City of Gladstone

Local Economies Opportunity Report

foundation michigan municipal league

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Introduction

In 2026, the Michigan Municipal League (the League) and Michigan Municipal League Foundation (MML Foundation) partnered with the Lake Superior Community Partnership (LSCP)'s Small Business Support Hub program to bring our Local Economies program to the central Upper Peninsula. We collaborated with LSCP, four central Upper Peninsula communities and their small businesses, and regional economic development stakeholders to better understand their small business environments and connect them with tools and resources to strengthen their local economic ecosystem.

Since 2022, the Local Economies program has explored entrepreneurship and small business support systems in specific Michigan communities. The goal of the initiative is to consider gaps in resources; e.g., space, capital, technical assistance, and networks that could be filled by local government and community stakeholders to support more equitable local small business environments.

In each community, we met with local small business leaders and stakeholders for daylong workshops to explore the resources available to entrepreneurs, as well as the challenges and opportunities unique to each community. Following these workshops, we provide tailored feedback and recommendations through community Opportunity Reports.

Why Gladstone?

The League and MML Foundation were excited at the opportunity to collaborate with the City of Gladstone on this project, as the community is experiencing excitement about the growth of its farmers' market and new small businesses opening along Delta Avenue.

The City of Gladstone serves as a gateway to Delta County, near the regional hub of Escanaba. It boasts a large downtown with a committed network of local entrepreneurs and other stakeholders, an active lakefront with ample opportunities for outdoor recreation, and a base of industrial businesses. Gladstone ISD boasts remarkably robust career and technical education opportunities for local young people.

With public and private investments already contributing to local successes, the next phase of economic development will depend on building stronger connections among these existing assets and fostering new partnerships that multiply their collective impact. Strategic updates to zoning regulations, targeted incentives, and continued investment in placemaking and wayfinding can help position Gladstone as an attractive mixed-use community benefiting residents, businesses, and visitors alike.

What is an Opportunity Report?

This report is a summary of what the League and MML Foundation heard and observed during our Local Economies Stakeholder Workshop in Gladstone on April 22, 2026.

This Opportunity Report is intended to serve as a resource for Gladstone and other local and regional partners who play a role in supporting its local economy. It describes areas for potential improvement, short- and long-term opportunities, resources to consider, and inspiration from other communities doing similar work.

The League and MML Foundation would like to thank the City of Gladstone, as well as participating stakeholders, businesses, and others who helped contribute to this "deep dive." Below are short and long-term recommendations across four opportunity areas for the City of Gladstone, its small businesses and local support organizations, and other regional stakeholders to strengthen Gladstone's small business ecosystem in the coming years.

In addition to the recommendations presented in this report, the City and its partners may find further inspiration in our *Microbusiness Best Practices Playbooks*, which offer additional strategies and examples for fostering entrepreneurship and strengthening local economic development efforts.

Opportunity 1: Make Opening Easy—and Celebrate It

Overview

Core to local economic development is improving access to and reducing the risks, costs, and unknowns associated with entrepreneurship.

When setting up shop in Gladstone, business owners should feel like they aren't going at it alone. Wherever possible, the City should remove informational and communication barriers to opening a business through clarifying its business development process. Gladstone should also work with the DDA, the chamber, and other business support networks to take advantage of all available communications channels to promote small businesses and to drive traffic and dollars downtown.

Once businesses are established, the City can also play an important role in ensuring that business owners feel seen, heard, and valued; and that they are enmeshed into their peer network through networking opportunities, both structured and informal.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Create a "virtual welcome mat" for entrepreneurs. Small business owners in Gladstone shared that navigating the business development process is possible largely through the knowledge of the existing business community. To address this information gap, the City should create a "How to Open a Business in Gladstone" guide, clearly outlining development procedures, costs, and anticipated timelines. Integrate visual tools like flow charts and checklists, as well as fillable application forms and updated fee schedules. The guide should be easily available on a dedicated "Opening a Business in Gladstone" webpage, with links to small business support resources such as grants, technical support, and programs from economic development organizations like the SBDC and Accelerate UP.

Celebrate new business openings. Small businesses are essential to Gladstone's economy, community, and culture, and ought to be treated as such. Organize official grand openings or ribbon-cuttings to celebrate new business openings along Delta Avenue and throughout Gladstone. These events should be highly publicized and include local news and social media. Elected officials, DDA members, and representatives from the Chamber of Commerce should be invited to attend. Following these more ceremonial forms of support, small businesses would appreciate regular check-ins from the City. This face time would give businesses a low-stakes opportunity to raise concerns and help the City stay in touch with small business needs.

Establish a dedicated DDA social media presence. Social media accounts (on Facebook, Instagram, etc.) for the DDA could help quickly and efficiently promote DDA-sponsored events downtown and showcase small businesses. As downtown programming and the farmers' market continue to grow in popularity, the DDA should develop its own distinct personality and voice, the tone of which should be fun and inviting. The DDA should also create an official social media policy to help govern all account activity.

Foster connection and camaraderie among the small business community. Entrepreneurship can be incredibly isolating, especially when starting out. A key form of support is simply introducing people who ought to know each other. When a new business opens, City officials should make introductions between the business owner, the DDA, and peer businesses. The City can also help organize monthly small business meetups for informal support. These casual get-togethers could serve as opportunities for sharing best practices, experimenting with collaboration, or supporting each other in dealing with frustrations. These meetups could happen at rotating business locations each month, and do not require City officials to be present.

Long Term (1–4 years)

Develop pathways for formal B2B collaboration. In addition to fostering informal business networking, the City should consider partnering with the Economic Development Corporation (EDC), established manufacturers from the North Bluff Industrial Park, and other local businesses to create a structured mentorship and business development program for Gladstone's newest entrepreneurs. This network could connect new business owners with seasoned leaders who can provide guidance on things like business planning, financing, and workforce development. Local industrial firms may also identify opportunities for new products and local supply chain collaborations, strengthening Gladstone's hyperlocal economy.

Identify opportunities to reduce barriers to entry with shared resources. One of the biggest challenges to opening a new business is the price tag. Gladstone can lower this barrier to entry by investing in shared infrastructure and services that reduce the upfront capital needed to start a business. The City could explore Wi-Fi in the Farmer's Market plaza, allowing point-of-sale operations for small businesses that otherwise can only accept cash. Pop-ups within vacant storefronts or multi-unit commercial spaces are especially valuable for trial businesses, artists, and makers who may not yet be ready for a long-term lease. Short-term occupancy programs for micro-retail bays, flexible leasing arrangements, or other partnerships with property owners can turn empty spaces into rotating hubs of activity. This would provide entrepreneurs with low-cost exposure and reduce vacancy in key commercial nodes.

Opportunity 1: Case Study

Ann Arbor SPARK's "Your Guide to Opening a Business in Washtenaw County" Blog Post:

And aid for entrepreneurs navigating business development and permitting processes across the County, illustrating each step with a clear narrative and visual aids. annarborusa.org/news/your-guide-to-opening-a-business-in-washtenaw-county

"Business After Hours" in Ishpeming:

Casual, monthly networking events hosted by the Lake Superior Community Partnership and the Greater Ishpeming–Negaunee Area Chamber of Commerce. These gatherings are free, open to all, and are hosted at rotating small business venues with featured sweets and treats from local participating businesses. marquette.org/business-after-hours

Opportunity 1: Resources

1. Sample DDA Social Media Policy from the Romeo Downtown Development Authority:
2. Michigan Municipal League's Microbusiness Best Practices Comprehensive Playbook and fillable "How to Open a Business Guide"

Opportunity 2:
Improve Visitor Access and Experience

Overview

For a city of its size, Gladstone offers many opportunities for things to do, including a growing downtown with locally owned shops and restaurants, a campground and beach area, a bustling farmers' market, and events and activities throughout the year. It should be easy and enjoyable to get to and spend time in the city.

While the City has taken many steps in recent years to increase and improve its marketing, it would still pay dividends to make access to downtown easier and encourage visitors to spend more time in the community.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Guide highway traffic into downtown Gladstone. There are few access streets—and poor signage—for potential visitors coming from the southeast or west on Highway 41. Consider while people who already know their destination will be able to find it with online and mobile maps, adding branded promotional and directional wayfinding for Gladstone and its attractions along the highway and access streets. This would help draw people into town—who might otherwise pass it by.

Provide clear and active parking management. Parking emerged as a key concern during our discussions with small business owners. Due to lack of enforcement, people park on the street for much longer than the allowed time—despite it being clearly posted. Furthermore, several people remarked that their customers are not aware of available city parking lots along Delta Avenue because they are not marked as public parking lots. The City should install signage on its downtown public parking lots to make clear that they are open to the public. The City should also be more proactive about enforcing parking time limits to ensure that visitors find it easy to access Gladstone's businesses.

Implement wayfinding and streetscape improvements. Gladstone gets many visitors to its downtown, beach, campgrounds, areas, and farmers' market. However, meeting attendees said visitors don't always stick around and explore. There are several ways the City can make things "stickier." Consider developing a cohesive, branded wayfinding system to help visitors identify attractions and businesses. Additionally, install modest streetscaping and placemaking features throughout downtown and on streets connecting to the beach and campground. The DDA has already done a great job improving the farmers' market site and has plans for the lot at Delta and 7th Street. Adding streetscaping between these locations—and throughout downtown—will create a more cohesive and engaging environment, driving foot traffic and highlighting Gladstone's unique local businesses.

Long Term (1–4 years)

Engage MDOT on M-41/4th Avenue and M-41/Hill Road design to improve non-motorized access. Neighborhoods to the west of M-41 are home to a large portion of Gladstone's population, but access between these neighborhoods and the downtown and waterfront across M-41 are very car-centric. Even though the Little Bay de Noc non-motorized trail is very close to the M-41/Hill Road access, the route from western neighborhoods to the trail is unsafe and unwelcoming for bikers and pedestrians. The City should work with MDOT on improvements to these intersections that add pedestrian and bike safety and accessibility features (e.g., bike lanes, more visible crosswalks, wider sidewalks under the railroad bridge on 4th Avenue). Improving accessibility to downtown businesses and amenities for all residents would help drive foot traffic and patronage of small businesses.

Coordinate with regional partners to extend the Little Bay de Noc trail to fully connect Gladstone and Escanaba. This beautiful, non-motorized trail along the bay is a fantastic asset for residents and visitors in Gladstone and is a connection on the statewide Iron Belle Trail. Currently, the trail extends just under three miles to Lake Bluff and the Terrace Hotel, funded with state and local resources and a crowdfunding campaign. Locals we met on our site visit all expressed a desire for a trail that extends all the way to Escanaba. Completing the Little Bay de Noc Trail to Escanaba would make it a truly regional recreation and non-motorized transportation resource, benefiting residents and attracting visitors to the region. The City should engage the City of Escanaba, Delta County, MDOT, the Delta County Road Commission, and regional and state economic development and recreation partners to pursue planning and funding for an extension of this trail.

Add to tree canopy during infrastructure projects. The main corridors of downtown Gladstone have very little tree coverage. While street trees do require maintenance, they offer relief from direct summer sun and help reduce winter wind, as well as improving appearance—all of which help encourage downtown visitors to circulate between destinations during their visit. As Gladstone performs capital maintenance projects on streets and parking areas downtown, consider finding space to add tree wells and plant (appropriately selected) street trees.

Opportunity 2: Case Study

Cassopolis Improves Broadway Street:

In 2018, the Village of Cassopolis worked with the Michigan State University Sustainable Built Environment Initiative (SBEI) to further develop and improve the downtown Broadway Street corridor. Building on community assets including the Historic Carnegie Library, County Courthouse, and Stone Lake, the Village and SBEI identified many streetscape improvements to revitalize the downtown. These included additional public art, sidewalk upgrades, consistent pedestrian infrastructure, and landscaping. The plan also called for new signage downtown and off highway corridors that distinguish the downtown, reflecting the local character of Cassopolis. In the years following the development of the corridor plan, the Village pursued and received more than $18 million in grant funding for investments **ruralinnovationexchange.com/imaginecassopolis**

Opportunity 2: Resources

1. **Michigan Main Streets Solution Center – Signage Guide for Downtowns**
2. **Tools for the Planning and Design of Pedestrian Crossing Enhancements**
3. **Guidance for Installation of Pedestrian Crosswalks on Michigan State Trunkline Highways**
4. **Towns and Trails Toolkit: Community Benefits**

Opportunity 3: Update Regulations and Incentives to Support Investment

Overview

Recently, there has been significant public and private investment into the Delta Avenue business district—but the area still has a number of vacant or underutilized buildings and lots. While most structures appear structurally sound, many need maintenance or cosmetic improvements, and stakeholders brought up blighted and potentially dangerous buildings in nearby neighborhoods as a concern. The City can use a combination of tools to support investment and occupancy of these properties.

The first steps should be to update zoning regulations to better enable desired investment, build the toolkit of financial incentives that can make development feasible, then heighten attention on vacant and blighted properties. Prioritizing action in this order provides the clearest pathway for owners to put their properties into productive use.

The Delta Avenue business district is also very long, and the local market is unlikely to ever support full occupancy of this corridor with business uses. The zoning and incentive strategy should require commercial occupancy only in a focused area—e.g., the blocks between 7th and 11th Streets along Delta Avenue—with the remainder of the district having the flexibility to be used for commercial, residential, or mixed-use. This will open more pathways for property owners to invest in development, and residential options will support business owners with more customers at their doorstep. Regardless of use, sites and buildings should be designed to support a main street environment, featuring small setbacks, parking accessed only from the alley, etc.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Implement planned CBD zoning on Delta Avenue. The current "B-2" zoning assigned to downtown Gladstone is a poor fit for a walkable main street area and may be inhibiting both investment and sense of place along Delta Avenue. The City's Master Plan calls for the creation of a "Central Business District" for this area that would differ from the automobile- and parking-oriented commercial areas. Implementation of this CBD zoning should be prioritized and need not wait for a full update of the zoning ordinance. Review the User's Guide to Code Reform—published by the League, MEDC, and other partners—for best practices and a model Main Street zoning ordinance.

Identify a tax abatement toolkit to support investment. Building rehab and new construction are challenging in Gladstone, as construction costs are high relative to commercial rents and residential prices. The City has many options for supporting housing investment by deferring new tax revenue (e.g., Housing TIF, PILOT, Neighborhood Enterprise Zones), whether on Delta Avenue or in the surrounding neighborhood. The Commercial Rehabilitation Act (PA 210) and Commercial Redevelopment Act (PA 255) are similar tools the City can use to support commercial investment. An understanding of these options—and a willingness to use them—can help Gladstone recruit developers to rehab buildings and fill gaps in the business district.

Offer a lighter-weight version of façade grants. During our meetings, local business owners expressed that available funding was not enough to allow for major building rehab, and that certain requirements—e.g., building liens—were too burdensome for small projects. To help make visible improvements quickly, focus a portion of the DDA's grant capacity on relatively small-dollar improvements—e.g., signs, painting, awnings, or lighting—and adjust requirements for the owner. Given the DDA's fiscal year start of April 1, consider a spring (rather than fall) call for projects to make funds available as early as possible and ensure funded projects can begin immediately.

Long Term (1–4 years)

Implement a vacant/dangerous structure program. The Center for Community Progress publication *Revitalization in Michigan* outlines various options and statutory authorities that Gladstone can consider to go beyond its existing application of property maintenance code to monitor, evaluate, and manage vacant and blighted properties.

Opportunity 3: Case Study

Downtown Farmington Sign & Façade Grants:

Farmington's DDA—the 2026 winner of the Great American Main Street Award—offers both a façade grant for large projects and a small "sign grant" topping out at $4,000 per property. The sign grant, which emphasizes "three-dimensional, symbolic, projecting signs," is a low-cost way for Farmington to improve the appearance of the public realm while also serving a direct need of operating businesses. **downtownfarmington.org/resources/doing_business/incentive_programs.php**

Opportunity 3: Resources

1. **Enabling Better Places: User's Guide to Code Reform:**
2. **Revitalization in Michigan: A Guide to Transforming VAD Properties Through Code Enforcement:**
3. **Michigan Commercial Rehabilitation Act:**
4. **Michigan Commercial Redevelopment Act:**

Opportunity 4:
If You've Got It, Flaunt It—And Build On It

Overview

Gladstone has a number of assets that work well individually but are disconnected from each other. Their impact can be multiplied by establishing conditions that allow them to interact and build off each other. This requires a "yes, and…" approach: Keep doing what's working, while looking for ways to combine partners and resources—or bring in new ones.

These are opportunities for the City to "host the party—don't be the party." Local government serves the community not just by directly providing infrastructure and services, but also by acting as a convenor and connector to other entities that can bring value to the community. The recommendations in this section look at some potential ways this could be pursued.

Recommendations

Short Term (<1 year)

Strengthen educator–entrepreneur connections. The Gladstone schools and Delta/Schoolcraft ISD have a variety of career and technical education programs, but stakeholders noted that while students know a lot about occupations, they know far less about running a business. Building ties between the schools and the business community can help students prepare to start or take over a business, while providing existing businesses with a pool of potential employees. Ideally, this would include curriculum-level support from the schools, to ensure support of student educational outcomes; and technical assistance from economic development organizations, to support businesses with financial and time costs.

Promote family and youth-friendly downtown activities—and create more. Business owners singled out the farmers' market as a great support for business and wished for more avenues to draw families downtown. Explore extending the farmers' market further into the fall and partnering with the library to expand after-school programming to keep kids and their families downtown after school. Any momentum gained from this programming will make the case for new youth- and family-oriented businesses downtown, and a critical mass of family-friendly activities can also be marketed to visitors and tourists as reasons to spend more time in Gladstone.

Show off infrastructure investments and readiness to serve. The City has recently made a number of infrastructure investments from the basics that are invisible when working well (e.g., water and sewer improvements), to new spaces that invite people in. This latter group includes the market plaza, beach and bandshell, the planned "Depot" pocket park, and a potential campground expansion. Together, these investments tell the story of a community that has its house in order and is setting the table to welcome new visitors. The City, DDA, and their partners should celebrate these individual investments—and the overall pattern of responsible maintenance and improvement of public assets—as part of their communications and marketing efforts.

Long Term (1–4 years)

Explore opportunities to host recreation sector industry in the business park. Gladstone and the Little Bay de Noc area offer a wide variety of outdoor recreation activities, including fishing, paddling, bike trails, snowmobiling, marathons, skiing, and tubing. The vacant parcels in the city's industrial park offer an opportunity to attract recreational equipment manufacturers and position Gladstone as a regional production hub. Despite the popularity of outdoor recreation, Michigan lags behind its neighbors in the outdoor recreation manufacturing sector. The City's EDC and the Delta County EDC can connect with MEDC's Office of Outdoor Recreation to understand opportunities in this sector and create a strategy for growing or attracting these businesses.

Opportunity 4: Case Study

Generation E in Monroe:

The Monroe Public Schools offer an entrepreneurship curriculum for K-12 students that includes business planning, soft skills development, and an annual student entrepreneur showcase. The City of Monroe, Monroe County Business Alliance, and individual businesses offer mentorship and support to students in the program and have noted that entrepreneurship interest and skills filter up from students to their parents. genei.org

Opportunity 4: Resources

1. MEDC Office of Outdoor Recreation:
2. MML Online Learning: The "Local Economies: Microbusiness Best Practices" module includes community network mapping templates and instructions.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Gladstone has assets to build on, boasting new energy both in City Hall and on Delta Avenue. While there are significant local pain points—a seasonal economy, aging building stock, vacancies, the division of the city by rail and highway corridors—Gladstone has opportunities to tackle improvements.

The City can start by broadcasting a welcoming and supportive environment for new businesses, emphasizing that City Hall is not just a regulator but a champion of investment and entrepreneurship. Cultivating supportive networks of existing businesses, new entrepreneurs, and economic development offices will both offer opportunities for mentorship and technical assistance as well as provide the camaraderie for weathering the challenges of small business ownership.

Improving access into and within Gladstone can drive more visitors to local businesses. This can start with a combination of signage and marketing, followed by filling infrastructure gaps. Vacancy concerns downtown can be addressed with a combination of zoning updates, active use of investment incentives, and enforcement of blight and safety codes.

A summary of the recommendations presented in this report follows, starting with opportunities that can be implemented within a relatively short timeframe, are less labor-intensive, and are relatively inexpensive. These small-scale interventions are shown alongside large-scale interventions that are more oriented toward creating new long-term infrastructure and resource development within Gladstone over the next few years.

Small-Scale and Short-Term Interventions

- Create a "virtual welcome mat" for entrepreneurs.
- Celebrate new business openings.
- Establish a dedicated DDA social media presence.
- Foster connection and camaraderie among the small business community.
- Guide highway traffic into downtown Gladstone.
- Provide clear and active parking management.
- Implement wayfinding and streetscaping improvements to connect destinations.
- Implement planned Central Business District zoning on Delta Avenue.
- Identify a tax abatement toolkit to support investment.
- Offer lighter-weight version of façade grants.
- Strengthen educator–entrepreneur connections.
- Promote family and youth-friendly downtown activities—and create more.
- Show off infrastructure investments and readiness to serve.

Large-Scale and Long-Term Interventions

- Develop pathways for formal B2B collaboration.
- Identify opportunities to reduce barriers to entry with shared resources.
- Engage MDOT on M-41/4th Avenue and M-41/Hill Road design to improve non-motorized access.
- Coordinate with regional partners to extend the Little Bay de Noc trail to fully connect Gladstone and Escanaba.
- Add to tree canopy during infrastructure projects.
- Implement a vacant/dangerous structure program.
- Explore opportunities to host recreation sector industry in the business park.

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We extend our deepest gratitude for your support and partnership in this effort!

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