

Memorandum



Date: August 5, 2026
To: Buchanan Downtown Development Authority
From: Tony McGhee
Subject: Considerations for Board Decision on Marketing Direction

Background

The Buchanan Downtown Development Authority will be discussing presentation made by marketing firms who submitted proposals and presented at the last meeting. Those firms include:

- Duneland Media
- Destination By Design
- JV Studios
- Kzoom

As the DDA is discussion the retention of a marketing firm to promote the community throughout Berrien County, the South Bend area, Chicagoland, and other parts of Michigan. How the DDA spends its available dollars is ultimately a policy choice for the Board, subject to applicable law and the adopted development, tax increment financing, and budget documents. This memo is not intended to direct that decision, but to provide context as the Board weighs a larger marketing investment against other potential uses of DDA funds.

Marketing is a legitimate DDA activity. Michigan law expressly authorizes a DDA to create, operate, and fund marketing initiatives that benefit retail and the general marketing of the downtown district. A coordinated campaign can raise awareness, direct people to local businesses and events, and help convert interest into visits. Some level of thoughtful marketing is appropriate and could provide value to the district.

At the same time, marketing has traditionally been one part of a broader downtown revitalization strategy rather than the primary purpose of a DDA. Michigan Main Street describes successful downtown work through four connected areas: design, economic vitality, promotion, and organization. Promotion works best when the physical

environment, business mix, public spaces, and programming give people a reason to visit and return.

Different Roles: Tourism Marketing and Downtown Development

A tourism council or visitors bureau is organized to market a broader destination. Its work is typically focused on attracting visitors from outside the area, increasing overnight stays, developing itineraries, working with travel media, maintaining visitor guides, and promoting attractions across a region. Visit Southwest Michigan already performs many of these functions through regional digital and print channels, event and attraction promotion, and a visitor marketing network available to local businesses.

A DDA has a narrower geography and a different primary responsibility. Its focus is the downtown district, including the public environment, existing businesses, private investment, public spaces, and the overall experience of the area. A DDA funded campaign may reach Chicago, South Bend, other Michigan markets, and the surrounding areas of Berrien County, but it should be clearly tied to activity and benefits within the DDA district.

This does not mean the DDA should avoid marketing. It means the Board should consider whether it is duplicating broad destination marketing already performed by regional and statewide organizations, or whether it can use those channels while concentrating its own resources on the downtown experience.

Buchanan Is Already on People's Radar

Buchanan is not starting from a place of no awareness. Visit Southwest Michigan maintains information on Buchanan ([Buchanan | Visit Southwest Michigan](#)) for visitors and identifies the community as approximately 90 minutes from Chicago. Pure Michigan and regional tourism channels already feature Buchanan attractions, businesses, trails, events, and the downtown social district. The Michigan Municipal League has also highlighted the downtown redevelopment and selected Buchanan as a finalist for the 2026 Community Excellence Award. The new streetscape, McCoy Creek, Pears Mill, the Commons, the Farmers Market, local businesses, cultural assets, and events such as Sip! Buchanan already provide a strong story. Additionally, the City is in the process of developing a new website which will go live in the Spring of 2027. This new site will have the ability for the DDA to have its own tab on the page to drive people to for information.

That awareness changes the question. The issue is not only how to tell more people that Buchanan exists, but what they experience when they arrive, how long they stay,

how many businesses they visit, and whether they return and recommend Buchanan to others.

Placemaking First, Marketing as an Amplifier

Marketing can create a first visit, but the physical experience determines whether that visit produces lasting value. People may respond to an advertisement once. They return and tell others because a place feels memorable, comfortable, active, and worth exploring. The Board may therefore wish to ask whether the next discretionary dollar creates a greater return through purchased awareness or through improvements that make downtown a stronger destination.

Potential Priority Areas

Several areas offer opportunities to build on the recent downtown investment:

- **Public space along McCoy Creek next to Hilltop Café**
This area could become an inviting creekside gathering space that connects a downtown business with one of Buchanan's defining natural features. Seating, landscaping, public art, and stronger pedestrian access could give people another reason to spend time downtown.
- **The Commons**
Continued investment in shade, seating, lighting, landscaping, event support, and flexible infrastructure could help the Commons host more frequent activities and function as a consistent downtown destination.
- **Mill Alley**
Additional improvements could reinforce its identity, support programming, highlight local history, and create a memorable pedestrian connection that encourages visitors to explore beyond Front Street.
- **Front Street east of downtown**
Lighting, sidewalks, landscaping, wayfinding, and other streetscape improvements could extend the downtown experience and better connect the businesses in this portion of the DDA district with the central downtown.
- **Farmers Market and Pears Mill**
Investments in these attractions could underscore our community's connection to agriculture with agricultural tourism being a well established draw for people.

Improving these spaces would create more reasons for residents and visitors to walk, pause, explore, attend events, and spend money with local businesses. It would also give a marketing firm better content and a clearer product to promote.

Events and Marketing as Supporting Tools

Events should remain part of the discussion. They activate public spaces, introduce new people to downtown, create repeat reasons to visit, and generate the photographs, stories, and social content that support marketing. A balanced DDA program could place its primary emphasis on physical placemaking and event support, with marketing used to amplify those investments.

That approach is consistent with the traditional work of DDAs throughout Michigan. Effective districts do not choose between promotion and place. They create a strong and distinctive downtown, then use promotion to bring people into that experience.

Questions Before Engaging a Marketing Firm

1. What specific audience is the campaign intended to reach, and what action should that audience take?
2. How will the campaign directly benefit businesses, events, and public spaces within the DDA district?
3. How will the firm coordinate with Visit Southwest Michigan, Pure Michigan, and existing event organizers instead of duplicating their work?
4. What measures will be used beyond impressions and followers, such as website referrals, event attendance, business participation, visitor origin, or changes in foot traffic?
5. Would a defined pilot campaign tied to specific events and destinations provide a better first step than a large ongoing contract?

Approach for Consideration

Some investment in marketing is a good idea. The central policy question is whether marketing should become the focus of the DDA's work or remain a secondary tool that supports placemaking, events, business vitality, and public space improvements.

For the DDA to consider is if it should first establish a two or three year list of physical and programming priorities for McCoy Creek, the Commons, Mill Alley, East Front Street, and other district spaces. It could then dedicate a defined portion of available funds to targeted marketing that promotes those improvements and uses existing regional tourism networks to extend the reach. This would preserve the DDA's ability to market Buchanan while ensuring the majority of its investment continues to build the experience being marketed.

Ultimately, the Board must decide where it believes the next dollar will have the greatest lasting impact. Buchanan already has momentum and growing awareness. The opportunity now is to make sure the downtown experience continues to become strong enough that people not only hear about Buchanan, but choose to visit, stay, explore, support local businesses, and come back.