



Hillsdale County, Mi

Community Visioning and Economic Development Plan

Final Plan

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Jarret Consulting Services



Poggemeyer Design Group, Inc.

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Hillsdale County Economic Growth Group

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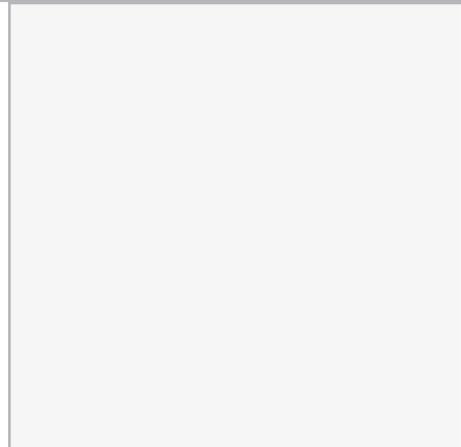
Executive Summary

For more than six months, the Hillsdale County Chamber of Commerce's Economic Growth Group (EGG) met to chart a new course for economic development. In recent years, plant closures, downsizings, and a generally sluggish national economy highlighted the need to re-assess local economic development efforts. The planning process used to chart this new course of action was a highly participatory one. Members of the EGG group felt strongly that meaningful, broad and extensive participation was needed. Therefore, substantial efforts were made to reach out to many segments of the community to create ownership and to make sure that all voices were heard and recorded.

Many things were learned during the public input phase of this work. At the four community visioning sessions, the general public expressed views that focused on needs such as: ensuring greater collaboration, diversifying the local economy, enhancing leadership and entrepreneurship, unifying marketing, developing art and culture as an economic engine, and improving infrastructure. Local industries were also surveyed, and it was learned that while many are optimistic about the future in terms of increasing business, many are concerned about the increasing cost of doing business such as workman's compensation, health care, property taxes, utilities and labor. Another key issue expressed was the fact that while increased business activity will likely lead to higher employment levels, anticipated gains are unlikely to totally offset past losses. Efforts to define local attitudes also included a survey of local high school seniors to determine how the next generation views local circumstances. Many of these future community leaders expressed desires to relocate to other places, and many indicated that they are at least somewhat likely to someday start their own businesses. Finally, focus group sessions in each of the downtowns and business districts throughout Hillsdale County provided insights into the unique local opportunities and challenges of each of these areas.

This public input, together with analysis of socio-economic trends at the local, state and national levels, helped form the basis for new economic development strategies for Hillsdale County. These strategies were developed by members of the EGG group and were refined in extensive work sessions. Apart from the individualized strategies for each business district, some of the key overarching county-wide strategies include the following:

1. While Hillsdale County must continue to do everything possible to attract new industry from outside, it must also look inward at opportunities to establish and grow local businesses. These initiatives might include everything from new technology to art and culture-related activities. To support these local endeavors and build on local conservative values, a new Center for Entrepreneurship, including a busi-



ness incubator, is recommended to spur small business development.

2. Economic Development should rise to a higher level from an organizational perspective. Now, economic development functions are somewhat fragmented. A new umbrella organization called the Hillsdale County Economic Development Partnership is needed to help make sure that efforts are coordinated and all resources are spent as efficiently as possible. With this, responsibilities of the Hillsdale County Chamber of Commerce are to be broadened and expressly oriented toward business development activities in addition to a new Convention and Visitor's Bureau. Similarly, the responsibilities of the Industrial Development Commission are also to be broadened and oriented toward real estate development, including supporting the improvement of the County's downtowns and business districts.
3. Certain areas in Hillsdale County present opportunities for focused and larger scale redevelopment efforts. Once such area is west of downtown Hillsdale, and can serve as a model for other economic development initiatives.
4. The uniqueness of Hillsdale County is something to be celebrated. The notoriety of Hillsdale College, puts the area in the national spotlight, and can serve as a foundation for an identified brand for consistent marketing and messaging in economic development efforts, to be carried out with the aid of a new Convention and Visitor's Bureau.
5. Arts and culture are a component of the economic development strategy, and include the creation of an art, culture, and entertainment district. Related efforts include assisting antique businesses in Allen to form an association to more effectively market the area as a destination.



Introduction - Planning Process

The Hillsdale County Community Visioning and Economic Development Plan is the result of a process that involved extensive and broad community participation from many sectors of the community. The consultant team consisting of Jarret Consulting Services and Poggemeyer Design Group, Inc. worked closely with members of the Hillsdale County Chamber of Commerce's Economic Growth Group (EGG) through all phases of the planning process. In addition, perspectives and recommendations were gathered from the community through the following:

- Community profile and trends analysis. A review and analysis of past reports and data sources was conducted to better understand the County's changing economic characteristics and quality of life. This analysis is included as part of this document.
- Stakeholder interviews. Interviews were conducted with approximately thirty community stakeholders, offering a wide range of perspectives and experiences. A Stakeholder Interview Report is included within this document;
- Visioning meetings. Four Visioning sessions were held throughout the County to help assess local attitudes, needs, and desires regarding economic development in Hillsdale County. These sessions, along with other elements of the process, shaped an overall Vision for the County. A report providing the results of the visioning process is also included in this document.
- Focus groups. The consultants facilitated eleven focus groups, nine of which were targeted to the downtowns and business districts within the County. These sessions were helpful in defining strengths, weakness, visions and strategies for the respective districts. An additional focus group was compromised of industrial representatives, while another session consisted of government administrators.
- Industrial survey. A survey was conducted of industries located within the County to assist in further defining economic development issues. The survey results are included in this report.
- High school student survey. A survey of high school students was also conducted to gain some perspective on the attitudes of local youth. These survey results are included in this document.



Based upon this process, an overall long-term vision was defined and long-term goals and strategies were crafted to attain this vision. These goals and strategies included the following:

- Enhancement of the downtowns and business districts within the County;
- Industrial retention and expansion;
- Industrial attraction;
- Designation of an Economic Renewal Corridor;
- Tourism;
- Agriculture;
- Art, Culture and Entertainment;
- Establishment of a Center for Entrepreneurship to support small business development;
- Branding Hillsdale County;
- A more collaborative and comprehensive organizational structure for carrying out the economic development vision and plan.

First year actions are identified as an initial work plan to carryout the five-year vision. This element of the plan includes a detailed work plan and milestones to guide the community's actions over the next year to initiate the process of attaining the community's economic development vision.

