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# **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR MICHIGAN SMALL TOWNS: HOW PLACEMAKING, AGRITOURISM, AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES CAN STIMULATE SMALL-TOWN MICHIGAN ECONOMIES**

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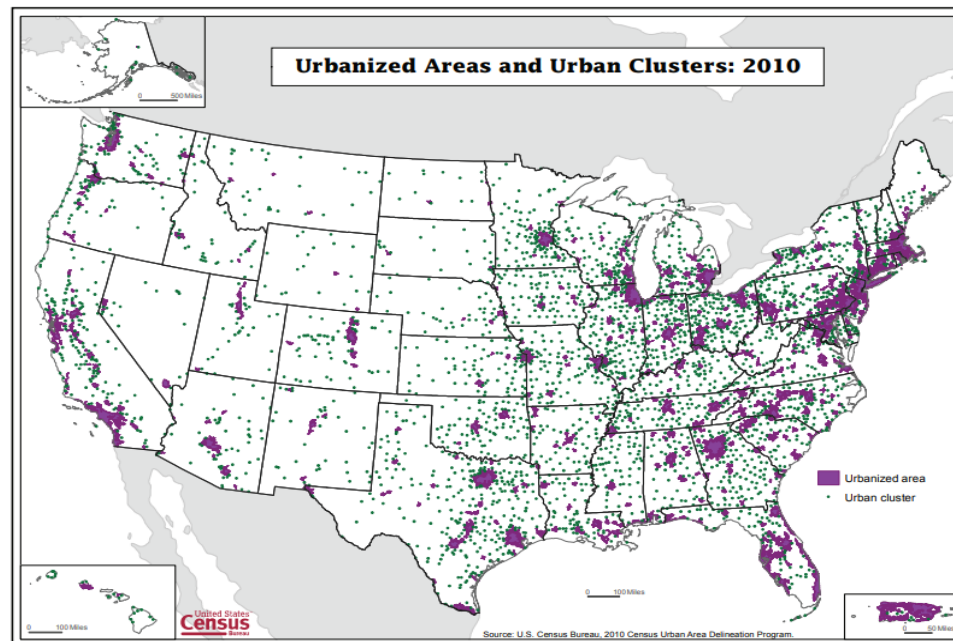
## **ABSTRACT**

*There have been increased efforts in recent years to diversify self-sustainable economies in small towns in the United States. Small towns face unique issues that are absent in high-density urban areas, such as declining populations and an over-reliance on one sector for their economic wellbeing. The specific research question this paper explores is what tools, strategies, and policy decisions can Michigan small-town communities do to strengthen their economic base? There are several strategies, policy decisions, and partnerships that can be created to promote economic development within small towns. Many small towns need to reform their existing zoning laws to allow for place-based economic development approaches. Zoning laws must be conducive to placemaking and not hinder it. Placemaking not only ensures a sense of loyalty, trust, and a feeling of “place” within small towns, but it will also help to increase the economic viability of small towns by promoting the relationship between residents and businesses. Facade grant improvement programs can also help to improve the appearance of downtown businesses and increase property values. Local libraries can serve as assets for small towns in training the workforce and local business community on how to stay competitive in fluctuating markets. Agritourism provides several benefits to small-town communities by preserving natural features in proximity to agritourism businesses, as well as by adding more revenue to the local economy and an influx of employment opportunities for both full-time and part-time workers. Several case studies specific to Michigan are then presented to depict the success of such strategies and policy decisions. The cities of Holland and Petoskey are recognized for their efforts to create a sense of place within their downtowns. Further, the public libraries in the City of Negaunee and Gladwin County are highlighted for their ability to partner with neighboring institutions and prepare the local workforce and business owners on how to stay up-to-date in the digital age amongst challenges presented by COVID-19 and limited internet access. The research concludes by drawing connections to the leadership, ethical, and technical competencies. Further, the research recommends utilizing a combination of these economic development strategies to improve small-town economies. In doing so, this will ultimately help to ensure that local economies are diversified and self-sustainable.*

## INTRODUCTION

Economic development practices in rural and small-town communities in the U.S. can encompass numerous approaches and have different metrics for success. As the general population in the U.S. is becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of supporting local economies, economic development practices need to reflect the same. Endeavors such as easing zoning restrictions to allow for placemaking, the promotion of agritourism, and the significance of local libraries are important strategies for small-town economies to embrace. However, it is important to set the proper criteria when talking about economic development initiatives for small towns. Defining small towns in contrast to rural and urban areas has been a challenge in the U.S. because of the vast differences amongst the varying perceptions of rural vs urban. For instance, some may picture rural as expansive farmland, whereas some may define a rural area as communities that exist on the fringe of urban areas. There is further debate over whether rural should be defined geographically or in terms of density, population, or land use. For this research, small towns will be defined based on population. The U.S. Census Bureau expanded the definition of urban in 2000 to include two classifications: urbanized areas and urban clusters (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). To shed light on the difference between the two, Ratcliffe et al. (2016) explain, “Urbanized areas are areas with 50,000 or more people. Urban clusters are areas with at least 2,500 but fewer than 50,000 people” (p. 3). The research and findings presented in the following sections will analyze tactics and case studies for communities that are classified as urban clusters per the U.S. Census Bureau. Further, urban clusters will be referred to as “small towns” throughout the bulk of this essay. To create a better understanding of where urban areas and clusters are located in the U.S., Ratcliffe et al. provide a visual representation of urbanized areas and urban clusters in their research, which is included below in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:**



Source: Ratcliffe et al. 2016

In analyzing economic development strategies for small towns in the U.S., this paper focuses on several tools small town communities can utilize to increase the economic viability of

local populations. First, a literature review will be presented that focuses on the economic development tools available, including zoning laws that allow for placemaking, agritourism, and public libraries. Further, this paper will focus on case studies specific to the State of Michigan, providing real-life examples of economic development approaches to boost local economies. The specific research question this paper explores is *what tools, strategies, and policy decisions can Michigan small-town communities do to strengthen their economic base?* Lastly, limitations to the research will then be presented, followed by a conclusion of the findings, recommendations for Michigan's small towns, and connections to the technical, ethical, and leadership competencies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As many parts of the U.S. have become more urbanized in recent decades, there has been a greater emphasis on how small towns in the U.S. can strengthen their local economies. Urban areas are not suitable for all populations, and we need economically viable small towns to ensure the economic diversity and prosperity in the U.S., which often include the economic sectors of farming, manufacturing, and small businesses. The International Economic Development Council (IECD) (2017) explains that local initiatives for economic development are becoming more established, even among the general population. In a 2014 American Planning Association (APA) poll of millennials and baby boomers, 68% believe that economic development over the next five years must be centered around local investments that make cities, suburbs, and small towns ideal places to live. Small-town communities are especially vulnerable to fragile economies as their economic base tends to rely heavily on one sector. Therefore, having a diverse economic base is a necessity for growing a strong and self-sustainable local economy.

### Placemaking

There are many approaches to economic development that can be used to strengthen small-town economies. Placemaking is a useful tool that involves capitalizing on an area's strengths by empowering factors such as culture, demographics, history, and geography. Placemaking is not only an important concept for building strong and connected communities, but it can also help to enrich local economies. The concept is best explained by Hes and Hernandez-Satin (2020), as "Placemaking can be understood as an intentional process of situating, revealing and creating meaningful environments" (p. vii). The environments in which we live, work, and play is unique to us. Creating a meaningful sense of place does not always involve million-dollar economic development projects attracting tourism from other areas, but rather can be created by empowering the local people and making small changes to the external environment to bring people together. Placemaking can also help to improve the relationship between people and the built environment, which ultimately creates a greater sense of loyalty and pride within the community. Therefore, an important component to successfully implementing economic development practices is the use of place-based policies, which help to define and shape a sense of place, ultimately leading to an enriched local economy. To better understand the significance of place, Matthew Carmona (2019) explains:

The international literature suggests that whoever we are, our everyday engagement with the places in which we live, work and play will influence, for good or ill, the lives we lead, the opportunities available to us, and our personal and communal happiness, identity and sense of belonging. (p. 1)

Carmona posits that people identify with the places in which they live, work, and play and that these places tend to dictate their livelihood, for better or for worse. Ideally, the practice of emphasizing place should be enticing and meaningful. In doing so, place-based economic development can then be useful for boosting local economies. When people are connected to the community in which they reside, the local economy naturally benefits as there is an increasing desire to support locals and maintain that sense of place. Carmona's (2019) research seeks to investigate the relationship between the quality of place and the value of its outcomes: health, social well-being, economic success, and environmental sustainability. Further, embracing a sense of place can have numerous benefits for communities, including, but certainly not limited to, increased property values in residential neighborhoods, improvements in the retail sector, reduced vacancies of residential and commercial properties, community investment, increased community support and competition for development, lower crime and policing costs, a stronger tax base, and lower costs of living (Carmona, 2019). Emphasizing place not only creates stronger community connection and involvement but also helps to promote the economic wellbeing of the local population.

Placemaking is a useful strategy to promote the economic base of main streets and downtowns. As the heart of small towns, downtowns are cultural hubs that naturally bring people together, therefore acting as an obvious place for placemaking. Zoning laws in downtowns must be conducive to placemaking; the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU) and Michigan Municipal League (MML) (2018) recommend several zoning amendments to better allow for placemaking, including establishing maximum front setbacks, requiring parking to be located behind buildings, and allowing for mixed-use and multi-family residential uses within downtown districts, among many others. Buildings need to be situated close to the sidewalks and main streets; when buildings are far away from the sidewalks, "streetscape enclosure is eroded and vibrancy suffers" (CNU & MML, 2018, p. 21); therefore, CNU and MML (2018) recommend establishing a maximum setback of 10 feet in downtowns. Further, parking should only be permitted behind buildings as on-street parking and parking structures hinder walkability, reduce the number of street trees, and can create safety hazards with cars pulling in and out (CNU & MML, 2018). Additionally, CNU and MML (2018) explain that allowing for mixed-use and multi-family housing in downtown districts will help to support the businesses in the downtown area. This not only includes permitting residential use above the ground floor in traditional downtowns but also allows for stand-alone residential uses.

Another way to enhance placemaking in small towns is through façade improvement grant programs. Façade improvement grant programs help to improve the appearance of buildings in downtowns, as well as to increase property values. In a case study of the downtown Business Improvement District (BID) in Kalispell, Montana, Gibson et al. (2021) explain that from 2013 to 2017, properties in the Kalispell BID saw an increase in taxable value after the implementation of a façade improvement grant program. Grantees and adjoining properties saw an increase of 0.07 USD per square foot increase on average, and while this only accounted for a small portion of the funds that were allocated for the program, it does show economic improvements that will multiply into future years (Gibson et al., 2021). Façade grant programs are useful tools for making downtowns more aesthetically pleasing and vibrant, which will help to draw people in and create a sense of place. Further, façade grant programs can also increase the taxable value of downtowns for small-town communities, which will help to improve their economic base.

## **Agritourism**

Agritourism can also be a useful strategy for boosting the local economies of small towns. Van Sandt et. al (2019) describe agritourism as “...any revenue-generating enterprise that takes place on a working farm or ranch and provide some service or recreation to visitors for a monetary fee” (p. 429). In analyzing nearly 1.3 million observations of farm-level data from the USDA’s 2012 Census of Agriculture, Van Sandt et. al. created a series of maps to show the relationship between agritourism enterprises in the United States with gross revenue. The models show that agritourism has been successful in increasing farm profitability. Van Sandt et al. (2019) explain, “Between 2002 and 2012, the number of farms and ranches with agritourism operations grew over 18 percent and real average agritourism revenue per agritourism establishment increased by 130 percent” (p. 431). However, it is important to note that farms with agritourism operations only make up 1.5 percent of total farms in the US, which means that there is room for growth within this sector (Van Sandt et. al., 2019). Van Sandt et. al. (2019) also found that agricultural activities that are driven by human interaction are significant pull factors for economic activity tied to agritourism, such as wineries, pick-your-own fruits and vegetables, and specialty livestock like petting zoos. However, Van Sandt. et. al. (2019) also determined that the impact of such activities is heavily dependent on the size of the agritourism business in the area. Further, agritourism can serve as a strong economic development tool to help strengthen small-town economies. Veeck et al. (2016) explain that agritourism can have several positive commercial, ecological, social, and cultural impacts, however, more information is needed to determine the specific economic contributions of the industry.

## **Public Libraries**

Local libraries can also help to strengthen economies in rural and small-town communities. Gallagher and Ehlman (2020) explain, “Libraries not only function as cultural hubs but are actively engaged in creative placemaking... The American Library Association has argued that libraries are positioned to partner in creative placemaking initiatives” (p. 99). Local libraries offer a variety of resources that are accessible to children and adults to enrich their knowledge of local artists, cultural artifacts, and regional history. In turn, this increased education and awareness of what makes each community unique can create a desire for creative placemaking initiatives, or at least an increased appreciation when they are implemented. Although local libraries can be extremely useful resources for educating communities, Gallagher and Ehlman conclude that they have not yet been able to document any specific results of these efforts. However, examples are discussed later in this essay which outline specific initiatives local libraries can take to strengthen rural and small-town economies.

The bulk of this essay will expand on specific economic development practices that have been shown to help to stimulate small-town economies in the US. Through real-life examples of communities and approaches in Michigan, it is evident that thriving local economies must incorporate both tangible and intangible improvements, thus creating a need for a hybrid model of economic development that encompasses a combination of the strategies outlined in this essay.

## APPLICATION OF THEORY

There are specific actions rural and small-town communities can take to increase their economic viability, such as changing their zoning regulations, providing accessible public spaces, and even façade grant funding. Rural and small-town communities also have the opportunity to engage in place-based economic development; placemaking can help to improve local economies by capitalizing on the area's existing strengths and uplifting the people that live in rural and small-town communities. Further, local libraries can serve as valuable assets that provide educational and professional development opportunities, partnerships, and initiatives to grow small businesses and entrepreneurs in the area. The research indicates that there are tangible results to these economic development tools, particularly for rural and small-town economies, and should be implemented in a hybrid form, if possible, by encompassing several strategies in cohesive and comprehensive economic development policies.

### **Agritourism in Michigan**

Looking at Michigan's agritourism sector holistically, there are plenty of benefits to promoting agritourism. The survey results provide information on the effects of agritourism on local economies including employment, sales, and taxes paid. Veeck et al. (2016) analyzed data from the Western Michigan University/MATA survey of 154 agritourism operations in Michigan in the summer and fall of 2013 to explore these benefits. The survey found that most of the agritourism operations in Michigan are farm markets (33.6 percent), animal-related firms (18.4 percent), and orchards (11.8 percent) (Veeck et al., 2016). Further, the survey showed that the agritourism industry in Michigan helps to provide additional income to farmers to cope with fluctuating markets conditions, as well as preserve agricultural land and natural amenities close to farms, including forests and streams (Veeck et al., 2016). Additionally, when analyzing the data, Veeck et al. (2016) found that the total tax revenues of the farms with agritourism operations in Michigan contributed a total of \$13.7 million and had estimated gross sales of \$434 million in 2012. An extrapolation of the data also found that agritourism operations in Michigan provided nearly 4,000 full-time annual jobs, which does not include unpaid family members, and approximately \$28,000 part-time employees (Veeck et al., 2016). The social and economic benefits of the agritourism industry in Michigan are vast. Therefore, it is in the best interest of small towns to promote agritourism operations, which is typically done by loosening zoning restrictions, to reap the numerous benefits of the sector and increase economic prosperity for the region.

Local governments can create policies that are conducive to agritourism. For example, Acme Township in Michigan (population of 4,717) amended its zoning ordinance in 2012 to allow for agritourism activities permitted by right and special land use (Acme Township 2011; U.S. Census Bureau). This ordinance amendment defined agritourism as the State of Michigan defines it, allowing small-scale entertainment like haunted houses, and allowing for spaces like weddings, birthday parties, and similar events (Acme Township, 2011). Acme Township's ordinance amendment allows for uses permitted by right such as Seasonal U-Pick fruits and vegetables, seasonal outdoor corn mazes, agricultural festivals, bakeries, petting farms, hayrides, nature trails, educational classes, and gift shops (Acme Township, 2008). Special land uses related to agritourism under this ordinance amendment include, but are not limited to, greenhouses and nurseries selling on the premises, sawmills, farmer's roadside markets, small-scale entertainment, wineries, and distilleries (Acme Township, 2008). This is merely one

example of how agritourism can be promoted within the realm of local economic development, particularly centered around the needs of rural and small-town communities.

### **Local Zoning Reform and Placemaking in Michigan Downtowns**

Zoning reform can be implemented to improve the economic climates of rural and small-town communities. Current zoning regulations, for example, must be examined so that they are truly encouraging development and not hindering it. Multi-use buildings in downtown areas can also benefit downtowns and local economies. In Holland, Michigan, (population of 33,402; U.S. Census Bureau) Arendt (2015) explains that the key to creating a successful downtown area is to promote upper-story use; nearly half of the upper floor space in Holland is residential, which ensures that there is life in the downtown area even after shops are closed. Holland also provides parking behind its main street buildings, which allows people to have greater access to retailers as they can now utilize back entrances. The use of off-street parking in downtown areas is also important as it allows for easier access to businesses, whereas street parking may deter residents from shopping in downtown areas. By setting standards for zoning regulations in downtown areas, economic development will be stimulated as the synergy between businesses and people is conducive to development and economic prosperity.

Façade grant programs can also contribute to small-town economies. For example, the appearance of building facades plays a major role in the viability of a community. If buildings in each downtown area have front façades that are dilapidated and worn, economic development will be a fruitless endeavor. Therefore, many communities often must rely on façade loans and other grant programs to remedy this issue. The IEDC (2017) explains:

Façade loan and grant programs are a common tool to incentivize businesses to improve their appearance from the street. These investments are usually low-cost improvements, but they can go a long way toward improving aesthetics and helping attract new economic interest and investment. (p. 27)

To provide context, the City of Petoskey, Michigan, (population of 5,877; Data Commons, 2022) created a façade grant program in 2009 to help the community improve the appearance of buildings downtown. The goal of the façade grant program is, “to preserve historic façade, achieve quality façade improvement, and encourage economic investment within Downtown Petoskey” (City of Petoskey, 2022). For every grant dollar that is distributed, the applicant must spend a minimum of one dollar; this highly competitive grant program allows individual grants to local businesses up to fifty percent of the project cost estimates or actual project cost, whichever is less. For the 2022 Fiscal Year, the City of Petoskey’s Downtown Management Board has allocated \$20,000 in grant funding to improve building facades (City of Petoskey, 2022). Both property owners and leaseholders with the property owner’s permission can apply for the grant but must follow an adopted set of design guidelines, which was created using data from public input sessions with assistance from Urban Development Services, a company based out of San Antonio, Texas. In creating a program to revitalize the core downtown, the City of Petoskey has been able to beautify its downtown area and spawn new development in the community.



## **Public Libraries in Michigan: Negaunee and Gladwin County**

Public libraries can spur economic development in small towns by providing resources to budding entrepreneurs. According to Hamilton-Pennell (2008), public libraries can help to grow businesses by educating staff, proving return on investment, and providing online and print resources to support businesses and their workforce. However, the benefits libraries provide to communities are dependent upon the librarian and their willingness to step outside of their traditional role and get involved in the business community. By focusing on partnerships, librarians can set up small business information centers offering services and online business databases, chair local chamber of commerce committees or serve on the chamber board itself, offer classes to small business owners, partner with local Small Business Development Center counselors to provide business research and collaborate with the local workforce centers to train the local workforce (Hamilton-Pennell, p. 3). There are numerous other approaches public libraries can take to grow the local business community. For instance, Hamilton-Pennell (2008) explains that local libraries can create small business information centers, become active in local economic development initiatives like Main Street programs and venture capital clubs, partner with the local SCORE chapter, set up a mentorship program using retired business leaders to mentor new businesses, and create and host networking opportunities (p. 6).

Further, public libraries can help to provide resources to small-town entrepreneurs and business owners. The American Library Association (ALA) (2020) explains that public libraries in Michigan have been proven to help the working class prepare for and secure employment opportunities by providing resources for resume writing and interviewing, providing internet access and digital skills, and collaborating with other stakeholders within the community to identify challenges facing the local workforce. There are several public libraries in Michigan currently working on such initiatives. For instance, the Negaunee Public Library provides services to the individual residents and businesses in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The City of Negaunee has a population of 4,627 (Data Commons, 2022) and has faced challenges with a reliable job market and limited internet access due to its rural setting. In response to these challenges and the economic hardships associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Negaunee Public Library created a partnership with Michigan Tech University (MTU) to train the local youth using the Building Adult Skills in Computing (BASIC) program to prepare for employment opportunities (ALA, 2020). The Gladwin County District Library, which serves a population of 25,386 (Data Commons, 2022) offered Get your Business Online classes to local business owners, which helped small local "mom and pop" businesses create websites and make their products and services more competitive. The Gladwin County District Library also assisted local business owners by providing tools for how to appear in online searches, how to list business hours, locations, and services, as well as using metrics to measure success. Further, the Gladwin County District Library has continued to offer support to business owners by "offering one-on-one assistance with business resources and digital tools" (ALA, 2020, p. 2). The Gladwin County District Library has a program budget of only \$2,000-\$3,000, however, partnerships within the community help to support the library's endeavors, including Michigan Works! and the local Chamber of Commerce to create a business resource library within the community (ALA, 2020). Local libraries provide a wealth of opportunities for growing local business climates. Education is necessary for small businesses to succeed, and with the right people on board and by forming new and creative partnerships, local libraries can serve as a great asset to rural and small-town economies.

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Metrics of success for economic development policies can be both qualitative and quantitative for small-town communities. For instance, success may include increased property values, abundant local revenue streams, and the number of jobs created. These are all tangible ways to measure whether economic development practices are successful. However, we can also rely on qualitative data as well. Since local populations know their communities best, which is especially true for rural and small-town communities, successful economic development and placemaking endeavors may result in an overall “feeling” of success, such as increased citizen participation, the collaboration between businesses, and ultimately a renewed sense of community. Local governments can also disperse community-wide surveys online, or via U.S. mail if broadband is not available, to get feedback on what economic development approaches are working. Although qualitative results are not always effective measures of success, they can serve as good indicators of the early results of economic development practices and if they are going to work with the characteristics of the community. The research presented in the former part of this essay has additional limitations to be noted. Agritourism in Michigan is a growing sector that contributes to local economies, however, many of the operating farms in Michigan do not have agritourism operations. Further, it can be difficult to define what is agritourism versus regular farming operations. It can also be difficult to gather data from cash-only fruit and vegetable stands, which are common in Michigan yet not included in the research. Public libraries can be assets for small towns in educating the workforce and assisting the business community with resources and information to stay competitive. However, libraries often have limited funding. Additionally, library staff must be willing to form partnerships within the community and act outside of their regular duties to foster these educational opportunities.

To conclude, economic development in small-town communities can embody numerous approaches. These topics also directly relate to the technical, ethical, and leadership competencies as outlined by Bowman et al. (2014). Placemaking has been successful in improving the viability of communities and creating an overall sense of place for both businesses and people. However, for communities to reap the benefits of placemaking, zoning laws must often be analyzed and amended to allow for better vibrancy and a community feel. This may include establishing maximum building setbacks, requiring parking behind businesses in downtown areas, and allowing for mixed-use and stand-alone residential housing in downtown districts. Further, façade grant programs can help to improve the appearance, structure, and longevity of building facades in downtowns, which will also help to create a sense of place, bring more people into the downtown to shop at businesses, and increase property values. The topic of placemaking and façade grant improvement programs directly relates to Bowman et al.’s (2014) technical competency as it requires specialized knowledge on behalf of the city, township, village, or county staff to implement. Since zoning laws are legally binding, legal knowledge will also be required to execute this successfully. Moreover, agritourism can be especially beneficial to small-town communities in Michigan, however, the research shows that this sector has room for growth. Nonetheless, agriculture can help to sustain farming operations, preserve natural resources in proximity to agricultural businesses, add full-time and part-time jobs, and create additional revenue streams within the regional economy. Agritourism directly relates to the ethical competency presented by Bowman et al. (2014); residents of small towns must reprioritize their values, if need be, to embody a mindset that supports local farmers. One could

argue that residents have a moral obligation to support farmers and agritourism operations because not only does it help to support small-scale farmers and their families, but it is also recycling money back into the local economy. Further, local libraries can serve as valuable assets to provide community-wide partnerships and educate the local workforce and business owners on how to stay competitive in fluctuating markets. Local libraries are relevant to the leadership competency explained by Bowman et al. (2014) since library staff and leaders of community business organizations must be willing to form the necessary partnerships to make this successful. Additionally, local libraries can also help to foster leadership within others, whether it be the local community workforce or the business community, by empowering them to learn and grow. Overall, small-town communities are most successful when using a combination of the strategies described in this essay as this will help to ensure a self-sustainable and diversified local economy.

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# **About the Author**

Natalie Davenport currently works as the Assistant Planner for Gaines Charter Township. With experience working in various local government offices in Michigan, her research interests include place-based economic development, downtown development, rural and small-town development, and zoning reform.

Throughout her time at Grand Valley State University, Natalie worked for the Village of Sparta as the Assistant to the Village Manager and Code Enforcement Officer, while holding a part-time internship with the Sparta Downtown Development Authority and Chamber of Commerce. Natalie's work in Sparta provided several mentorships and community ties that would ultimately ignite her passion for public service.

Natalie holds a Master of Public Administration from Grand Valley State University (2022) and a Bachelor of Science from Central Michigan University (2018) where she studied political science and sociology.

During her time at GVSU, Natalie served as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) Student Chapter President (2021-2022) and was the recipient of the Graduate School's Academic Excellence Award for Service to the Community/Profession. She has career aspirations in municipal management.

