The “Ah-ha” Moment

We took the shell of a vacant factory in downtown Ann Arbor, added some tables, phenomenal art, good food, engaged leaders and major players from across the state to engage in a powerful conversation. The topic centered on what it will take to transform Michigan and reclaim our place as an economic powerhouse in the 21st century. It was hot and humid, but the fans were blowing and the ideas were flowing.

Beyond the building’s weathered walls, the city buzzed with trendy bistros and coffee shops, young professionals zipped by on expensive bikes, laptops slung over shoulders, headed for important things. The pricey loft conversions next door were sold out. There was energy all around that opened people’s eyes to the potential of this dusty old building next to the train tracks. They could all see their own hometowns in the reflection of its cracked windows, the opportunity to transform old and forgotten places into new and vibrant places once again.

Their chance to create Better Communities. Better Michigan.

The Pilot Program

Our Center for 21st Century Communities (21c3) was born from the public policy forums that featured such “ah-ha” moments. 21c3 identified eight key assets for creating vibrant places in a global, knowledge-based economy. Experts from around the world agree that investing in communities is one of the most critical elements of any long-term economic development strategy. We believe this is especially true in Michigan, and that “place” matters more than ever.

To prove it, we began our pilot project series. Five pilot communities—Alpena, Lapeer, Lathrup Village, Sault Ste. Marie, and Ypsilanti—have put theory into action to demonstrate the impact of these principals and their applicability regardless of size or location. Through their demonstration projects, communities across the state will better understand how to leverage a unique sense of place in a community to enhance quality of life and attract the people and businesses that will fuel the 21st century economy.

8 ASSETS OF A 21ST CENTURY COMMUNITY

1. Physical Design & Walkability
2. Green Initiatives
3. Cultural Economic Development
4. Entrepreneurship
5. Multiculturalism
6. Messaging & Technology
7. Transit
8. Education K-16
**Project Focus:** CULTURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**Project Vision:** The City of Alpena will be the arts and culture hub of Northeast Lower Michigan through a key public-private partnership with Michigan Arts and Culture Northeast - ARTown Michigan.

**Overview**

If you hear “arts and culture” and Alpena doesn’t come to mind, think again! Arts, culture and history have an enduring presence in Northeast Michigan, and Michigan Arts and Culture Northeast (MACNE) - ARTown Michigan is evidence of that. This non-profit corporation is led by Besser Museum, Art in the Loft, Thunder Bay Arts Council, and the National Marine Sanctuary. Sparked by the pilot project, the City of Alpena became a formal partner in MACNE, which also includes 36+ other organizations and individual artists from around the region. Through their powerful collaboration they are accomplishing what one group could not do alone. This 21c3 pilot project included:

- **ARTown website:** A communication hub for myriad arts, culture, humanities and history organizations in the region, and a mechanism to collectively promote programs and events. Visit [www.artownmichigan.org](http://www.artownmichigan.org)

- **Passport to the Arts:** MACNE’s flagship project is an actual passport that serves as a comprehensive regional arts/culture calendar for nearly 200 events/activities in the summer season.

- **Route 23 ARTrail:** A user-friendly regional roadmap and reference guide highlighting arts, culture, natural resources, historical sites and related attractions along the US 23 corridor.

- **Community Expressions:** A variety of hands-on creative and cultural experiences for the community including the installation of building scrims (art and photography is printed on all-weather fabric for enormous outdoor displays). The scrims are displayed on a downtown building to give people a glimpse of the past so they might dream of what the future can be.
Lessons:

LEVERAGE YOUR EXISTING STRENGTHS

In Alpena’s case, a strong effective network—Michigan Arts and Culture Northeast (MACNE)—was already in place. Its purpose naturally complemented the city’s interests in cultural economic development. There was real opportunity for a “win-win” through mutual efforts.

REACH BEYOND YOUR TYPICAL PARTNERS

The city became a formal partner in the MACNE organization through the pilot project. This important step demonstrated the city’s ongoing commitment to cultural economic development, and it provided the city a “seat at the table” with their new partners. In formalizing partnerships, it is important to plan beyond the current champions who are taking the lead, and consider that turnover among people is inevitable; so a clear, solid structure is very important to create continuity and permanency.

FOLLOW MORE THAN YOU LEAD

The city had to overcome some concern among the MACNE partners that its formal involvement with the group might overshadow the dynamic of collaborative equality and autonomy that had fueled its success. The city had to prove to the group it could be a good partner, and would support and enable their work rather than dominate or interfere.

THINK BIGGER, BROADER

Without sacrificing focus, consider ways that incorporating all 8 assets into a project strategy would broaden the base of support and catalyze spin off projects. Alpena’s primary focus was cultural economic development, but the city’s traditional, walkable downtown is inextricably linked to many arts and culture anchors, and it creates critical synergy between arts and culture, entrepreneurship and the broader business community.

An important offshoot of the pilot project was the relocation of the Thunder Bay Arts Council main office and gallery to a downtown Alpena storefront near Art in the Loft, an existing downtown anchor. At first, Art in the Loft was concerned about added “competition” for art gallery patrons. But the city representatives to the project explained how clustering arts and culture attractions would actually add visitors and enhance vibrancy in the downtown district.
**Project Focus:** WALKABILITY & TRANSIT

**Project Vision:** Expand and better leverage Lapeer’s extensive trail system as part of a comprehensive non-motorized transportation plan, with emphasis on connectivity to the downtown district.

**Overview**

Lapeer and transit may not seem a likely pair, which made this project all the more exciting. Communities of every size, in every region, are thinking differently about transit and have a whole new understanding of what falls under the “transit” umbrella. It’s not just cars, trains, buses and other motorized transit that matter in a 21st century community. The key is to offer diverse options, including an integrated non-motorized network.

Lapeer has an extensive trail system in place that connects its parks, K-12 schools, community college, commercial districts, traditional downtown, nature preserves, community center and other key amenities. The city recognized the value of the non-motorized system, and suspected more connections, better wayfinding and other improvements could even better leverage this excellent transit option.

The project began with an on-site visit from Dan Burden, international walkability expert. He spent an intensive day providing a walking audit of the downtown area as well as the trail system. Mr. Burden offered some key recommendations related to the riverfront area in the downtown district, as well as strategies for creating more dramatic entries and signage for the downtown area and trail system. Next, the city engaged Archive DS and Wade Trim to develop a comprehensive non-motorized transportation plan. That non-motorized plan led to the community working with MDOT to host a “Training Wheels” program, which brought national experts in traffic engineering to Lapeer to identify ways to improve bikeability and the community’s non-motorized transportation network.
Lessons:

BUILD ON EXISTING MOMENTUM
Lapeer was already involved with a regional economic development effort that embraced many of the 21c3 concepts. Using this as a platform, Lapeer was masterful building on the interest and passion within the community to connect several programs and keep projects moving forward, from concept to implementation.

DETAILS, EVEN VERY SMALL ONES, MATTER ON THE HUMAN SCALE
When you physically experience a space, your perspective is absolutely altered. Very small, seemingly minute details can impact a person’s sense of safety and accessibility.

Every community should insist that changes or improvements to their streets or other non-motorized facilities include a hands-on, experiential component with elected officials, business leaders, administrators, engineers and the general public. Until you experience an area on foot or on bike, it remains too easy to design for the automobile only.

RECLAIM KEY ASSETS, EVEN IF YOU MUST FIGHT FOR THEM
Even if the task seems too overwhelming to attempt, find the will and the way to reclaim the most important physical spaces in your community. In Lapeer, a prime strip of riverfront is lined with a parking lot; Burden implored the city to prioritize redevelopment of this hidden treasure and assured it would pay back the community many times over by bringing life to the district and spurring business activity in the area.

Communities across Michigan have similar challenges. Maybe it’s a brownfield on a key stretch of waterfront, perhaps it’s a special historical building or a state road dissecting your downtown. Local leaders must be prepared to fight to protect the “bones” of their communities.

EVEN WHERE IT SEEMS UNLIKELY, SHRINK YOUR ROADS
John LaPlante, an internationally renown transportation expert from Chicago, participates in nearly every national committee of import in the road design/traffic engineering world. He said that roads are designed for 30 minutes of peak traffic that might occur once in awhile, 30 years from now.

He implored us to STOP THAT! We must begin designing streets that work for all users most of the time. According to him, almost every street can have narrower lanes and fewer of them, and nearly all can include safe biking and safe pedestrian options.

The concept is “complete streets” and Michigan is a national leader. How is your community designing its future? How are you protecting your “bones?” Take a lesson from Lapeer, spend the time, and yes the money, to get it right!
**Project Focus:** PHYSICAL DESIGN & WALKABILITY

**Project Vision:** Transform a challenging stretch of five-lane roadway into a pedestrian-friendly thoroughfare that serves as the physical hub and emotional heart of the community.

**Overview**

In Lathrup Village high volumes of cars move *through* the community, but at what cost to the quality of life *within* the community? The Lathrup Village founders envisioned a connected, pedestrian-friendly city-center when they designed the city. But today, the city finds itself with a dangerous, loud and unsightly road cutting right through its heart. Residents cannot safely cross Southfield Road on foot, or comfortably walk on their main road to patronize their business district. They yearn for a peaceful stroll, the opportunity to interact with neighbors and spend their money on the corner, not miles away.

When the pilot project began, we heard a story about a young mother who lived on one side of Southfield Road who has to put her babies into their car seats and drive them less than a half mile across the street to meet a friend at the park. How sad that she can’t enjoy the simple pleasure of peacefully pushing her baby in a stroller over to her neighborhood park!

Lathrup Village is determined to restore its original city-center concept, putting its residents’ needs above the automobile. They hope, and research proves, that this type of physical design will spur new and different types of entrepreneurial activity in the area and will further catalyze the already rich sense of civic pride and engagement within the community.

Dan Burden, international walkability expert, was tapped as a project consultant. Of course there was a blizzard the day of the walking audit, but that could not stop the inspired team in Lathrup Village!
After an instructive hands-on walking tour, the day concluded with a comprehensive presentation of findings and recommendations. Later that evening Mr. Burden presented the walking audit, findings and recommendations in a public community forum which was also broadcast on public access cable.

A second full-day work session with key stakeholders was held to discuss specific options for designing the city-center and Southfield Road. The county road commission was apprehensive at first. Many proposed solutions were progressive, unconventional and truly tested the limits of some imaginations. But Dan Burden challenged them to set a new pattern for Michigan, to prove you can have it all when it comes to physical design. There was healthy discussion and lively debate. In the end, the city and the road commission could not find consensus on a design that would work.

Undaunted, the city proceeded in developing a complete streets ordinance. This formalized the city’s commitment and obligated all agencies to work with the community throughout the design and planning process for Southfield Road.

**Lessons:**

**DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME:** Bring your tenacity and lean on the enthusiasm and commitment of your champions. Passion for community trumps bureaucracy almost every time. In the case of Lathrup Village, the road redesign will certainly take many years longer because creating a walkable community is a must for the community. They are willing to take a stand, and pass on the quick funding, to get it right. They had to go back to the drawing board to put their complete street ordinance in place, but the reward of getting something this importation right is well worth the extra effort and delay.

**FOCUS YOUR POSITION AROUND HEALTH, SAFETY AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS:** Some 21c3 initiatives are viewed too simply as aesthetic improvements that can be dismissed as “nice-to-have” but not imperative on a practical level. That is simply false, these eight assets—especially physical design—are critical to successful place-making and have a direct, economic impact.

**UNDERSTAND THAT SOME ARE SLOW TO CHANGE:** It takes patience and persistence to undo long-held beliefs based on old information and paradigms. But change will come; in fact the next “green book” which serves as “the bible” for transportation design, includes a change in the long-held engineering standard for wide travel lanes. Ten foot lanes will now be commonly acceptable on most streets with speed limits of 45 mph or under.

If you build a road to look like freeway, people will behave as though it is one. The City of Lathrup Village has been suffering for years, living proof of this. But if you create an environment that informs drivers that people live here, they will be walking, biking, and shopping here, drivers will cooperate! They will probably even slow down enough to patronize the local businesses, and a young mother will be able to grab a coffee at the corner on the way to the park—on foot, pushing her babies in a stroller as nature intended.

Overview

Sault Ste. Marie (the “Soo”) is home to Lake Superior State University (Lake State), and the two entities have happily co-existed since the beginning. However, being “peaceful neighbors” is different from being a cohesive, integrated community. Both the university and city have thought for some time that each would mutually benefit from a stronger collaboration.

Further, the K-12 educational system and major employers in the area such as the hospital look to the city and the university as key partners in their success. This team of key stakeholders and community leaders astutely observed that Sault Ste. Marie is a “town with a university” rather than a “university town.” They all view that transition as a potentially powerful catalyst for the region’s economy and quality of life.

As such, all involved wanted to see students and the university community more engaged with the Soo community, more active in the downtown district and to eventually choose to make the area their permanent home following graduation. And conversely, all wanted the community to be more active and visible in their support for and celebration of one of their most critical anchor institutions, Lake State.

The Soo is the oldest city in the state, the place where Michigan was born. The assets of the region are innumerable, yet the community tends to be quiet in its pride. In fact, the group seriously considered focusing the project on “Messaging & Technology” to develop a unified brand and promote a more positive self-image in the region. However, in the end, the group agreed that “Laker Pride” would influence the overall identity in the community.
Lessons:

“DO IT YOURSELF” MIGHT NOT BE THE RIGHT FIT: When assembling a group of stakeholders an objective third party facilitator is worth his/her weight in gold. The facilitator will help organize the team and provide continuity and focus. However, the facilitator is not the leader of the initiative. Stakeholders must take the lead in identifying what will work for their particular community, and they must be committed to doing the work.

SOMETIMES SMALLER IS BETTER: It is tempting to include every potential stakeholder in this process, but keeping a laser focus on those with a vested interest, and those who have demonstrated commitment saves you from spending scarce time and resources on “selling” your initiative to reluctant participants. There should always be room for more participants, ideas, etc. but the core leadership team must be small enough and committed enough to push the project forward.

A SUPERSTAR HELPS, BUT THE TEAM GETS IT DONE: A passionate, charismatic champion will make any special project easier (especially one the involves garnering public support.) But when you are building a better community, changing long-held opinions or beliefs or shifting the “culture” of an organization or place, you must have a strong team and a very deep bench.

Your superstar can deliver one or two remarkable projects, but those quickly fade. Sustained excellence and real change comes through teams like in the Soo; key people and groups with a clear and focused vision, doing what they are doing because they see themselves as one part of the bigger community.

YES, YOU NEED ANOTHER MEETING TO ATTEND!: In the Soo the elected officials, professional administrators, business leaders, educators and others really understand that the most powerful change will come from working in a deliberately collaborative way, on a formal comprehensive plan. That means formalizing the group, declaring your commitment and meeting regularly. Without regular interaction, a newly formed partnership can quickly revert to peaceful neighbors who sporadically coordinate on special projects.
Project Focus: ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Project Vision: Identify and fill gaps in the resources and support network available to a broad range of current or potential entrepreneurs in Ypsilanti.

Overview

Ypsilanti is a community with traction in all eight asset areas; so, they wondered, what area would benefit most from an additional boost of resources and attention? Immediately entrepreneurship came to mind. Ypsilanti has a great foundation for entrepreneurship in place including SPARK East Business Incubator, student-focused programs through Eastern Michigan University and a very successful regional Small Business and Technology Development Center (SBTDC).

The project began with experts from Michigan State University completing an overall inventory of the entrepreneur resources in the community. After discussing the results with stakeholders, the city found their “help” wasn’t really needed or wanted, at least in the established and traditional networks.

The question then turned to whether all populations within the community were being comprehensively served, particularly those without formal education or capital, who fall outside the traditional entrepreneurship network. The rich potential was seen in a successful non-profit, Growing Hope, the farmer’s market and the growth in the cottage food industry and urban farming. Perhaps this was the means to reach potential start-ups that don’t naturally fit within the existing supportive network for entrepreneurs.

Through a partnership with Growing Hope, the project included the following activities:

- Development of a farmer’s market vendor directory to improve networking and marketing.
- Business workshops for vendors on how to start and run a business.
- Completion of a feasibility analysis and formal planning for a market gardener co-operative.
- Vendor and market signage, equipment and related infrastructure.
Lessons:

CONFIRMING WHAT YOU MAY ALREADY KNOW IS REALLY WORTH THE TIME

It is tempting to begin moving forward, full-steam-ahead on exciting new initiatives, but taking the time to get organized about what you know and where you currently are is an important first step. It really helps in creating a roadmap for where you want to be. In the case of Ypsilanti, they suspected they had really strong entrepreneurship networks, programs and services available through various organizations. Confirming that freed them up to consider more non-traditional project options.

In the case of Growing Hope and the farmer’s market, the City offered support at a time that this niche industry was really gaining momentum and would benefit tremendously from added resources.

SOMETIMES A SUPPORTING ROLE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE LEAD

Through the inventory process, the city realized that there were great things happening without them, and that is just fine. Offering to be supportive, on someone else’s terms, can be a little scary. You don’t have “control” and there may be less accountability, but try it anyway!

Ypsilanti has found, through necessity, that volunteer-driven services can be the answer to dwindling city resources. Both its parks and recreation function and the farmer’s market are powered through volunteers and non-profit organizations with great success. The city’s role is to enable these groups and support their endeavors. The city is no longer the Leader, it acts as a facilitator and supportive partner.
21c3 Assessment Tool

Through the Sault Ste. Marie pilot project, we tested our draft assessment tool for the first time and discovered that the assessment process really should be a facilitated one. An objective, trained person can help lead the community through the complex asset areas, see things through new eyes, and promote consensus around how to prioritize the endless opportunities that are invariably uncovered through the assessment process.

Perhaps most important, a facilitated assessment process provides an important avenue for community engagement. Having a skilled facilitator meet with various stakeholders and present information and findings to the community is a great way to introduce the public to 21c3 concepts as critical economic development tools and also as key ways to improve quality of life within their community.

OVERVIEW OF THE 21c3 ASSESSMENT TOOL

**Purpose:** The 21c3 assessment tool is intended to assist communities in understanding their strengths in each asset area and the opportunities that may exist for further development.

**Background:** The content in each asset area reflects factors that have been identified by a broad base of research as critical to creating attractive places with quality of life amenities that appeal to key demographics, including young, college-educated “knowledge-based” workers, retiring baby-boomers and many in between. Visit our website, www.mml.org for specific references and the foundational research that supports these concepts.

**Outcomes:** A preliminary readiness assessment will help identify whether a sufficient level of interest and support exists to move ahead with a formal inventory and assessment process. If so, at the conclusion of the assessment process you will have an understanding of why each asset area is important to the economic vitality of our state, and how each relates to your specific community/region. Further, after completing the assessment process you will have the information necessary to strategically prioritize these assets within your community’s context to determine where to focus your attention and resources going forward. You will understand what your community **wants**, as well as what it **needs**, and where the greatest likelihood for success exists.

**Deliverables:**

1. A comprehensive list of key stakeholder groups in your region and an understanding of who your strongest potential partners will be.
2. A list of your community’s resources in each asset area.
3. A list of the opportunities to further explore in each asset area.
4. A preliminary prioritization of the opportunities/asset areas to focus on moving forward.
5. Ideas for leveraging additional resources (including identifying grant opportunities), potential new partnerships to pursue, and other suggested strategies.
6. Referrals to experts in the fields of interest identified.

Those interested in taking a preliminary readiness assessment can contact Heather Van Poucker at hvanpoucker@mml.org or 734.669-6326.