



CITY OF BIG RAPIDS

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

TRAILTOWN
of PURE MICHIGAN[®]

Table of Contents

Part One: Overview	3
Summary of Key Information.....	3
Table 1: Key Statistics.....	5
Part Two: Economic Development Process	6
Summary or Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT), & Suggestions.....	6
Part Three: Local & Regional Economic Development Goals	7
Local & County Goals.....	7
Regional Goals.....	8
Part Four: Economic Development Strategy	9
Strategic Objectives.....	9
Part Five: Implementation Matrix	12
Appendix	13
Appendix A: SWOT Analysis & Suggestions from Community Input.....	14
Appendix B: Implementation Partners.....	18
Appendix C: Other Sources.....	19

I. Overview

Summary of key information

The City of Big Rapids is the county seat of Mecosta County and the only city within the county's boundaries. Though located within Big Rapids Township, it is politically independent. Originally called Leonard, the town grew and prospered, profiting from the vast forest of pine which was chopped and floated down the Muskegon River to the metropolises where the wood was used. At first people avoided the name of Leonard saying, "I'll meet you by the big rapids," and thus the town took on the name of Big Rapids when it got its first post office. The area was already a major logging center at the time but the industry, however, soon began to wane. So, residents turned to making equipment related to logging, such as saws, blades, and sharpening tools. Several of those firms remain today. Since 1884, Big Rapids has been home to a four-year, public, Division II athletics, Division I hockey university, the Ferris State Bulldogs.

Present day, Big Rapids is located along the US 131 Interstate and is in close proximity to bigger cities like Grand Rapids and Traverse City while still being able to enjoy living in a rural setting. Recreation in Big Rapids offers a variety of year-round opportunities for all outdoor enthusiasts. Here in Mother Nature's playground there are endless trails across the region for hiking, biking, snowmobiling, or snowshoeing. In the city there are nine public parks, two city-operated trails, and falls at the midpoint of the linear 91-mile Fred Meijer White Pine Trail. The White Pine Trail is located along the old Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad that dates back over 150 years. In the 1990's, the railroad line was converted to a "Rail-to-Trail," with the 13 miles from Big Rapids to Reed City being the first section paved. According to the National Rails to Trails Conservancy, the White Pine Trail is designated as one of the Top 100 Rails to Trails in the nation.

Population

The City of Big Rapids has an estimated population size of 8,976 and a median age of 22. The population size decreased between the 2010 and 2020 Census, and the City is exploring whether or not a census recount may be worthwhile due to the impacts a population decrease has on economic development efforts. By having a medium-sized public university like Ferris State right in the center of the city, the population of full-time residents somewhat fluctuates due to the movement of college students. The large presence of college-aged people skews the median age to the younger side.

Labor Force

The economy in Big Rapids employs 5.3k people. The largest industries are education, retail trade, and health care & social assistance. Though those are the largest industries present in the community the most common job groups are sales & related occupations, office & administrative support occupations, and food preparation & serving related occupations. Compared to other places, Big Rapids has an unusually high number of residents working as health technologists & technicians, food preparation & serving related occupations, and personal care & service occupations. The highest paid jobs held by residents in the community are health technologists & technicians, healthcare practitioners & technical operations, and health diagnosing & treating practitioners & other technical occupations (usadata.io, 2020). Some of the largest employers in the area include Ferris State University, Spectrum Health, Original Footwear, Big Rapids Products, Federal Screw Works, and Haworth.

Household Income

The City of Big Rapids has a poverty rate at 37.7% with a median household income of \$28,628 (datausa.io, 2020).

Housing

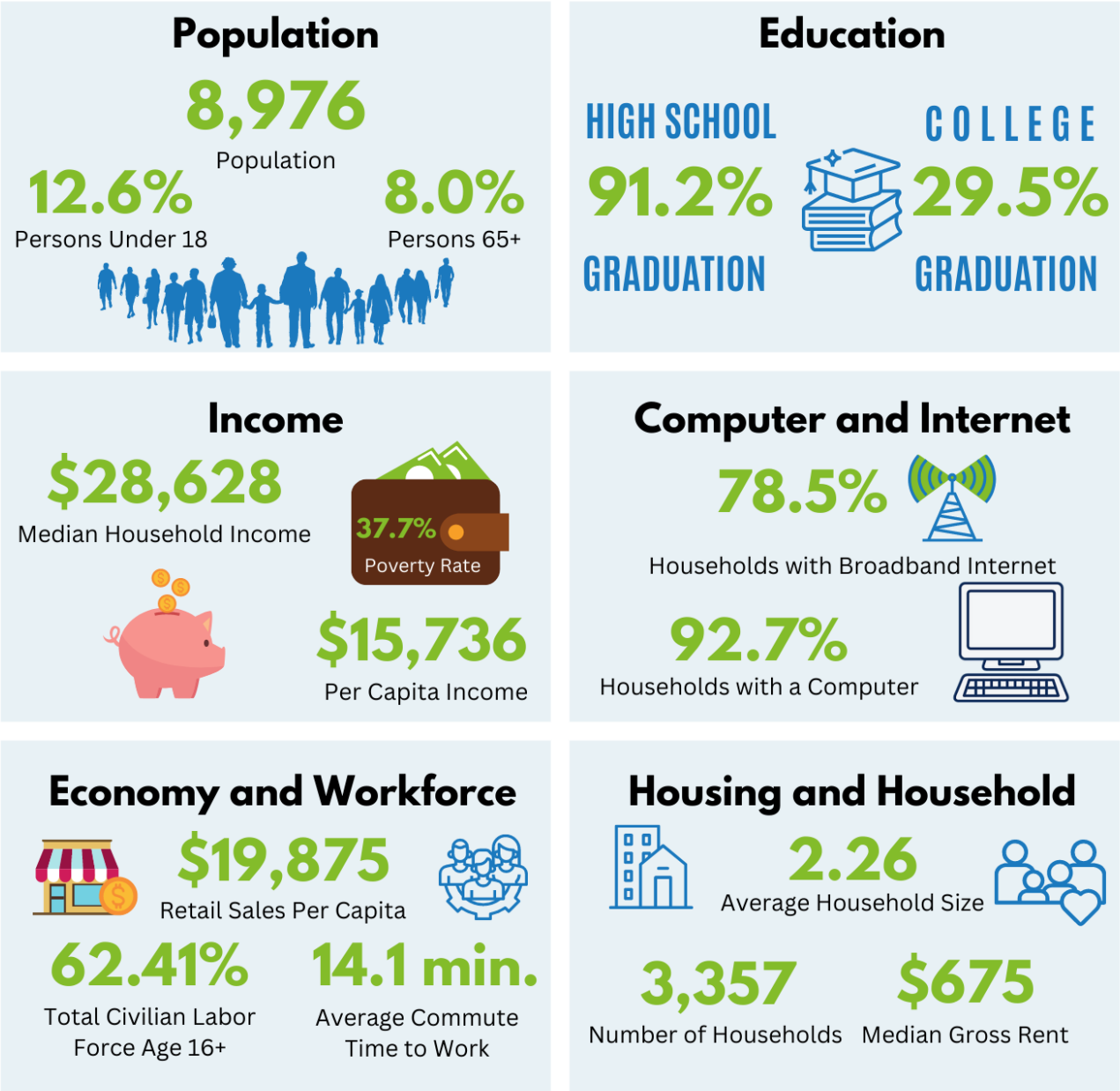
Big Rapids is a community where more residents rent their home than own their home. There are a total of 3,357 households reported to the US Census from 2016-2020. Between 2019 and 2020 the median property value increased from \$93,900 to \$100,100, a 6.6% increase. The home ownership rate in Big Rapids is 40.6%, which is lower than the national average of 64.4%. People living in the city have an average commute of 14.1 minutes, and they report driving to work alone. Car ownership in Big Rapids is an average of 2 cars per household, same as the national average.

While the City is not a developer and does not build housing, the City does have several roles to play in ensuring that residents of Big Rapids have the safe and attainable housing they wish to have. In 2020, the City commissioned a study of the local housing market. The final Report includes a narrative summary of the findings, two market potential analyses based on an aggressive and a conservative approach, a breakdown of the lifestyle clusters of Big Rapids residents, profiles of the target market for Big Rapids homeowners and renters, movership rates, a real estate analysis, market parameters, residential building typology information, and a summary of Missing Middle Housing in Michigan. The findings of this report are being used by City staff, the Planning Commission, and the City Commission to analyze and amend City Ordinance and policies around housing, with the goal that Big Rapids has housing to meet the needs of current and future residents.

Education

The high school graduation rate is high in persons 25 years of age or older at 91.2%. Those 25 years of age or older that hold a Bachelor's degree or higher reflects 29.5% of the population.

Table 1: Key Statistics



II. Economic Development Process

As part of the planning process for this strategy, City Staff hosted two community input sessions and attended the City's annual Chili Cook Off event to engage with a variety of stakeholders and residents and gather their visions for future development. The input sessions were structured to complete a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis. The SWOT analysis was followed up by a breakout for participants to place their commercial development wishes on maps of the four commercial districts present. In addition, an Economic Development Strategy Committee was established to ensure stakeholders were invited into the planning process.

Below is a summary of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and suggestions that were provided by residents. A detailed compilation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and suggestions provided by residents can be found in Appendix A.

Strengths

The strengths that residents identified highlighted many of the great amenities Big Rapids has to offer such as sidewalks/bike lands, Katke Golf Course, the local parks/trails system, and annual local events. Many observed strengths based on the geographic location of Big Rapids and its proximity to Interstate 131 and M-20; in addition to having a municipal owned airport and the economic opportunities that provides. Services such as Corewell Heath and strong local public schools were also identified as strengths for the community.

Weaknesses

The weaknesses that residents identified showcased what they feel that Big Rapids is lacking in. Residents expressed that they are frustrated with the minimal diverse dining options, evening and weekend hours of local businesses, and availability of open businesses on Mondays. Increased access to childcare services and missing middle residential housing was a common theme to support the retention and growth of the community. Across the board there was an outcry for improved communications, rapport, and trust between residents and the City.

Opportunities

The opportunities that residents identified showcased the pride and hope they have for the community to continue to be a great place to live, work, learn, and play. Some examples include Scooter's Coffee coming to town, activating being the tubing capitol of Michigan again, Depot Park Development, and the airport runway extension.

Threats

The threats that residents identified highlighted the complexities of businesses and people migrating outward of the city because the opportunities to expand, cost of doing business, and big box store dilemma are crippling their opportunities. As a college town, a threat that was identified was the students not feeling welcome, which impacts the competitiveness of recruiting for the University.

Suggestions

The suggestions include residents' creative feedback for what commercial businesses or models they wish would come to Big Rapids. This was a fun and creative way for residents to provide City Staff their commercial development wish list that can be taken into consideration for individuals looking to invest in businesses ventures in Big Rapids.

III. Local, County, & Regional Economic Development Goals

The Economic Development Strategy follows the recommendations and best practices of the Redevelopment Ready Communities (RRC) program best practices by connecting individual objectives to local, county, and regional economic goals. This section outlines the local, county, and regional economic goals.

Local Economic Goals

The City of Big Rapids aims to achieve the following goals for its local economic development efforts:

1. The City of Big Rapids is an attractive, livable community.
2. The City of Big Rapids is a top choice for area professionals and others to live, having a variety of housing types and strong neighborhoods.
3. The City of Big Rapids maintains and expands vital infrastructure with detailed plans and sustainable funding sources.
4. The City of Big Rapids continues to improve local government services through coordination with other governments and organizations in addition to opportunities for professional development.

County Economic Goals

The Mecosta County Development Corporation aims to achieve the following efforts in support of local and regional economic development efforts:

1. Representing Mecosta County on the Regional Childcare Coalition from January '23-January '24
2. Touring college towns across Michigan to get a better understanding of their partnerships and functioning processes

Regional Economic Goals

The City of Big Rapids is in the west central lower peninsula of Michigan within West Michigan region 4. The Right Place, Inc. (RPI) is the primary economic development partner in West Michigan. Since its founding in 1985, RPI has developed and implemented plans to guide the organization and drive long-term economic growth in the Greater Grand Rapids Region. According to their 2020-2022 Strategic Plan, RPI is steering the boat to achieve the following economic development goals:

1. Strengthen our position as the leading resource for growing companies in the Greater Grand Rapids Region.
2. Increase our focus on inclusive growth initiatives to provide economic opportunities for all in the Greater Grand Rapids Region.
3. Ensure long-term economic growth by supporting the region's foundational economic assets, such as infrastructure and quality of life.
4. Provide comprehensive strategies for economic prosperity in the region by engaging business and community leaders.
5. Drive economic growth throughout the Greater Grand Rapids Region with strategic partnerships and collaboration.
6. Educate and inform the region on strategic emerging and long-term business trends impacting the Greater Grand Rapids Region's economy.
7. Engage in regional talent development, retention, and attraction efforts to address the Greater Grand Rapids Region's most challenging economic growth issue.

These goals are tailored to address the following strategic growth areas:

1. Advanced manufacturing
2. Information technology
3. Health sciences
4. Food processing & agribusiness

IV. Economic Development Strategy

The Economic Development Strategy is outlined from feedback received during the community input sessions and Economic Development Strategy committee meetings. In addition, on January 24, 2022, the Mayor, City Commissioners, City Manager, City Clerk, City Attorney, and Department Heads met to review the Vision for 2024 that was developed in 2019 and the four goals established in that previous process. The team identified key objectives for each goal area and one-year tasks to be accomplished in 2022-2023. Through this process, the goals and tasks laid out within the 2022-2023 Strategic Plan have informed the overall goals and vision of this Economic Development Strategy.

Strategic Objectives

Branding & Marketing-

This objective aims to enhance the public relations, communications, and marketing efforts towards residents, visitors, businesses, and investors. As the new Communications Officer transitions into their role, they should implement the goals and actions outlined in the Big Rapids Marketing Strategy. The plan should be evaluated and updated on an annual basis.

Retention in the Big Rapids Industrial Park-

With Big Rapids Township surrounding the boundaries of the City of Big Rapids, the industrial park in the City does not have much, if any room, to expand. The primary objective for the Big Rapids Industrial Park is to work with the existing companies within to retain their business. In collaboration with the City, Mecosta County Development Corporation, Ferris State University, and other economic stakeholders, it will be an objective to work together to provide a reliable and skilled workforce.

Housing Options-

The final Housing Study demonstrated a need for additional housing in Big Rapids and can be utilized to direct actions and new policies. Big Rapids must address the need for higher density options, single family residential rentals, and the missing middle. Providing an adequate stock of housing allows for a robust workforce and bountiful local economy.

Increase in Dining & Retail-

There are gaps in the available dining and retail options across the four commercial districts within the City. In addition, there also appears to be a gap in the number of regional dining and retail establishments in the area. Attracting and retaining the interests of regional brands as well as expanded support for small business opportunities will create a vast variety of options for the community.

Increase in Activity-Based Entertainment-

In addition to the gaps in available dining and retail options, there is an even larger gap in the options for activity based entertainment across the four commercial districts within the City. As a college town, and aligning with the strategic goals to become a more family-oriented community, a focus on these types of retail establishments would serve the community well. Some examples include fowling, e-sports bar, escape room, and paint and pours to name a few.

Infrastructure Maintenance & Improvements-

Infrastructure maintenance and improvement is a foundational piece to all economic development. Having adequate and reliable infrastructure in place allows the wheels to move on other development, redevelopment, and improving the overall quality of life for residents. New housing developments can be jumpstarted by the City through the development of infrastructure, such as streets and water utilities, to support residential development.

Sidewalk and Bike Lane Expansion-

As a Pure Michigan Trail Town and rural community with limited resources for mass public transportation, having adequate sidewalks and bike lane access is imperative to a healthy economy. Big Rapids strives to be as walkable and bikeable as possible and has one of the highest walk scores in the state of Michigan according to walkscore.com. The municipality has been funding projects that connect key destinations to sidewalks and create bike loops that offer cycling enthusiasts a plethora of options for routes that are all interconnected to the major local trails.

Real Estate Development-

Economic vitality for Big Rapids is reliant on not only new development opportunities but also potential redevelopments. Redevelopments create the space for underutilized properties to be rejuvenated and can transform unused land into bright, purposeful spaces. There are multiple redevelopments the City is working on or plans for in the near future, key highlights from this list are shown below.

Mechanic Street Area Development: The infrastructure project will include the extension of Loudon Street, Mechanic Street and DeKraft Avenue, and the addition of two parallel streets between DeKraft Avenue and Bjoranson Street, along with installation of water and sewer lines to service the entire future housing development in this neighborhood.

Rust Avenue Extension: Rust Avenue will be extended beyond Escott Street to a small cul-de-sac, at which there will be three lots for purchase to develop housing that borders the Clay Cliffs nature area.

[*Hanchett Property*](#)

[*AMC Theater*](#)

[*JC Penney Building*](#)

Outdoor Recreation Tourism-

The City is working towards the goal of becoming an outdoor recreation destination for Michiganders and beyond. They have made great strides towards this goal as the City of Big Rapids was designated as a Pure Michigan Trail Town in April 2022. The newly named, and now City-owned, Depot Park remains largely undeveloped. Through grant opportunities the city is hoping to develop this park as its official White Pine Trail Trailhead in the next few years. In addition, the city is working to develop a skatepark on separate, but nearby, parkland to expand recreation opportunities for all. Finally, the city and other private-public partnerships are investing millions of dollars to improve Hemlock Park and add/update features such as tennis courts, basketball courts, pickle ball courts, a splash pad, a universally accessible playscape, and a universally accessible kayak launch.

Expanding Childcare Opportunities

The City is working in tandem with the Mecosta County Development Corporation to explore opportunities for expanding childcare opportunities across the community. Increasing access to childcare can help to stabilize our local businesses by reducing worker turnover since often times; scheduling employees' work hours around their childcare needs negatively affects workers' ability to fulfill job-related commitments. In addition, providing affordable childcare opportunities will provide growing minds the opportunity to increase their socialization and other primary skills before entering kindergarten.

V. Implementation Matrix

The implementation Matrix below details the status, timeline, and partners involved with the previously discussed strategic objectives. The matrix will assist the City of Big Rapids with keeping track of economic development priorities. Seen as a working document, the matrix outlines anticipated goals and timelines which may change as opportunities arise. *Many Partners Involved are displayed with their acronym of the organization, for the full list of Implementation Partners and their contact information, please see Appendix B on page 18.*

Strategic Objective/Project	Status	Project Timeline	Partners Involved	Description
Branding & marketing	Ongoing	Start in January 2023	DBA, Band of Locals, MCVB, FSU, MCDC/RPI, Chamber of Commerce	In connection to the City of Big Rapids Marketing Strategy, increased PR/communications/marketing and overall branding is a priority.
Retention in the Big Rapids Industrial Park	Not Started	Ongoing	MCDC/RPI, Chamber of Commerce, Leadership Mecosta, MI Works! West Central	Supporting existing businesses in the Industrial Park through partnerships with the MCDC and FSU to provide a reliable and skilled workforce
Housing options	Ongoing	Started, Ongoing	MCDC/RPI, Housing Commission	Need to create diverse housing stock to support a growing community.
Increase in dining & retail	Not Started	Ongoing	MCDC/RPI, DBA, DDA Chamber of Commerce	Attracting and retaining the interests of regional brands as well as expanded support for small business opportunities
Increase in activity-based entertainment	Not Started	Ongoing	MCDC/RPI, DBA, DDA Chamber of Commerce	Attracting and retaining the interests of activity based entertainment businesses that can serve all demographics of the community.
Infrastructure maintenance & improvements	Ongoing	Ongoing	MCDC/RPI, MDOT, Consumers Energy	City will continue to invest in projects that create adequate and reliable infrastructure so development, redevelopment, and quality of life can improve.
Sidewalk/bike lane expansion	Ongoing	Ongoing	MCDC/RPI, MDOT	City will continue to invest in bike lane and sidewalk extension projects that support the vision of being a walkable and bikeable community
Real Estate Redevelopment	Ongoing	Ongoing	MCDC/RPI, MEDC, Housing Commission, DDA (for those within downtown district)	Redevelopment is vital to infill the City and repurpose property, which is being underutilized.
Outdoor Recreation Tourism	Ongoing	Ongoing	MCDC/RPI, MDNR, Muskegon River Watershed Association, Friends of the White Pine, MCVB	To support the City's designation as a Pure Michigan Trail Town and vision to become an outdoor recreation destination; continue investing in park development/improvement projects
Expanding Childcare Opportunities	Not Started	Ongoing	MCDC/RPI, Community Development Department, City Manager's Office, Big Rapids Township	Expanding affordable childcare opportunities can help to stabilize our local businesses by providing parents a safe and reliable place that can care for their children while they attend work. It also provides growing minds educational and socialization opportunities before entering kindergarten.

IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS:

- In partnership, City of Big Rapids and MCDC will create baseline metrics and evaluation timeline for the implementation matrix
- Implement Big Rapids Marketing Strategy as new Communications Officer position is filled
- Conduct entrance and exit interviews with business owners to better understand their decision-making process, barriers to success, and create a tracking system for this process.

APPENDIX

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Appendix A: SWOT Analysis & Suggestions from Community Input

Strengths

- Ferris State University
- Municipal owned airport
- Pure Michigan Trail Town
- Katke Golf Course
- Proximity to urban centers and tourist destinations
- Community festivals and activities
- Big Rapids Trails and Parks
- Sidewalks/bike lanes
- Overall walkability and bike access
- Big Rapids industrial park
- Big Rapids Public Schools and Crossroads Charter Academy
- Corewell Health (rebranded Spectrum Health)
- Farmer's Market
- Pure Michigan Trail Town designation
- Muskegon River
- City Staff
- MCDC/The Right Place, Inc.
- White Pine Trail
- Hanchett property
- Located along 131 Interstate and M-20
- Band of Locals + their weekly radio show
- Currie's sign outside their business
- Virtual accessibility of city meetings
- Huntley's Clubhouse Childcare
- Marihuana tax revenue
- Local people and new folks to the area rehabbing rundown rental properties
- Investors rehabbing and/or building new structures
- Kindness
- Parades
- Marihuana shops and their tax revenue
- Pocket Park Concerts
- Kind vendors/merchants
- Artworks
- Festival of the Arts
- BR Pride Event
- Downtown landscaping efforts

Weaknesses

- Municipality has a lack of control over development opportunities.
- Downtown Urban Renewal initiatives have, in a way, handicapped the character of buildings in that commercial district.
- Lack of “destination feel” in the downtown district.
- Manufacturing companies having challenges with skilled employee hiring/retention
- Missing middle for residential housing
- Surrounded by townships (creates challenges for development)
- Capacity of the DDA
- ‘Services’ heavy in the downtown district.
- Encouraging new models of coordination/collaboration
- Availability of diverse commercial dining businesses (vegan, vegetarian, world cuisine, etc.)
- A formal downtown square doesn’t exist currently
- Rapport between FSU institution, students, faculty, ‘The City’
- Closed attitude of new ideas, people, and businesses
- Communication and rapport between city and residents
- Quality of local paper
- Businesses not open 5-6 days a week, most closed on Mondays
- Many businesses don’t have extended and/or nighttime/weekend hours
- Options and availability of childcare
- Rhetoric is “it’s easy to do marihuana business here” → how do we create a culture to make it easy for all business types
- Maintenance of rentals within city limits, particularly rentals on State St.
- Outdated manufactured homes
- FSU adjunct and overall faculty living locally
- Strength/productivity of Town & Gown
- Big Rapids is an island community in the sense that it’s isolated on its own island with no room to build out and not much else around it.
- Not enough for families to do in town.
- Not enough activities for college students
- No central location for information about local events

Opportunities

- Creating and nurturing an economic environment for multiple options of the same business to thrive (ex: coffee shops).
- Being more strategic about economic development/marketing and the ways in which we pull people of the highway and main roads, out of their car, and into shops.
- Having a food co-op established
- Battery plant coming into the township
- Scooter's Coffee
- Restaurant/retail expansion in downtown district
- Social district
- Developing a downtown farmers market pavilion
- Conducting an analysis of what businesses come into downtown, when/if they leave, and learning more about what factors play into making those decisions.
- Activate being tubing capitol of Michigan again
- Depot restoration and Depot Park development
- The Dragon (our proximity to the trail bolsters economic opportunities)
- Big Rapids becoming a destination city
- Improvements in the main entrances of town to enhance the overall aesthetic
- Mini golf course development
- Movie theater restoration
- A department store (like JC Penney's) coming into town
- Investing in an incubator space for upcoming entrepreneurs
- Airport runway extension
- Putting information in the water bill to improve city/resident communications
- Enhanced awareness of the Band of Locals Radio Show
- Availability in water/sewer system to offer to entrepreneurs looking to invest/build
- Having more community events to bring people together
- 'Electrification' to prepare for electric vehicle car influx
- The White Pine Trail development on the southbound portion of the trail

Threats

- Retail/medical/commercial businesses moving outside city limits
- Need for more skilled trade professionals
- Need diversified types of housing to anticipate the needs of the future influx in residents. Without it, the city is majorly threatened by outside municipalities absorbing the housing development opportunities and residency growth.
- High rent for retail spaces makes investment difficult for upcoming entrepreneurs
- Big box store dilemma/dark storefronts
- Competitiveness of farmers market vs. other municipalities
- Students not feeling welcome impacts our present and future competitiveness as a college town
- COVID-19
- Inflation/overall economy on local and national scale
- Shipping delays/supply chain issues
- FSU faculty using their student commuter coach bus to commute from Grand Rapids
- Hospital moving out to the township
- Public schools moving outside the city
- People having no choice but to drive 1+ hours to access amenities
- Closed mindedness about new businesses

Suggestions

South Third Avenue District

- Eating establishment to service the White Pine Trail users
- Mini golf
- Playground near the hiking trail
- Any fast food on the East Side
- Glass museum/shop
- Five Guys Burgers & Fries
- Craig's Cruisers Family Fun Center
- Taco restaurant
- Sonic Drive Thru
- Music center (noted it could be anywhere although posted on this board)
- Chick Fil-A
- Glass blowing school
- Chuck E. Cheese

Perry Avenue District

- Olive Garden
- Gellyball
- Veterinary office
- Beauty supply store for African Americans
- Costco/Sam's Club
- Indoor swimming pool

North State Street District

- Improve facades of buildings in this district
- Toy store
- Drive-in movie theater
- A fishing shop (like Cabela's)
- An indoor activity place for kids—bounce house, something similar to the model of Catch Air in Grand Rapids
- Taco stands
- Rest area closer to factories
- YMCA
- Tube/kayak rental

Downtown District

- Clothing store
- Movie theater
- Children's museum
- Sushi restaurant
- The Wellness Witch (tarot, massage, tea)
- EverPlay Café
- Vegan food options
- Year-round farmer's market/enclosed pavilion
- Acting club
- Kayak course on the Muskegon River (behind the middle school)

Appendix B: Implementation Partners

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***Point of contact may be updated*

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Big Rapids Downtown Development Authority

Contact Mark Gifford, Big Rapids City Manager
**Contact information provided in the left column*

Appendix C: Other Sources

Data USA. (2020). *Big Rapids, MI*. Data USA. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/big-rapids-mi>

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