

West Branch Township

1705 S. Fairview Road, West Branch, MI 48661

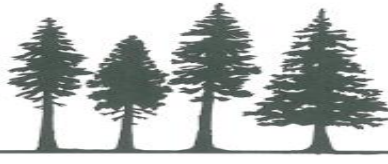
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www.westbranchtownship.org

Economic Development Strategy



Developed for the West Branch
Township Board & West Branch
Township Community



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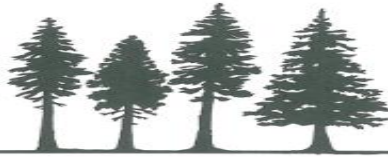


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The Goals of the Economic Development Strategy is to help guide West Branch Township and the West Branch Township Downtown Development Authority to support, promote, enhance and sustain Township Economic Development.

The process for Development of the Strategy

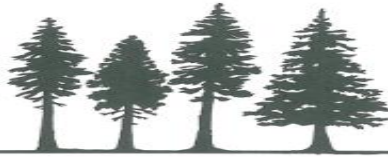
This Strategy was developed with input from township citizens at Township Board Meetings, citizen forums, Downtown Development Authority Meetings, and members of township community organizations. Those who participated in discussions provided the major issues included in this strategy as well as recommendations for action projects that will help to address the major issues in the strategy. Members of the West Branch Township Board and the West Branch Township DDA offer their thanks to all who have supported the township with their input over time.

Members of the West Branch Township Board and West Branch Township DDA are:

- Township Supervisor - Jim Morris
- Township Clerk - Jeremy Hickmott
- Township Treasurer - Diane Philbrick
- Township Trustee - Mike Selinski
- Township Trustee - Mike Durfee

West Branch Township Downtown Development Authority Board

- Jim Morris
- Greg Morris (Vice President)
- Bob Griffin Jr. (DDA President)
- Mark Pecella
- Laura Hanlon
- Jay Spaulding (DDA Treasurer)
- Brad Neubecker
- Ken Gildner



Strategic Planning for Economic Development in Rural and Urban Areas of Northeastern Michigan

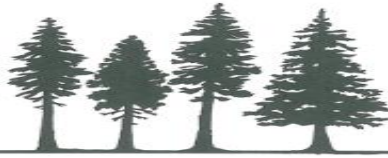
Economic Development has become the “watchword” for rural Northeastern Michigan as local leaders continue to revitalize and enhance the economy of their areas. West Branch Township is pushing and continuing to enhance opportunities for increased and diversified businesses to enhance not only the quality of life in West Branch Township but Ogemaw County overall.

Strategic Planning implies forward thinking, anticipating the future, and identifying goals for the community and how to achieve them. Resources will be utilized and decisions made to achieve desired future goals. Strategic planning by the West Branch Township Board, Planning Commission, and Downtown Development Authority will clarify the process of building a local foundation for economic development. There is nothing mystical about developing a strategy; it involves hard work, communication, thought and cooperation. To succeed in economic development efforts, a community must know where it wants to go and the best course of action to get there. Business firms are often advised to develop a business plan in order to survive an ever changing environment. The plans can be used to assist management in assessing potential opportunities and implementing decisions, developing a strategy for community economic development is very similar and necessary if communities are to succeed. Local leadership must be involved in developing the strategy because it cannot be successful without their total support. It is also very important that local leaders understand at the very start that they must make a substantial commitment of their time and effort if they hope to be successful.

Statistics / Community Information for Economic Strategic Planning in West Branch Township.

For the purposes of strategic planning, information below is providing a base starting point:

1. As economics changed, general retail has stabilized in West Branch Township but does run the risk of declines due to internet sales, population trends, and income changes.
2. Population declines have stabilized. Greater focus on future planning for economic development should help to continue the stabilization and lead to potential small increases.
3. West Branch Township continues to see its average age increase this will increase pressure on area social, public safety, and medical services. The average age of the Ogemaw County population is 45 plus years of age.
4. Many local hospitals and medical facilities have upgraded and continue to develop larger facilities in the region. This trend is expected to continue
5. The medical services provided in West Branch Township will be determined by the nature of mergers, governmental policies, and the market available in the area.
6. Hospitals, medical clinics, and services for older adults will become more important to an aging population in the township.
7. The agriculture economy, while stable continues to look at way to diversify its potential. Nevertheless agriculture will continue to be a vital part of the township economy and will be strengthened with a more diverse agriculture.
8. The education level of the township and county needs further improvements to create a competitive “labor shed”. In the year 2015, 75% of the population had a high school diploma or higher and 11.7% had a bachelor’s degree or higher. This does not compare favorably with other communities in Michigan who have 20% plus of the population with a bachelor’s degree. Innovation, business attraction and retention will remain challenging without a more educated work force.
9. Township Government has and continues to set new and evolving priorities for spending to support new economic growth initiatives and solve problems like safety and roads.



10. Increased wages and better jobs found in neighboring and comparative communities and counties will attract qualified workers from West Branch Township and Ogemaw County. The median family income of West Branch Township / Ogemaw County is about \$36,000 which is comparable to the Oscoda Area (about \$34,000) and Roscommon County (about 37,000). This is nevertheless a comparatively low range and many citizens are living in poverty (about 22% which is higher than surrounding areas) The average weekly wage for citizens is (about \$600) which compares favorably to Roscommon and Oscoda Counties but compares poorly with (about \$800) in Crawford County and (about \$1,000) in Otsego County.
11. The costs of university education has increased in the West Branch Township area to on average of about \$30,000 per year, and may continue to increase, making it more important that local schools and community colleges work together to make university degree more affordable for the area.
12. Tourism, continues to be an essential part of the West Branch Township economy, it can be improved because of the excellent summer and winter resources available and seizing off the surrounding communities increase tourism activity as well.
13. The people of the Township who know one another and are engaged positively will continue to do so, regarding projects that build place making in the community.
14. Township Blight and Ordinance issues will be limiting factors in attracting citizens and industry without changes in priorities for spending. Engaged citizens who want a more inviting community will continue to call for stronger policy to address blight. West Branch Township has taken steps to curb blighting / ordinance issues through civil infraction ordinance and enhancing current ordinances.
15. Lack of internet and Cell phones services will continue to be challenges for attracting citizens to the township because new citizens and people visiting the area expect these services in their homes and vacation locations. Local government should make this expansion of services a priority.
16. New Industry in Ogemaw County and the surrounding areas will provide a better quality job and income for the Citizens of West Branch Township but will also create and increased need for housing. Housing will be a limiting factor in overall growth of West Branch Township.

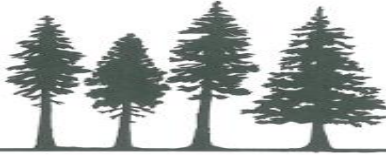
Strengths of West Branch Township

Manufacturing / Warehouse Business

West Branch Township has multiple manufacturing and warehouse business that provide jobs to the area. Most of these facilities are located within two miles of the M-55 Corridor which provide easy access to State Trunk lines. While manufacturing / warehouse business has not increased greatly the township does offer tax abatement policy to help enhance potential growth in these sectors. The manufactures / warehouses in the township provide services and products across the state of Michigan and Globally.

Retail / Commerce

West Branch Township has since the early 1990's and continues to be an attractive place for retail and commerce development. Interstate I-75 and M-55 are the two major routes through multiple locations in northern Michigan. I-75 travels through West Branch Township and the 212 Exit is the first exit for the entire West Branch region and is located in West Branch Township. These two highways make West Branch Township and attractive place for retail, commerce, and industry. Approximately 12,000 vehicles travel on the interstate bypass (Business Loop I-75) every day.



Broadband / Internet Services

In 2014, Ogemaw County became a Certified Broadband community. The West Branch Township Board in 2022 partnered with a private company to enhance broadband services in West Branch Township including along the M-76 business area. The township continues to identify current internet capabilities and expand service to meet increasing needs.

Agriculture Growth / Diversification

West Branch Township has substantial agricultural and natural gas industries. Ogemaw County wide 280 farms produce a total of \$46,260,000 in farm sales annually. In West Branch Township approximately 70% of the township is zoned for agricultural uses. Dairy, Beef cattle and grains are the top produced agriculture products in the region. There is a strong infrastructure to support continued agriculture growth but also allowing for diversified agriculture uses like Solar Farm Development.

Job Training

Michigan Works! and the Ogemaw County EDC offices are both located within West Branch Township and provides training for employees of local business. Having these two resources close in the township makes efforts to collaborate with industry, business, and commerce, and locale government that much easier to help develop trainings that meets employer needs and promotes growth.

A PLAN FOR AN IMPROVED AND ENHANCED ECONOMY IN WEST BRANCH TOWNSHIP

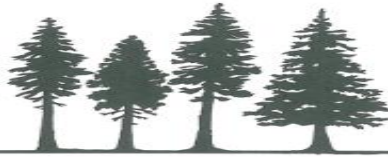
Strategic Direction #1 – Improving the Economic Environment of the Township

Present Situation: Community members and citizens have questions and concerns about blighting factors and Zoning regulations affecting the future direction of the community and adding additional challenges for to the Township to attract people the township through the development of new housing and also the creation of new businesses in the township. While the community has seen growth over the past three years it has been more corporate and the community would also like to see an expansion of small business in the township.

Strategic Direction: West Branch Township plans to continue to implement elements of the Branding and Marketing initiatives (project rising tide) that was created a few years back. Also to implement strategies, policies, and streamed line enforcement of the township current ordinance policy but also engage through a stronger online informational push to help people get informed about township ordinance and provide multiple guides regarding subjects that maybe hard to understand or unknown.

Action Projects:

- Work with Developers regarding redevelopment of blighted, closed, or vacant parcels through information about tax abatements and initiatives that can be help by the township.
 - **Time Line** – ongoing through at least 2030 to identify problem properties within the main commercial district and surrounding residential areas.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township DDA, Private property owners.
- Continue seeking grants for place making enhancements and expanding park development.
 - **Time Line** – ongoing through at least 2026 to continue the development of the township park system and working to acquire additional recreation resources. .
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township DDA, Partnership with State



Agencies, Working with NEMCOG' s ‘Supportive Systems for Business Growth Strategy’

- Work with Township legal to address blighting / zoning issues to remove and clean up blighted and zoning violation issues.
 - **Time Line** – No definite timeline to identify problem properties within the main commercial district and surrounding residential areas.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township Zoning, Township Legal, and Private property owners
- Promote online and through social media presences information about new businesses large and small and also provide information regarding available buildings and land.
- Continue working with the MEDC in the future to remain a redevelopment ready community.

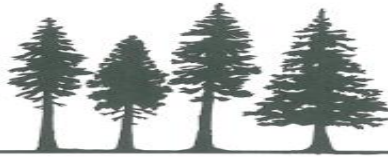
Strategic Direction #2 – Improving Housing Opportunities in West Branch Township

Present Situation: The West Branch / Ogemaw County region continues to see a stable and slightly increasing industrial growth. These businesses have also helped to attract more residents and other related and dependent businesses that will bring others for work. Yet there is critical lack of housing in West Branch Township and Ogemaw County which has driven up prices in the region to unreachable levels for some new families and for those looking at these new area jobs, but also for health care workers and others that might consider West Branch Township if there were places to live and thrive.

Strategic Direction: West Branch Township will actively inform investors, realtors, and citizens of the need for housing in the community and of the new job opportunities in the region. It will also seek investors who will consider building or remodeling housing in the area. It will inventory the zoning regulations regarding housing and mixed use developments and bring these discussions to the planning commission as the township see fit or how the communities needs change.

Action Projects

- Develop a listing of Investable property for developing housing in West Branch Township.
 - **Time Line** – Start in 2024 to have a compiled list of property that is compatible with zoning and is ready for development.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township DDA, Local community organization (Chamber of Commerce, EDC, and Real-estate offices).
- Encourage Developers to meet with the township to gather information on zoning regulations and also possible tax incentives available through the township.
 - **Time Line** – currently ongoing with increased presence of information and availability of information on the townships website.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, EDC, and Township DDA.
- Conduct an inventory of housing availability and needs. Encourage banks, property owners, and realtors to invest in a housing study for the Township.
- Promote planned housing developments with place making elements, walkability, high speed internet, and other amenities.
 - **Time Line** – ongoing through at least 2030 with the construction and acquisition of additional property and facilities to enhance neighborhoods and the business corridor.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township DDA, Private property owners.



Strategic Direction #3 – Improving Maternal and Child Care Services

Present Situation: Citizens of the Township are concerned about the lack of obstetrical care in the county and other maternal care services. There are also concerns about the decline in child care services for families and its impact on the community and workforce development. There is information indicating the number of child care providers has dropped from 160 providers to less than 20 in a five year span. While the township is extremely limited in its ability to address this concern, the EDC has been working on plans and the township could work with hospitals and other who can.

Strategic Direction: Gather information regarding the needs of pediatric and obstetrical care services in the county and encourage the hospital to consider providing those services. Provide business plan support for new child care providers.

Action Projects:

- Gather data that projects obstetrical needs in the future.
 - **Time Line** – ongoing through at least 2028 to identify the needs of the overall population in the township.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township DDA, NEMCOG, MEDC, and the local Chamber of Commerce.
- Support the local hospital in discussion about the need for maternal care / obstetrics in the township and the area.
- Provide business plan support for new child care provider.
 - **Time Line** – 2026 to begin looking at alternate options within zoning to help streamline the potential development of childcare facilities.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township Planning Department, Township, Private property owners

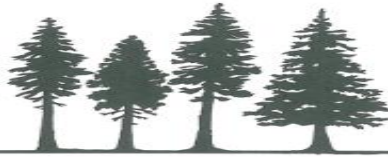
Strategic Direction #4 – Developing a Stronger Workforce with Education

Present Situation: The education level of citizens needs to improve within the township to create a competitive workforce. About 75% of the population has a high school diploma or higher and 11.7% have a bachelor's degree or higher which is not competitive with surrounding communities.

Strategic Direction: Encourage more educational opportunities for citizens and encourage high school students to enroll in college course or being looking at skilled trade programs while still completing high school courses.

Action Projects:

- Investigate the possibilities of partnering with private companies to enhance the education opportunities they may provide and provide this information to residents.
 - **Time Line** – starting in 2025 working within the NEMCOG “Cultivating our Workforce and Talent” in an effort to attract, development, and retain a talented workforce in the township.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, NEMCOG, Township DDA, Private Business owners, Michigan Works.
- Seek other specific training programs including skilled trades and apprenticeship programs that can be brought to West Branch Township or the surrounding areas.
 - **Time Line** – starting in 2026 to work with Michigan Works and other local organizations to better improve training programs for township residents and residents of the entire community.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, NEMCOG, Michigan Works, Private



property owners

- Write and distribute a letter to parents about college or skilled trades in the high school programs.
- Conduct a feasibility study for a culinary entrepreneurship program in West Branch Township.
 - **Time Line** – working with 2026 to get the study developed and implemented in the community to learn about the needs of the area.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, NEMCOG, Michigan Works.
- Market associate degree programs for returning (nontraditional) students who maybe working within the community.

Strategic Direction #5 – Improving Internet Service for Citizens & Businesses

Present Situation: Businesses, visitors, and residents of the Township have and continue to have some issues with no or inadequate internet services in some portions of the township. This has an impact on attracting citizens to look at and purchase homes and property and for the establishment of new business and/or strengthening existing businesses potential.

Strategic Directions: Improve internet and broadband across underserved areas within the township.

Action Projects:

- Continues to distribute information on the number and location of towers and other places where wireless communications equipment could be located.
- Conduct meeting on the possibilities of forming internet broadband, and cell phone cooperatives in areas of the Township.
 - **Time Line** – in conjunction with the State of Michigan’s efforts into 2024 to identify the needs of the overall population in the township.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township DDA, NEMCOG, MEDC, and the local Chamber of Commerce.
- Continue public private partnerships in the township to expand broadband services.
- Create “Connected Communities” in new planned unit developments and mixed use constructions projects.
 - **Time Line** – start work in 2024 to build into the west branch township zoning ordinance for planned unit developments to include “Connected Communities” information.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township Planning Department, NEMCOG, and MEDC.

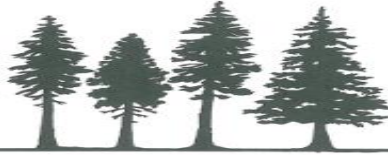
Strategic Direction #6 – Improving Tourism

Present Situation: Community members have stated there is a somewhat untapped market for tourism in the West Branch Township area and the West Branch area overall that can develop over time. The townships variety of outdoor activities and walkability is the townships best kept secrets for its size. Consider tourism not as an “end” but as a means to attract new residents and business development.

Strategic Directions: Collaborate with other organizations to support market strategy for the tourism economy of the Township and the entire West Branch Area.

Action Projects:

- Create a brochure / marketing materials inviting travelers to visit township place making locations across the township like farmers markets, recreation facilities, and lakes.
 - **Time Line** – Annual task by regional and local partners to best identify the current and future assets of the community and the region.



- **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township DDA, NEMCOG, MEDC, and the local Chamber of Commerce.
- Strengthen the maps and website to promote walkability in the township.
 - **Time Line** – Annual Item to make sure the township website and social media links have to most up to date information regarding new and updated pathways.
 - **Responsible parties** – Township Government, Township DDA, and the local Chamber of Commerce.
- Act as local information source regarding economic development issues relating to tourism.

Economic Development Strategy Summary

West Branch Township has some unique and challenging economic characteristics. Citizens need to reflect on its many many opportunities and bring people together to formulate a new and unique economic strategy for the future of West Branch Township. Citizens have voiced their belief that to grow our community and economy we will need to make decisions, in ambiguous times, with an eye to the growth and development of the future, and we will likely be required to make decisions that in the moment seem overwhelming but are best for the long term viability economically of the township. Nevertheless we must push forward thinking of the future of the community or lose to other competitive communities.

The greatest incentive to leave an area is a lack of opportunity. As we work on multiple plans for the future and projects to promote economic growth, we are building a township where our community will find opportunities for the future and fulfillment.

All of the goals listed in the Economic Development Strategy will not be accomplished without and optimistic and forward thinking local unit of government that is willing to plan for the next decade and decades to come.

**WE LOOK FORWARD TO THE FUTURE ECONOMIC GROWTH
OF WEST BRANCH TOWNSHIP.**

“WHERE THAT FARM MEETS THE CITY”

This Economic Strategy is designed
for the West Branch Township Board
and the West Branch Township Community

October 10th 2023