENHANCEMENT STRATEGY

Downtown Belding is facing economic and physical challenges. As new competition and retail develops outside of the downtown, it has become more difficult for the downtown to remain the retail hub of the community. In 1972, a Housing and Urban Development program geared toward revitalizing the downtown replaced the core downtown blocks with an indoor mall. While this effort was initially successful, it has not endured as an economic draw and has left the downtown with a physical barrier to redevelopment.

The retail marketplace is increasingly competitive. Downtowns that have failed to recognize and respond to changes in the market continue to struggle in their efforts to compete: those that are successful are redefining their position in the market and re-asserting the downtown's important role as part of the economic and community landscape.

In an effort to address downtown Belding's need for revitalization, the City of Belding commissioned a Downtown Economic Enhancement Strategy. Goals of the strategic planning process, as identified by the City, included: completing a downtown market analysis and conducting an analysis of existing buildings to determine a "best-use" strategy. The City required a highly participatory process of review and analysis throughout the project.

Through a competitive bidding process, the City selected Beckett & Raeder, Inc. in cooperation with Downtown Professionals Network to develop the strategic plan. The strategic planning process began in July 2003, with an Initial Client Meeting. Following this "kick-off" meeting, the planning process included the following steps:

Stakeholder Interviews & Community Workshop	<i>September 2003</i>
Analysis of Existing Conditions	<i>October 2003</i>
Market Analysis	<i>September 2003 - February 2004</i>
Board Planning Session	<i>November 2003</i>
Recommendations & Implementation Strategy	<i>February-March 2004</i>
Presentation of Draft Report	<i>April 2004</i>

The findings presented in this report are a direct result of the planning process described above. Each step in the process yielded valuable information on the current state of downtown Belding, and has guided recommendations for the future.

*City Assets:
the setting and history*

Flat River Belding, Michigan, circa 1900



The restored Belrockton Museum (middle right), the Gibson Building Clock Tower (bottom left) and the Alvah N. Belding Library (bottom right)



I. Analysis of Existing Conditions

INTRODUCTION

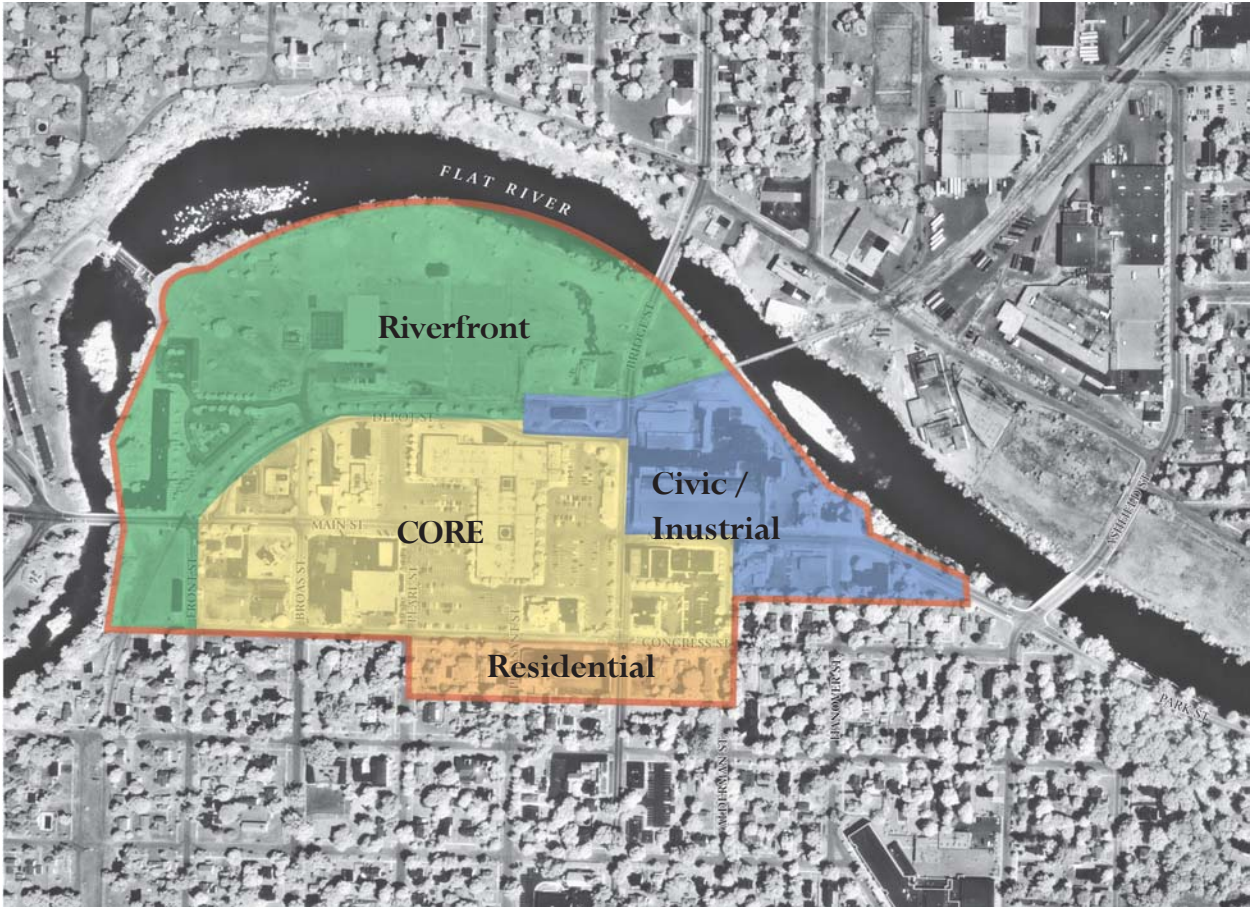
*I*n order to fully understand a community it is important to have an understanding of its history. The following is a brief synopsis of Belding’s history and the elements that hold the character of the community. The first settler, Levi Broas, arrived in Belding in 1838 and built a sawmill on the Flat River and was known as Broas Rapids. While logging plays a significant part in the history of Belding, it is the silk factories that Belding is best known for. The Belding family built the first silk mill in 1884 and called it “Richardson Mill”, fearing it might be a failure. But that was not the case and Belding Brothers and Company built another silk mill in town and three dormitories to house the female workers.

Belding became the third largest silk producing city in the world and became known as the “Silk City of the World”. The city was renamed Belding in 1871 in honor of the Belding family. The development of rayon fabric (or “artificial silk”) and the fad for short skirts in the 1920s reduced the demand for silk. The Great Depression put many of the labor-intensive silk producers out of business and the Belding Brothers and Company closed their last Belding silk mill in 1932. However, it is this strong association with the silk mills that provides Belding with its unique character.

Downtown Belding contains a number of elements that demonstrate the strengths of the community. These include the restored Library and Belrockton Museum, the last remaining of three remaining women’s dormitories built by Belding Brothers and Company to house the silk mill workers, as well as the architecture of other historic buildings that hold the history of the community. The strong presence of the riverfront with updated park facilities, easy access to the surrounding residential community, and a strong civic presence in the downtown are all assets on which to build upon.

The downtown area also contains a number of opportunities for redevelopment and improvement that would result in a more successful heart of Belding. In order to better understand where improvements could be made, an analysis of physical conditions was conducted. This analysis assessed the physical conditions of the downtown including how well the streets, parking lots and sidewalks function and work together, and the character defining features that provide Belding its unique identity.

DOWNTOWN BELDING CHARACTER ZONES



CHARACTER ZONES

The City of Belding established the Downtown Belding Project Area in which redevelopment opportunities will be assessed. This area contains a variety of uses and types of development and for analysis purposes the district has been classified into several character zones, which are described below and illustrated on the following pages.

Core Downtown:

This is the central area of commerce and represents what was once the traditional “downtown”. The land uses here consist primarily of office and retail commercial with a couple of civic buildings. Originally the downtown core consisted of through streets in a grid pattern. In 1972, as part of a HUD program to revitalize downtowns, the central downtown area was replaced with a single story indoor mall, The Covered Village, surrounded by a parking lot. The mall is the central building in downtown and is no longer thriving. The remaining buildings are one to three stories with various setbacks and architectural styles. Only three buildings in this zone remain that date from the early 1900’s. While this area is compact, the mall and the surrounding parking lot complicate the walkability. There are few street trees and sidewalks are absent in several locations.

Riverfront:

The riverfront area is primarily composed of parkland, although there is some development at the eastern and western edges by the river crossings at Bridge and Main Streets. The major structure at the Main Street bridge is the Richardson Mills, a National Historic Building. This industrial building has been adapted for residential use. The Bridge Street crossing area also contains several small businesses, the VFW and an electric transfer station. While the park is a well-used amenity for both active and passive uses and provides a valuable access to the Flat River, it is not well connected to the Core Downtown area. Several factors that contribute to this are that it faces the back side of the mall and one must cross the Mid-Michigan Railroad tracks to enter the park. The development potential of this area is limited by the flood plain.

Residential:

Included within the Downtown Belding Project Area is a small portion of residential buildings, which are representative of the neighborhoods that surround the downtown. This zone also includes the Breimayer Building, which is vacant and in a state of disrepair.

Civic/Industrial:

The eastern edge of the Belding Downtown Project Area contains three of the five civic buildings, the Post Office, Library, Belrockton Museum, and the Gibson Building. The library is on the National Register of Historic Buildings and the museum is on the State register. Both

CORE Downtown Zone

The Covered Village Mall is the predominant feature of the CORE Downtown Zone.



This zone also contains the City Hall.



Riverfront Zone

The Flat River provides a scenic setting for the downtown





Residential Zone

Residences along Congress Street.



Civic / Industrial Zone

The Post Office is one of five civic buildings in this zone.



The Gibson building, an historic silk mill has had additions over the years that have not enhanced the character of the original structure.

Approach Routes

Signage at the intersection of M-66 and M-44 does not list Belding as a destination and it is just seven miles away



Nor is there a sign to direct people downtown when you reach Bridge Street



A sign on M-91 directs travelers to Belding



Again, there is no sign to direct people to the downtown at Bridge Street



buildings have been recently and beautifully restored. The post office and the original Gibson building, Belding Brothers Mill No.1, are also historic structures that support the character of this zone.

APPROACHING & ENTERING THE DISTRICT

*D*owntown Belding is not on a major thoroughfare, rather it is nestled in the bends of the Flat River. While this location provides a scenic setting, it is not readily accessed from the major roads that pass along the outskirts of town. The signage along these routes to direct one to Downtown Belding is absent or minimal and thus makes locating the downtown more difficult.

Approach Routes:

The main routes to Belding are on M-91 from either Greenville or Lowell or along M-66 to M-44 through Ionia. There are signs directing a traveler to Belding on both M-91 and M-66, however they are inconspicuous. On M-66 the sign to Belding is located behind a number of other directional signs, making it harder to see. At the city limits, there is a nice sign to welcome visitors and let them know that they have reached their destination.

Entering the District:

The main entrances to downtown are on Bridge Street, both from the north (the M-91 access via Ellis Road) and the south (via M-44) and secondarily from the west along Main Street and from the east on Park Street. The entry routes to Belding are not well marked. Rather they are defined by the mill towers, which provide the visual cue for where downtown is located. The towers are only visible in close proximity to the downtown, which would benefit from signage directing visitors to the downtown area from the entry routes. Directional and way-finding signs are an effective method of attracting visitors to the downtown and directing them once they arrive. Frequently there are no signs and the existing signs are small and indistinguishable, thus not effectively serving either purpose. Additionally, there are no signs downtown that direct visitors to the city hall, library, historic or recreational assets, etc.

In addition to way-finding signage, the gateways into downtown form the first impression for the visitor and indicate arrival in the district. There are four such gateways into Belding. The gateways establish an expectation for of what one can find downtown.

First, there is the bridge on Bridge Street, which is in a state of disrepair and is not pedestrian friendly. However, a MDOT reconstruction project has been initiated which will replace the bridge. Initial concepts for the new bridge suggest a stone faced structure with accommoda-

*The approach to Downtown
establishes expectations*



Heading south on Bridge Street



Heading east on Main Street



Heading west on Main Street



Heading north on Bridge Street

*Entry Points to the District
don't match the expectations*



South on Bridge Street



East on Main Street



West on Main Street



North on Bridge Street

Street Patterns

The "Traditional Main Street" was replaced by the Covered Village Mall in 1972



Without architecture, the edges are lost



The reconfiguration of streets left some confusing intersections for both vehicles and pedestrians



tions for pedestrians that will create a striking visual gateway to the downtown. Until the repairs are complete, heavier truck traffic is utilizing the Ashfield Street bridge to access downtown and reach points south of Belding.

Another entrance is from M-44, which requires a turn onto Bridge Street heading north. This turn toward downtown is not marked at the intersection, making it difficult for visitors to locate the downtown. Once on Bridge Street, there is no indication that you are headed toward downtown, nor is there a “gateway” to let you know that you have arrived in downtown.

The east and west entrances, along Main and Park Streets, are secondary entrances to the downtown area, utilized mostly by locals. While the entrance to downtown along Park Street lacks signage, the restored Belding Library and Belrockton Museum provide a strong presence and are the cornerstones of this entrance. The entry to downtown from the west over the Main Street bridge also does not have signage, but is marked by the Richardson Mills building which also presents an historic front.

CIRCULATION AND PARKING

*D*owntown Belding’s street pattern is a disrupted two-way grid pattern. The Covered Village mall and the surrounding parking lot break up the traditional grid pattern, which reduces the number of choices and the legibility of the street system. Many stakeholders remarked about the confusion they have when driving downtown, particularly at the intersection of Main and Pearl Streets. The aisles in the main parking lot function for vehicular circulation, but are not well defined and are often too wide for controlling traffic movements.

Street Patterns

Main and Pleasant Streets dead-end at the mall parking lot, resulting in intersections that are difficult to understand and navigate. In addition, the focal point along these roads is the mall, which overwhelms the architectural and historical gems of the city. Bridge Street, the main thoroughfare in downtown Belding, is approximately 3 ½ blocks long. The west side of two blocks are sided by the mall parking lot, while the east side contains a block long addition to the Gibson building. This does not create a streetscape with the inviting image of a traditional downtown, one with numerous storefront window displays and pedestrian activity.

Pedestrian Orientation

Providing for the safety and comfort of pedestrians in a downtown is not just nice, it is essential to a lively and active downtown. The more people that are downtown, the more people will come to downtown. The experience for pedestrians plays a critical role in determining whether

*Pedestrian Orientation:
room for improvement*

*Universally accessible sidewalks are crucial
for all users to feel comfortable*



*Buffers between pedestrians and vehicles
increase pedestrian safety and comfort levels*



*Sidewalks in the downtown are not always
continuous*





*Pedestrian Orientation:
positive examples of
pedestrian focus*

A pedestrian connection to the downtown from a wider trail network provides trail users with a destination point



Landscape buffers increase pedestrian comfort levels



A signalized crosswalk provides pedestrians with safe crossing opportunities. This intersection could be improved however with a striped crosswalk.

Parking

Parking downtown can be a difficult issue, but on-street parking is the best solution: it usually gets customers closer to their destination, provides pedestrians with a buffer from traffic, and slows vehicle speeds



Most streets in the downtown are wide enough to accommodate on-street parking



people will choose downtown over other competing shopping centers, whether they will enjoy being there and whether they will continue to return.

A safer pedestrian environment could be achieved with better crosswalks, the addition of sidewalks on all blocks, and pedestrian access to the mall. Currently to access the mall area, pedestrians must traverse the large parking lot that does not contain dedicated pedestrian access routes and negotiate through unpredictable vehicular turning movement. Due to very limited on-street parking on the district, most visitors park in this lot.

Parking

Parking downtown is best accomplished on the streets. This allows customers to park in close proximity or directly in front of their destination. On-street parking also serves to slow traffic through a district and increases pedestrian comfort by buffering the sidewalk from the traffic lanes. Compared to other towns its size, Belding has few on-street parking spaces. However, the opportunities for on-street parking are significant and in most cases simply require a reconfiguration of the lane widths and pavement stripping within the existing street width.

Currently, the City of Belding prohibits on-street parking on most of the downtown streets. In the areas where on-street parking is permitted there is little or no signage and no parallel parking street markings to indicate that parking is permitted. Most of the streets in the downtown project area are wide enough to accommodate two lanes of traffic, one traveling in each direction, and a row of parallel parking. In fact, many are able to handle parallel parking on both sides of the street.

The off-street parking lots in the downtown area consist primarily of the mall lot and several smaller lots located on the side or the rear of buildings. The mall lot is difficult to navigate and is a prominent feature downtown. It contains no islands which assist in directing traffic flow and offer a degree of safety, nor is there signage to direct a visitor to destinations. The smaller lots are located to the side or rear of buildings. On the east side of downtown they are connected to each other and allow for overlap use while on the west side of town the lots typically service a single building and have individual point of ingress and egress.

CHARACTER DEFINING FEATURES

*N*ot only do public realm elements define the character of the district, but the architecture and facades of the private realm do as well. These character-defining features were analyzed to determine where improvement could be made to enhance the character of the district.

Architecture

The mall detracts from the character of the downtown and does not provide a streetscape



The historic silk mills, like the Richardson Mill shown here, are the character defining features of the community



The west side of downtown has a more suburban feel with the deep setbacks and parking lots for each business



Architecture

The architecture of buildings in downtown lends as much to the character of the district as do the streets and sidewalks. Overall, the downtown core does not have a cohesive appearance. This can be attributed to the inward nature of the Covered Village. As with most malls, the store windows face the interior, while the exterior of the building has little to offer the public. Over the years, several businesses, such as Artistic Attitudes Salon and The Belding Apothecary have altered their space to allow patrons to enter from the parking lot as well as the interior of the mall.

The architectural styles and materials in downtown vary according to the period in which they were built. The newer buildings do not maintain the character of the buildings that date back to the early 1900s, which hold the history of the community. Many of the more recent commercial buildings have a more suburban or strip style, with buildings set back from the right of way line and parking located in the front.

The mall and its parking lot take up a large amount of space in the center of downtown. The streetscape surrounding this “superblock” is lacking in character and largely undefined by an architectural street frontage. The inward facing architecture of the mall results in a significant amount of the public realm focusing on the back of buildings.

Building Facades & Storefront Signs

Facades and storefronts combine to create the character of a street front. They can draw people in by having active, occupied storefronts with merchandise in the window, an awning or recessed entryway, or an interesting sign. While there are several good examples of inviting storefronts, many of the buildings downtown lack the visual interest to attract or invite visitors.

Signage is another important aspect of creating an interesting public space. Belding has numerous temporary signs, such as the one shown on page 23. The addition of a permanent sign shows the visitor that there is commitment to the community or the customer.

Rear Facades & Side Walls

Rear and side walls of many buildings are very visible in Belding. There are several large buildings in the downtown area that present side or rear walls to the community. The Covered Village with its inward focus is a prime example, but the addition to the Gibson Building and the supermarket are other examples of prominent side walls. In addition, parking is typically found in the rear or to the side of buildings. For these reasons, upkeep of rear facades and side walls are just as important as front facades. While most of the side walls in the district are well cared for, many could provide more visual interest and better pedestrian scale detailing. A blank wall with no windows can become visual dead space.

Building Facades

To increase visibility, many of The Covered Village shops have been retrofitted to open up on the parking lot



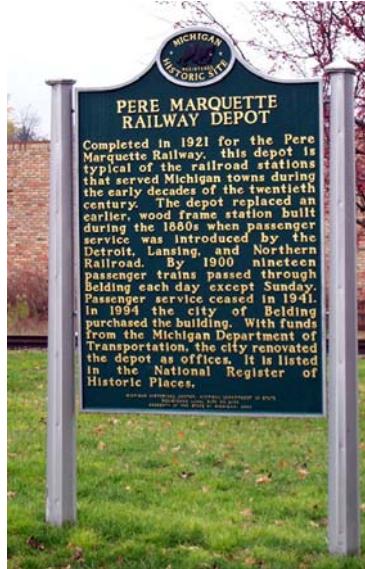
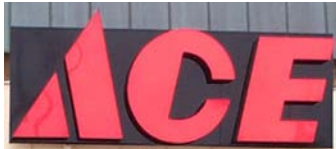
A covered entrance, large windows and parking at the door welcome shoppers



A few of the original Main Street buildings remain



Storefront Signs



Attractive signs come in a variety of styles and enrich the downtown. They also highlight the rich history of the community



(left) An uninviting entrance and poor signage can have a big impact on more than just the business

(right) Temporary signs send the message that there is a lack of commitment to the community or the customer



Multiple signs in one location can create clutter which detracts from a sign's effectiveness

*Rear Facades &
Side Walls*



*The backs of buildings are entrances too
(above) These people must be regulars, as
they knew the rear door to the Hideaway
restaurant is also an entrance*

*(right) Greenville has recognized the
importance of the rear entrance with good
signage and welcoming entrances*



*While the side of a building may not have
an entrance, it can still have a very public
face*

*(above) The Gibson building is not
reinforcing an attractive downtown
streetscape*

*(right) Extruded Metals has resolved their
blank wall street presence with landscaping*



Public Art

Public art can enliven a downtown space considerably. Public art engages the individual and stimulates the senses; it can serve as a focal point, be an interesting background or be the basis for a gathering. In Belding, there are opportunities to incorporate public art in the form of well-crafted murals along the side walls of buildings, the addition of sculpture in civic spaces or even with the dedication of a space for locals to showcase their art work and perhaps creating a community cultural event.

Landscaping, Lighting & Street Furniture

A common language of landscaping, lighting and street furniture is needed to create a better sense of cohesion in the district.

Street trees and pedestrian-level lighting work together to define vertical space along a street. This vertical plane gives definition to a street, and creates a more comfortable pedestrian environment. Street trees create character, provide shade, increase pedestrian safety, and generally make for a more pleasant environment. The study area contains few street trees, most of which are located along the periphery.

Pedestrian scale lighting is absent in the district and is particularly noticeable in the mall parking lot where two very large fixtures light the entire area. Pedestrian scale lighting is also absent in the park, although it does contain some lighting for recreational activities.

Visual clutter detracts from the appeal of the streetscape and should be minimized. Several examples of items that unnecessarily add to visual clutter include excessive signage, and poles without a purpose.

The recently updated park is the only area of the district that contains street furnishings. Any streetscape improvements should consider the materials that have already been introduced in order that a cohesive environment is created.

Public Art

This corner park in Greenville incorporates sculpture as a focal point and creates a quiet spot at a busy intersection



Historic images could be recreated as murals, thus enlivening the city with public art and sharing the story of Belding as the “Silk City”



Landscaping, Lighting & Street Furniture



The street furnishings in Belding’s parks should be brought into the downtown, perhaps like this mid-block pedestrian access in Greenville





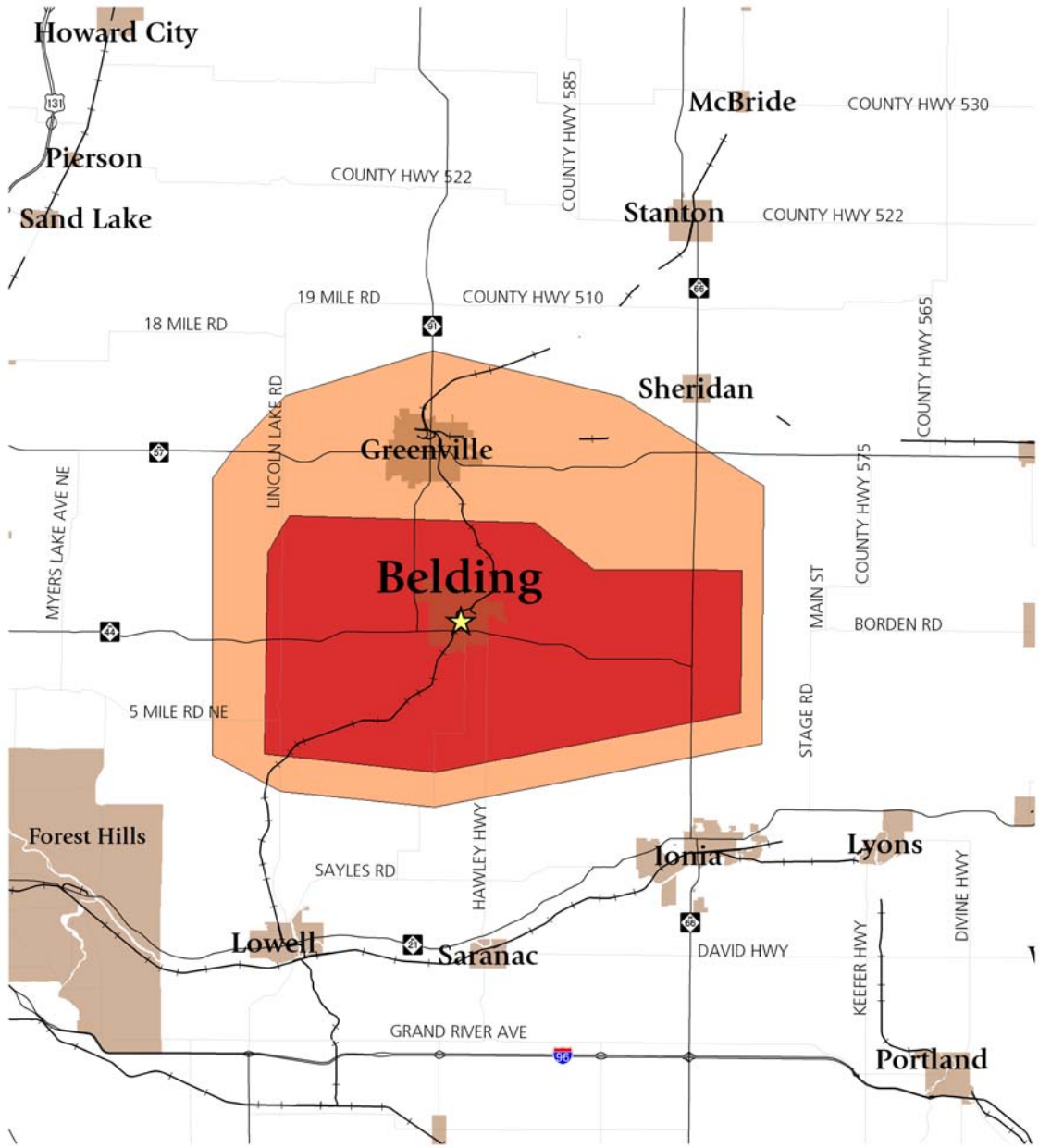
Landscaping, Lighting & Street Furniture

Street trees provide vertical definition to streets and enhance pedestrian comfort



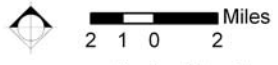
(left) Lighting should be appropriately scaled. In the mall parking lot it is not scaled for the pedestrian

(above) "Mystery poles" clutter the landscape and increase maintenance costs



DOWNTOWN BELDING MARKET STUDY
Belding Market Trade Areas

- Local Trade Area
- Regional Trade Area



II. City of Belding Market Study Summary

Prepared by: **Downtown Professionals Network**
Marketing • Management • Planning
Batavia • Illinois • USA
February 2004

INTRODUCTION

The community of Belding, like communities across the United States, has seen the role of its traditional downtown business district change. Downtowns, once the retail hub of communities like Belding, have changed as new competition and retail developed in areas outside the downtown business district and in neighboring communities.

The highly competitive nature of the retail marketplace, including the perceived need to compete “on par” with larger regional shopping centers and malls, was likely at the heart of a 1970’s urban renewal project that demolished the core downtown business district to make way for the Belding Covered Village Mall.

Today, the mall and surrounding downtown area is largely occupied by non-retail and non-pedestrian oriented uses. The area immediately surrounding the mall is largely underdeveloped, due in part to the mall location’s disruption of the traditional street grid and related traffic circulation and pedestrian access challenges.

Information and insight gained through the Downtown Belding Market Study will be critical to exploring redevelopment possibilities and to pursuing emerging business opportunities. Findings from the study must be considered carefully in order to establish meaningful directions for current and future downtown redevelopment, business development and marketing strategies that are consistent with community goals for the downtown area.

The process and resulting products of this study include:

- Definition of the downtown’s geographic trade area and the demographic, economic and socioeconomic characteristics of the trade area population
- An assessment of the existing downtown business mix and retail climate and the identification of potential business development opportunities
- An assessment of possible downtown redevelopment opportunities consistent with the community’s vision and goals for the downtown area
- An outline for marketing strategies that could help attract targeted consumer market segments and new investments to the downtown area

Demographic Snapshot

	Local Trade Area	Regional Trade Area
Population		
2000 Census	13,137	32,533
2002 Estimated	13,186	32,890
2007 Projected	13,355	33,891
2002 – 07 Change	+1.3%	+3.0%
Households		
2000 Census	4,735	12,060
2002 Estimated	4,771	12,280
2007 Projected	4,886	12,879
2002 – 07 Change	+2.4%	+4.9%
Average HH Income		
2002 Estimated	\$45,651	\$45,132
2007 Projected	\$52,827	\$51,332
2002 – 07 Change	+15.7%	+13.7%
Age		
2002 Est. Median Age	33.8	35.4

Sources: Claritas, Inc.; Downtown Professionals Network.

Regional Trade Area data is cumulative of local and regional geographies.

TRADE AREA DESCRIPTION

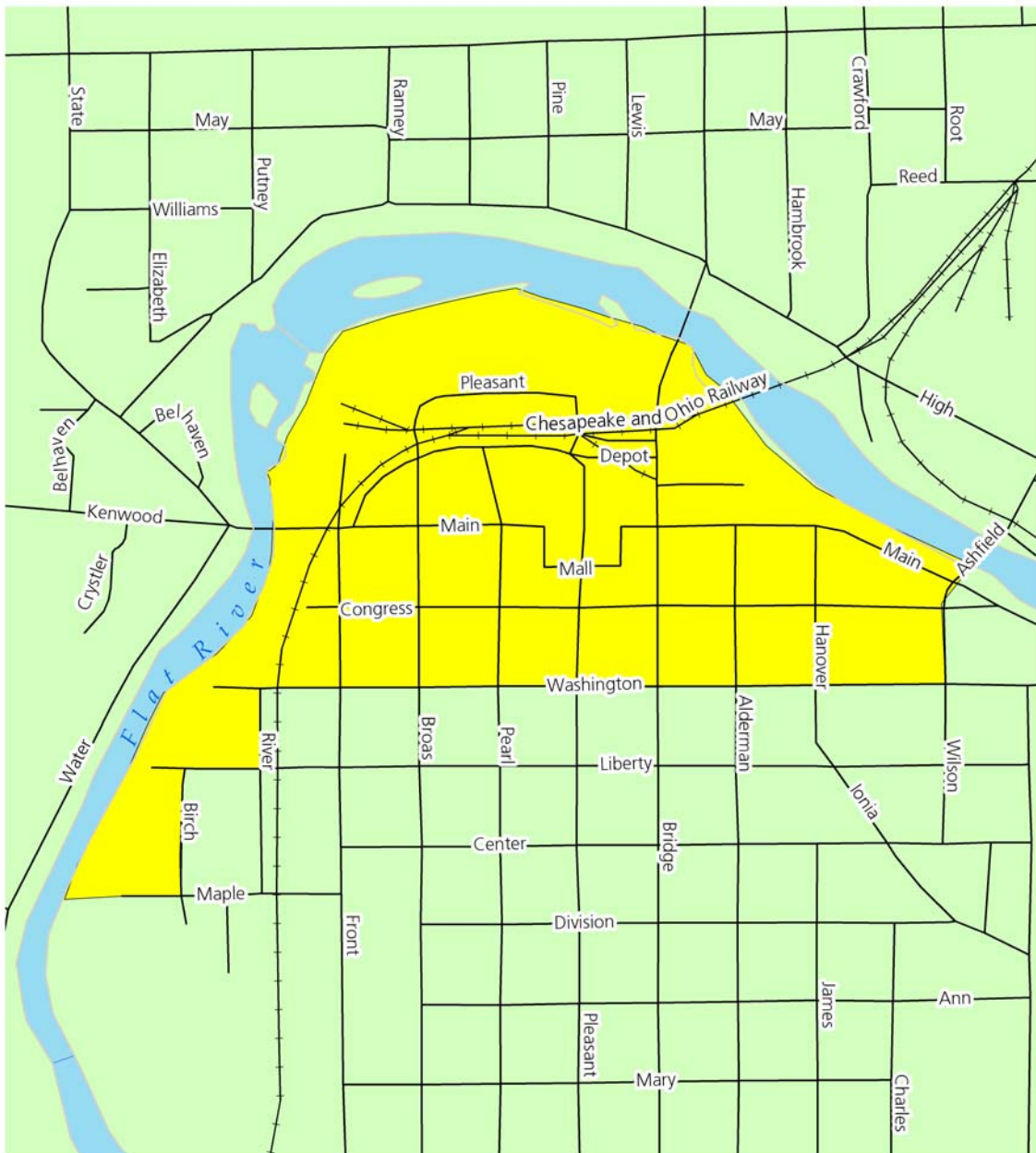
The downtown Belding local trade area includes residents and households in the City of Belding and the populated areas of Cooks Corners, Moseley, Orleans, Shiloh, Smyrna, and Woods Corners. The regional trade area includes a geographic ring surrounding the primary trade area and primarily extending north to include the populated areas of Amsden, Fenwick and Greenville.

THE DOWNTOWN MARKET

Analysis of demographic trends and socio-economic characteristics provides keen insight on consumer market segments within the local and regional trade area. Marketing and business development efforts that recognize demographic trends and target households that share similar lifestyle traits and characteristics will best serve efforts to increase the Belding downtown area's market share and to capitalize on existing and evolving business opportunities.

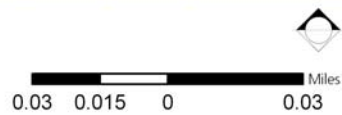
Opportunities to increase the downtown's market share are weighted and directed toward an aggregate "target market" composed of people and households that have similar demographic and lifestyle characteristics, and that could generally be described as, or tend to:

- Married couples with or without children
- Spread across all age brackets with higher concentrations in the under 18 and 35 to 54 years age brackets
- Lower to lower-middle households with annual Incomes generally concentrated in a range of \$20,000 to \$30,000, with a smaller concentration in the \$40,000 to \$50,000 range
- Native or long-time residents of the area
- Employed in Blue Collar, Farming and Service occupations
- Owners of single-family or mobile homes
- Spend a great deal of time at home and in the local community with lifestyles centered around family, children, school and church
- Enjoy family entertainment, Country and Christian music, and hobbies and outdoor recreation including hunting, fishing, camping, boating, bowling, sports, auto races, sewing, and crafts



DOWNTOWN BELDING HOUSING STUDY
Belding Housing Study Area

Study Area



MARKETING & PROMOTION STRATEGIES

Efforts to enhance the downtown area’s physical environment and business mix will likely be orchestrated over an extended period of time. Marketing and promotional efforts – including special events and festivals – provide a more immediate opportunity to introduce messages and activities that showcase the downtown area’s assets and positive changes occurring within the downtown environment.

76% of community survey respondents indicated that they would place a “high” or “moderate” importance on possible downtown revitalization efforts to stage additional community festivals and events in the downtown area. The findings, along with analysis of socio-economic and lifestyle characteristics of the trade area population and targeted consumer groups, support efforts to stage family-oriented activities that:

- Showcase and capitalize upon the downtown area’s important historic structures, civic facilities and natural resources, including the riverfront, railroad depot, library and museum
- Include hands-on activities and quality, wholesome family entertainment for all ages

Examples of relatively simple promotional activities and events that might effectively help to attract area residents and targeted consumer market segments include:

- “Smooth as Silk” French silk pie bake-off
- “Silk Worm Olympics” – fun competitions, relay races, fun run & walk, etc
- “On the Flat” outdoor stage performances – theater, music, etc.
- “Downtown Drive-in” movies series
- “Make-it & Take-it” crafting activities
- Hobby shows – model railroad, gardening, etc.
- Country and Contemporary Christian musical performances
- “Farm & Home” exhibits, shows, demonstrations and contests
- Old-fashioned town picnics & ice cream socials
- Old-fashioned street fairs and dances

Efforts to introduce traditional elements as part of the downtown area’s seasonal and holiday décor, and as part of a comprehensive landscape and streetscape improvement plan, should also seize on opportunities to celebrate the community’s heritage and reinforce the downtown area’s image as a community center.

DOWNTOWN HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES

*D*emographic trends suggest that an increase in the number of housing units to accommodate a growing number of 1- and 2-person households could offer opportunities for the adaptive reuse, rehabilitation and development of downtown area properties to accommodate residential uses. Possibilities could include:

- Redevelopment and adaptive reuse of former industrial and manufacturing properties, particularly former manufacturing properties in proximity to the Flat River, to include a housing component
- Neighborhood improvement programs and efforts targeting the rehabilitation of single family residential structures in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the downtown area

2000 data indicates that of the 141 housing units in the defined downtown study area, 6 were vacant and available for rent. The 4.3% vacancy rate in the downtown study area was slightly lower than the rate for the City of Belding at 4.5%.

Community survey results suggest that in the broader scale of potential downtown redevelopment and revitalization efforts, the development and redevelopment of housing in and near the downtown area may rank low in priority. Long-term downtown redevelopment strategies, though, should recognize the economic benefits of downtown area housing and attractive neighborhoods surrounding the downtown area.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS

*M*arket analysis findings provide general direction for various retail and service business types that could be candidates for expansion and recruitment in the Belding downtown business area. The successful implementation of business development strategies must be considered within the context of a comprehensive, long-term downtown redevelopment and revitalization initiative.

Retail

Retail development strategies should capitalize and expand upon the downtown area's retail sector strength and traffic generated by existing retailers primarily concentrated in the grocery, general merchandise, furniture, hardware and pharmaceutical merchandise lines. Examples of candidates for expansion and recruitment that fit the profile include:

- Books, Tapes & CD's

- Computers & Computer Software
- Crafts & Hobbies
- Gifts & Novelties
- Miscellaneous Home Furnishings
- Radio, TV & Consumer Electronics
- Video Tape & DVD Rentals

Eating & Drinking Places

Sales analysis and community survey results suggest that eating and drinking sales currently leaking to the regional trade area and establishments located outside of the trade area might be captured within the local trade area if the variety of restaurants were expanded. Survey findings suggest opportunities exist for family-style, sit-down, non-smoking eateries and a coffeehouse concept, possibly combined with bakery and deli goods or books.

Services

In the short term, some of the downtown area's best prospects for expansion and recruitment could be found in service and office sectors. Service lines candidates include:

- Advertising
- Computer & Data Processing
- Laundry, Cleaning & Garment
- Mailing, Reproduction & Stenography
- Miscellaneous Equipment Rental & Leasing

DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT DIRECTIONS

*T*he direction for business development and redevelopment efforts in the downtown Belding area must consider a host of factors that extend beyond an analysis of trade area performance and potential. The community of Belding must deal with complex planning and development issues that include property ownership and management, traffic circulation, infrastructure, and the public sector's role in downtown redevelopment.

Perhaps more than what might ordinarily be considered "typical" in other locales, the Belding community's vision for the future and its tolerance for change will largely dictate the nature and direction of downtown business development strategies.

The success of potential business expansion and recruitment efforts could rely heavily on the substantial rehabilitation or redevelopment of existing downtown properties in order to provide space that would be attractive to potential business prospects. Only 2,400 square feet

of space within the Belding Covered Village Mall was identified as being vacant at the time of this study and, even if available, it is highly questionable that prospects would find the mall space to be attractive, economical or functional for their purposes. The majority of properties with unoccupied space located outside of the mall would appear to require substantial investment and rehabilitation in order to make the spaces attractive to retail prospects, or could be candidates for demolition and redevelopment.

Community survey results suggest that a majority of Belding area residents understand this relationship and view the Belding Covered Village Mall as a major deterrent to achieving a vision for the downtown area as a traditional small town downtown business district and community center. 69% of survey respondents indicated they would place a “High” or “Moderate” value or priority on efforts to reconfigure, or demolish, the mall to enable the rebuilding of Main Street. Conversely, only 31% of survey respondents indicated they would place the same value on potential proposals to remodel and maintain the mall in its current configuration.

The Stakeholders

Shelley Cooper
Cooper Mechanical

Deb Curler
Richardson Mills Apartments

Bruce Feuerstein
Johnson-Feuerstein Funeral Home

Gary Gephardt
Extruded Metal

Kevin Lasser
Belding Brothel Building

Gary Knowlton
Greenville Middle School

Chad Rayborn
Rayborn Ace Hardware

Dr. Rogers
Chiropractor in Covered Village Mall

Scott Rukenbrod
Rosie's Pizza

Joe Schraeder
Vogue's Home Furnishings

Bob Schrauben
Belding Area Schools

III. COMMUNITY INPUT SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Community input on downtown Belding was gathered in several ways. First, the project team met with community “stakeholders” - business owners, residents, and others with a stake in the future of downtown Belding. Shortly thereafter, the DDA hosted two public workshops for the larger community. Lastly, the project team met with DDA board members to review the results, and to prioritize strategies for success in downtown Belding.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Throughout the day of Tuesday, September 23rd, the project team interviewed eleven downtown stakeholders. The stakeholders included local business owners and operators, educators, and residents. Stakeholders were asked a variety of questions regarding the downtown, adjacent corridors, and other areas that influence the downtown district.

What is your image of downtown Belding?

In general, stakeholders see potential in downtown, but are concerned by the lack of retail shopping opportunities. In 1972, the Belding Area Development Corporation, with the assistance of HUD, demolished a portion of Main St. and its buildings, and redeveloped the area as a shopping mall. The mall, termed “totally obsolete” by one stakeholder, has devolved from a retail center to a service center in the years since its construction. Currently, businesses in the mall include several hair salons and two drugstores. According to one stakeholder, the mall is a “lousy place to do business.”

Stakeholders are also concerned about pedestrian accommodations downtown. South of the mall, neighborhood sidewalks end at Congress St., with no pedestrian linkages through the mall parking lots to the city parks north of Depot St. The result is a downtown that is pedestrian-unfriendly and seems to have “no green [space]”, according to one stakeholder. What little green space does exist around the mall—planting strips at the perimeter of the building and parking lot—is poorly maintained in some places, giving the appearance that “nobody cares”. Mall lot lighting also detracts from the pedestrian environment: it’s too bright and too large.

Two stakeholders are extremely dissatisfied with the decision to build the mall; they feel it was a mistake to tear down the buildings of Main St. As a result of the mall's construction, they feel there "*is no* downtown district" in Belding. Another stakeholder says downtown just "doesn't look like much", and sees little reason to go downtown.

Other stakeholders view downtown as under-utilized, but see "tremendous possibilities", and feel the city is "headed in the right direction" with recent riverfront park and trail improvements. Several stakeholders would like to see downtown become the retail center for a prosperous bedroom community. They see potential in Belding's "friendly" atmosphere, scenic river setting, historic mill architecture, and well-regarded school district. Stakeholders feel a lack of available goods and services downtown, coupled with a lack of new housing development in the community-at-large, prevent Belding's development as a bedroom community.

What is your image of the adjacent corridors?

Stakeholders commented on the visual quality and usability of three entry corridors to downtown: West Main St., Bridge St., and East Main St. Overall, stakeholders perceive the visual quality of these corridors as inconsistent. Positive and negative characteristics of the corridors are listed below:

Positive:

- Riverside Park near W. Main St. ("the city does a great job with all the parks")
- Bellrockton Museum and grounds create a beautiful gateway to downtown
- Perennial plantings on the north side of E. Main St. ("all of downtown should look like this")
- Tree-lined, residential character of Bridge St. north of downtown (past the empty church)

Negative:

- Bridge St. bridge is dangerous, unsightly
- Pedestrians are not well accommodated on Ellis St., which connects M-44, M-91, and Bridge St.
- Property adjacent to the river, southwest corner of Front St. and Main St., has a neglected appearance
- Church and printing press properties north of downtown, west side of Bridge St., are under-utilized
- In general, Bridge St. property owners need incentives and assistance to improve their properties

Stakeholders also noted the economic impact of the area’s major transportation corridors on the downtown. Most feel commercial competition in the surrounding area is a major challenge for downtown Belding. They cited downtown Greenville and commercial strip development on M-91 and M-44 as areas most likely to see economic growth in the future. Another stakeholder disagreed, stating that the M-44 commercial strip is “not a threat to downtown.” One stakeholder notes that growth in the area is occurring predominantly to the west, closer to Grand Rapids and Rockford.

Assess the vitality of the business district:

In general, stakeholders see the downtown as struggling. However, stakeholders noted that the downtown does a good job of providing basic goods, and businesses such as Leppink’s Grocery, Vogue’s Home Furnishings, and Rayborn Ace Hardware are doing well.

Some stakeholders also noted popular businesses within the mall: the independent apothecary and the Rite-Aid. And despite the mall’s drawbacks, one stakeholder mentioned that storefronts with external entrances have free, convenient parking for customers. But in general, stakeholders are very concerned about a lack of vitality at the mall.

Additional stakeholder comments on the vitality of downtown are listed below:

- Downtown gets a “C+/D-” grade for vitality
- “Nothing going on—can’t go for a Sunday walk with the kids and shop in the stores”
- There “needs to be something more”
- Meijer stores in Greenville and Ionia are “a big draw way from Belding”
- Businesses “might move into downtown if they could be shown it would work for them”
- “Businesses don’t work together”, and are sometimes even antagonistic
- “Residents want [businesses] to carry everything—but [they] can’t carry everything”

What types of land use changes or improvements would you like to see in the district?

Belding was once the third largest silk producing city in the world. This history is important to stakeholders, many of whom would like to protect historic buildings downtown and provide incentive for property owners to make improvements. Stakeholders have many insightful ideas on preserving Belding’s heritage. Several stakeholder suggestions are listed below:

- Encourage property owners to follow compatible, contemporary design guidelines
- Prohibit alteration of the “defining characteristics” of Belding; preserve landmarks such as the Gibson building clock tower.
- Remove additions and facades not in character with the turn-of-the-century mill town architecture
- • The boarded-up Breimayer Building (the printing press repair shop) should be

improved—it is visible from the historic city hall.

- The Belding Recreation Board’s plan to upgrade the waterfront parks should be supported

A stakeholder noted a unique strength of downtown Belding businesses: they are able to compete against “big city” prices, because property taxes and overhead are usually lower in a small town. While this may be true of other downtown businesses, the mall’s organization as a condominium results in high operating costs, say the stakeholders. Condominium fees are based upon square footage—resulting in especially high overhead for the larger stores, and making it difficult for new businesses too buy into the mall. Stakeholders would like to see a change in the ownership structure of the mall.

Stakeholders noted there are no anchor stores in the mall, and thus little to draw people to downtown. One stakeholder feels the square footages in the mall shops are too small to attract investment, as the stores were constructed in the era of small boutique retail. Many stakeholders would like to see renovation or demolition of the mall, but worry about the cost.

One stakeholder feels Belding is failing to attract young residents in their twenties and thirties because of the struggling downtown. According to the stakeholder, many people express an interest in living in Belding, but are reluctant to move in because there is nothing to do downtown. Similarly, another stakeholder would like to see a greater variety of goods available downtown.

Several stakeholders see “walkability” as a major attraction of small town life. Stakeholders would like to see a more pedestrian-friendly redevelopment of the mall property. Stakeholders would also like to see adaptive reuse of the silk factory buildings, integrated with downtown through pedestrian linkages.

What types of land use changes or improvements would you like to see in the adjacent corridors?

Several stakeholders would like to promote all of Belding as “a garden city”, with coordinated landscape improvements along entry corridors, at gateways, and throughout downtown.

However, another stakeholder feels visual improvements along corridors and at gateways will do little to draw people in—“customers are coming [downtown] for a specific purpose.”

Other stakeholder comments about adjacent corridors are listed below:

- The empty basket factory, church and printing press north of the river should be adapted to new uses
- Currently satisfied with adjacent residential land use

- Would like to see more retail/commercial land use mixed in with existing residential on Bridge St. to help draw people from M-44
- Would like to see more retail development on M-44

If commercial land use changes or improves, what types of new businesses would you like to see?

Stakeholders want to see a prosperous downtown, but are reluctant to propose limitations on development along the M-44 and M-91 corridors. One stakeholder envisions the downtown as a professional service center—an office center with ample pedestrian walks and green spaces.

Stakeholder sentiment is divided about whether to keep or demolish the existing mall. One stakeholder in support of the existing mall pattern said, “The mall is what we have to live with. The old downtown is gone, [we need to] get over it. It’s time for some updating at the mall.” Stakeholders made other specific suggestions regarding the mall:

- More green space is needed along Congress St. and within the mall property
- Change the ownership structure of the mall from condominium to landlord tenant
- Look to other towns in similar situations for solution strategies, such as an Iowa town that adapted an obsolete mall to a health care center

Are there any problems with/ barriers to redevelopment downtown?

Some stakeholders believe resentment and distrust about “poor decisions of the past” are barriers to redevelopment. Some poor decisions cited by stakeholders are listed below:

- Automakers moved car dealerships to Greenville
- City allowed construction of the mall
- City council members voted down many businesses that would have been competition for their own enterprises

Stakeholders noted many obstacles to bringing more people downtown, and keeping more people in Belding:

- Belding is not close enough to the highways, it is “off the beaten path”
- Belding is a bedroom community—most people shop where they work
- Local residents already leave town to shop—think nothing of driving 30 or 40 miles to make major purchases
- Retailers are not “on top of trends”, not savvy enough
- People who want higher education leave Belding

Stakeholders perceived the following economic barriers to redevelopment and infill development:

- Potential need for environmental remediation on old industrial sites
- Cost of demolition
- Cost of Property
- Property taxes —one building owner’s taxes tripled after property renovation
- Possibly more expedient and less expensive to develop property on M-44 or M-91
- The mall: “people are not buying the vacant units”, yet it is risky to tear it down and start over

Stakeholders also identified governmental barriers to development downtown. In general, stakeholders expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the City of Belding’s efforts to reinvigorate downtown. The city staff was given high marks for their work with parks, recreation, and transportation infrastructure, and for their attitude of “looking to the future”. However, one stakeholder expressed dissatisfaction with the city’s governance, stating there is a lack of incentives for potential property owners and failure to carry through with promised improvements in the public right-of-way.

One stakeholder, who was involved with city government in the past, said it has been difficult to enforce building and zoning codes. In the past, developers have been allowed to build without submitting plans. As a result, sidewalks have not always been constructed, and construction has not always been appropriate to the character of Belding. This is a “no win” situation for elected officials.

One stakeholder indicated that change is slow to occur because of the attitude of some citizens who “are afraid of change” or fear Belding will lose its “small town atmosphere”.

What improvements would you like to see in the areas that influence the downtown district?

Several stakeholders feel downtown could benefit from greater use of the riverfront. Some suggested more recreational use of the river and adjacent trails for canoeing and walking, and the creation of more riverfront amenities, such as a restaurant overlooking the water. Many stakeholders are looking forward to the MDOT funded rebuilding of the Bridge St. bridge, scheduled for 2004-2005.

One stakeholder would like to see more high-end housing development near Belding. Greenville was cited as a town that is attracting new residents with discretionary income to spend downtown. This stakeholder believes that sub-division housing is needed to draw upper income residents to the area, but noted that developable land is scarce, because Belding is

surrounded by productive farmland and DNR property.

Another stakeholder would like to see more small scale manufacturing enterprises in Belding to provide jobs and keep people in the area.

Several stakeholders would like to see better pedestrian linkages into and throughout downtown.

Is the downtown a good place to invest?

Stakeholder opinion was evenly divided on whether downtown Belding is a good investment. Reasons stated for each opinion are listed below.

“No”:

- Comparing downtown to a big box retail site, one stakeholder feels the mall property is not large enough to redevelop with the store and parking square footages that investors want.
- One stakeholder feels the city is unsupportive of investors.

“Yes”:

- Stakeholders cite Belding’s good schools and supportive residents as “classic small town USA”. They feel hopeful that redevelopment of the mall could revitalize Belding.
- “The market is here [for new businesses].” High school students might patronize new businesses marketed to them.
- Many stakeholders feel Belding’s potential has not been realized, but are hopeful for the future. One example cited was the recent purchase of the basket factory across the river, which stood vacant for the past 25 years.

Stakeholders would like to know the economic feasibility of renovating the silk factories for commercial use.

Are there any traffic/transportation issues?

Downtown Belding is nestled against the bends of the Flat River. While the river creates a natural boundary and a lovely setting for the downtown, it also makes finding downtown from the expressway difficult. Currently, Bridge St. is the main corridor into downtown, bringing traffic in from M-44 and from M-91 via Ellis Rd. One stakeholder would like to see Kenwood Ave. extended to create another east-west corridor. The same stakeholder would like more connectivity between Ellis Rd. and north-south neighborhood streets.

The traffic pattern on Main St. is seen as cumbersome due to the mall. “People avoid down-

town because it's hard to get around". The Pearl-Main intersection is seen as particularly dangerous because drivers are confused about the circulation pattern of the mall parking lot. The mall and city hall parking lots are also seen as dangerous for pedestrians.

Traffic on Bridge St. is viewed as a hazard to pedestrians attempting to cross. One stakeholder would like to see traffic calmed, and pedestrians protected by a well-marked crosswalk.

Some stakeholders view parking downtown as a problem. Store employees frequently occupy parking spaces closest to stores in the mall lot. One stakeholder suggested allowing more on-street parking throughout downtown. Another stakeholder would like to see on-street parking specifically on Bridge St., to make upper-story apartments more viable.

One stakeholder thinks the two-lane streets downtown are too narrow for trucks to navigate when servicing businesses.

Another stakeholder identified the Dial-a-Ride is a valuable service—it's "great for kids and senior citizens".

Have you ever considered expanding in the future?

Nearly all stakeholders answered this question negatively, for the following reasons:

- "Too much money tied-up already downtown"
- Traffic counts are higher on M-91 and M-44
- Until Belding area population grows, expansion is unfeasible.

One business, Extruded Metals manufacturing, which is located out of the project boundary, would like to extend its operation along the riverfront.

What type of businesses do you believe would complement your business?

Stakeholders had many suggestions for businesses they would like to see downtown, and that they believe would be supported:

- New businesses to serve a bedroom community clientele
- Good "sit-down" restaurant
- Restaurants "would be supported"
- Coffee and ice cream shops "would be supported"
- Brand name store
- Wal-Mart
- Clothing store
- Shoe store

- Convenience retail and delicatessen
- Specialty stores
- Bookstores
- Cafes
- Gift shop
- Five-and-dime store
- Sporting goods store
- Entertainment
- Auto dealership (new cars)
- Casino in the old silk factory (Gibson building)
- Outlet mall in the Gibson building
- Small lumber company (not a big chain store)

Is the downtown currently engaged in events, promotions, and marketing? Do you see potential for more in the future?

Recreation on the Flat River is seen as a prime asset to the community. In general, stakeholders feel that the city is “headed in the right direction” with promotion of the riverfront parks. One stakeholder noted that the riverfront parks are a “safe area” for kids to roam and explore. Existing recreational activity, such as canoeing, brings visitors to Belding and should be encouraged.

Stakeholders are enthusiastic about recreation programs in the park, which have expanded considerably in the past year. Some park activities that stakeholders appreciate and would like to see promoted are: movies in the park, soccer, football, inline skating, and hiking/walking along the riverfront trails. As one stakeholder said, the Saturday soccer leagues in the park bring families downtown, “but they don’t stay”. People need a reason to stay downtown after events.

Are there other issues affecting downtown Belding?

There is a dedicated group of citizens who support historic preservation in Belding. Many stakeholders expressed pride in restored structures in Belding, such as the Belrockton Museum and the Library. One stakeholder would like to see more community-wide support for preservation, and suggested using existing special events such as Apple Fest to publicize Belding’s identity as the “Historic Silk City”.

A recently chartered community group, the Silk City Nature Association, has succeeded in designating the riverfront trail way as the “Silk City Nature Trail”. The Association plans to create a botanical/sculpture garden in cooperation with area schools.

Belding is currently pursuing Tree City USA and Garden City designations. One stakeholder feels “getting people on board” to achieve these designations will improve the downtown image and the quality of life in Belding.

PREFERRED FUTURE WORKSHOP

Two community workshops were held: an evening workshop on September 23rd, 2003 attended by 34 people, and a morning workshop on September 24th, 2003 attended by 13 people. Community members gathered to discuss current issues facing downtown Belding, and to brainstorm possible scenarios for the future of downtown. A series of small group exercises guided the discussion.

Exercise One: Understanding the Present

Participants were asked to brainstorm the things they feel most proud and most sorry about Belding’s downtown. After each group had compiled their list, each member was given four dots and asked to vote on the two proudest “prouds” and the two sorriest “sorries”. Listed below are the items that received the most votes in each group.

Top “prouds”:

- Nice library
- Library
- Great library
- Belrockton museum building
- Gibson building clock tower
- Historical buildings and homes
- Historic buildings—library and Belrockton
- Riverfront park and walkway
- The river—it’s parks and landscape
- Location of river
- River
- Parks
- Trail near river
- Recreation
- Active service organizations
- Small town atmosphere

Top “sorries”:

- “Where is Main street?” downtown is hard to find, and doesn’t feel like a downtown

- No Main Street
- Negative perception [of downtown]
- Not enough restaurant variety
- Lack of retail
- Lack of diverse retail
- Lack of businesses in the mall
- No reason to come to town
- Outside appearance of mall
- [Lack of] mall concept/original theme
- Mall age and [lack of] upkeep
- Mall parking lot
- Parking lot around mall is a mess
- Mall
- No sidewalks [around mall]
- Lack of continuous pathways
- Traffic flow
- Breimayer building
- Breimayer building—location across the street from city hall and [poor] appearance
- Gibson building [is under-utilized]
- General upkeep of buildings downtown
- Lack of aesthetics
- No green area [around the mall]
- Library is too small

Exercise Two: Events, Developments, Trends

Participants were asked to think about events, developments and trends that affect Belding’s downtown. This part of the workshop helped focus the group on specific topics and gave the session grounding in reality. Comments were loosely focused and recorded under four major headings. Many commonalities arose in the comments of various groups. The comments below are summarized under the four headings, and organized by common themes.

Economic Development

Since its construction in 1972, the Covered Village Mall has changed from a retail center to a service center. Most community participants feel the mall provides basic services such as hair care and pharmacy, but shopping opportunities are lacking or don’t meet family needs. Several participants felt that Belding needs to plan for the removal or adaptation of the mall, and a return to a traditional downtown development pattern. Others felt Belding needs to refocus on making the mall a viable part of economic development. A representative range of

comments about the mall are listed below:

- The mall doesn't look attractive and doesn't invite foot traffic.
- Rent and overhead are too costly.
- The mall is the wrong place for the educational services now located in it.
- The mall's businesses don't attract more investment by other businesses.
- The mall is a "Catch 22": requires money to refurbish and maintain (needs a roof), requires money to demolish and remove.
- The mall is tired, old, rundown—not a happening place.
- Businesses in the mall can't build or grow.
- The mall has an overall negative influence on downtown, as it is now.
- The single story building is out of scale with rest of downtown.
- The area near Leppink's grocery and the hardware store needs attention.
- The mall has no public gathering space

Community members would like to see better use of vacant and underutilized buildings. Some suggestions included:

- Small businesses could be located in Gibson building: coffee shop, donut shop, etc.
- Farmer's market and antiques could be sited in a renovated vacant building.
- Replace the Gibson building warehouse with an amphitheater.
- Tear down Mormon church building
- Tear down Breimayer building
- Encourage mixed-use zoning

Participants identified several businesses and services they would like to see in the downtown:

- Hospital or medical center
- Museum
- Retail stores—clothing, shoes, etc.
- Boutiques—gift shops, specialty shops, better restaurants
- Art supplies, art and frame store
- Sidewalk cafes
- Coffeehouses
- Meat market
- Deli
- Book store
- Gas station
- Other businesses to serve "bedroom community" clientele

Many participants would like to see a continued emphasis on locally owned businesses. The

community appreciates that local business owners are readily available to their customers.

Several participants viewed the river as an asset that could be better utilized in making the downtown a destination.

Transportation

Participants identified many transportation issues in the mall parking lot:

- The mall destroyed the downtown traffic flow.
- The mall parking lot needs islands [for spatial definition and traffic direction].
- Circulation in the lot is not indicated by markings or other means.
- The parking lot needs resurfacing.
- Pedestrian and vehicular circulation is awkward within the lot.
- Parking layout is poor.
- Walking in and around the lot is chaotic and sometimes dangerous—“helter skelter.”
- The lot needs defined pedestrian area, separate from vehicular traffic.

There was some disagreement regarding parking downtown in the mall lot: some noted that parking is adequate, but layout poor; others stated that the mall lot is usually full, and additional parking is needed.

Participants also identified several transportation and circulation issues in the downtown as a whole:

- It’s difficult for visitors to find downtown Belding.
- Downtown needs on-street parking in general, specifically on Bridge Street to slow traffic speeds.
- Semi-truck traffic is a problem downtown.
- Roads need repair.
- Need green spaces
- Need way-finding signs
- Many streets don’t have complete sidewalks on both sides.
- Parking in recreational area of park lacks handicap accessible area.

Community members noted that linkages between business and recreational land uses do not fulfill their potential. Some suggestions included:

- Create a connection between the mall and park—mall turns its “back” to park.
- Remove the railroad tracks; convert the land to another use.

Maintaining Small Town Character

Many participants noted that preservation of historic buildings and open spaces is important to citizens of Belding. Community members identified obstacles and opportunities affecting physical character (buildings, streetscape, and organization):

- Restore small town character.
- The mall doesn't represent a "small town" image—past its prime.
- Restore Main Street though the mall; add businesses on each side.
- Radical refurbishing of the mall is needed
- The mall is not inviting—dark at night

- Downtown should be walkable, it should be easy to meet and talk with neighbors; this will separate it from the M-44 commercial corridor.
- Control urban sprawl by developing downtown, keeping businesses downtown.

- Tear down the Gibson building warehouse and restore the town green.
- Need a public square for a public downtown.
- Downtown lacks a focal point such as a statue.
- Too much cement, need landscaping
- Need lighting/atmosphere
- More color (flowers, etc.) needed
- Signage needed

- Downtown lacks defined entrance or gateway—could be created through landscaping, community signage and lighting.
- Bridge Street river crossing is unsightly and unsafe.
- Bridge and Congress intersection needs improvement/enhancement.

Participants identified open spaces and the Flat River as crucial to Belding's character. Suggestions for maintaining and better utilizing these amenities included:

- Connect all the beautiful river parks.
- Expand library on the river.
- Continue concerts and movies in the park.
- Parks need clear signage.

Community participants made suggestions regarding services and maintenance:

- Law enforcement in the center of town is a good idea.
- Foot patrol is a viable community policing option.
- The city hall and library need handicap access.
- Better upkeep of businesses is needed.
- Street sweeping is needed.
- Underground water and sewer utilities need attention (the mall was built over some portion of these).

Image and Promotion

Belding has a unique and engaging history as a textile-manufacturing center. Workshop participants view this history as the foundation for the future image of downtown. Image suggestions included:

- Generate interest and attract people through authentic preservation of historic features and accentuation of heritage—the “Historic Silk City.”
- Utilize the river and parks—paddle boats, soccer, skateboarding, walking.
- Summer programs are successful—continue and promote.
- Install flags and banners on incoming streets.
- “Decorate our city!”
- Christmas decorations are needed downtown.
- Promote Labor Day fireworks and Apple Fest.
- Combine Labor Day and Apple Fest activities.
- Downtown needs two more events—tractor pull in the park?
- Promote Belding Community Center for celebrations.
- Need better signage to direct people from highways to downtown.
- Need more festivals/people/community involvement.

Participants had thoughts about the image of downtown, its effect on businesses, and possible means of improvement:

- Improve appearance of streets and buildings.
- “Why don’t citizens use retail businesses when we have them?”
- “Overall image needs an overhaul!”
- Suggestion boxes?
- Positive and proactive city leadership [will help].

Exercise Three: The Preferred Future

The workshop participants were invited to take an imaginary trip via hot air balloon over Belding in the year 2012. Each participant was asked to describe the images they saw that

please them the *most*. Participants were asked to describe and record these images in the present tense—as if they were actually viewing the downtown Belding of the future. Each person was asked to vote for the three most important images on their group’s list. The top preferred images are described below.

- The Gibson Building is now condominiums—loft apartments in the upper stories and shops in the first story. The warehouse portion is gone, replaced by a park and plaza.
- The restored Gibson building has a working silk mill in a portion of the lower level.
- The clock tower of the Gibson building has been restored; the clock is fully functioning.
- The mall is gone. Three story “vintage” buildings, sidewalks, and historical lighting replace it. Main Street has been restored to its historic appearance. Belding has a thriving, traditional downtown.
- The Main Street traffic corridor is restored; there are new strip malls along Main Street.
- There is “a real Main Street”: no mall, attractive businesses instead with a landscaped streetscape.
- The riverfront has been redeveloped with housing, retail and restaurants.
- A beautiful restaurant or café overlooks the river.
- The library is expanded to double its current size; the new facility extends over the river.
- There are “lots of retail stores”.
- City Hall is now a retail and service center.
- There is a college educational facility in downtown Belding.
- Belding is a nature-themed community, and this is evident in the downtown. Belding has been designated a “Backyard Habitat Community” and a “Tree City USA”.

Exercise Four: Realizing the Image

Each group brainstormed strategies to move toward the top images of a future downtown. The strategies are grouped by idea and listed below.

Adaptive Reuse of the Gibson Building

- Already a renaissance zone; seek grant money (MEDQ, DEQ), offer further tax incentives for redevelopment
- Seek brownfield funding
- Contact current owner, share redevelopment ideas.
- Create a vertical public easement to bring the clock tower under city stewardship
- Hold fundraisers
- Phasing ideas: 1) tear down warehouse portion and restore park, 2) renovate clock tower, 3) add trees, walks and other site amenities, 4) renovate for lofts, shops
- Work with a developer to market
- Anchor businesses on first floor such as: fitness center, upscale bar/restaurant

Restoration of Main Street

Participants suggested two options:

1. Open the building to reconnect Main Street, and then renovate the entire mall. Consolidate mall ownership under one owner.

2. Remove the south portion of the mall and parking lot to recreate Main Street and open sites for infill development. Construct infill buildings with uniform heights and roof styles.

- Develop a plan and design recommendations—use events to publicize the plan
- Seek grants—NMTC, TEA-21
- Seek state and federal funding—MDOT
- Seek merchant backing
- Purchase property from owners for Main Street reconnection
- Help existing merchants to form partnerships and obtain tax incentives to relocate from the mall
- Use historic district funding
- Reinvest tax base as it grows
- Get the federal government (HUD) involved
- “Prayer”
- Create an active Downtown Development Authority

Library Expansion

- Identify a lead donor
- Launch fundraising projects
- “Make it happen!”

Riverfront Development

- Obtain natural resource funding
- Expand recreational use: canoe rental, restaurant

BELDING BOARD PLANNING SESSION

*O*n November 6, 2003 a Board Planning Session was held with key stakeholders to review the information compiled during the Visioning Sessions, the Site Assessment and preliminary Market Analysis. During the meeting, the priorities that had emerged from these exercises was reviewed and confirmed with the key stakeholders.

Beckett & Raeder, Inc. presented a slide show of the existing conditions assessment, including some preliminary design recommendations. Downtown Professionals Network, presented the preliminary market analysis findings and distributed a report of the preliminary findings. Beckett & Raeder, Inc. delivered a draft report to the board on the results of the stakeholder interviews, the preferred future workshop, and the existing conditions assessment of downtown Belding.

Following the presentations, the board was asked to discuss strategies for catalyzing success in downtown Belding. The board's comments are paraphrased below.

- We want the old Belding back. Rebuild Main Street through the mall and add new facades to the mall that fronts the rebuilt Main Street.
- Create a walkable downtown. If you build it, people will use it.
- Preserve and reuse the historic buildings.
- New housing does not have to be geared toward seniors. Generation "Y" (1977-1994) is as large as the Baby Boomers, but more cohesive as a demographic group. This group likes individuality and downtowns.
- Infill with multi-story buildings to incorporate retail on the ground level with office/residential uses on upper floors.
- Develop a way-finding system to assist visitors in locating and navigating downtown.
- Need to identify funding opportunities for projects.

- Should an Historic District designation be pursued in order to qualify for certain tax breaks and funding options?
- Considering that there may be some division within the community about where to concentrate development efforts, either in downtown or along M-44, perhaps the better solution is to look at the appropriateness of the use, rather than simply a commercial designation. For example, a car repair shop may be better located along M-44, while restaurants would be better in the downtown.

IV. RECOMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The recommendations of the framework plan are guided by the following goals:

- Re-establish the Main Street Corridor
- Build on Your Assets
- Enhance the Function and Identity of Downtown

The project team identified these goals and developed recommendations based upon the analysis of the existing conditions, the results of the market study, and input from the community. These recommendations are presented by category and where necessary, are further divided into subcategories.

RE-ESTABLISH MAIN STREET CORRIDOR

Originally, Belding had a traditional downtown streetscape with multi-story buildings, tight set backs, large shop windows, on-street parking, and comfortable, connected sidewalks. This changed in 1972 when a HUD sponsored program geared at revitalizing the downtown demolished the center block of downtown Belding and built a single-story indoor mall, The Covered Village. While this solution was successful for a number of years, it is no longer vital and inhibits the vitality of the downtown.

By removing two blocks of Main and Pleasant Streets and one block of Pearl Street, the mall and its parking lot are a vehicular obstacle and impede the flow of pedestrian traffic by requiring that both cars and people navigate around the area. While it is possible to move through the parking lot, this is a confusing and potentially dangerous endeavor. Pedestrian movement in the downtown is further deterred by the inward focus of the mall.

In addition to the physical barrier the mall has created in the community, it does not contribute to a lively downtown. Malls, by their very nature, are focused on the interior of their structures and do not interact and blend with their surroundings. They do not encourage people to explore an area, rather they are often the sole destination.

Restoring the Main Street Corridor is an important component of re-establishing the downtown as a central business district and also as an easily accessible and navigable place. While



Re-establishing the Main Street Corridor

Downtown retail with living space on the second floor. Opening the greenhouse onto the parking area softens the edge.

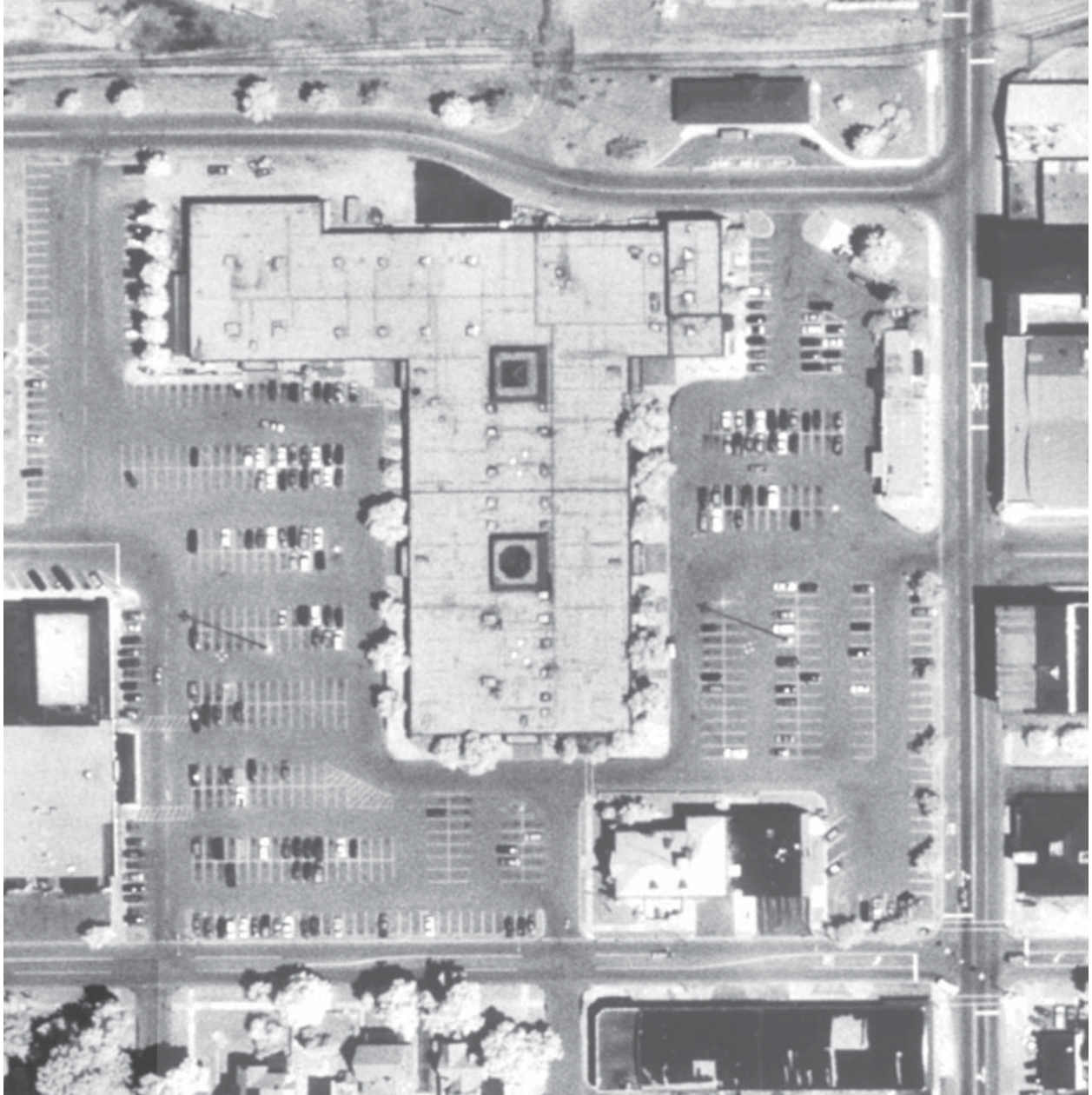


New construction in a downtown can replicate the traditional downtown atmosphere (photo courtesy of Dan Burden).



Restored facades strengthen the streetwall and add character to the downtown.

Re-establishing the Main Street Corridor



Aerial view of the central blocks of downtown Belding.

reconstructing Main Street is a big endeavor, it is crucial if the district is to remain a viable downtown. This project would re-establish the pedestrian and retail focus in the downtown and would demonstrate a commitment to the business community that would not only support existing business but would enable the district to recruit new businesses and redevelopment opportunities.

Rebuilding Main Street will involve three main components; a reconfiguration of the mall, construction of the street and in-fill development

Reconfigure the Mall

In order to re-establish the Main Street, part of the Covered Village Mall will need to be demolished. The intent is to facilitate vehicular and pedestrian flow as well as recreating the mass and functions of the downtown.

Maintain the central, north / south pedestrian axis in the mall, as it would provide a pedestrian link from Congress Street to Depot Street. This would require the creation of a main entrance on Depot Street eliminate the “dead end” and provide pedestrians with a connection to Riverside Park.

Main Street

Rebuild Main Street as a two-lane street with angled on-street parking on both sides. Not only will this minimize the impact of lost spaces in mall parking lot, but will also provide shoppers with convenient parking close to the front doors of their destination, and offers pedestrians a buffer from vehicular traffic.

The installation of a streetscape plan will create a more legible, more comfortable and easier to navigate downtown. As this is the core area of the downtown, it is important that the streetscape elements blend seamlessly with and reflect the character of the district. These items are further discussed in the section on Character Defining Elements.

In-Fill Development

The massing of buildings is an important factor in a downtown. Buildings help to establish the pattern and boundaries in a downtown and they also serve as destination points. To enhance the re-established Main Street, the DDA should encourage in-fill development on Main Street between Pearl and Bridge Streets. As the market study indicates that only a small amount of additional square footage could be absorbed, it should be concentrated in this location to reinforce the efforts to revitalize the downtown. These buildings should reflect the historic qualities of the downtown as described in the section on Character Defining Features.

Build on Your Assets

The Belding of today is deeply linked with its history as the “Silk City” and its unique location, nestled in a bend of the Flat River. These assets should serve as the foundation of all revitalization efforts.

The Flat River provides a scenic backdrop to downtown Belding and is a feature that should be preserved and emphasized.



The City of Belding has proven their commitment to the historic fabric of the community as demonstrated in the restoration of Belrockton.



Creating a strong identity for the city involves many details - this attractive sign could be located at all major entrances to Belding

This postcard depicting Main Street as it was prior to the development of the mall can serve as inspiration for what Main Street could be again.



BUILD ON YOUR ASSETS

The City of Belding has numerous assets, the most notable are its setting on the scenic Flat River and its history as the “Silk City” and turn of the century architecture. These aspects of the community should not only be appreciated, but they should be preserved, restored and even celebrated.

The community clearly acknowledges these treasures, as is evident in the restoration of the Belrockton building and the improvements to the riverside parks and trails. These efforts should be continued to establish a positive image and marketable identity for downtown.

This plan includes elements that reinforce the importance of downtown as a place of commerce and as the central part of the community. The central element is the re-establishment of the Main Street corridor. Other improvements are focused on improving circulation, aesthetics and the pedestrian experience.

Preserve the History of Belding

Belding, located on the scenic Flat River, has a rich history of silk production that resulted in the construction of Belding’s landmark structures. These assets are the foundation of Belding’s character and should be preserved and celebrated. Northampton, Massachusetts, another city with a history of silk production, undertook a community wide effort to “uncover, understand and convey the story” silk production in their community. For more information see www.smith.edu/hsc/silk. A similar effort in Belding would preserve the history and perhaps result in a marketing strategy.

Flat River

The banks of the Flat River have mostly remained in a vegetated state and provide downtown with a delightful green space, Riverside Park. The views from this area are of Armstrong Park on the north side of the river. This green buffer has enabled the river to maintain its natural beauty.

Preserve and Enhance: The natural, vegetated banks of the Flat River should be preserved, and enhanced. This area could even serve as a demonstration site for the Backyard Wildlife Habitat program.

Scenic Opportunity: Riverside Park would be an ideal location for a scenic overlook of the Flat River. Such a structure could also serve as the setting for festivals and entertainment such as a concert series along the Flat River. Another location for overlooks to appreciate the Flat

Landmark Buildings

The old silk mills are landmark buildings for the downtown. They predominate vistas and are an integral part of the communities history. Pictured here are the Gibson Clock Tower (top right) and the Richardson Silk Mill (right). The preservation and restoration of these buildings is an important aspect in maintaining the character of Belding.



Belrockton (above) and the Belding Library (right) are examples of preservation and restoration efforts that have enhanced the look and feel of the downtown.



River is on either side of the Bridge Street Bridge where there is a long vista to both the east and the west. The Bridge Street Bridge is a major gateway to the downtown and should be reconstructed in a manner that reflects its importance in setting the tone for visitors, pedestrians and vehicles alike.

Trail System: The trail system that runs along the river provides a great recreational amenity as well as a connection to downtown. The connections from Bridge Street to the Library should be pursued and the City should encourage connections to a greater Ionia Trail system.

Additions: The City should purchase the parcels on the north side of the river east of downtown in order to enhance the aesthetic and environmental quality of this asset.

Landmark Buildings

The City of Belding is marked by three landmark buildings; The Richardson Silk Mill, The Belding Brothers Mill No. 2, and the former silk mill on the north side of the Flat River. These buildings share the City's history as the "Silk City" and are the predominant feature in the skyline. The Richardson Silk Mill is on the National Register of Historic buildings along with the Pere Marquette Railway Belding Depot and the Alvah N. Belding Memorial Library. Another important structure is the Belrockton Dormitory which is a State Historic Site. These landmarks are important to the community and efforts should be made to ensure their preservation and restoration and reuse. Views of the three silk mills from prominent entrances into the downtown should also be preserved and respected.

Preserve, Restore, Reuse: The Richardson Mills building is on the National Register of Historic Places and has been adapted for residential use. This can serve as a model for other efforts with the Belding Brothers Mill No. 2, known as the Gibson Building and the former silk mill on the north side of the Flat River. While the Gibson building is still used for industrial and office purposes, both offer opportunities for restoration and reuse.

Preserve & Respect views: The silk mills are prominent features in the landscape. The Gibson Clock Tower and the Richardson Building towers rise above the city and are beacons, guiding people to the downtown. Their scenic qualities should be respected and protected with the institution of a scenic easement that would not permit the construction of structures that would alter the views of these features.

APPROACHING AND ENTERING THE DOWNTOWN

*T*he existing conditions assessment revealed that there is little signage to guide visitors to downtown Belding. Signage on M-66 and M-91 should be enhanced to provide travelers with

Way-finding



Examples of a co-ordinated wayfinding system

Sidewalks & Crosswalks

Belding needs to establish a comprehensive system of sidewalks that incorporates safe crossings to facilitate and encourage pedestrian activity in the Downtown. Sidewalks that dead end are discouraging to pedestrians.



Well marked crosswalks direct pedestrian traffic and alert motorists that they are entering a pedestrian zone.



more information and advanced notice regarding downtown Belding. Additional directional signage should be placed at the intersection of M-44 and Bridge Street and at Ellis Road and Bridge Street to further direct people to the downtown.

Vehicular and Pedestrian Circulation:

Vehicular and pedestrian circulation could be improved in a number of ways, as follows:

The re-establishment of Main Street: This is a major component in improving vehicular and pedestrian movement, as it opens throughways in the downtown and significantly reduces the impact of the mall on vehicular and pedestrian circulation.

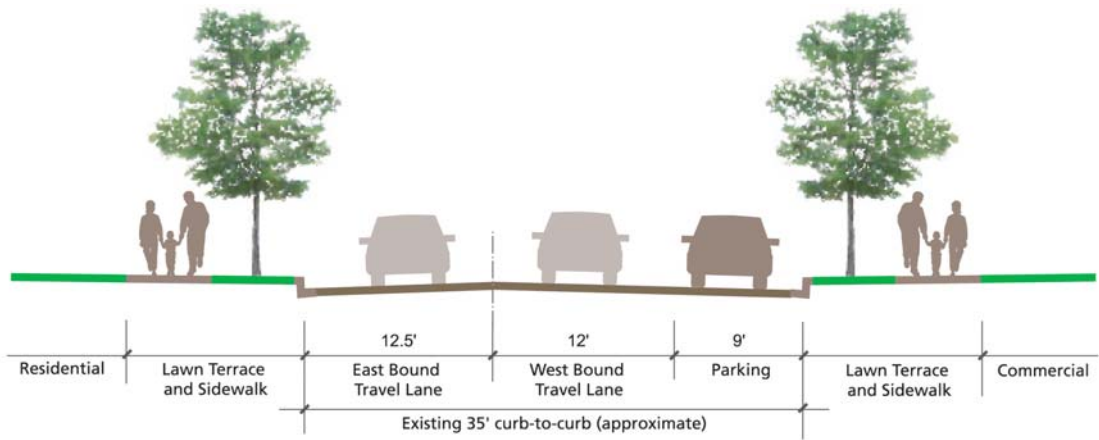
Way-finding: A well-designed sign program provides direction and information in a consistent format that enables visitors to move around without confusion. Welcome, directional, identification, information and regulation signs can be a part of the way-finding program. Signs should function as a complete system to promote preferred traffic patterns and eliminate confusion. A comprehensive way-finding system will reduce the stress of customers and especially visitors who are unfamiliar with the area and benefit from the assistance a signage program provides, thus leaving a favorable impression of the downtown experience with all visitors of the district.

Sidewalks & Crosswalks: Sidewalks in the downtown should be developed as a comprehensive network with safe crosswalks at all intersections. Sidewalks should be connected on both sides of downtown streets and crosswalks incorporated at every intersection. New sidewalks should be designed with pedestrian safety and comfort in mind, with trees in the lawn terrace when possible and on-street parking as a buffer from the road. The non-motorized trail system should be connected to the downtown and surrounding communities.

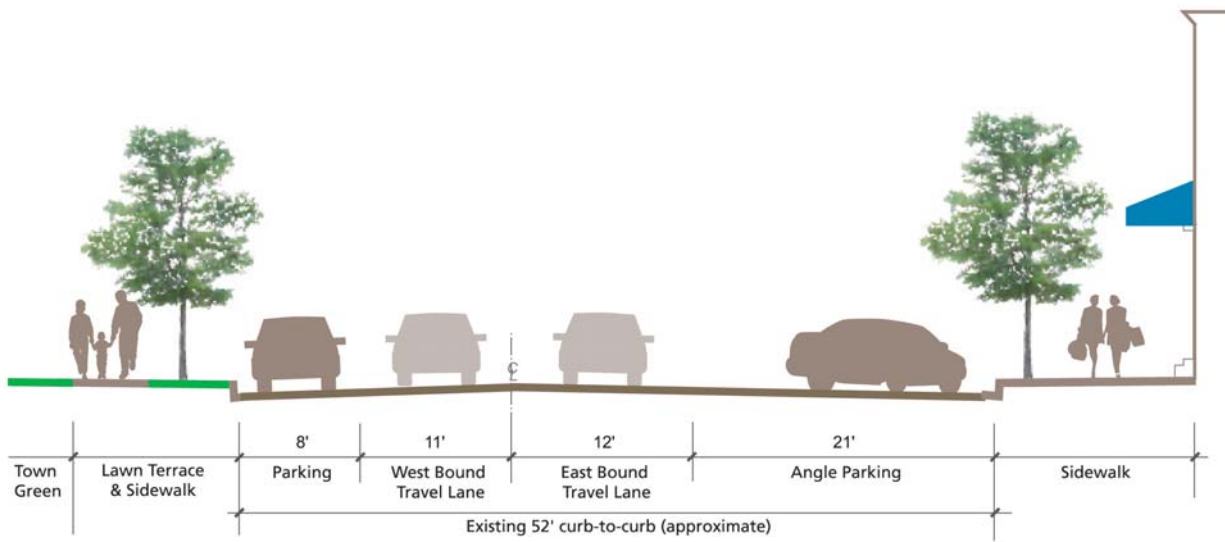
Bridges: While the bridges are outside of the project area, the City should consider the safety and comfort of non-motorized users (pedestrians and bikers) of the bridge. In addition, consideration should be given to creating scenic vistas where pedestrians can appreciate the scenic views of the river and downtown.

PARKING

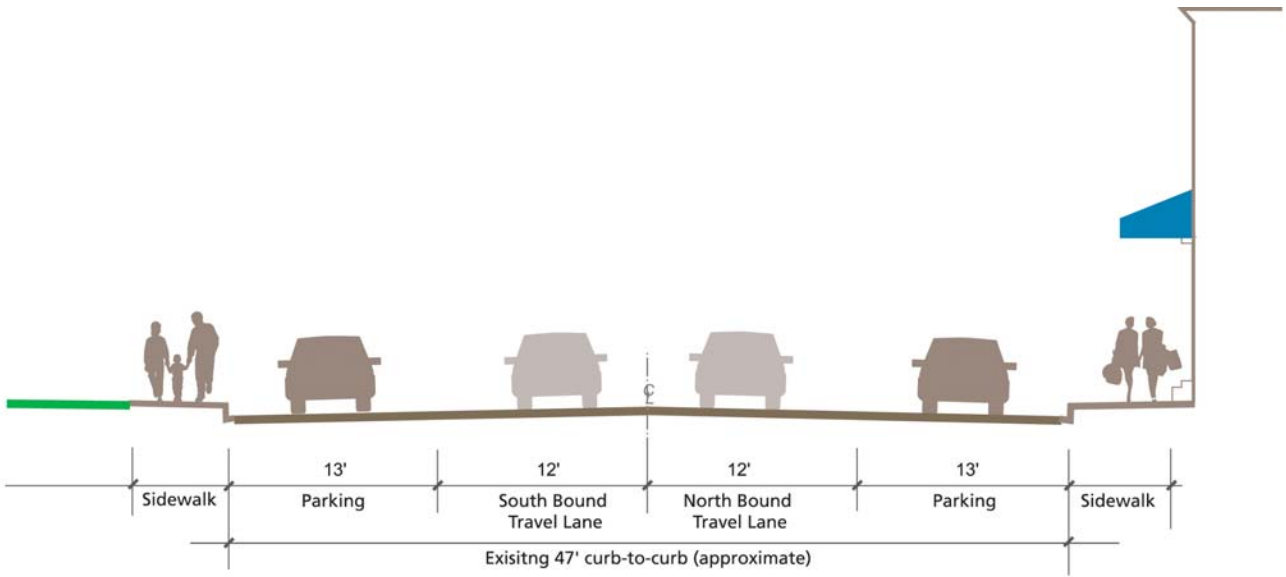
*A*dequate parking is a common concern in downtowns. The Covered Village parking lot supplies downtown with a vast amount of parking, but also creates an obstacle for vehicles and pedestrians. In consideration of the recommendation to reinstate Main Street and establish additional building frontage along Main Street, several suggestions are recommended.



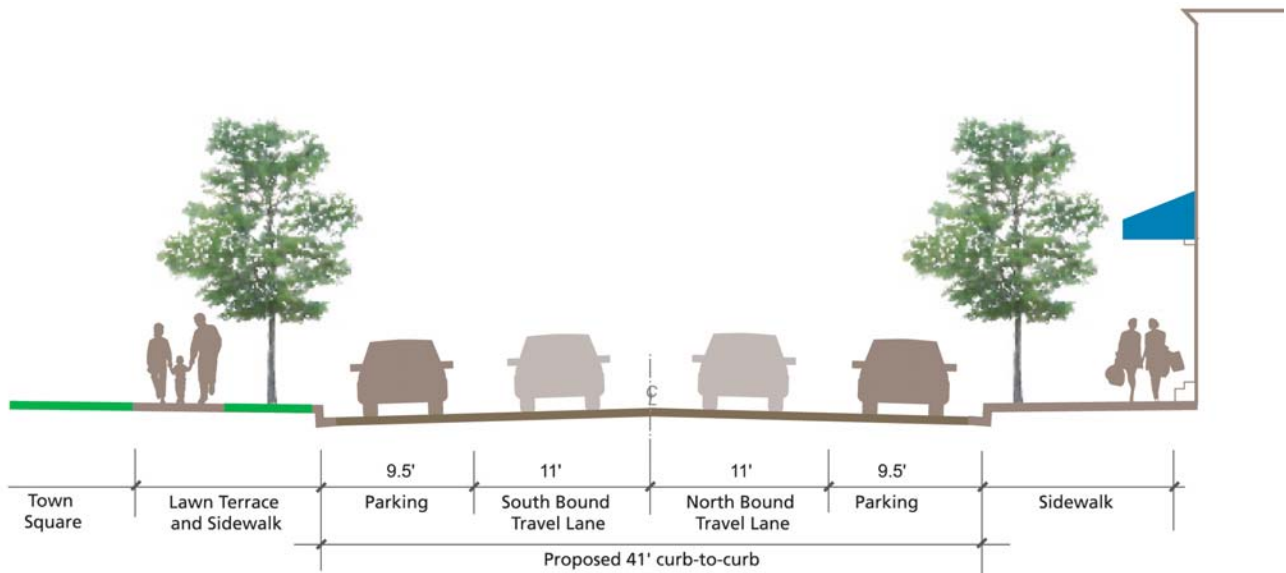
Congress Street Looking West



Main Street at Bridge Street Looking East



Bridge Street between Gibson & Congress Looking South - Short-Term Improvements



Bridge Street between Gibson & Congress Looking South - Long-Term Improvements

Parking Downtown



Shared parking lots increase efficiency and reduce the number of curb cuts. Belding has many opportunities for shared parking lots. A few examples include the block bound by Front, Broas, Main and Congress Streets (top) and by Fifth Third Bank and Belcor (middle).



Downtown streets can accommodate on-street parking as demonstrated in the cross sections on the preceding pages and further described on page 71. Seen here is the existing conditions on Main Street east of Bridge Street.



The first is to take advantage of on-street parking opportunities. Most streets in the downtown can accommodate on-street parking by simply restriping the road, as illustrated in the following examples.

On-Street Parking

Congress Street: Congress Street can accommodate one lane of parallel parking on the north side of the street with 12' and 12.5' travel lanes.

Main Street east of Bridge Street: Main Street, east of Bridge Street can accommodate angled parking on the south side and parallel parking on the north side with 11' and 12' travel lanes.

Bridge Street: Bridge Street between Depot Street and Congress Street in the short term could be restriped to accommodate 13' parallel parking on both sides of the street and 12' travel lanes. Long-term improvements for this section of Bridge Street would involve narrowing the curb-to-curb road width to 9.5' parallel parking lanes and 11' travel lanes with the additional space being used to improve the pedestrian experience with the addition of a lawn terrace and street trees.

Parking Lots

Belding has numerous parking lots, but they are designed for use by individual businesses, even if they are adjacent to another business with its own lot. Encouraging businesses to share parking and access would increase capacity and efficiency. Sample locations include, the Post office and the Mason's building, the Hideaway restaurant and the Mini Market, Fifth Third Bank and Belco, and the block bound by Main, Front, Broas and Congress Streets.

Remainder of Mall Parking Lot: The southwest corner of the Covered Village parking lot should be reconfigured to better accommodate vehicles and pedestrians.

CHARACTER DEFINING FEATURES

Guidelines for improvements to both the private and public realms can bring a sense of unity to the district as a whole. The recommended changes will begin to visually integrate the character zones of the district and will result in a greater sense of cohesion within the downtown. Thus, reinforcing the sense of having "arrived" in downtown Belding.

Architecture

In a traditional downtown, while each individual building facade is unique, buildings work

Architecture

Example of new construction with a traditional downtown feel (photo courtesy of Dan Burden).



Creating dynamic storefronts enlivens a downtown. Ionia (right) and Greenville (above) are examples of a traditional downtown.



Rear Facades & Side Walls

Rear and side entrances should be welcoming and dynamic. Businesses in downtown Greenville have successfully incorporated these principles.



together in harmony to create a continuous and appealing edge along the street. A variety of materials, ornament and architectural styles, when presented in a consistent way, reinforce each other and make a streetscape a visually interesting and exciting place.

In order to encourage the development and redevelopment of properties with the objective of creating a cohesive downtown, the creation of building guidelines is recommended. Architectural guidelines should allow for variations while promoting the use of unifying materials such as brick or stone. New architectural details can be required to be compatible with the existing historic buildings in the downtown.

Setbacks

Buildings in a traditional downtown are usually located at the right-of-way line. Setback requirements in downtown Belding should support the creation of street wall. Design guidelines can assist in accomplishing this by establishing maximum rather than minimum setback requirements in the downtown.

Building Facades & Storefront Signs

Design guidelines can be used to encourage attractive facades and lively storefront signs. Design guidelines should be created with the objective of promoting the preferred image of the downtown and reducing clutter while allowing for variety and uniqueness. Design guidelines should draw upon the historic architectural elements of the downtown in determining size, scale, materials, details, etc. Window displays and covered entrances enhance the shopping experience and should be included as important considerations in the design guidelines. Signs should be modest in size and in a uniform location. Well designed projecting signs often make it easier for pedestrians to locate their destination. Signs of non-durable materials or with temporary messages should not be permitted.

Rear Facades & Side Walls

Design guidelines should include the side and rear facades of buildings. As noted in the Analysis of Existing Conditions, many side walls and rear facades of buildings are public and are not always attractive or inviting. Buildings with exposed side walls or rear facades should be treated with care and consideration for the public. Not only is upkeep important, but so is encouraging window displays, landscaping, murals or painted advertisements as well as lighting, signage and awnings for entrances. The rear entrances in Greenville can serve as a positive example.

Public Art

Introducing public art is one way to further enhance the unique identity of Belding. Public art could include sculpture in a public park, murals on some of the large side walls (perhaps

Public Art



Ann Arbor has incorporated a series of transparent panels that explain the history of the community.



High quality murals, such as this one in Eldorado, Illinois, enliven the side wall of a building and communicate the history of the community.

Lighting & Street Furniture



Example of a street lights scaled to their location

recreations of old Belding Mills advertisements) or it could include a series of informational kiosks that share the history of the community.

It is important to note that each addition of public art must be well executed and contribute to the overall image of the downtown. If not done well, public art can look amateurish and detract from the quality of historic buildings.

Landscaping, Lighting & Street Furniture

Another important aspect of a pedestrian friendly area is the degree of interest for pedestrians. This can be promoted through various amenities. For example, benches, outdoor cafes, and attractive window displays all provide interest and comfort for pedestrians. Attention to visual elements such as landscaping, lighting, and public art create a place where people want to come and spend time. Even small measures such as screening dumpsters and providing a welcoming entrance into both the front and rear of buildings makes for a more comfortable walking environment.

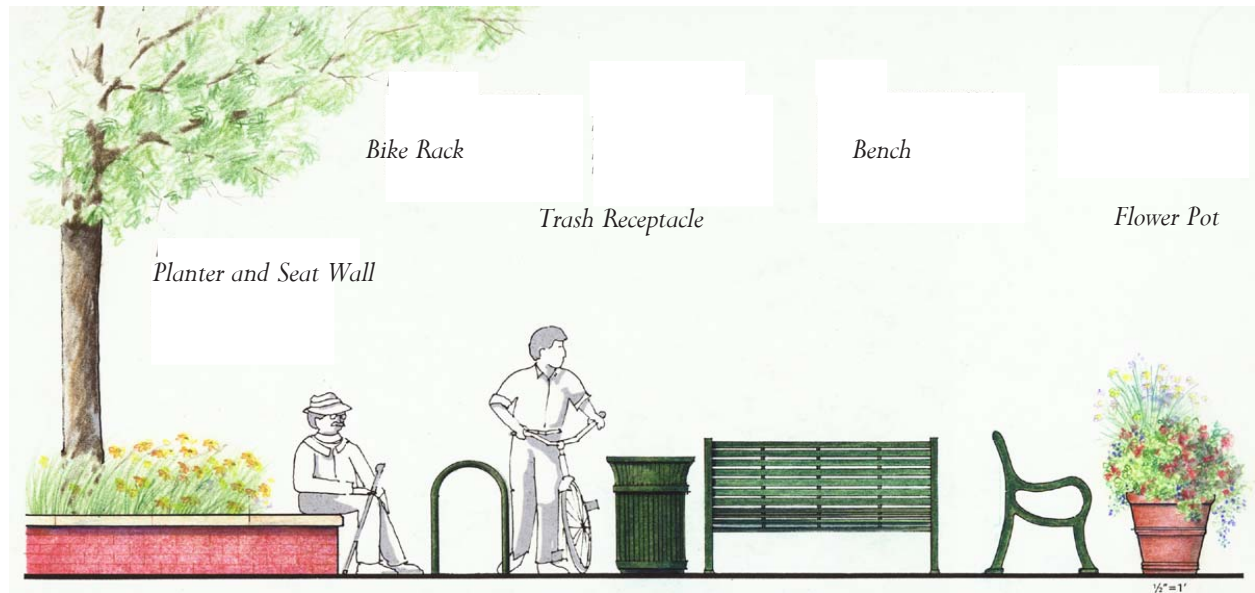
Landscaping, lighting and street furniture all contribute to the overall character of the downtown and help to unify the district. Where a few businesses have made attempts to create a pleasing environment, design guidelines and a city wide effort would ensure a uniform result.

Landscaping: Street trees are the key element in defining a street. They define the vertical edge, provide shade, create a buffer between vehicles and pedestrians and establish a unified rhythm and pattern for the district as can be seen in the adjacent neighborhoods. The majority of the district could incorporate street trees although there are a few areas, such as the east side of Bridge Street between Depot and Congress, that would not be able to incorporate street trees until the road is reconfigured. When selecting street trees, a variety of species should be used to prevent widespread loss from disease.

Landscaping in the downtown, particularly in Riverside Park, can also serve as an example for community wide landscaping efforts such as the Belding Community Backyard Habitat program. Landscaping can also screen unpleasant views such as the electric substation on the west side of Riverside Park. Efforts should be made to provide a naturalized buffer on the banks of the Flat River. Native grasses and forbes along this riparian edge will help to filter storm water before it enters the river. This type of landscaping will need to be mowed or selectively burned on an annual basis.

Lighting & Street Furniture: Lighting and street furniture are important components of a downtown landscape. They are both functional and aesthetic and should be appropriately scaled and designed to complement a downtown experience. Furnishings used in the City

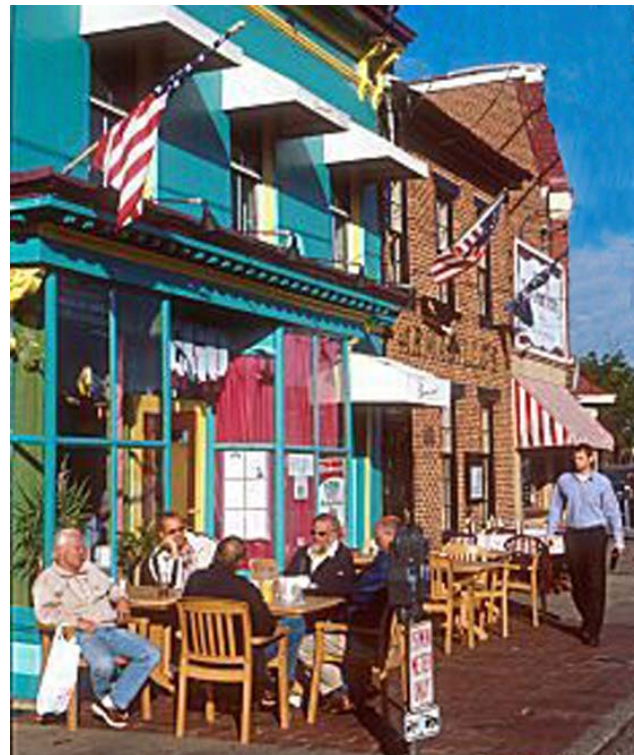
Lighting & Street Furniture



Example of a coordinated system of street furnishings



A bike hoop (above) and people enjoying outdoor seating and a lively streetscape.



parks should serve as a model for the downtown. Continuing with the same style of furnishings will enhance the cohesive aspect.

Benches: should be located in parks and along the river as well as in the core downtown. Entrances to shops and outdoor cafes are appropriate locations for moveable chairs.

Trash Receptacles: should be located at intersecting walks, adjacent to benches, in the parks and at the edge of courtyards.

Lighting: in the district should be pedestrian scaled and blend with the historic character of the downtown. The oversized lighting currently in the Covered Village Parking lot is inappropriate for a downtown.

Bicycle Racks: eliminate the visual clutter that results from haphazard bike parking and provides an efficient and secure means for bike owners to temporarily store their bikes while visiting the downtown. Bike racks should be located by the Depot, the Library, at Central Riverside Park, and near the town square.

Seasonal Decorations: include banners, hanging flower baskets, holiday lights and decorations to name a few. These items would further enhance the sense of having arrived at an important destination, downtown. They should be coordinated with other streetscape improvements even if their implementation would occur at a later date.

OPEN SPACE OPPORTUNITIES

While the City of Belding has adequate parkland downtown, Central Riverside Park is more of a destination for recreation than an extension of the downtown from which it is separated by the railroad. Additional public park space in the downtown is recommended as it provides a location for civic events and also a quiet corner for people watching, for visitors to rest and for lunchtime breaks.

Central Riverside Park

Central Riverside Park is a great recreational amenity in the downtown. The addition of a scenic overlook along the river would provide another destination/draw to the downtown and could also serve as a location for events such as local theater or concerts. As previously mentioned, a connection to the Covered Village and downtown should be created and reinforced within the park.

Parks & Plazas

Throughout history, town squares have served as the heart of a community. They are gathering places, resting places, areas for public art, civic events and more. Historic image of the town green located where the Gibson addition is now.



Redevelopment Opportunities

Additions to the rear of the Gibson Building are unattractive and mask the historic structure.



The Breimeyer building, located on a prime corner in the downtown, is another key redevelopment opportunity.



Town Square

The Town Square is envisioned as a civic green space/plaza that is framed by the City Hall and Fire Department and also serves as a quiet respite on Main Street. It would be an ideal location for an installation of public art

Town Green

The Town Green is a proposal to restore the town green that was once located here. The restoration of this green space would further reconnect Belding with its history.

The Town Square and Town Green would provide an attractive and civic foundation to the busy and prime downtown intersection of Main and Bridge Streets.

EXISTING BUILDING REDEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

*T*he citizens, stakeholders and city officials all place a high priority on the preservation and restoration of the historic buildings and the recruitment of new businesses. These two priorities are closely linked as the restoration and preservation of buildings typically demonstrates a commitment to a community that new businesses like to see before they invest in the downtown.

The Gibson Building

Prior to the construction of the Gibson Addition, the original structure was the Belding Brothers Mill No.2. The Gibson Addition occupies the location of the former town green. This and other additions to the building compromise its historic character. The restoration of the original Belding Brothers Mill No. 2 offers an opportunity to reconnect the City with its heritage.

The Gibson building currently contains vacant space and some office and industrial uses. The need for physical improvements coupled with its prime location along the Flat River, provide the Gibson building with an exceptional opportunity for mixed-use redevelopment.

The Breimeyer Building

The Breimeyer building is currently vacant and offers opportunity for redevelopment. As it is the transition between the residential area and the downtown, future uses should be considered carefully.

REDEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The creation of a traditional downtown in Belding will be a complex process involving both the private and public sectors. In much the same way as the Belding Covered Village Mall was constructed utilizing a “development corporation,” the same process will be needed to encourage the construction of new buildings and recruitment of new business.

It has been noted that the Covered Village Mall has transformed, since its inception in 1972, from a retail center to a personal service center. Unfortunately, the property is not owned by one entity, which is typical for a mall or shopping center, but instead is comprised of individual owners. This condition increases the complexity of the redevelopment process.

The Downtown Framework Plan illustrates a long term vision for Main Street to reopen, which will obviously take full cooperation from the Mall owners and their association. However, in the near term it is recommended that the City make available property that now is used for off-street parking on either side of the former Main Street for new development.

DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

The City established a DDA in 1983 under Public Act 179. Many of the recommendations outlined in the Implementation Strategy, and especially the establishment of new downtown buildings and businesses along a new Main Street consistent with the Framework Plan, will rely on the tools authorized under a Downtown Development Authority.

To effectively utilize development tools and financing opportunities of the DDA a development plan and tax increment financing plan will need to be prepared reflecting the recommendations of this Downtown Economic Enhancement Strategy. This action will make available to the DDA and the City the tax revenues needed for property acquisition, infrastructure, adaptive reuse of former industrial properties, and improvements to existing buildings and parking facilities.

If the Belding Downtown Development Authority is not active it needs to be reconstituted into a quasi-development agency. Without an active DDA the likelihood of accomplishing many of the implementation recommendations will be significantly curtailed.

Other redevelopment strategies would include:

1. Preparing a physical design plan, which determines the right-of-way for Main Street, including the roadway, angle parking, pedestrian width sidewalks, and other traditional downtown

amenities.

2. Determine the dimension for building sites in the existing parking lots, which front on the new “Main Street.”
3. Solicit the Michigan State Housing Development Authority for a grant to fund upper story residential units. Funding levels should be based on providing up to \$25,000 per residential unit.
4. Solicit the Michigan Economic Development Corporation for a downtown infrastructure grant to assist in the financing of the new roadway and streetscape.
5. Prepare a Request For Proposal to solicit developer(s) to construct traditional style downtown buildings on the city owned property reserved for building development on Main Street west of Bridge Street. The RFP would require retail uses compatible with the market strategy (restaurants, video/DVD rental, book store, and dry cleaners) and upper level housing units. This combination of businesses is typically associated with an errand-oriented shopping center, and therefore should not be foreign to many commercial real estate developers.
6. The building sites would be offered to the development community at no cost, in lieu of meeting local design guidelines, and market recommendations. The City would recoup the cost of the property through an agreement with the DDA , who would repay the City the cost of the property out of the tax increment revenues generated by the new development.
7. The City would install the new roadway and streetscape amenities once a private developer was recruited and retained for the project. Funding for this portion of the project would be derived from MEDC, local capital improvement funds, Act 51 Street funds, and possibly the DDA , if the land acquisition repayment is deferred until the infrastructure is financed.
8. The extension of Main Street through the existing Covered Village Mall could be derived from a special assessment on owners within the existing Mall who would derive added benefit from the project, and their linkage to the traditional downtown project.

V. Implementation Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The City of Belding should employ the National Main Street organizational structure as a model to accelerate the implementation strategy. The National Main Street Program model for downtown revitalization has a proven national track record. The State of Michigan is again embracing the National Main Street Program model for downtown revitalization.

The Main Street Program divides downtown revitalization into four components: Organization; Design, Economic Restructuring, and Promotion/Marketing.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

By-Law Review

The Downtown Development Authority (DDA) should be reactivated and the DDA By-Laws should be reviewed and amended to include the formation of four working committees: organization, design, economic restructuring, and marketing.

Memberships

In order to stay up-to-date with current trends, issues and problems facing downtowns, the City and DDA should consider or continue memberships in the Michigan Downtown Finance Association, National Main Street Center, and the Michigan Economic Developers Association. These organizations can provide vital information and education regarding economic development, grant and funding availability, and commercial district revitalization.

Annual Strategic Planning Session

The City and DDA should schedule an Annual Strategic Planning Session to review the Master Plan and update if necessary.

Code Enforcement

The City and DDA should continue to focus attention on code enforcement matters such as nonconforming signs, building uses, blight, and maintenance problems.

DESIGN AND PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

*I*n order to increase the physical appeal to business owners, investors and potential customers, Design and Physical Improvement Strategies must be a vital part of Belding's revitalization program. The City has already been active in aspects of making physical improvements in the district, including: street furnishings in the parks, maintenance issues, and other physical improvements within the district. In addition to these activities, the Committee and the DDA may also consider the following:

Facade/Sign Grant Program:

Incentive programs should be considered for business and building owners to improve and maintain the district's building facades and signs. Grant or loan programs can be developed to accomplish this task.

Low Interest Loan Pool:

Establish with local lending institutions the creation of a low-interest loan pool which can be used for the improvements to exterior facades and conversion of upper story spaces to residential units. Local lending institutions should view their participation in the program as part of their respective Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) activities. Historic Building improvements to facades must be in compliance with the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings.

Design/Facade Study:

Consider completing a design study for one of the main blocks of downtown. This study would show existing and proposed conditions and outline guidelines to achieve the goals of the improvements. The study could be used for all future developments as a guide for appropriate facade improvements.

Design Guidelines:

Design Guidelines, whether mandatory or voluntary, will help to guide the appropriate design of facade, sign, and other physical improvements in the downtown district. At the very least, review the National Trust for Historic Preservation publication on appropriate improvements to historic buildings. A pro-active approach to facade improvement needs to be established and with the right tools in hand, i.e. incentive programs and design guidelines, the City/DDA should be able to start realizing goals of facade improvements in the district.

Public Art Review:

Establish a review process for art proposed in the public realm. Other communities with established mural arts and outdoor sculpture programs may serve as organizational models. One possible model is a jury of arts professionals to review proposed projects and assist in selecting artists for downtown commissions. The design committee can contact arts faculty at area colleges and universities, as well as museum and gallery professionals, to solicit interest in serving on a jury. Jury recommendations should also be subject to review and approval of the Design Committee.

Wayfinding System:

One of the recommendations noted in this plan is to develop a 'Wayfinding System' in the Downtown

district. The Design Committee should oversee the development of this project and make recommendations to the City.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

*T*he goal of an Economic Development Strategy is to strengthen the existing economic assets of the business district while diversifying the economic base. Activities include analysis of current markets, retaining and expanding existing businesses, recruiting new businesses to create a balanced mix, converting vacant and under-utilized spaces to productive properties, and creating attractive public/private financing mechanisms to encourage development.

Market Analysis

The market analysis conducted and included in this planning process is an essential tool in making decisions about business development, real estate development and promotional strategies. It must be used actively and understood and used by the City/DDA. This analysis will give the City and the DDA a sense of what downtown's market opportunities are and give some direction on what the downtown should become. The most apparent uses for market analysis in an economic development strategy is to: assist in creating an overall revitalization strategy; assist existing businesses considering repositioning by changing or expanding product lines; evaluating whether or not to proceed with proposed development projects; utilizing data for business recruitment packages; fulfilling lender requirements for financing; and helping to influence public policies including land use, zoning, and public improvements.

Business Retention

Business retention starts with thoroughly knowing each and every business, understanding the needs of the district, and pro-actively meeting those needs. Business retention can be as simple as maintaining a safe, clean and well-maintained environment or can become a full-blown program of financial assistance, workshops and seminars, and marketing/promotion efforts provided by the City/DDA. Other business retention activities include:

- Distribute and explain market analysis information at a meeting held by the City/DDA.
- Provide assistance programs to renovate buildings/signs.
- Encourage joint and cross advertising programs to ease costs to business owners and to portray a united image.
- Create a master direct mail or e-mail list for special promotions of the district.
- Hold 'Town Meetings' periodically to allow business owners to be heard regarding issues affecting the downtown.

Business Recruitment

Business recruitment strategies are essential to the success of a comprehensive revitalization plan. One of the most effective recruitment tools a downtown district can have is an effective program to

assist existing businesses in remaining downtown or expanding their businesses within the downtown. Through this process, the businesses will be strengthened and they, in turn will become an important recruitment tool. Once the business retention program is solidly underway, a comprehensive business recruitment strategy can be prepared. To develop an overall Business Recruitment Strategy, the City/DDA should:

- Maintain a database of available lots, buildings and rental spaces.
- Develop a list of desired businesses to be recruited utilizing the information derived from the Market Analysis Report.
- Match desired businesses with available locations.
- Develop a Business Recruitment Packet including: market analysis and demographic information, trade area statistics, geographical features (access to highway, parking lots, proximity to popular destinations), commercial district characteristics (anchors, number of employees, organizations, calendar of events, financial assistance, revitalization strategy, etc.)
- Keep realtors informed and supply them with the above information.

The Business Recruitment packet should be well designed and of very high quality. Information within the packet should be personalized for each prospect. The information should be maintained and updated on a regular basis. The City/DDA should serve as the central resource for prospective businesses in the Downtown District.

Upper-Story Housing Development

Opportunity exists for upper-story housing development in Downtown Belding. In order to encourage this type of development, financial assistance and incentive programs need to be created. In addition, local ordinances may have to be amended to allow for and regulate these uses within the context of a commercial district.

Redevelopment Projects

The Framework Plan identifies areas within the downtown conducive for commercial/retail, housing, and mixed-use development. In some instances the City may have to acquire or obtain an option on the property prior to soliciting a developer. These public-private partnerships have been successful in the past in many communities and can add significantly to the vitality of the downtown and the tax base.

Land Acquisition

Set aside a portion of TIF revenues to establish a land acquisition fund. The fund's purpose is to finance the acquisition of property to facilitate select redevelopment projects.

National Register of Historic Places

Historic buildings in Belding that are not currently on the National Register of Historic Places should be considered for such designation. This designation would allow property owners renovating the exterior and interior of their buildings access to investment tax credits, as long as the improvements are done in compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's guidelines.

MARKETING & PROMOTION STRATEGIES

Raising the level of awareness of the downtown district is key to the success of the businesses and the district as a whole. Creating an overall marketing and promotions program directed at target markets will help increase awareness and bring new customers to the downtown.

Developing a Marketing & Promotion Program

Recommendations include:

- Continue strengthening existing festivals, events and promotions. Complete an 18-month Calendar of Downtown Events so that it can be readily available for business prospects, recruitment packages, customers, and visitors. This will also be helpful in future planning of events.
- Work with the local newspaper to submit a weekly downtown news column. Include news about what's new in downtown businesses, promotions, events, City updates.
- Submit downtown events and happenings to local and regional radio stations. Most have free community spotlights. Some have programs that give you an opportunity to be a guest weekly, monthly or quarterly.
- Consider cooperative district-wide advertising with local businesses on all types of media to advertise as a district and to keep costs down for everyone.

Web Site

Maintain a City web site which includes a summary of market demographics and profiles, trade area information, downtown wayfinding and parking lot map, and information on existing businesses. Where possible provide a link to existing business websites to increase market exposure and penetration. Lastly, make the market study available as a downloadable "PDF" file.

SUPPLEMENTARY PROGRAM INFORMATION

Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21)

The U.S. Department of Transportation funding program provides pass through funding to each State for highway improvements, aesthetic enhancements, non-motorized projects, and traffic and safety projects. The Michigan Department of Transportation coordinates the funding through their office of Economic Development. Funding is available for streetscape improvements, pedestrian related projects, and non-motorized facilities.

Land & Water Conservation Fund

Funding for this federal program comes from off-shore drilling leases on federal bottomlands. Funds are dispersed to each State based on a formula. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources administers the program, and funds provide for local government park and recreation projects on a competitive basis. There is a 50% match for these funds, and funding can be used for a variety of local park and recreation projects. MDNR does require local governments applying for the funds to submit a five year recreation plan prepared using state guidelines.

Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA)

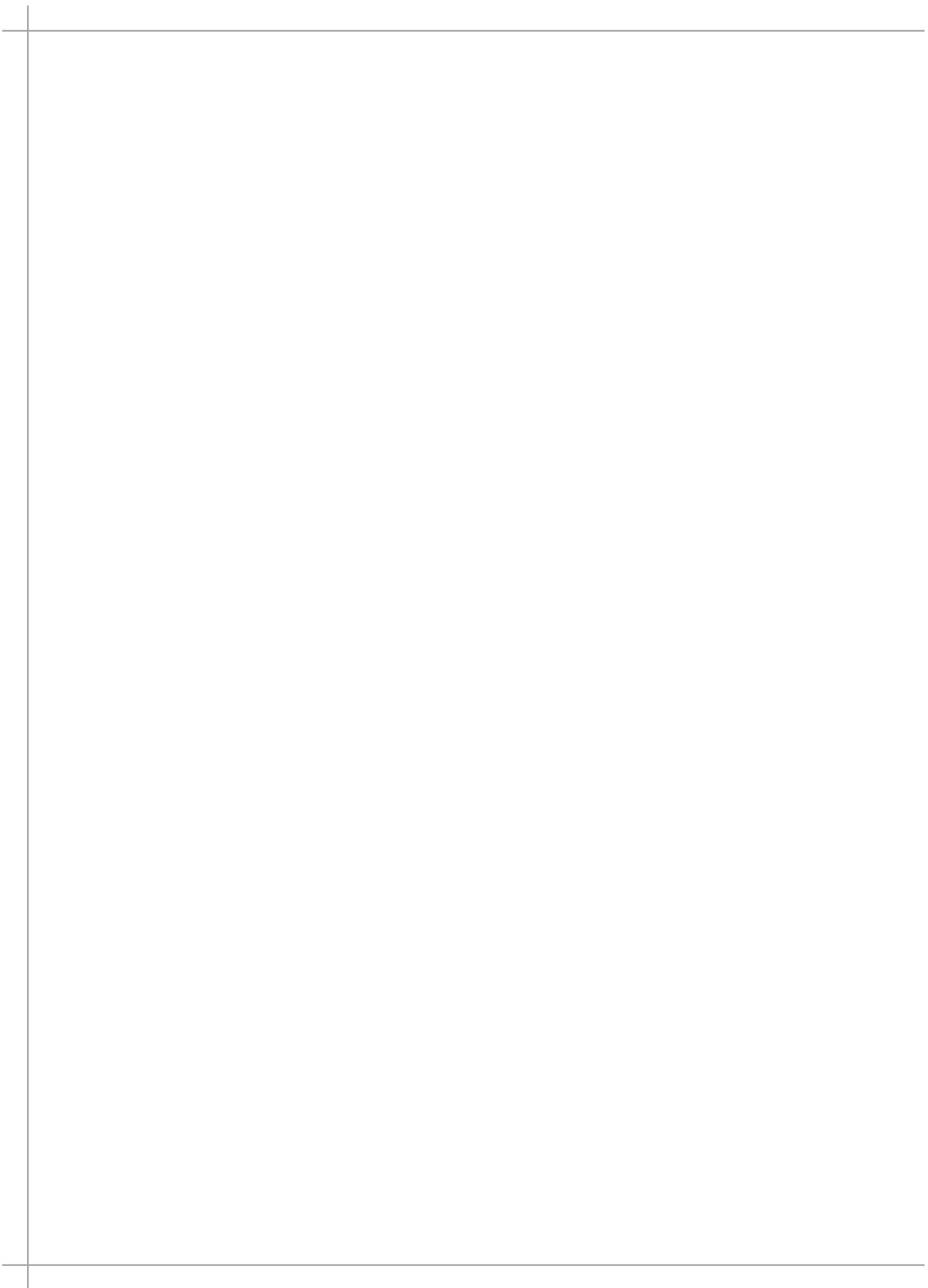
The Michigan State Housing Development Authority offers several programs to local governments. One is the rental rehabilitation program. MSHDA's Office of Community Development makes Housing Resource Fund awards to local units of government to encourage the rehabilitation of affordable rental units. A community may loan property owners up to 75 percent of rehabilitation costs, not to exceed \$15,000 per unit. Funds may be combined with MSHDA's Single Family Property Improvement Program (PIP). This loan may be forgiven after five years; although 100 percent of the assistance must be repaid by the borrower should any term or condition of the program be violated.

Governor's Cool City Initiative

The Governor's Cool City Initiative is about capitalizing upon inherent strengths of Michigan's cities to be attractive places to live for an increasing diverse group of residents. The Michigan Cool City Pilot Program creates a Toolbox that represents an unprecedented collaboration of state agencies, and offering state agency resources that can be used to move our state toward the goal of creating Cool Cities that simultaneously retain and attract workers and jobs. This Toolbox, under the Governor's initiative, is an effort to promote holistic approaches and ongoing investment in neighborhoods that have, or are moving to create, a mix of residential and commercial uses, mixed income housing, and a pedestrian-friendly environment. This is as important in downtown and near downtown areas as it is in more traditional residential neighborhoods (from the Cool Cities RFP 4 2004).

The Cool Cities program is a 3-year initiative. First round applications are due May 7, 2004. Communities will have the opportunity to also apply for Year 2 and 3. Twelve projects per year will be accepted into the Cool Cities program. Decisions will be made on the basis of the neighborhoods identified, specific project submitted, the strength of the partnerships, the level of public and private investment in the project, and the anticipated ability of that project to make a significant impact in the neighborhood. In addition, the feasibility and strength of the plan for implementation will be evaluated.

Appendix A Market Study



Appendix B Board Planning Session Summary

A Board Planning Session was held on November 6, 2003. During this session Connie Pulcifer and Katie Davison of Beckett & Raeder, Inc. presented a slide show of the existing conditions assessment, including some preliminary design recommendations. Jay Schlinsog, of Downtown Professionals Network, presented the preliminary market analysis findings and distributed a report of the preliminary findings. Connie Pulcifer of Beckett & Raeder, Inc. delivered a draft report to the board on the results of the stakeholder interviews, the preferred future workshop, and the existing conditions assessment of downtown Belding.

Following the presentations, the board was asked to discuss strategies for catalyzing success in downtown Durand. The board's comments are paraphrased below.

We want the old Belding back. Rebuild Main Street through the mall and add new facades to the mall that fronts the rebuilt Main Street.

Create a walkable downtown. If you built it, people will use it.

Preserve and reuse the historic buildings.

New housing does not have to be geared toward seniors. Generation "Y" (1977-1994) is as large as the Baby Boomers, but more cohesive as a demographic group. This group likes individuality and downtowns.

Infill with multi-story buildings to incorporate retail on the ground level with office/residential uses on upper floors.

Develop a way-finding system to assist visitors in locating and navigating downtown.

Need to identify funding opportunities for projects.

Should an Historic District designation be pursued in order to qualify for certain tax breaks and funding options?

Considering that there may be some division within the community about where to concentrate development efforts, either in downtown or along M-44, perhaps the better solution is to look at the appropriateness of the use, rather than simply a commercial designation. For example, a car repair shop may be better located along M-44, while restaurants would be better in the downtown.

Attendees:

Dan Reed

Mike Wood

Carl Jones

Audre Oliver

Rex Bannen

Deb Curler

Merrill Russell

Bob Thompson

Shirley Loree

Dan Blunt

Connie Pulcipher (Beckett & Raeder, Inc.)

Katie Davison (Beckett & Raeder, Inc.)

Jay Schlinsog (Downtown Professionals Network)
