ALMA ASPIRES

Alma aspires to be the best small city within Michigan’s shoreline.

From the days of its founding, Alma has benefited from thoughtful strategic planning. To this day, Alma is strengthened by the bold decisions by the community’s early leaders. Alma College, MidMichigan Medical Center-Gratiot, Masonic Pathways, the Opera House, historic downtown, strong public schools, and globally-relevant employer base are all a result of forward-thinking civic action.

Building upon these strengths, Alma today takes another leap forward. Alma aspires to be a community of choice, where families, seniors, students, employers, and tourists all choose Alma for its unique charm and community connectedness. Where, through a quality education and training system, economically diverse employer base and proximity to additional employment centers, everyone reaches their full potential.

Visualize Alma’s downtown alive with people enjoying an array of shops and restaurants; music filling the streets as a community festival delights the crowd; neighborhood parks buzzing with activity, from kids’ soccer games to the new adult kickball league. Winter is appealing too, as the community embraces the season with a community skating rink and a new snowman competition that attracts visitors from across the Midwest.

This wave of community spirit results in more high school and college graduates staying in Alma and new families moving here as well. New housing developments - houses and apartments - sprout up across the community. Importantly, the downtown events and activities bring the community together - the entire community. With Alma's growing diversity, greater emphasis is placed on the delivery of programs and opportunities that appeal to all. As a result, cultural activities connect the entire community in ways few places can accomplish.

Alma experiences growing jobs, wages, and investment. Existing companies add jobs and increase wages as they find more trained workers locally and more receptivity from those considering relocating to Alma. The growth of current employers complements the addition of a wave of startup companies, everything from new local restaurant operators to high-flying technology firms. These entrepreneurs benefit from a supportive community, with Alma now delivering an abundance of startup services and co-working spaces to accelerate the launch of successful home-grown companies.

Through a series of bold actions first taken in 2020, an aspirational Alma has solidified itself as a leading community in Michigan for the benefit of all of its citizens.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Alma Aspires is the result of extensive hard work and collaboration among a range of stakeholders, community and business leaders, elected officials, and members of the public who care deeply about the future of Alma. In particular, the following people are recognized for their contributions to this effort.

STEERING COMMITTEE

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Donalynn Ingersoll | Alma Public Schools
Jeff Abernathy | Alma College
Jim Wheeler | Greater Gratiot Development
Mike Logan | Michigan Masonic Homes
Marita Hattem-Schiffman | MidMichigan Medical Center-Gratiot
Matt Schooley | City of Alma

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Sara Anderson | City of Alma
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Aaron Hale | City of Alma Planning Commission
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Bill Henderson | Aircraft Precision Products
Darcy Hodges
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Garnet Johnson | Triterra
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Tim Lambrecht | County Commissioner District 4
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Aeric Ripley | City of Alma
Vicki Ritz | Michigan Masonic Home
Damian Sanderson | Highland Blush
Andy Shafley | Commercial Bank
Ryan Smith | Gemini Capital Management, LLC
Sue Stack | Alma Church of God
Audra Stahl | City of Alma Planning Commission
Jayson Sumerix | Century 21 Lee-Mac Realty
 Lorrie Taylor | City of Alma
Erie Taylor | Alma Church of God
Heather Therrien | City of Alma Planning Commission
Katie Tobias | Katie Tobias State Farm
Tina Travis | Gratiot County Community Foundation
Ashley Tupper | Alma College
Adam Vlibber | Century 21 Lee-Mac Realty
Wes Wickes | Central Michigan Youth For Christ
Mark Williams | City of Alma
Jim Wolf | Avalon & Tahoe Manufacturing
Kasey Zehner | Greater Gratiot Development, Inc.
Alma holds a unique position within Michigan and the Upper Midwest. Thanks to the foresight and bold action of earlier generations, Alma is home to a nationally-recognized college; exceptional healthcare and supporting senior services; a strong public education system, including career tech education; a collection of strong, internationally relevant employers; and a family-oriented culture that offers unparalleled quality of life to those who call Alma home.

Alma has exhibited remarkable resilience as it progressed through an ever-changing economic landscape. This can-do culture is what drew the civic leadership together to develop and execute a visionary strategy to position Alma for renewed success. Building upon strengths frees the community to move forward in a bold new way.

Alma certainly has many legacy assets that serve as the foundation of this plan. Few peer cities can equal the collective advantages that Alma offers. In more recent years, the community has moved forward on a series of big moves that have continued the advance forward, including:

- $7.5MM renovation of the Opera House
- 16 new businesses in downtown, including Alma Brewing Co., Highland Blush, and Starbucks
- New downtown apartments and boutique, Airbnb-style hotel recently announced
- New state-of-the-art 190,000 SF Meijer supercenter
- Recent upgrades to Wright Park
- Mountain bike trail open and enjoying strong ridership
- Alma Grand Prix of Cyclocross bike course and annual event
- Regional Education Service District (RESD) awarded a $1.3MM Marshall Plan for Talent grant
- Linking to the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail, which helped Alma rank #2 out of 571 communities nationwide for bike network connectivity
- $50MM invested into facilities at Alma College
- $3.6 million invested in a new maternity unit and a new cardiac catheterization lab at MidMichigan Medical Center—Gratiot, as well as establishment of a family medicine physician residency
- Masonic Pathways announcing nearly $20MM in upcoming investments which includes over $750,000 to enhance the Doig Chapel & Performance Arts Center
- Passage of the $10MM Alma Public Schools Bond Issue for school renovations
- Garr Tool expanded manufacturing to 200,000 SF, producing more than 14,000 tools per day to serve a global customer base

These recent projects provide Alma and this Plan the momentum to become a leading, winning small city. Additional momentum may come as a result of shifting demographic trends as more people consider small cities as their preferred place to live:

“Small and mid-size downtowns can anchor the emergence of new 'opportunity cities.' Increasing numbers of Millennials are moving from top tier 'superstar cities' to smaller markets in search of affordable living, quality of life, and civic involvement.”

- 2020 Global Trends Report, PUMA

Alma can satisfy these emerging trends; housing affordability, quality of life, and civic connectedness are core strengths for the community. With intentional execution of the Alma Aspires Plan, the city is poised to fully capitalize on this new demographic wave.
Like much of Michigan, long-time Alma residents know their town, too, has absorbed several economic shocks. The losses of Lobdell-Emery Manufacturing and Total Petroleum Refinery were particularly painful as hundreds of good-paying jobs were lost. And like many other Michigan cities, Alma has not fully recovered from the Great Recession as jobs and income remain below pre-recession levels.

Unlike many other Michigan cities, Alma has maintained a strong economic position as an employment center. An economic cluster analysis conducted by Dr. Michael Porter, who led Harvard Business School's Cluster Mapping Project, found Alma excels in several areas, including education, agriculture, automotive, metalworking, and water transport. Porter’s work focuses largely on traded clusters, which considers the percentage of the goods or services sold outside the local economy.

Importantly, Alma outperforms the nation with 43% of the local jobs within traded clusters, compared to 36% nationally. Simply put, Alma’s companies and workers are more globally relevant than the balance of the nation. This global economic relevance bodes well for Alma’s economic future.

### EMPLOYMENT BY TRADED CLUSTER

**ALMA, MI - Rank in the US**

Private, Non-Agricultural Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Employment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education and Knowledge Creation</td>
<td>290</td>
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<td>Automotive</td>
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<td>Metalworking Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food Processing and Manufacturing</td>
<td>576</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plastics</td>
<td>492</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Within Alma’s local traded sectors, healthcare, which is rapidly transforming into a traded cluster, employs over 2,500 people and is clearly an economic strength of Alma.

**EMPLOYMENT BY LOCAL CLUSTER**

**ALMA, MI - Rank in the US**

Private, Non-Agricultural Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Cluster</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Local Hospital Establishments</td>
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<td>Local Retailing of Clothing and General Merchandise</td>
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<td>Local Motor Vehicle Products and Services</td>
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<td>Local Community and Civic Organizations</td>
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<td>Local Utilities</td>
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<td>Local Commercial Services</td>
<td>839</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local Food and Beverage Processing and Distribution</td>
<td>890</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Alma also enjoys proximity to major employment centers, including Mount Pleasant (20 miles), Midland (35 miles), and Lansing (45 miles). As Alma furthers its position as a family-oriented community, Alma can serve as a home-base for people working throughout the greater region. And by providing high-speed internet connectivity, cultural and recreational opportunities, and a connected community that provides the human interaction often lost in a home office environment, Alma can tap into this growing teleworking market.
ALMA ASPIRES

PEOPLE
PLACE
PROSPERITY
PEOPLE
Alma aspires to be a community where everyone can achieve their highest potential.

1. Enhance Capacity For Career-Based Training
2. Expand Early Childhood Support and Services
3. Launch Career Awareness Campaign
4. Grow New Leaders

PLACE
Alma aspires to be a community of choice, where people choose to visit, locate, and stay.

1. Launch New Community Brand and Marketing Campaign
2. Develop Affordable Inter-Generational Housing
3. Enhance Alma's Parks and Recreation Offerings
4. Offer Expanded Entertainment Activities

PROSPERITY
Alma aspires to be a vibrant, diversified economy that provides good careers and opportunities for all.

1. Grow High Wage Jobs and Capital Intensive Investment
2. Accelerate Technology and Innovation Development
3. Establish Alternative Access to Transportation
4. Increase Downtown's Appeal to Developers and Entrepreneurs
Alma aspires to be a community where everyone can achieve their highest potential.

Jobs of tomorrow require greater education and training than ever before. To compete in this new economic environment requires an even stronger commitment to developing young talent and refreshing the skills of existing talent. Alma has several competitive advantages as it pursues this goal, including Alma College, collaborative industry-education relationships through the Alma Public School's Career Technical Education (CTE) program and RESD, and a strong healthcare system that includes a high concentration of senior support services and facilities.

Tomorrow’s economy will look different than today’s economy, not only in the business mix, but also in the mix of people filling the jobs. Alma has already realized a rapidly changing demographic profile, with demographers forecasting this trend to continue. Communities that actively embrace this change will excel. In particular, Alma will see a rapidly aging population, as more seniors live longer than ever before, and continued growth within the Hispanic population.

Alma can achieve the People strategy as follows:
1. Enhance Capacity For Career-Based Training
2. Expand Early Childhood Support and Services
3. Launch Career Awareness Campaign
4. Grow New Leaders
Recent program launches, including mechatronics and the grant-funded programs on healthcare and manufacturing, highlight the community’s commitment to staying current with industry needs. Short term, increasing program participation requires renewed industry partners to grow student participation. Adding five more active company partners will provide greater incentives for students to participate in career-based training. The most successful programs—for students, schools, and employers—are ones where a student is provided a part-time job at the company while they go through their training. With greater company participation, a goal of 50 Alma students annually can be achieved. Further, Alma’s Gratiot-Isabella Technical Education Center (GI-TEC) Campus is fully subscribed to Welding and Auto Repair programs, suggesting an opportunity for new investment to expand these programs.
EXPAND EARLY CHILDHOOD SUPPORT AND SERVICES

According to research conducted by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska, at-risk children who do not receive a quality early childhood education are 25% more likely to drop out of school, 40% more likely to be a teen parent, 60% more likely to never attend college and 70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime. Public-private partnerships dotting the country are seeking to address this situation and provide their youngest people the best opportunity for lifelong success. Gratiot County has already engaged in this process to a degree, launching the Great Start Collaborative. For Alma, there is more to be accomplished, including:

a. Grow the Current Great Start Collaborative Efforts at RESD
   Model after the successful Ready for School initiative in Holland, Michigan, where the community has realized a 23% increase in school preparedness for those entering Kindergarten. The Ready for School model is a public-private partnership that is focused on evidence-based initiatives that produce measurable outcomes. A benchmarking exercise should be undertaken to evaluate Alma’s efforts relative to Holland’s.

b. Enhance Childcare Options
   Currently, Alma has 22 childcare facilities (18 in-home; 4 commercial) serving as many as 282 children. As state regulatory demands have intensified, there has been a growing trend away from home-based childcare to commercial facilities. Given the relatively few commercial service providers currently in Alma, this trend requires careful attention going forward.

c. Host a “Day of the Young Child” Event
   Each year, the State of Michigan designates April as the “Month of the Young Child,” to bring attention to the special opportunity everyone has to make a difference in the life of a child. In Zeeland, Michigan, they expanded upon this concept to create the “Day of the Young Child” event. Filling the Middle School gym with child-focused vendors and service providers and closing the streets to bounce houses and fire trucks, hundreds of families and thousands of people enjoy a day together learning and having fun. This program should be modeled in Alma as a way to bring the community and schools together for an annual celebration.
LAUNCH CAREER AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Having clear visibility into future career opportunities is critical to affording every Alma resident—young and old—the opportunity to achieve their full potential. This can be achieved as follows:

a. Experiential Program for High School Students
   This program will have a goal that all Alma high school age students experience no less than 5 career opportunities before graduation. To achieve this goal requires a new approach and a commitment from area employers like never before. Modeled after Omaha, Nebraska’s highly successful CareeRockit program, Alma schools and employers will team up to deliver an annual career exploration day, where students are given immersive experiences at employers throughout the community. From freshman year through graduation, students will be able to learn firsthand the exciting careers available within Alma and the skills required to attain those careers. This will help students focus their studies, help employers develop a pipeline of talent, and increase the retention of young people in the community.

b. Youth Employment
   With just over 1,000 teenagers between the ages of 16-19 in Alma, only 350 are currently employed. In fact, only 50.1% of Alma teenagers are looking for work and of those, 31.6% are unemployed. The dramatic decline in teenage employment has been a growing national trend since 2000. Though the problem is not unique to Alma, the solution can be. For many, teenage employment is an introduction to the world of work, learning what it means to earn a paycheck, and understanding workplace norms. Employers can make a marked improvement to the future workforce quality by increasing the volume of teenage hiring. Whether two hours or twenty hours, every teenager seeking their first job should be able to find work in Alma. By committing to creating 150 new jobs for teenagers, Alma would then be providing an opportunity for virtually every teenager seeking work. Greater Gratiot Development, Inc. (GGDI), Gratiot Area Chamber of Commerce, Central Michigan Manufacturers Association, and other partner organizations should organize a youth employment program, getting area employers to commit to hiring one or more teenagers each summer. By adding 50 new teenage positions over each of the next three years, the goal of providing employment opportunities for all teenagers seeking work can be achieved.
c. **Factory/Business Tours**

Many a Michigander will recall the days of touring the auto assembly line or, if so lucky, grabbing a box of Frosted Flakes after a tour of the Kellogg’s cereal plant in Battle Creek. Unfortunately, for a host of reasons, factory tours have largely become extinct. Alma can step forward to restart this American tradition, inviting their neighbors to look inside to see the amazing work taking place around the community. This community-pride boosting initiative will also serve as a talent retention and recruitment tool for area companies. Existing employees will be invigorated as they showcase their skills and their company, and area residents may find themselves drawn to work for companies they previously knew only by the sign on the building. Alma should select one week each year where several companies open their doors each night of the week, inviting the public into their facilities. This could be done in conjunction with the CareeRockit program discussed elsewhere in this Plan.

d. **Healthcare Talent Initiative**

Alma enjoys an incredible, growing healthcare sector. This industry is labor-intensive, requiring a large number of compassionate, skilled people to serve the community’s most in-need residents. With over 2,500 employees currently employed within this sector, job growth and natural turnover suggest over 500 open positions require new hires each year. To meet this volume of job opportunities, Alma’s health care system must partner with education and training providers at all levels to form a Healthcare Talent Taskforce designed to create a sustainable talent pipeline.
GROW NEW LEADERS

While Alma’s overall population has remained relatively flat, the makeup of the community’s population has evolved. In general, the population is growing older while also realizing an increasing Hispanic population. At the same time, Millennials are rapidly growing into key leadership roles across the community. These changing demographics are in line with national trends and represent an opportunity for Alma to adapt to this new dynamic.

a. Young Professionals
The recent launch of the Gratiot Young Professionals Network (YPN) was a bold move to develop the community’s next leaders. To be successful, YPN must be embraced by the current civic leadership. The business community can be supportive of the initiative by hosting events, sponsoring activities, and empowering employees to be active leaders in the program. For the broader community, being quick to embrace the new ideas brought forward and providing ‘seats at the table’ for representatives of YPN to serve on broader community efforts will serve to further integrate new leaders. Civic groups like the Chamber, GGDI, Alma Action, and City Council should find ways to integrate YPN leadership into their Board functions, whether as ex-officio board members or invited reports to Council. Finally, when planning long-standing community events and in developing new programs, extra effort should be put forth to recruit new volunteers from the YPN group.

b. Senior Workforce
In a tight labor market, extending the working years of an aging labor force can help to expand the available pool of labor. This requires employers to be flexible, balancing the need for experienced talent with the desire of many seniors to downsize their work schedule. This can include reduced work week (by number of hours and/or days), job share programs where two people share one full-time position, increased vacation time (paid and unpaid), and health insurance for part-time work.
c. Leadership Initiative
Rural communities often struggle to develop and retain young talent. One community, Ord, Nebraska, implemented a youth leadership program that combats this challenge. All 8th-grade students participate in a formal leadership development program. The same model is provided to adults throughout the community. Combined, the program is credited with increasing retention of young graduates. Alma should consider a comparable program, seeking to provide professional leadership development available throughout the community.

d. Spanish Translation
As the population continues to shift, embracing this change is paramount to long-term growth and prosperity. The simple act of having key community communications translated into Spanish can be a strong signal to the Hispanic community that they are welcomed and invited to fully participate in civic leadership.

e. Diversity & Inclusivity Speaker Series
As major employers in Alma host their own staff training on diversity and inclusivity, providing speakers and trainers to the community for a broader audience on the topic would help advance the conversation locally. Whether a formal program with the Chamber or more general public outreach through library programming, bringing this conversation to the community will be a good step forward as the community continues to embrace a shifting demographic environment.
ALMA ASPires

PEOPLE

PLACE

PROSPERITY
Alma aspires to be a community of choice, where people choose to locate and stay.

A strong sense of community is vital to a thriving residential community. A deep connectedness to the larger neighborhood makes for a more deeply rooted community. In today's fast-paced economy, a city that intentionally slows down to meet in the street will find its residents will be more engaged, more fulfilled. This activation can take the form of organized public events, Farmers Markets, new bars and restaurants, live music, community competitions, and more.

Alma offers much today and can provide more tomorrow through the following strategies:

1. Launch New Community Brand and Marketing Campaign
2. Develop Affordable Inter-Generational Housing
3. Enhance Alma's Parks and Recreation Offerings
4. Offer Expanded Entertainment Activities
LAUNCH NEW COMMUNITY BRAND AND MARKETING CAMPAIGN

As demographics have evolved, many communities with cultural heritage brands have begun to reposition their community marketing strategy. Alma should do the same, leveraging the Scottish heritage while moving Alma forward. This brand can be a significant spark in starting a new, forward-looking movement in Alma. Zeeland, Michigan’s award-winning and highly successful Feel the Zeel campaign can offer inspiration.

a. Contract with a Professional Marketing Firm
   Develop a comprehensive marketing strategy, creating a new brand, including a logo and design standards, for Alma.

b. Hire a Part-time Downtown Marketing Director
   Or consider partnering with Alma College marketing students to execute the new marketing strategy. Ideally, this effort is a coordinated one, linking the City of Alma, Gratiot Area Chamber of Commerce, and Alma Action. Each group should commit to adhering to a new, higher design standard in all community marketing.

c. Replace All Community Signage
   As part of the marketing strategy, updating existing marketing collateral, including signage, is imperative. This helps establish a fresh start. As an example, Zeeland started by repainting the water tower. For Alma, all signage and marketing collateral should be updated over a period of two years to reflect the new logo, brand, and color scheme selected with the marketing firm.

d. Launch an Aggressive Social Marketing Campaign
   This can become the new “What’s Happening” section that was lost with the downsizing of the local newspaper. This social media effort should be kept strictly to fun community events, activities, and opportunities.

e. Apply For, and Win, Community Awards
   Community branding goes well beyond a new logo. A new community brand can be amplified by creating a winning culture. It is time to regain a competitive, winning attitude by applying for a series of awards and recognitions. This serves to boost community pride and encourage continued advancement of community goals.
DEVELOP AFFORDABLE INTER-GENERATIONAL HOUSING

For all its strengths, Alma has not seen much in the way of new housing since the Great Recession. There are bright spots, including a number of new downtown loft apartments and a recent proposal to provide new housing options on the former school property near downtown. Alma can build on this recent momentum by focusing on the following:

a. **Continue to Support New Infill Housing**
   Opportunities include downtown apartments and the former school site, as well as accelerating the completion of the Gemstone Subdivision. These sites, within the existing housing fabric of Alma, provide quality infill opportunities to grow new housing options.

b. **Long-Term, Renewed Focus on the City-Owned Parcel along the Pine River**
   The location at State Street, with views of the river and proximity to downtown, is the exact type of location that is seeing new development in cities across the country. A public-private task force should be established to oversee and determine the brownfield remediation requirements and market potential of this effort.

ENHANCE ALMA’S PARKS AND RECREATION OFFERINGS

Alma offers a robust parks system. With nine city parks complemented by a number of school park facilities, the Alma Mountain Bike Trail and the trail head of the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail, all Alma residents are afforded easy access to outdoor spaces. With great green spaces already established, Alma would do well to refresh the Parks and Recreation Plan, focusing on existing facility enhancements, program activation, and linkages between the various parks and green spaces. Program activation should be a key point of emphasis, as youth sports and adult recreation leagues often serve as a link between the city and its residents while providing terrific public health benefits. Additional parks opportunities to explore include expansion of the successful mountain bike trail, groomed cross-country ski trails, and the addition of modern playscape equipment. In doing so, understanding which parks serve as primary parks and those that are secondary parks will be important in determining where investments are made.
OFFER EXPANDED ENTERTAINMENT ACTIVITIES

Beyond home and work, people seek out interesting third places to connect with their friends and family. Alma has seen an uptick in these venues of late, with Alma Brewing Co., Main Cafe, and Highland Blush joining long-time anchors Pizza Sam’s, Terry’s Cycle, and the True Value Hardware store. These community gathering places can be expanded upon as follows:

a. Food

In 2018, for the first time, Americans spent more at restaurants than at grocery stores. Building on this trend, Alma must continue to grow its food options, including:

- **More Restaurants.** Alma can become a dining destination with the addition of two new quality restaurants downtown. This concentration of restaurants provides the customer confidence, knowing that if one restaurant is too busy they will have several options upon arrival to Alma. To achieve this goal, Alma should market aggressively in nearby markets noting the opportunity for new restaurants and targeting existing chefs who seek to start their own operation. Zeeland, Michigan successfully recruited a Grand Rapids-based chef who went on to open two restaurants in downtown Zeeland and two more in nearby Holland.

- **Food Hall.** As people blend food and entertainment, new venues across the country are popping up to meet this growing demand. The food hall concept is a modern twist on the traditional mall food court, bringing new flavors and often new entrepreneurs together under one roof. Denver has seen a rise in this offering, with Avanti, Stanley Marketplace, and Punch Bowl Social all new to the scene. This large city trend will soon adapt to smaller markets - Alma can be the first.

- **Food Trucks.** There is a tendency to believe that food trucks take away business from brick and mortar storefronts. More often than not, food trucks attract a different, new clientele that likely would not be dining out that particular evening. In fact, food trucks tend to expand the base of dining customers. Alma should consider hosting food trucks for special events. Food trucks from Mount Pleasant, Lansing, and Midland should be targeted with the goal of recruiting some of those truck operators to open restaurants in Alma over time.

b. Live Music

While mountains and beaches are not replicable, music is universally available. And with local college and high school performing arts and music programs in Alma, there is a nearby source of talent to feed a local live music scene. Whether as informal street performers or hired by local bars and restaurants, live music can be a great addition to the downtown scene. This does not always need to be a rock ‘n roll show or dance party each time but could include a simple instrumental or an acapella act in the corner of the restaurant.
c. **Street Performers**
A simple, low-cost way to bring consistent energy to the downtown scene is a street performer program. Holland’s successful street performer series has evolved from a one-night offering to a weekly program that runs all summer long. Some cities, including Holland, St. Joseph, and Grand Rapids, have taken the street performer concept inside, working with storefront owners to do live mannequin displays that attract thousands of people.

![Street Performers](image1.png)

![Street Performers](image2.png)

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d. **Community Events**
Alma is already the proud home of the major Highland Festival and produces a series of local events, including Come Home for the Holidays that draws great crowds. The Grand Prix of Cyclocross proved that Alma is fully capable of hosting great new events that attract people from all over. This energy should continue, seeking ways to bring additional event opportunities to market:

- **Cycling Competitions and Tours.** As the second-highest ranked bike community in the country and at the trail head of the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail, Alma has a unique opportunity to build upon this relatively new strength. Positioning Alma as “the place to be” location for cycling events and tours will bring new people and new spending to the market.

- **Family Events.** Developing new family events, specifically events for children, will grow the affinity towards the community. The “Day of the Young Child” example offered earlier provides a community-wide day of celebrating and supporting young people. Adding at least two new events each year for the next three years will help expand the calendar of events, build a rhythm to help create new community habits, and will help to grow the audience. In developing new programs, the pool of volunteers and sponsoring companies will grow. As community spirit grows, the opportunity to expand both fronts will improve.

- **Winter Event.** The Come Home to Alma for the Holidays event is an example of how people will come out into the cold for a quality program. In fact, with relatively few alternatives for activities, wintertime presents the perfect opportunity for the community to embrace the season. An outdoor ice rink at a city park or a community-wide snowman competition would bring some sunshine to the winter months. Frankenmuth's ice sculpture program is a prime example of how people will weather the weather to have fun.
PEOPLE
PLACE
PROSPERITY
Alma aspires to be a vibrant, diversified economy that provides good careers and opportunities for all.

In a reversal from long-standing economic development practice, economic prosperity now follows people and place. That is, talent is the ultimate economic development strategy and talent is first drawn to a dynamic place. Millennials have voted with their feet, choosing first where they want to live before deciding where they want to work. As a result, companies are now following the talent, rather than choosing a location and hoping talent will move to the new business location.

This Plan places great emphasis on Alma’s People and Place. While Prosperity occurs with little recognition to local municipal boundaries, Alma can play a stronger role within this regional context. By offering a better product - people and place - Alma can expect to gain in Prosperity. With that renewed focus, Alma can reinforce the long-standing economic development strategy in partnership with Greater Gratiot Development, Inc.

Alma can increase Prosperity through these strategies:
1. Grow High Wage Jobs and Capital Intensive Investment
2. Accelerate Technology and Innovation Development
3. Establish Alternative Access to Transportation
4. Increase Downtown's Appeal to Developers and Entrepreneurs
GROW HIGH WAGE JOBS AND CAPITAL INTENSIVE INVESTMENT

Through the work of GGDI, Alma has been able to move forward throughout an otherwise turbulent economic environment. New major employers have arisen in the aftermath of difficult plant closings. Today, Alma’s industrial base is more diversified than ever before, both from a product and market-reach standpoint. Thanks to the strong manufacturing strength, Alma is a globally relevant city. To build on this position requires careful attention to supporting and retaining the existing industry base and intentional recruitment of new employers. Several opportunities exist:

a. **Formal Business Retention Visits**
   Certainly, GGDI and the city have consistent communication with key employers. At least once a year, GGDI should visit the top 25 employers in Alma to learn firsthand of how the business is doing and seek ways to support their growth. As appropriate, GGDI should be encouraged to include other stakeholders in these visits, including the city, Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), Michigan Works, etc., who can be helpful in addressing company needs. These visits should include at least 10 specific questions that can be tracked over time to observe how the company, and the community, is performing. Lakeshore Advantage has been conducting formal business surveys for 10 years and has a deep understanding of the local business market. Needs identified by the employers should be addressed immediately, removing any barriers to growth. Further, the companies should be invited to participate in community efforts, including enhanced career-based training, student career exploration, and new business recruitment. These visits offer the opportunity to inform business leaders on how they can best be involved in the city.

b. **East End Opportunity**
   The east entrance to Alma had long been a major employment center. Today, with the closing of the refinery, Alma must determine what the future holds. It should be noted that industrial-zoned parcels that are large in size, rail-served, and have all utilities in place are increasingly difficult to find across the country. As the community considers what is next, having the patience to wait for the right opportunity will be critical.

c. **Business Attraction**
   The growing number of Spanish-speaking residents and a base of college students offers Alma an opportunity to attract a contact center-type operation to the market. These facilities have become more sophisticated in recent years, with employees commanding better salaries and benefits. A 50 person contact center would do well in a market like Alma and a targeted outreach effort should be undertaken.
ACCELERATE TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION DEVELOPMENT

The fastest-growing markets - by jobs and wages - are those markets with the highest concentration of technology and innovation activity. Alma can capitalize on this shift in the economy in two ways - directly, through increased investment in technology and innovation efforts; and indirectly, by supporting greater telecommuting employees who choose Alma as a place to live. To do so requires the following:

a. **Technology Analysis**
   Currently, Alma's connectivity is uncertain, with conflicting reports on the community's telecom infrastructure capacity. A careful review is necessary to fully understand the opportunities and challenges. This effort will look both at capacity and cost to determine Alma's competitive position and the need for improvements to the system.

b. **Business Accelerator Program**
   Working with Alma College business faculty and students, Alma can offer a virtual incubator to increase the number of entrepreneurs and increase their rate of success. The [CO.Starters](#) program in Denver offers a model to consider. The program is open to all entrepreneurs across all industries. This 9-session program walks an entrepreneur through a series of modules that help position them for success. This program could be replicated in Alma, with coordination from GGDI and volunteer instructors from the community.

c. **Startup Competitions**
   With a growing number of entrepreneurs attracted to the accelerator program, offering an annual business startup competition would round out the startup programming. An annual business plan competition with a $10K cash prize, complemented by additional in-kind support offered by area businesses, would help to grow the pool of entrepreneurs and startup businesses. This could be an open competition or targeted toward a specific community need.

d. **Tech Company Recruitment**
   The collective purchasing power of the major businesses and institutions should be explored as a way to recruit a tech firm to Alma. For example, if the major businesses and institutions share a common IT support firm, that firm should be asked to open an Alma office to support the local contracts. Beyond tech, there may be other similar opportunities where leveraging the buying power of these major institutions can bring new businesses to town.
Cities with under 25,000 people struggle to provide quality, reliable transportation services. It is a math problem - with relatively few people to serve, the costs per person become unjustifiable. Alma has seen this over the years as services have started and stopped repeatedly. However, there remain several opportunities to pursue:

a. **Social Services Route**
   With many of the social services centered in the county seat of Ithaca, residents of Alma requiring those supportive services often face challenges traveling that distance. A scheduled route would allow those residents to plan to utilize the bus route to access those services.

b. **Bike Friendly Designation**
   As noted earlier, Alma has earned the #2 ranking as a bike-friendly community by People for Bikes. The city should leverage this strength further by having the city and area employers (Alma College, in particular) apply to gain additional bike-friendly status. By doing so, the community will be committed to enhancing bike facilities around the community, including additional dedicated bike lanes, bike parking and hosting bike-friendly events. This action will help position Alma as an active, healthy community.
Downtowns have long been the center of every thriving community. In fact, a thriving economy depends upon a healthy, dynamic downtown environment. Alma’s downtown is in the midst of a great renaissance, with new housing, new restaurants, new shops, and, of course, the transformative Opera House renovation. Alma College’s recent introduction of student housing into the heart of downtown promises to build on the energy and excitement in the area. In addition, the announcement of a new Airbnb-type hotel downtown promises to further add to the mix. This momentum must be maintained and built upon.

a. Civic Investment Fund
Create a $2MM civic investment fund to accelerate and support the redevelopment activity in and around the core of downtown Alma. Major benefactors and institutions in Zeeland, Holland, and Grand Rapids quietly invested in key development projects in the core of their respective home city. This patient capital - often investment, sometimes philanthropic - proved to be the spark that ignited a wave of new development. Alma offers a similar opportunity for those leaders who seek to be part of Alma’s next chapter as a growing, dynamic community.

b. Hotel Market Study
The past four years has produced near-record level hotel construction as the hospitality industry addresses a shortage that resulted from the 9/11 and Great Recession-induced hospitality pullback. This wave of hotel construction has not bypassed small cities, as many have witnessed new highway hotels and an occasional downtown hotel. To date, Alma has not enjoyed new hotel investment to match the national trend. A careful analysis, including review of the Albion, Michigan, Courtyard by Marriott project, is required to determine the market feasibility of a new Alma hotel offering.

c. Opportunity Zones
The new federal tax incentive program signed into law in late 2017, which provides investors an avenue to reduce and eliminate certain capital gains taxes, is only now beginning to be utilized across the country. In Alma, the Opportunity Zone covers virtually all of the city north of Superior Street. Though maybe not an immediate opportunity, this program warrants monitoring as it begins to take hold nationwide.

d. Peer City Exploration Visits
Modeled after Denver’s successful Urban Exploration program, Alma leaders should explore peer and aspirational cities once a year to learn firsthand what is happening in like markets. This can start as a one day visit, departing early morning and returning early evening, though the power of the program is maximized when local leaders spend two days in the selected city, allowing for leaders to deepen relationships with the extended stay. Key markets to consider in the first few years: Zeeland/Holland, Hillsdale, Tecumseh, and Coldwater.
### IMPLEMENTATION

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PEOPLE</th>
<th>TIMING</th>
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<td>Enhance Capacity For Career-Based Training</td>
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<td>Expand Early Childhood Support and Services</td>
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<td>Launch Career Awareness Campaign</td>
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<td>Grow New Leaders</td>
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<tr>
<th>PLACE</th>
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<td>Launch New Community Brand and Marketing Campaign</td>
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<td>Develop Affordable Inter-Generational Housing</td>
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<td>Enhance Alma's Parks and Recreation Offerings</td>
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<td>Offer Expanded Entertainment Activities</td>
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<td>Grow High Wage Jobs and Capital Intensive Investments</td>
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<td>Establish Alternative Access to Transportation</td>
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<td>Increase Downtown's Appeal to Developers and Entrepreneurs</td>
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### ACTION STEPS

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<tr>
<th>PLACE PROSPERITY</th>
<th>PEOPLE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALMA ASPIRES</strong></td>
<td><strong>ACTION STEPS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Add 5 new company partners to area career-based education programs</td>
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<td>Invest to grow Welding and Auto Repair programs</td>
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<td>Benchmark Ready For School Program in Holland</td>
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<td>Assess current child care services’ dependence on home-based care</td>
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<td>Host Day of the Young Child event</td>
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<td>Through CareerRockit-type program, provide every high school student 2 or more career experiences each year</td>
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<td>Boost youth employment through focused outreach, employer education and expanded marketing to students</td>
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<td>Host annual “Plant Tour” day, opening area businesses to visit employer facilities</td>
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<td>Form health services talent taskforce to develop and deploy new training pathways for area students</td>
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<td>Grow Young Professionals Network by engaging 10 new employers and grow participation by 25 individuals</td>
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<td>Develop toolkit for employers considering expanding their hiring of seniors</td>
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<td>Deploy comprehensive community leadership development program.</td>
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<td>Key employers and civic institutions commit to translate key materials and websites to Spanish</td>
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<td>Launch a Diversity &amp; Inclusivity Speaker Series, with 3 or more sessions per year</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ACTION STEPS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hire professional marketing firm to develop new brand and marketing strategy</td>
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<td>Hire a p/t person to market downtown</td>
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<td>Replace all community signage to align with new design standards</td>
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<td>Launch new social media marketing campaign</td>
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<td>Seek out, and win, community recognition awards</td>
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<td>Gain approval and begin construction of new in-fill housing development</td>
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<td>Study feasibility of housing development along the Pine River at State Street</td>
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<td>Develop new Parks and Recreation Plan</td>
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<td>Expand existing Alma Mountain Bike Trail</td>
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<td>Provide groomed cross-country ski trails</td>
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<td>Attract 2 new restaurants</td>
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<td>Bring food trucks to 3 events</td>
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<td>Offer more live music throughout the community, seeking to increase by 50%</td>
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<td>Institute a consistent, high quality street performers series during summer months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Host one additional bicycling event each year</td>
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<td>Add two new family-oriented events each year for next three years</td>
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<td>Offer more Winter activities, including a community skating rink</td>
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<td>Conduct a formal business retention survey process to better track business performance</td>
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<td>Patiently pursue big opportunities for East End development site</td>
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<td>Pursue business attraction opportunities that fit with existing infrastructure</td>
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<td>Form Technology Taskforce and analyze current technology capabilities and prospects for enhanced service</td>
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<td>Launch virtual business accelerator, leveraging existing community assets and expertise</td>
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<td>Host annual Startup Competition</td>
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<td>Analyze tech consulting contracts of key employers to determine if a tech firm can be induced to locate in Alma</td>
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<td>Deploy a once-a-week bus service to social services in Ithaca</td>
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<tr>
<td>Earn Bike Friendly Designation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create a $1 million Civic Investment Fund</td>
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<td>Monitor Opportunity Zones across country, seeking to model successful deployment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visit one peer city per year with 30+ Alma leaders</td>
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ALMA ASPIRES
PEOPLE • PLACE • PROSPERITY
January 2020