

Michigan Leads the Way

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Placemaking and Place-Based Governance is New, State-Wide Economic Development Strategy



Downtown Traverse City, MI in early July during the National Cherry Festival. Image © Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau

Interest in the idea of Placemaking and Place-based Governance has been ‘percolating’ around the world during the past several years as people are looking for new models for economic growth and for creating [place capital](#), the shared wealth that drives thriving communities.

One center of this ‘percolation’ is in Michigan where the new Governor, Rick Snyder, used the announcement of his first [Special Message](#) to the Michigan Legislature to demonstrate the important role that Placemaking could play in the state’s future.

Recognizing the successful efforts of various organizations including the [Michigan Municipal League](#), [The Michigan Land Use Institute](#), and the [Michigan State University Land Policy Institute](#), the governor’s Director of Strategic Planning, Bill Rustem, helped craft a [Special Message](#) with an unprecedented focus on Placemaking at both the state and local levels:

[The Governor’s Special Message on Community Development and Local Government Reforms to the Michigan State Legislature](#), March 21, 2011:

“Neighborhoods, cities and regions are awakening to the importance of ‘place’ in economic development. They are planning for a future that recognizes the critical importance of quality of life to attracting talent, entrepreneurship and encouraging local businesses. Competing for success in a global marketplace means creating places where workers, entrepreneurs, and businesses want to locate, invest and expand. This work has been described as a “sense of place” or “place-based economic development” or simply [“placemaking.”](#)”

Economic development and community development are two sides of the same coin. A community without place amenities will have a difficult time attracting and retaining talented workers and entrepreneurs, or being attractive to business.

Each community contributes to the overall success of its region. People, companies and talent do not move to specific communities- they move to regions. Being globally competitive as a region requires understanding, mapping and pooling regional resources and assets. Local governments, the private sector, schools, higher education and nongovernmental and civic organizations must collaborate to make Michigan's economic regions, and ultimately the state, competitive."

According to **Arnold Weinfeld**, director of Strategic Initiatives and Federal Affairs at the [Michigan Municipal League](#), "Placemaking is a positive approach to recreating our economies and communities for the 21st century."

PPS and Placemaking in Michigan

In early 2011, [Fred Kent](#) of [Project for Public Spaces](#) gave the keynote address at [Michigan's first Placemaking Summit](#). And over the past decade, some of PPS's signature projects have been in Michigan. The new [Campus Martius Square](#) in downtown Detroit has become a community magnet and has attracted over \$700 million in new investment around it. Most significantly, Compuware, a computer firm, moved its headquarters and 4000 employees from the suburbs to a new building adjacent to the square. "Compuware would not have come downtown without the park," notes Bob Gregory of [Detroit 300](#). "They didn't want just a building. They wanted a lively district, where their workers would have things to do."



Campus Martius, Detroit

The revitalization of Eastern Market, underway today, was made possible by PPS's planning and technical assistance dating back in 1998. More recently, with the support of the Ruth Mott Foundation, PPS has completed a three year Placemaking program in downtown [Flint](#), and new vitality is emerging in places ranging from Riverbank Park to the Flint Farmers Market.

Over the last 5 years, PPS has also given keynotes at the [Michigan Association of Planning](#), the [Michigan Municipal League](#) and to the Michigan health community. PPS has also facilitated and led many Placemaking trainings and workshops in [Midland](#), Dearborn, Detroit, Holland, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, and other cities.

Michigan State and Local Authorities to Prioritize Placemaking

Mike Finney, director of the [Michigan Economic Development Corporation \(MEDC\)](#) and leader of the Economic Development Executive Group, was directed to engage state agencies and authorities to prioritize the following points and to issue a report on their progress by the end of the year:

- Identify ways to foster and promote collaboration among entities engaged in economic development and **Placemaking** activities.
- Maximize under-utilized resources throughout the state, particularly in urban communities and rural communities.
- Establish a process for evaluating the performance of economic development and **Placemaking** activities.
- Support investment programs that deliver measurable, positive results.
- Encourage new initiatives that support local and regional programs involved in economic development and **Placemaking**.
- Recognize successful state, regional, and local economic development and **Placemaking** programs that can be role models for groups around the state.
- Promote best practices for local and regional economic development and for **Placemaking** activities.
- Partner with local economic development and civic groups to fully understand the needs of the community

The Potential for a New Michigan

Orienting the state's economic development strategy around creating and sustaining great places and using a new, collaborative approach towards economic development built on broad, community-

based partnerships makes it possible for the creative entrepreneurial spirit of Michigan's citizens to emerge.



Crowds at the National Cherry Festival in Traverse City, MI. Image © Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau

Placemaking is a catalyst that provides a way of not only playing off the natural assets that exists within every community but also strengthening partnerships between communities and government. Because Placemaking is holistic, it breaks down silos between government agencies that would not usually communicate with each other. It may very well be the best way to re-create our economies and communities for the 21st century.

The [Grand Traverse Bay Region](#), mentioned by the Governor's [Special Message](#), could lead the way in establishing a Place-based agenda in the state. Its citizen-led [Grand Vision](#), a blueprint to guide the region's growth for the next 50 years, provides a vision for cooperation on building transportation, education, and broadband infrastructure to renew the region's downtowns.

As **Jim Lively** of the [Michigan Land Use Institute](#) explains, the process of drafting the [Grand Vision](#) was one of asking what citizens wanted for their region. He also said that "the regional visioning process clarified that people who live here want to see new growth in our existing cities and villages. That helps us now to put a focus on working within those communities. What's so cool about Placemaking is that it offers ways to enhance our communities with 'lighter, quicker and cheaper'

[approaches](#), because we can see that there's not going to be a lot of government money coming in. You have to change your mind set to figure out how you can do things yourself."

According **Nigel Griswold**, Regional Planner with the [Northwest Michigan Council of Governments](#) , "the power of a Placemaking approach is also that it's a sexier way to find solutions to traditional problems with land-use and investment strategies." Sexy or not, PPS has always known that thinking in terms of creating great places brings together a wide range of skill sets and professions around a common goal.

In Michigan, Griswold thinks the greatest Placemaking opportunity in the region is to "create a package to unite the area's most beautiful assets, especially among Michigan's coastal and waterfront communities. The region is home to world class inland lakes and streams and fantastic freshwater resources and governments of all scales must take steps to weave together and leverage and preserve these assets."

Michigan's struggles are not unique: budgets everywhere are tight- and citizens are starting to see that they can't wait any longer for investments to come from the top to fix or improve their neighborhoods. To create the changes they want to see, they will have to take the lead.

And while the shift to place-based strategies for economic development in Michigan might have been motivated by the state's severe budget deficit and the need to make each tax dollar do more, the place-based strategy for economic development is actually a wonderful, positive way to encourage citizens to take an active and creative role in co-making the places where they will live.

For more information about Placemaking in Michigan, feel free to contact:

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