

John Thomas
23 Center Street
Douglas, MI 49406

Douglas DDA,

Today I saw pictures of the proposed designs for the future sign at Center and Blue Star. At the risk of being criticized for being unnecessarily blunt, I have to say that I couldn't be less impressed or more disappointed. And I make no apologies for being totally honest about my reaction because this sign is so critical to our struggling downtown businesses that I can't be anything but brutally honest.

Put quite simply, these design concepts are nothing but new variations of similar designs which have failed miserably at effectively attracting traffic downtown for the past ten years! This is a classic case of doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

We are a business district. We don't sell waves, sunsets, or herons. But we do have things that tourists specifically look for, like a coffee house, great restaurants, pizza, an entertainment venue, and kayaks. In an area known as the Art Coast of Michigan, we have EVEN MORE GALLERIES THAN SAUGATUCK. We have drop dead gorgeous shops like Endora and Brackett. But our sign doesn't suggest any of that! And as a result, thousands of people go by Center Street every day because we don't let them know what they are missing.

But worst of all, in my opinion, unless we do something totally different to improve our sign, we won't improve the traffic flow that we desperately need to keep our downtown businesses alive. And, although it is a separate issue, we also cannot wait for a long-discussed big arch, that may be years away.

To those who do not depend on this sign for their livelihood, this may be a rhetorical discussion and a choice about which design you "like" best. But for those of us who have invested our money and our lives downtown, this is about having a sign which will be "effective." And this is about our survival.

If you think I am exaggerating, I encourage you to actually poll our businesses about their assessment of the health of our downtown as it relates to customer traffic.

Having said that, these are my thoughts about the proposed designs:

1. Ask yourself, "what do you see when you look at these designs?" Then ask yourself "what will someone unfamiliar with our town see as they drive past the sign, in traffic, traveling at 35 mph.?" When I ask myself those questions my answer is that what they would see most, is "DOUGLAS," because it is most prominent, while everything else is much smaller and subservient to it; including downtown, any reference to shops, etc, and anything directing them to turn.
2. It is my opinion the sign at Center and Blue Star is NOT the gateway sign for "DOUGLAS" and the word Douglas should not be it's primary message. That job should be satisfied by a separate sign at the town's boundary.
3. Instead of being about DOUGLAS, the purpose of our sign should be to visually "tempt visitors" to turn and check out our "businesses." These designs don't do that!
4. We are in 2023 - soon to be 2024. Why does our sign not reflect the changes taking place around us? These designs are so dated that they suggest that our downtown is out dated too.
5. Ask yourself, what catches your attention these days when you are scanning social media, or other people's signs or ads? What do you respond to? Would the simple words Douglas and Downtown intrigue you? I doubt it. That is why reels, posts, and articles in print, use pictures, or even emojis, to far more "effectively" communicate. So, I ask you, given this, "what is visually appealing about these signs?" Would you describe these as interesting? Enticing? Motivating? I certainly wouldn't.

6. But most importantly, how do these designs describe what we have to offer? And how do they direct people to our "businesses?" That should be the real goal for our DDA and this sign. It should be primarily, if not exclusively, about our shops, restaurant, services, etc. And saying that creatively would be best; perhaps with vividly and visually contemporary graphics, because symbols can be processed more quickly than written words when driving at 35 mph. Why not think out of the box and communicate in a different way than we always have?
7. Also, I hope this sign will be constructed in such a way that it will allow the image to be changed regularly and inexpensively with vinyl. If not, if this is a static, and unchanging image, it will very quickly lose its impact and just blend into its landscape.
8. Ideally, if the DDA and the Council understand the importance of this sign and how critical it is to keeping our downtown from falling back into the state it was in 25 years ago, we will be granted an exception - like the school has been granted - that will allow for a modern, changeable, and more effective, eye catching sign. Remember, this is not a sign for "a specific business" this is for our Downtown District, and as such, should be treated differently because a healthy downtown is so important to the whole community, its public image, and even the town's property values. There is a lot at stake here!
9. At the very least, I implore you to rethink these designs.

IMPORTANT NOTE: For those of you reading this, who do not have personal experience operating a brick and mortar business, there are a few things that you need to know in order to put my comments in their proper perspective. 1. People who rent brick and mortar locations don't rent them for the "brick" and "mortar," they rent them for "access to customers" - foot traffic. Without traffic, buildings are of no value to renters. No traffic leads to empty buildings. 2. The general rule of thumb for retail sales is, that on average, it takes eight people through the door to generate one sale; which makes the amount of traffic even more critical. 3. When traffic falls below a sustainable level, businesses can't survive, buildings go vacant, and brick and mortar downtowns go derelict, effecting the whole community. 4. In order to remain in business, and compete effectively with Amazon, many retailers have given up the brick and mortar business model and shifted to online sales, which can be operated out of cheap spaces like a garage, or any location from which you can ship - not expensive store fronts. That could be the future scenario for Douglas if we don't change what is happening. But we first have to be honest about what is going on, and then do everything we can to be proactive while there is still time. So, please take this seriously.

I hope you will give my comments your consideration before moving forward with what is currently on the table.

Respectfully submitted,



Douglas retailer for 25 years and counting
12/21/2023