



EXPLORE...

Weekly Newsletter

Phil Power's Columns

Envision Michigan Story Contest

Community Conversations

Discussion Forum

Michigan Photos

LATEST POSTS

Great Debates Issue Guide: a playbook for this year's candidates

Class Size Matters: How Lansing can prevent cattle calls for kids

SUCCESS STORY: Accelerating the arts economy in West Michigan

A quick way to cut through the noise

GUEST COLUMN: Economic impacts of Latinos and baby boomers in Michigan

RECENT COMMENTS

Bob

: Rob Your leaving out the top three reasons why companies don't even consider Michigan as a place to...

Bob

: David David Your right. That's why companies are knocking the doors down to open factories and offices in...

KG-1

: I read the SFA Report, David. Interesting figures. It's a shame that they don't bear out with what...

Bob

: David You failed to mention how our great unions work for the benefit of all our companies. Also, if you travel...

David Waymire

: KG-1: I would like to suggest you visit the Senate Fiscal Agency's web page. There you will see...

MICHIGAN PHOTOS

FROM OUR MICHIGAN PHOTOS GROUP



Search input field

- CONTACT US
NEWSLETTER
ABOUT THE CENTER
MICHIGAN'S DEFINING MOMENT CAMPAIGN
DONATE
THE CENTER AT WORK

< No new taxes? Not necessarily, voters say Getting it done in the Michigan economy >

SUCCESS STORY: Downtowns innovate to thrive in recession

By The Center for Michigan - May 6, 2010

By Melissa Preddy

When Don and Cathy Comaianni scouted sites for a new bookstore-bistro, they were charmed by Northville's historic streetscape and eclectic downtown mix of shops, eateries and special events.

"We fell in love with Northville," said Don Comaianni. There was just one problem: None of the city's vacant storefronts offered enough space for the merchandise, espresso bar, outdoor cafe and other amenities the couple had in mind.

Elsewhere, that might've been the end of the story. Instead, what happened next illustrates how merchants in Plymouth and Northville's quaint downtowns have weathered the recession through cooperation, creative thinking and pulling together.

Northville officials swung into action and worked to relocate a smaller shop to a more suitable location around the corner from the too-small site the Comaiannis had been forced to reject. The move freed up an adjacent storefront; the dividing wall was knocked down and this week, The Next Chapter bookstore and cafe — and its 12 newly hired employees — will welcome the store's first customers.

"Everyone was very cooperative," said Dan Comaianni. "The historical commission worked with our architects, the city planners were very encouraging, and the DDA was instrumental in making our idea fit into Northville. Everyone did everything they could to expedite things for us."

Lori Ward, longtime director of Northville's downtown development authority, said this sort of cooperation among merchants has helped Northville's retail-heavy downtown weather the recession and emerge poised for growth instead of rebuilding.

"At our first merchants meeting of the year, some businesses said they were struggling, but many reported a great holiday season and were expecting to do well this year," said Ward, who noted that there is only one retail vacancy in Northville's entire downtown district. "A lot of that has to do with how these business owners have positioned and promoted themselves."

For example, Ward noted, a local art gallery started a First Friday event to draw patrons out; now sometimes local wine stores provide refreshments to gallery patrons in exchange for a bit of advertising during the events.

"They really package themselves and help each other out and pull together as a community," said Ward.

DDA funds are offered to local businesses through grants that match up to \$5,000 in spending on exterior upgrades. Comaianni, who says he and his wife sank more than \$200,000 of their own cash into upgrades, obtained a DDA grant that helped with The Next Chapter's new facade — which features 12-foot-high foldaway doors



STATE THEATER BY BEHIND BLUE EYES - STEVIE EXXXX

[CLICK TO VIEW THIS PHOTO ON FLICKR](#)

---

#### META

[Register](#)

[Log in](#)

---

#### RSS LINKS

[All posts](#)

[All comments](#)

---

#### ARCHIVES

Select Month

---

#### DONATE TO THE CENTER

[Click to Make a Tax-Deductible Gift to the Center](#)



that transform the front of the store into an open-air market café. It's already starred in a Lincoln-Mercury advertising shoot, and Hollywood scouts have toured the store as a potential set for a scene in a future movie.

About 40 other DDA grants since early 2008 have helped business owners with items ranging from pubs to jewelers to salons with new signage, windows and other outdoor spruce-ups.

Meanwhile, a \$2 million streetscape improvement is getting under way; Ward said about one-third of the project is funded by a Michigan Department of Transportation grant; the rest by the DDA. Energy-efficient lighting, sidewalks, benches and street repaving will improve accessibility for visitors and freshen the city's main thoroughfare.

"And some of it is keeping up with the Joneses," said Ward. "We compete for investors, visitors and shopping dollars. A slow economy is the best time for us to be doing this. We're getting great bids, it shows confidence in our community, and we'll be ready to go when the economy fully turns around."

Pride in Plymouth

A few miles south in Plymouth, merchants there also have found creative ways to pull together, said Tony Bruscato, DDA operations director.

On April 15, downtown eateries celebrated the tax return deadline with a Pub & Grub Crawl. For \$5, participants purchased a T-shirt that identified them to downtown bars and restaurants that served drink specials and free appetizers to the crawlers. Meanwhile, downtown retailers answered shopper questions and displayed their art, giftware and other merchandise within the restaurants.

"We had more than 1,000 people participating," said Bruscato. "The restaurants know they need the retailers, and vice versa. Visitors want a good variety of things to do here."

Last winter, Bruscato said, more retailers than usual banded together to sponsor ice carvings on their shared sidewalks, as part of the annual Plymouth International Ice Sculpture Spectacular festivities. "And at Christmas, some of them got together to organize special promotions," he said. "And they're already talking about making Plymouth a winter wonderland for next Christmas season."

Plymouth, like Northville, is investing in upgrades to its main intersections, including a giant decorative compass set in concrete at the base of the city's Kellogg Park gathering spot. But the centerpiece of downtown Plymouth continues to be the Penn Theater. The revival of the once-defunct 1940s movie house at the edge of the park is a relief to area business owners and illustrates the community's commitment to that small-town feel.

Closed in 2003, the Penn was in danger of being demolished until a grass-roots citizens effort created the non-profit "Friends of the Penn" group, which purchased the property and spared the single-screen theater from the wrecking ball. Reopened in 2006, the Penn now operates as a second-run film theater, concert hall and special-event venue with labor from dozens of volunteers.

The Penn runs classics and family movies on Thursdays, current movies on weekends and themed series like this spring's Hitchcock film festival. The community pops band and the Plymouth Symphony play there occasionally, and the lobby even has been rented out for weddings and corporate events.

Ellen Elliott, executive director of the Friends of the Penn, says revenue from the \$3 ticket sales covers the theater's operating expenses. On a good weekend, about 1,800 people view the current features, in addition to 200 or more showing up for the special Thursday showings.

"It's ongoing," said Elliott. "If people weren't coming to the movies on a weekly basis, there would be no reason for the theater to be there."

One patron survey showed "we had people from as many as 49 communities outside of Plymouth and Northville," she added. Special events like a recent charity auction drive donations for renovations, like the \$100,000 marquee that replicates the 1940s original. Coming soon: New front entrance doors and touch-ups to the

Hollywood mural on the theater's exterior façade.

"As a private enterprise the Penn was barely surviving," noted Bruscato. "Staffed by volunteers, it's thriving.

"Not too many communities have a focal point like that, a place people can migrate to," he said. "It's especially important in a place like Plymouth, that depends on the appeal of an older era."

This entry was written by [The Center for Michigan](#) and posted on at 12:28 pm and filed under [Fresh Thoughts](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Follow any comments here with the [RSS feed for this post](#). [Post a comment](#).

---

#### 4 COMMENTS

1. [George Brown](#)  
Posted May 6, 2010 at 2:11 pm | [Permalink](#)  
  
Great story about cooperation among downtown merchants and local government to expand the business base in these two communities. Are the folks in Jackson, Michigan getting this message?
2. [Judy Putnam](#)  
Posted May 6, 2010 at 6:36 pm | [Permalink](#)  
  
Thank you for a delightful story, Melissa. I am definitely adding Northville and Plymouth to my list of Michigan outings this summer.
3. [Bruce Snook](#)  
Posted May 7, 2010 at 9:44 am | [Permalink](#)  
  
I, too, thank you for an excellent story that I found interesting, encouraging and inspiring. It left me thinking that "we're on the right track" with many of the things we're doing in "Historic Downtown Three Rivers." And the reference to the Penn Theater in Plymouth had me thinking appreciatively of our own Riviera Theatre ([www.trriviera.com](http://www.trriviera.com)), which was restored and re-opened in the summer of 2008 and is now playing an important role in the revitalization of our downtown.  
  
Again, thanks for the article and best wishes!
4. [Cindy Timmerman](#)  
Posted May 11, 2010 at 9:07 pm | [Permalink](#)  
  
Thank you for this article. We are watching with interest!

---

#### POST A COMMENT

Your email is *never* published nor shared. Required fields are marked \*

Name \*

Email \*

Website

Comment