



West Branch Township

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2023 Marketing Plan

'Creating a Destination'



November 6, 2023



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Introduction

West Branch Township's unique location and proximity to major transportation networks has always contributed to a community that was considered a gateway to the north. The development of the I-75 Exit 212 area in the 80's and 90's has continued to be an economic asset for the community. The Exit 212 area has become a rest stop for travelers heading north with over a dozen restaurant options and other businesses like gas stations and retail sales. Infill development along the Business-loop corridor continues today and has expanded to expand to the M-55 and Old M-76 corridors.

The township's political boundaries encompass this commercial and retail area and is bounded on the east side by another north-south highway M-30. M-55 splits the township with a primary east-west running highway that connects Lake Michigan at Manistee to Lake Huron at Tawas. Off the southwest corner of township is M-33 making another southerly highway connecting to the Midland region. All of the highways make the area a central location for rural services that can serve a large geographical area. Essential services like healthcare, public safety and public utilities are an asset that are best located in a centrally located hub like West Branch.

Despite the changes in the Outlet Mall the recent commercial growth in the area with Aldi's and Starbucks as well as the "big box" retailers that have been established in the area like Walmart and Home Depot are indicators that West Branch Township is a hub where a large region can be serviced. The recent investment into medical facilities in the West Branch community offers a further indicator of this "hub" concept. This hub is comprised primarily of three separate governmental units, West Branch Township, the City of West Branch, and Ogemaw Township. The core of this hub is in the southwest portion of the township where the City of West Branch meets the township. This leaves the north and east sides of the township locations for expansion of development to support the workforce of these larger employers.



Background Studies and Referances



Over the past few decades several Marketing Plans have been developed for the community. These plans seem to conctrate on the quaint downtown that tried like so many others to present themselves as a “Victorian” themed community. The coloboration of the townships and city in developing these plans have been significant because of the geographical position of the municipalities that make up the community of West Branch. West Branch Township stands in a strategic position as a local governmental unit with a large portion of the geographical area that is “West Branch”.

Much of the outcomes of these plans are a foundation that should be continued. Progressively elements from each plan have been carried over into the next. The “Victorian Theme” has been transitioned to a community with a historic charm. The colors and concept of the wayfinding plan are furthered complimented with the Branding from Rising Tide. Further the concept of West Branch as a Destination is a fundamental part of this marketing plan. The creation of a “Destination” is a primary premise for the desired development that township desires.

West Branch Community, Michigan I-75 Business Loop Market Strategy

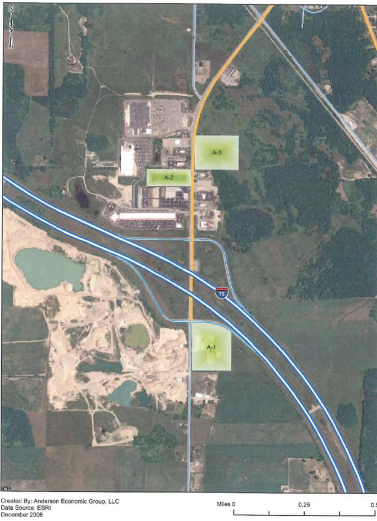
In 2007 Anderson Economic Group, a consultant that specializes in economics, geography and urban planning, public policy and finance prepared a Market Strategy for the community. The report presents their analytic results, findings, conclusions, and recommendations regarding the feasibility of developments along the I-75 Business Loop. The recommendation was that West Branch capitalize on its geographic position as the “Gateway to the North,” and that this image be clearly conveyed in a community-wide marketing theme.

The report states, “The Historic Victorian Village theme is an additional prestige title held by downtown West Branch, and could also be carried through to new development along the corridor.” and “...open, green and public spaces along the corridor should be capitalized to preserve the “Up North” character, and we recommend at least one public area with natural stands of pine trees and picnic areas along the corridor.”



The report's Development Plan explored the opportunity for the development of retail, professional space and services along the I-75 Business Loop Corridor. The site selection along the West Branch Township portion of the corridor included the following recommendations:

Parcels A. - West Branch I-75 Business Loop



Parcels B. - West Branch I-75 Business Loop



Parcels C. - West Branch I-75 Business Loop



A-1: Excellent high visibility, ideal for small non-retail business.

A-2: Excellent in-fill opportunity with visibility to customers already at Home Depot and Wal-Mart Supercenter.

A-3: Planned and parceled commercial space, ideal for small businesses or one significant chain or anchor store.

B-1: Large, level parcel ideal for big-box retailer similar in size to Home Depot or Wal-Mart Supercenter.

B-2: Good frontage along the business loop with opportunities for a mixed-use project with both retail and multi-family, owner-occupied condominiums or townhouses.

B-3, B-4: Good frontage on the business loop, would provide good balance for any development along frontage of B-2.

These same observations are still relevant and are being part of the considered for potential development along the Business Loop for purposes of this report.

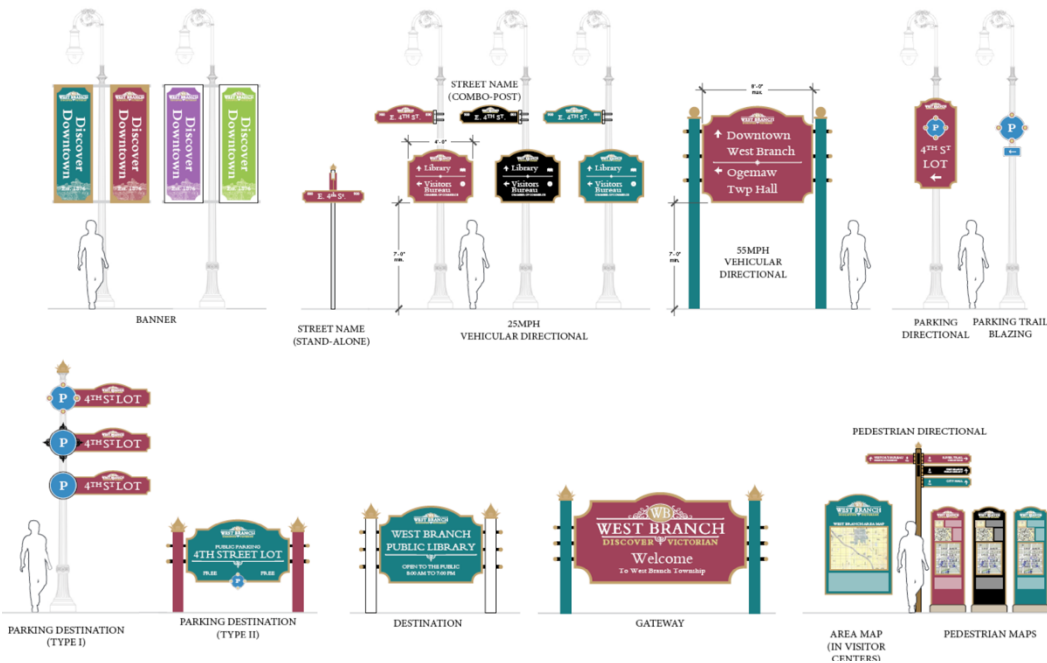
West Branch I-75 Business Corridor Marketing Plan

In 2014 USDA Rural Business Economic Grant Program funded a marketing plan that was prepared by a group of consultants included Lapham Associates, McConnell & Associates and Landscape Architects and Planners. The most important task was to define what the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of the I-75 Corridor was, and to agree on the importance of creating a



supporting brand for that positioning statement. It was determined that “Discover Victorian” would be this positioning statement.

The “Discover Victorian” position was used to develop logos and a theme that was incorporated into a wayfinding and signage plan that unified the business loop from Exist 212 in West Branch Township through the City of West Branch and to Exist 215 in Ogemaw Township. “The goal of the wayfinding system is to capture a portion of the traffic along I-75 north and south, as well as the exiting traffic visiting the Outlet Mall into the Downtown and travelers exiting from the north at the 215 Interchange through the Ogemaw Springs area.”





Rising Tide Program

In 2018 West Branch was selected to participate in the Rising Tide Program. The mission of the Rising Tide initiative is to provide communities with the tools they need to design and build a successful economic framework. It supports vibrant, thriving communities to attract business investment and talent by creating a sustainable path toward economic stability and growth. The results of this state sponsored program included a housing study and a branding & marketing study.

A Housing Market Analysis was one of the products of the public input from the Rising Tide program. Community Research Services was tasked with examining the viability of various housing options based on market conditions. The analysis was directed from public input and surveys that identified a need for housing by local employers and realtors. The January 2019 report took a deep dive into the local economy and demographics as well as the local housing stock from data originating from the Census Bureau. The study summarized a calculated demand number of various types of housing units. Potential development sites that were suggested, but the study was concentrated on the City of West Branch and did not further explore other sites outside the city. The data that was gathered is useful because it was regional and did not concentrate on the city.

The Branding program was headed up by Ben Muldrow, a marketing consultant whose background was in branding and marketing for communities across the United States. The direction that he suggested that the community is to be a destination rather than just a stop on the way “up-north”. His approach on combining all the previous themes or brands that the community had previously used.

Ben’s approach was to utilize a consistent image with the brand through standard typefaces and colors with the values that represent the community and create a “Destination Brand” for West Branch. “West Branch, Michigan BrandTouch™ Manual” was the document that was the final product and should be referred to regularly to maintain the cohesiveness of the brand.

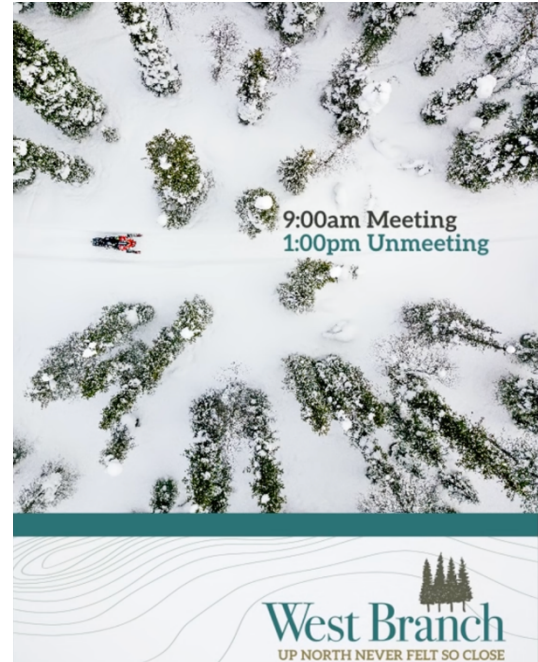


Maintaining consistency with the typefaces and colors while projecting a consistent theme is something that can be carried across the governmental boundaries and industries within the community to make a brand. The use of these branding technics can be used to create an icon that represents the community and a versatile tool for everyone.



Many developers' "Site Selection" process is valuing the quality of life in a community, and that is one of our best economic development tactics. A strong workforce that passionately wants to be here is paramount to attracting new businesses or industries. Tourist also will value the quality of life and want to return again and again. So building on our assets of being a friendly outdoorsy type of community with a long standing history should be our brand.

Ben Muldrow's West Branch, Michigan Branding Presentation:
<https://youtu.be/v7ifGXvpAnY>





risingtide branding summary West Branch, Michigan

destination identity



organization identity



brand extension





Where Are We Now?

As part of West Branch Township's endeavor to obtain Redevelopment Ready certification an updated marketing plan that builds on the synergy of the prior plans is the logical progression. The COVID-19 shutdowns and subsequent pandemic together with current economic conditions make these times different than what was presumed in the previous reports' forecasts. Recent new retail developments along the loop including the increased development at Exit 215 are economic indicators that West Branch has a solid future. In addition to the Exist 212 developments of Aldi and Culver's as well as the Starbucks Plaza between them have contributed to the new employers for the region helping maintain West Branch's economic strength.



The changing uses at the outlet mall has been a recent economic development change that has begun to attract visitors and residents and generate traffic along the business loop. The proximity to major thoroughfares provides quick easy access to the West Branch area for the rural surroundings. Development along the M-55 and M-33 corridors are identified in the current Land Use

Masterplan and continued commercial development along the Business Loop with in-fill development support the expansion of the current urban center at Exit 212 and downtown City of West Branch.

Public utilities have been planned and developed along the M-55 and Old M-76 corridors providing municipal water and sanitary sewer. Other infrastructure including the pathways, streetscape and broadband expansion have set the foundation for future development and attracting new construction. There are multiple locations along those corridors for expansion of new development. Mixed use developments should be encouraged that provide both a residential element as well as a low-use retail to service the neighborhood. This type of land use encourages homeowners like young professionals and other higher income outdoor enthusiasts.



Demographics

The median age for Ogemaw County is 50.5 (West Branch Township is 43.6) which is 25% higher than the median age for Michigan and US. The sexes are fairly evenly divided amongst the population and consisting of primarily (over 90%) whites. Median Income for Ogemaw County is at \$44,165 (West Branch Township \$49,075) and per capita income is \$25,414 (West Branch Township \$26,294), and 17% (West Branch Township 16.5%) of the population is below the poverty level. The Average household is 2.3 (West Branch Township 2.5) with 59% (West Branch Township 66%) as married couples and the next highest category of non family making up nearly 20% of households (14% in West Branch township). Migration to Ogemaw County is fairly low with only 10% of the population having moved to the county in the last year. 87.1% (West Branch Township 91.6%) has graduated high school which is consistent with both Michigan and the United States, but only 13.3% (West Branch Township 18.4%) have a Bachelor's Degree or higher which is nearly half the number for Michigan and the United States.¹

Based on the Census Bureau's American Community Survey estimates the population in the township has slightly increased from 2,427 in 2016 to 2,582 in 2021 with an increase primarily in the male population. However, 2016 median household income \$53,156 has decreased to \$49,075 in 2021. Employment in Ogemaw County has been on the uptick for the past four years with the labor force rising from 8,081 in 2019 to 8,229 for the year of 2022. Unemployment levels for Ogemaw County have remained around 7% compared to the Michigan 4.2% unemployment for 2022.

Existing Community Assets

West Branch Township has been adapting and growing together with its downtown district. Improvements to make the Business Loop more pedestrian friendly with paved trails, timber pedestrian bridges and street lighting. These elements have expanded to include the Austin Way corridor, the Old M-76 corridor and the M-55 corridor with an effort to expand the walkability of the area. Municipal water and sanitary sewer have also been extended to help assist with potential development sites along these corridors. These corridors connect other community assets including :

- Ogemaw Hills Recreation Park with ballfields and disc golf.
- Rifle Creek Archery Park with indoor/outdoor archery range and an upcoming outdoor 3D archery course
- Secret Campground and RV Park is a hidden gem of a campground located right in the heart of the West Branch business area

¹ **Citation:** U.S. Census Bureau (2021). *American Community Survey 5-year estimates*. Retrieved from *Census Reporter Profile page for West Branch township, Ogemaw County, MI*



- The upcoming West Branch Commons project with gathering spot for festivals and events located on the Business Loop and the Old M-76
- Exit 212 food and recreational facilities. A variety of restaurants and entertainment options with wine tasting, indoor golf simulator, axe throwing and smash room.

West Branch Township's social media presence has been an effective method of promoting local businesses, keeping the public informed on current issues and highlighting current events. The township's webpage has an abundance of information as well as forms, calendars and minutes to all the township public meetings. The township strives for transparency and keeping its citizens informed through an online presence and digital media.



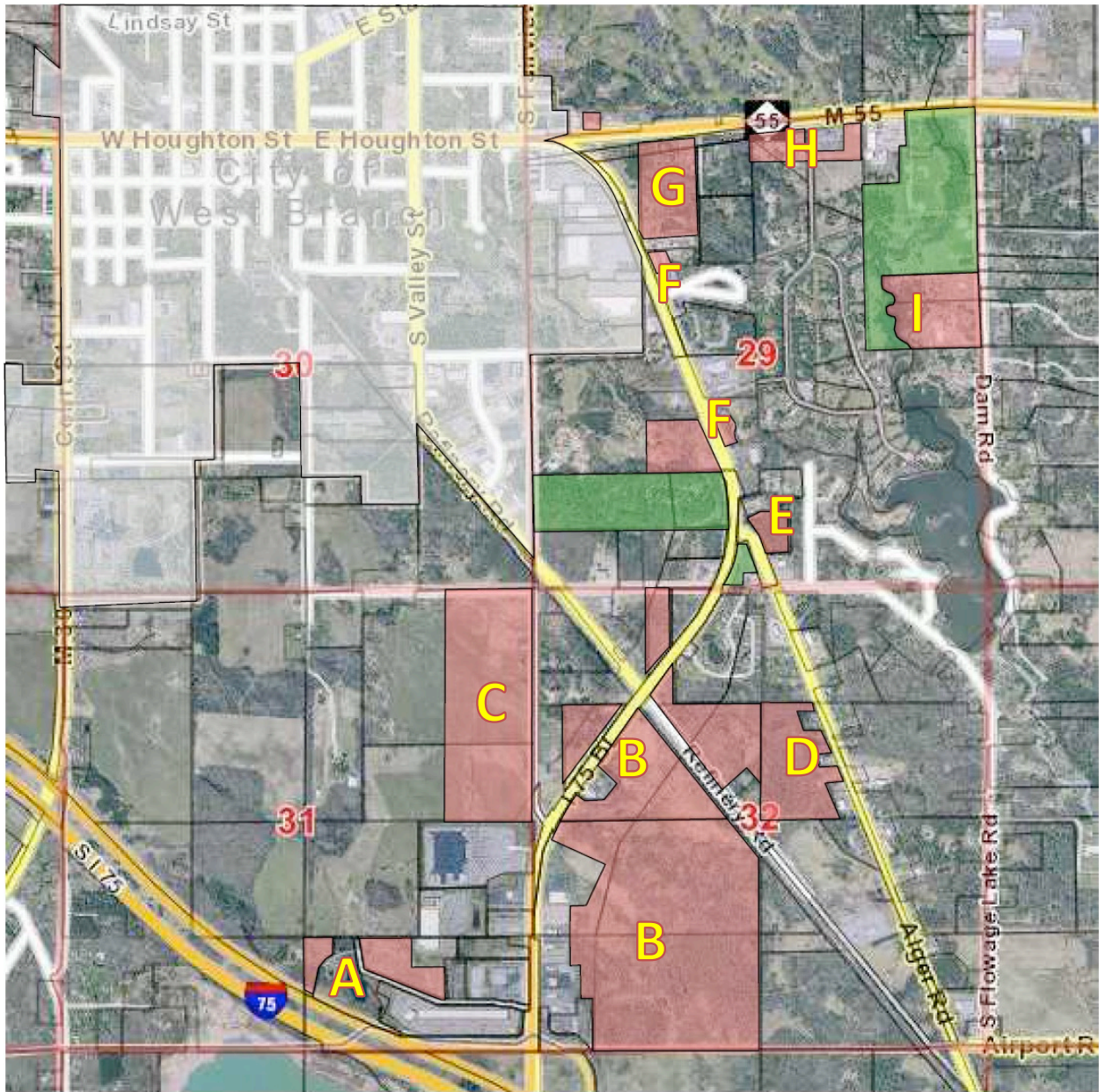
Where Do We Go?

West Branch Township has become a regional hub with its growth in large commercial developments like Aldi, Walmart and Home Depot. Even our outlet mall has been able to be rejuvenated commercial property with the decline of retail outlets and increasing online retail. Further expansion of the commercial development along the business loop and M-55 seems to be the logical expansion for our community. More intense residential developments around the edges of the corridor's commercial developments can provide needed housing.

West Branch Township is a perfect destination with its proximity to the outdoor recreation or natural resources and the highway that connect the entire state. The opportunity for planned growth to help build a sustainable community for everyone and future generations is here. West Branch township should continue to promote the commercial development along the state highways along with quality and affordable residential developments.

An updated inventory was made of the potential developable lands in the "West Branch Township Urban Development Zone" where infrastructure such as water and sanitary sewer are readily available, as well as pathways and parks and place making elements. Proximity to primary transportation routes and major employers makes areas desirable for development. Not all the parcels shown are available for sale or may already have some sort of design or planning underway. Most of these areas are smaller in-fill types of development that should be marketed to specific type of business or brand.

Other natural features like wetlands, streams and floodplains hinder development plans for a lot of the area along the business loop but that provides for a nice natural buffer that could allow for more intense uses on the developable land. Small neighborhood retail and commercial uses tend to blend quite well with nice orderly planned residences. Coffee shops, hair salons, and professional offices are types of commercial development that can be included in these types of mixed-use developments. Pedestrian friendly streets with tree lined neighborhoods are inviting and will help maintain West Branch Township's Destination feeling.



- A. Forwards Properties: 10 acres at the corner of Austin Way and the Home Depot-Walmart connector road.
- B. Aldi's Remainder & Branhoff Properties: Well over 100 acres of land with streams and floodplains as well as wetlands. But suitable for a large mixed-use development.



- C. Griffin Cook Road Properties: Location and public services make this land desirable for either commercial, residential or mixed-uses.
- D. West Branch Township Property: 21 acres of land fronting on Old M-76 and a stream with wetlands in the rear.
- E. Old M-76 Intersection properties: Several in-fill parcels with Bussines Loop frontage and public utilities. The West Branch Commons project at the former West Branch Steel property will serve as a place making destination for the surrounding parcels.
- F. Dash Property, the former Jerrys Joint, the former Brian’s Fruit Market, and Griffin property are all In-fill development sites.
- G. Hobohm Property: Access to both the business loop and M-55 makes this property desirable for commercial or mixed-use development. The property is serviced by public water and sewer and has a small pond. The Woods remaining property is also a great in-fil development site with public utilities.
- H. Fox Run Properties: Great access to M-55, pathway, recreation facilities and public utilities.
- I. Dam Road Industrial Properties: Excellent industrial opportunity or redevelopment into some sort of commercial recreational use.

Action Plan

West Branch Township will strive to market these parcels and promote desirable development that is supported by the township master plan and other planning documents. The following are specific tasks that the township will pursue:

- List available sites online and promote realators listings
- Promote the township’s tax credits and abatement programs
- Promote and help facilitate public services and utilities available to sites
- Assist with traffic strudies and help provide available traffic data
- Communicate with regional developers and realtors



Goals & Objectives

Marketing for West Branch Township is a multifaceted issue that involves multiple partners and campaigns to make a noticable difference. As a governmental unit you are marketing a place not a object or specific service. The township needs to not only provide the fundamental governemtnal services but make a place that is welcoming and inviting for the residents and and next generation.

The following are this plan's Goals:

- ***Maintain the friendly charm that is associated with West Branch***
- ***Support the preservation of the natural resources and capitalize on the accessibility to those natural resources***
- ***Encouraging entrepenuers and businesses to choose West Branch as a destination***
- ***Promote quality and affordable housing for young working class families***

The following objectives have been derived to futher set forth a detailed plan moving forward that will help build and maintain a sustainable community for everyone:

1. Continue the improvement and development of parks and place making within the township to create an inviting culture. A local gathering spot that can support a local farmers market, food truck court, or larger community events such as concerts or festivals.
2. Seek in-fill and large-scale developments that supports the "Destination" brand that was created by the Rising Tide Initiative. Hotels, restaurants, and other entertainment venues are vital for the transient visitor that may be here for the natural resources or for business.
3. Encourage quality mixed-mix developments that create a neighborhood inviting to young families and provide local services that support the community. Small retail or service type uses with small traffic flows and normal business hours can blend nicely with residential developments and should be encouraged where appropriate.



4. Increase marketing and support local tourism services to help expand the West Branch Township as a “Destination”. A target market of young, higher income, outdoor enthusiast.
5. Collaboration with local stakeholders with similar interests such as the EDC, Visitor’s Bureau, and Chamber. Common investments that further increase tourism and build a better lasting community.
6. Implement policies and programs that create an inviting community for developers. Programs like tax abatement and other financial incentives are necessary to make some developments feasible.
7. Implement policies and programs that create an inviting community for employers or their workforce. Programs like a “Social District” and outdoor seating create an attractive entertainment venue for businesses, residents, and tourists.
8. Invest into infrastructure to support the growth in a direction that meets the needs of the community. Extending pathways, improving roads and extending municipal water and sewer are projects that the township and the Downtown Development Authority should be planning.
9. Market the Township’s Old M-76 21 acres and surrounding underutilized properties to developers that will develop a quality mixed-use development.



Conclusion

West Branch Township is in a very unique position where the convergence of major transportation systems and the close access to outdoor tourism has encouraged recent development of central services such as medical, police and utilities; and major retailers like Walmart, Aldi and Starbucks. This makes for an opportunity that allow West Branch Township to direct and plan for future development before it gets here. As the community continues to grow and demand for more housing, retail and entertainment venues increase, the marketing of in-fill sites and larger tracts will direct those developments to West Branch Township.

The following is from the Rising Tide Branding report and explains “How to be a Brand Partner”. This graphic reminds of of the many ways that the community can help build the brand further promote the economic development needed to sustain West Branch Township as a Destination.

Brand Merchandise	Brand your Digital Presence	Brand Your Place
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Hats● T-Shirts● Coffee cups● Decals● Bumper stickers● Bags● Shopping bags● Cycling jerseys● Pint glasses● Guitar picks● Water bottles● Outdoor gear● Polo shirts● Climbing chalk bags● Hiking stick medallions● Rain jackets● Guitar straps● Koozies● Socks● Invent something	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Add logo to website● Add logos to Facebook as a gallery● Link from web to community website● Use hashtag● Share photos of branded items● Tweet the web address● Link google photo galleries to share● Profile pics● Send other businesses and organizations to the web address● Instagram people having fun	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Request interest icons● Look for brand extension opportunities● Organizational logos● Street banners● Wayfinding signage● Open signs● Store hours signs● Shopping & dining guides● Advertising● Pocket folders● Visitor guides● Business cards● Brochures● Annual reports● Maps● Trail guides● Shopping bags● Loyalty cards

West Branch Township should continue to work with regional partners like the NEMCOG Regional Agency Collaboration and partner with other state agencies like the MEDC to fulfill its goals. Partnerships have been successful in the past with implementing projects and developments within the township and should continue to be a resource for future projects and development.