

The **Unstoppable** Story of 2020 with **Southwest Michigan First**

southwest michigan  first
THE GREATEST FORCE FOR CHANGE IS A JOB

ANNUAL REPORT



Pivot. Essential. Change. Safe. Together. Remote. Distance. Mask. Quarantine.

These are just a few of the words that came to define the year 2020 for all of us.

But back in January 2020, none would have guessed these would be the words describing the next twelve months. Southwest Michigan had just enjoyed major announcements at FedEx, Stryker, and other great companies. The region was humming along with a 4.0 percent seasonally unadjusted regional jobless rate. Things never looked better.

And that's when that other big word hit: pandemic.

It started off as just a whisper of a word; something happening on the other side of the world—far away in Wuhan, China. By mid-January, a Washington state resident became the first person in the U.S. infected with COVID-19. The spread of the virus in our direction was soon undeniable. On March 23, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued the first of what would become many executive orders to keep Michiganders safe: a Shelter-in-Place order requiring residents to stay home, with the exception of essential service workers, through midnight on April 13.

We thought that would be it. Life would return to normal on April 14. But it did not—and has not.

Like it has for most companies and organizations throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the way Southwest Michigan First does business. Called upon to rethink how to achieve our mission that the “greatest force for change is a job,” we strategized and implemented changes to our work approaches almost overnight. Going in, we had two big advantages on our side:

Our Team and Its Relationships in the Community

We were called on to quickly figure out how to connect in new ways, and quickly we did. Knowing that we must maintain connectivity to our region's most valuable resource—its people—our team members picked up the phone and reestablished the importance of an old-fashioned call, embraced video conferencing to share information and reimagine event delivery, and ignited our digital communications to our clients and customers with informative emails and targeted newsletters.

Previous Experience in a Crisis Situation

Looking back to the Great Recession, we maintained solid data collection and reporting, though we did most reconciliation of it after the fact. That experience taught us to start tracking early. And track we have. Right away, we established a weekly protocol requiring each team member to report individual work completed toward collective goals to their team lead. Why weekly? Things were moving fast and continued to shift daily.

Through it all, know that you and your business were, and always are, top of mind for the team at Southwest Michigan First. While you will find representations of our work with you and our community in the numbers on the following pages, it is your partnership and personal connection that we value above all during these unprecedented times.

In closing, we would like to introduce another word: unstoppable.

If you are familiar with Southwest Michigan First's annual conference Catalyst University, then you know “unstoppable” was chosen as this year's theme for the event. Watching Southwest Michigan's leaders nimbly respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic and beat back an April high of 21.3 percent unemployment to a more manageable 4.7 percent as of November, we saw your unstoppable desire to keep moving forward in Southwest Michigan.

Throughout 2020, Southwest Michigan First had the privilege of working alongside great leaders who carried on. They picked up the pieces, dusted off the dirt, accepted the reality of both challenge and opportunity, and refused to stop. So, please enjoy our 2020 story. It's our story ... and it's your story.

Together, we are unstoppable.

— *The Southwest Michigan First Team*

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Our Why

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

The team at Southwest Michigan First is often asked to describe what we do and why we do it. As the region's economic catalyst, we take a holistic approach to our work. Depending on the need, we willingly take the lead on a project, develop community collaborations, or facilitate the efforts of others.

We believe that Southwest Michigan's survival requires the commitment of the entire region—but starts with us. The challenges COVID-19 posed to our part of the globe highlighted the need for us to double down on our commitment to bring our diverse partners together in business, industry, higher education, philanthropy, and local government to ensure we meet the demands of current and prospective residents alike.

Our risk is not change but the complacency of the status quo. Pandemics happen. Supply chains shift. New governments are elected. We all saw this happen in 2020. As we ready ourselves for the next wave of change, we must adapt, invest and culturally align. We must recruit and retain college students, attract young families and grow great jobs. How we go about our work may change, but our areas of focus must not.

The wheel on the following page shows where we focus our efforts. We are at a pivotal moment. There are incredible opportunities in front of us. Let's continue the ride together.





Working Together as One

Southwest Michigan First benefits from the power of a focused team working as one. The activities of our entire organization are focused specifically on job creation that directly impacts the economic strength of the region as a whole.

We make it our business to understand our customers' needs, wants, and desires and then go above expectations to deliver to them a variety of services that run the gamut from traditional economic development projects to inspiring leadership development training.

It's important to us that you know we value transparency amongst our team members and their commitment to our axiom that we are each "CEO of our own responsibilities." We are all here for you. We'll never make you jump through hoops to get to the right person. Just talk with someone you know on our team, and they'll connect you to the person who can most quickly and expertly handle your need.



Our **unique model of teamwork** in 2020 was recognized with these honors:



Outside Magazine's 50 Best Places to Work
Ranked 14th



Crain's Cool Places to Work
Top 10 Honoree



National Best & Brightest Companies to Work For
Top 101



West Michigan Best & Brightest Companies to Work For
Elite Award for Best Small Business



National Best & Brightest in Wellness



Michigan's Best & Brightest in Wellness



Meet Our Team by Division



CARLA SONES
president & interim ceo



CATHY KNAPP
partner



PETEY STEPHANAK
partner



FAYE DAVIS
director



BROWNWYN DROST
director



JARED LUTZ
director



CYNTHIA MCMULLIN
director

INVESTMENT TEAM

Focused on the attraction to and acceleration of companies in Southwest Michigan, along with the execution of our national consulting strategies.



JILL BLAND
managing partner



KELSEY MCKAGUE
director



BROOKE OOSTERMAN
director



GRETCHEN SLENK
director

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Centered on growing relationships throughout the community to foster positive economic growth, small business outreach, and the strength of our workforce, talent, and leaders.



HEATHER BAKER
chief operating officer & managing partner



TRISHA DUNHAM
director



PAIGE NIVEN
director



OLIVIA KOSTER
associate

COMMUNICATIONS

Charged with proper execution of our organizational brands in all deliverables and at events, along with sharing the positive stories of our region's companies and leaders in action.



KIM WEISHAAR
chief financial officer & managing partner



JUSTINE GRIFFIN
partner



HEATHER BURNETT
director



RACHAEL TIESENGA
associate

OPERATIONS

Tasked with oversight of the organization's financial, human resources, and office services, as well as the engagement and well-being of team members.



ABBIE RUMERY
partner



NICK RIASHI
partner



MIRANDA GARSIDE
associate

DEVELOPMENT

Dedicated to advancing and honing relationships with current and future supporters, customers, and clients and delivering exceptional customer services.



2020's Game Changers and Place Makers

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

There's no hiding from it: What we are celebrating this year looks a lot different from what we gave applause to in prior ones.

But hold onto your hat and get ready, Southwest Michigan, as there is lots to celebrate. From placemaking announcements to the innovation of our local companies in transitioning their production to personal protective equipment (PPE), the year's news shows how we all came together.



1. Pfizer showed that Kalamazoo has the right stuff, meaning workforce, as **its COVID-19 vaccine was first to receive approval for use from the FDA.** The first trucks pulled out of Portage's manufacturing plant on the morning of December 13, 2020.

2. Protecting local small businesses was top of mind for many this year—from small business owners to residents alike. Southwest Michigan First served as the conduit for passing on **\$7.8 million in Michigan Small Business Relief and Restart grants to 1,578 regional small businesses.**

3. Western Michigan University (WMU) and Graphic Packaging International (GPI) made the grade on their project **developing new technologies to remove contaminants from recycled paper to less than 0.5 percent.** The REMADE (Reducing Embodied-Energy and Decreasing Emissions) Institute awarded a portion of a \$6 million grant to project partners WMU, GPI, and Idaho National Laboratory.

4. Over 40 regional companies were honored by Congressman Fred Upton's team in September for **transitioning their manufacturing lines to innovate vital personal protective equipment (PPE)** to keep our communities safe.

5. **Forty-eight regional companies were named West Michigan Best and Brightest Companies to Work For®.** Of those, 34 made it to the national list of Best and Brightest Companies to Work For®, and eight made it to the illustrious list of Top 101 national companies. Kudos to these companies for maintaining their ongoing legacy of outstanding workplace culture.

6. The Kalamazoo-Portage metropolitan statistical area (MSA) continues to rank among the top three places in the U.S. with the lowest cost of living. Kalamazoo also received this call out on Business Facilities' 2020 Metro Rankings Report.



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7. Landscape Forms received the coveted John. G. Thodis Michigan Manufacturer of the Year award for excellence in manufacturing from the Michigan Manufacturers Association. The industry leader in integrated solutions of high-design site furniture, advanced LED lighting, structure, and custom environments has been operating from our neck of the woods in Kalamazoo for more than 50 years. And there's more: The company was named one of the top three in Fortune Magazine's 2020 Best Workplaces in Manufacturing and Production™.



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8. With social distancing becoming the norm for 2020, the City of Kalamazoo approved a Social District to expand the downtown's entertainment landscape. This new program allows for approved bars and restaurants to serve within the Central Commons Refreshment Area and for purchased beverages to be consumed in Bronson Park. Cheers!

9. Did you hear that Zoetis is bringing 22 new production jobs to Kalamazoo? These new positions are part of a \$94.4 million investment by the global animal health company in three new products to be made at its Kilgore Road operations. The 41,000-square-foot expansion project received support from the Kalamazoo City Commission in October and will continue Zoetis's long Kalamazoo history. Today, Zoetis is the world's largest producer of medicine and vaccinations for pets and livestock, marketed in approximately 45 different countries around the world.



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10. The Regional Event Center Financing Act, which would support the creation of such a facility in downtown Kalamazoo, was passed by both the Michigan House and Senate and signed by Governor Gretchen Whitmer. If the effort continues to roll along, the region could see the **construction of an event center in the coming years** that would enhance our sense of place and draw residents and visitors to our center city.



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11. There are **1,685 active apprentices in 172 programs** happening right now in our region. This age-old worker-training model pairing on-the-job training with classroom instruction is helping employers find and hold onto quality, skilled workers like electricians, construction laborers, pipefitters, tool and die makers, and more.

12. We'll be seeing you at the "plaza." **Downtown Kalamazoo's Haymarket Plaza will get a transformation in 2021**, with an artful space for relaxation and community gatherings and two seven-story projection screens designed to display art, advertisements, and entertainment on the northeast elevation of the Haymarket Building. Announced by developer Treystar, significant donors include The Kalamazoo Downtown Partnership, Southwest Michigan First, and Michigan Economic Development Corporation, which will match crowd-funding donations.



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13. Your next staycation destination just opened! Originally the Masonic Temple and most recently the former Rose Street Market building, **the Hilton Garden Inn in downtown Kalamazoo opened in November** for you to book your stay. PlazaCorp, the City of Kalamazoo, and Indiana-based hotel developer Dora Hotel Co. partnered on the project to create the new, six-story hotel with 114 guest rooms.

We're on a Mission

THE GREATEST FORCE FOR CHANGE IS A JOB: RESULTS 1999-2020

As we reflect on the past year, we acknowledge the serious challenges and struggles that individuals and organizations throughout our region, our nation, and the world have faced. Seeing these challenges first-hand not only strengthened Southwest Michigan First's unwavering commitment to serve and support our business community, but also forced us to pivot from our traditional ways of doing business.

Used to face-to-face connections and bringing together groups for collaboration, we quickly switched gears to continue social interactions through online conferencing and digital platforms. Through technology, we were able to engage a far greater number of leaders and business owners than we may have otherwise been able to through in-person events and interactions. Because of the way we shifted our work, some of our performance indicators are exponentially higher than last year, like our 5,685 company consultations up from 1,423. Many others are down, such as our 11 project announcements and 370 K-12 student impacts, as our ability to impact in those areas was greatly affected by factors outside of our control.

This year taught us that old strategies for growth are no longer sufficient, and we must push to envision a future that allows for maximum impact for our region. Our community's future depends on our local companies' ability to grow, be competitive, and change with the times. We believe many programs in the near, and perhaps even distant, future will take place online and through hybrid models of small in-person groups and virtual platforms. In 2021 and beyond, we must continue to adapt to the needs of our businesses and community and embrace change in pursuit of our mission that "the greatest force for change is a job."



DIRECT JOBS ANNOUNCED
295 2020
19,941 1999-2020



ESTIMATED SALARIES AND WAGES
\$36M 2020
\$4.41B 1999-2020



COMPANY CONSULTATIONS
5,685 2020
30,629 1999-2020



CONTRIBUTING COMPANIES
429 2020
14 1999



INDIRECT JOBS ANNOUNCED
443 2020
29,912 1999-2020



PROJECT ANNOUNCEMENTS
11 2020
739 1999-2020



LEADERS DEVELOPED AND TRAINED
4,057 2020
61,894 1999-2020



CHAMBER ENGAGEMENT EVENT ATTENDEES
1,242 2020
7,421 2013-2020



PRIVATE INVESTMENT
\$113M 2020
\$2.4B 1999-2020



**KALAMAZOO COUNTY JOBLESS RATE
FOR THE COMPARABLE MONTH OF OCTOBER**
4.0% 2020
10.4% 2009



K-12 STUDENT IMPACTS
370 2020
20,810 2016-2020



MEDIA REACH
72,184 2020
274 2008

The Jobs Report

SHOUTING OUT THE JOBS ANNOUNCED IN 2020

Southwest Michigan First's belief that "the greatest force for change is a job" is at the heart and soul of our work.

We understand that a good-paying job can change the trajectory of life for an individual and their family and the way of life for generations yet to come. Job creation lies at the heart of all of that Southwest Michigan does.

Like other organizations throughout the nation, many of the programs and goals that Southwest Michigan First set forth in the beginning of 2020 were flipped upside down once COVID-19 struck our region. Companies faced challenges unlike those they had ever seen, with the majority having to restructure their workload for at least several months due to the "Stay Home, Stay Safe" order to help slow the spread of COVID-19. Goals set at the beginning of 2020 were based on historical factors, and the uncertainty posed by a global pandemic was not in the growth projections for most companies. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic brought almost all job growth to a standstill as companies focused efforts on keeping their organizations operational and maintaining their current staff rather than expanding.

During what turned into an incredibly challenging year for all, we are proud to have announced 295 direct job opportunities to individuals in our community. These 295 new jobs generated an additional 443 indirect jobs and \$113 million in regional investment. The snapshot on the next page shows the new jobs and investment announcements in which our team had a direct hand (projects led by our economic development peers are not reflected). For each, we appreciate the key partnerships with company, local and state government, education, and workforce development agency leaders that culminated in success for our communities.

JOBS AND INVESTMENT IMPACT



CITY OF STURGIS
\$4,000,000
10 NEW JOBS
75 RETAINED JOBS



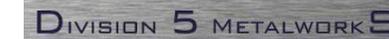
CITY OF GALESBURG
\$1,000,000
10 NEW JOBS



VILLAGE OF CONSTANTINE
\$1,000,000
20 NEW JOBS
20 RETAINED JOBS



CITY OF STURGIS
\$1,500,000
20 RETAINED JOBS



CITY OF PARCHMENT
\$500,000
2 NEW JOBS



CITY OF GALESBURG
2 NEW JOBS



CITY OF STURGIS
\$5,000,000
22 NEW JOBS



CITY OF THREE RIVERS
\$41,000,000
100 NEW JOBS
1,131 RETAINED JOBS



CITY OF KALAMAZOO
\$275,000
5 RETAINED JOBS



CITY OF PARCHMENT
\$12,000,000
15 RETAINED JOBS

Special Note: Only public information is shared. In announcements where information appears to be missing, it is withheld as part of our non-disclosure agreement with the company to respect its privacy.



Readying a Skilled Workforce

HOW MICHIGAN'S GOING PRO TALENT FUND IS INJECTING JOB GROWTH INTO OUR COMPANIES

Ask a manufacturer what their biggest challenge is, and they will probably answer this: the search for skilled talent.

Michigan has worked hard to reclaim its spot among the top states for both manufacturing output and employment since the Great Recession. As part of its efforts, the state listened to the employment struggles of industry leaders and responded by establishing a workforce funding program that assists employers with job training and developing and retaining their current and yet-to-be-hired employees. Called the Going PRO Talent Fund, the program is delivered by the state's Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity through collaboration amongst economic development partners, Michigan Works! agencies and educational providers.

In our region, Southwest Michigan First and its regional economic development partners worked closely with existing industry companies and Michigan Works! Southwest on the process. Southwest Michigan First's services included providing education to companies during one-on-one business consultations and in training sessions on the application process and benefits of the program, in addition to writing letters of support. With program work completed in the latter half of 2020, our team received the good news on January 19, 2021, that it would be a record setting year for Southwest Michigan companies. Overall, 103 companies located in the seven-county Southwest Michigan Region received \$4,852,270 in grant funding, with an average award of \$47,109.

For a complete list of regional recipients, visit <http://bit.ly/GoingProAnnounce>.

Economic Development in Action

ACTIVE STEPS TO STABILIZE OUR LOCAL ECONOMY

Job creation is never black and white. In 2020, it was red, violet, and all the colors in between.

Projects often start with an informal spark—a cold call, phone call, or email sent by a Southwest Michigan First team member to a company contact with a request to meet. That connection is traditionally followed with an on-site consultation that starts an ongoing relationship. It most likely happened on Zoom in 2020; during the summer and early fall, we were lucky enough to hold in-person meetings when agreeable to both parties in accordance with specific company safety requirements.

As discussions typically progress, we reach out to our economic development partners where appropriate—at the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD), Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO), Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), Michigan Occupational Safety

and Health Administration (MIOSHA), Michigan Works! Southwest, Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center (MMTC), local units of government, Intermediate School Districts (ISD) and Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESA), local school districts, and more. These entities have business-growth assistance programs in areas such as incentives for capital and infrastructure investments, training funds and workforce recruitment services, safety certification offerings, exporting, and more. As the cost of doing business factors into decisions on choosing locales, incentives can help make this region more competitive and give a company a reason to expand locally.

Looking to the next year and beyond, it is critical that we stay laser-focused on supporting businesses in the region, helping them tackle the continuous challenges of COVID-19, and assisting them in building a more resilient and prosperous community. We also know we must take bold and decisive action now toward the growth, development, and retention of skilled and educated citizens within our region to ensure an adequate workforce capable

of meeting the future demands of our companies and community. The pandemic has only made more evident the fragility of the workforce in Southwest Michigan, as individuals were suddenly displaced from employment in sectors like entertainment and hospitality to keep people safe and healthy and our labor force was challenged by the escalated need for essential workers and manufacturing support when that sector reopened. We must continue to stay focused on executing strategies aimed at overcoming the projected gap of 35,000 workers in the coming decade required to fill jobs in our community as the accelerated demographic trend of Baby Boomers becoming eligible for retirement continues to outpace the rate at which people are entering the workforce.



Our region's economic vitality depends upon leaders making systemic decisions now to ensure the strength of our community for generations to come.

BY THE NUMBERS



We engaged in **4,105 one-on-one consultations with regional businesses** through in-person meetings, video conferencing platforms, and phone calls, which far surpassed **our original goal of 600 in-person existing industry meetings.**



We polled **48 global real estate site consultants** to gauge their 18-month predictions of how companies and deal flow will react to the pandemic and how we can ensure our region's relevance. **We had an additional 415 interactions with these individuals who can impact future attraction projects.**



We shared more than 2,100 open jobs specific to the pandemic on social media and through the FIRST & 42 Jobs Board.



Small Businesses, Big Impact

THERE IS NOTHING SMALL ABOUT THE IMPACT THAT SMALL BUSINESSES HAVE ON OUR COMMUNITY

The economic impact of small businesses continues to be instrumental in the success of our communities. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration's 2020 Small Business Profile of Michigan, the 886,557 small businesses located across the state are responsible for 49 percent of Michigan's 1.9 million jobs.

Here in Southwest Michigan, our small businesses provide opportunities for entrepreneurs, jobs for neighbors, and gathering places for our residents. They're dotted along our skyline, up and down brick walkways, near our shores, and along the countryside. With every small business impacted during the pandemic, we saw those located in our midst put their skills to the test and innovate and reinvent to better support customer needs.

Early on, we recognized that small businesses and community organizations were in complete crisis—struggling to pay rent and utilities, maintain operations and keep employees on the payroll. For this reason, we intentionally expanded our support outside of our existing industry and Chamber members to include all small businesses and community organizations in Southwest Michigan. We hosted weekly COVID-19 briefing calls, inviting Chamber and small business leaders to join us to hear from economic experts and state and government officials. We launched a monthly small business series with the goal of providing tools and resources to help businesses grow, expand, and get back to business.

Working alongside the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, our team administered several rounds of grants specifically targeted to keep businesses with 50 or fewer employees in business during times of shelter-in-place or restricted services. And we still got the chance to cut the ribbon on business openings at Jaqua Commerical Real Estate, Trellis, Honor Credit Union, Samson's Haircare, and Little Hands Montessori. These efforts and more were essential to ensuring Kalamazoo and its surrounding counties have the ability to come back stronger than ever.



The First Path Taken

A PROGRAM FOR ENTREPRENEURS TO SEE WHERE THEIR IDEA LEADS THEM

Entrepreneurs in Southwest Michigan just need the right ecosystem where their ideas can blossom from concept into reality. That's precisely why Southwest Michigan First started First Path, a nine-week journey to help budding entrepreneurs decide in which direction they should take their idea. This course gives insight into the "who, why, and how" to build a business. Designed to help problem solvers and entrepreneurs, participants are not only introduced to a community of support and alumni network, but they also get a chance to workshop their business idea to learn if they should take the leap forward. Twelve participants took part in the program's launch in the fall of 2020.

With two program cohorts planned for 2021, isn't it time you got on the path to figuring out what to do with it? Take the First Path with us.

BY THE NUMBERS



12 ENTREPRENEURS

EXPERIENCED OUR



FIRST 9-WEEK ENTREPRENEURIAL PROGRAM

FEATURING



24 EXPERIENCED SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

ALONG WITH



1 PROGRAM PARTNER

(ATLANTA-BASED PLYWOOD PEOPLE)



HERE ARE SOME OF THE WAYS YOU SAW US IN ACTION ON BEHALF OF SMALL BUSINESSES:

159 participants took advantage of our small business series, learning about topics like maintaining your competitive edge and brand, fostering team and culture remotely, and staying current with updates from the Kalamazoo County Department of Health and Human Services.



We promoted **37 local makers** during our holiday Merry Makers' series in FIRST & 42 to encourage shopping local during the holiday season.



Our team processed 1,060 applications for **\$800,000 of Michigan Small Business Relief Grants** available to our seven-county region in April from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. As a result of these applications, **144 small businesses** received an average **grant award of \$5,555**, and **1,742 jobs** were positively impacted.



Southwest Michigan First allocated **more than \$7 million in Michigan Small Business Restart Grants** from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation in September to 1,434 qualifying small businesses and nonprofits throughout our seven counties. Additionally, **this allocation required that 30% of the funds be awarded to minority-, woman-, or veteran-owned eligible businesses. 60% of the funding in our region went to businesses with these designations.**



We engaged **277 small business leaders** in Back to Business discussions.



We passed 12 Michigan Small Business Relief Loan requests from businesses on to the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Of these, **7 loan requests were approved, for a total of \$447,820.**

Our team interviewed **40 local banks** about their ability to support the Paycheck Protection Program and made **254 additional consultations** with small businesses during the first round of the CARES Act small businesses funding program administered by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Our team secured **3 Pure Michigan Business Connect COVID-19 Emergency Access & Retooling Grants for a total of \$235,000** for companies shifting production to personal protective equipment. This was more than 25% of what was available for the entire state.



We featured **9 local nonprofits** at our Chamber Connect events, bringing awareness to St. Luke's Diaper Bank, Speak It Forward, MRC Industries, Kalamazoo Marriage Resource, Open Doors, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Open Roads, Alongside, and Comstock Community Center.



We were incredibly proud to **maintain our Chamber membership of 429** during a tumultuous year.



While several of our in-person Chamber networking events were cancelled due to COVID-19, we were **thrilled to bring together 927 Chamber members** throughout the year for in-person events when it was safe to do so by closely following state guidelines and protocol.



Our sixth annual **Makers' Mart entrepreneurial competition featured 3 finalists** at our annual Catalyst University event. Samson's Haircare was voted the ultimate Makers' Mart Champion, receiving a \$2,500 cash prize awarded by Western Michigan University's Haworth College of Business, as well as MiSpringboard legal services courtesy of Varnum LLP and marketing support from Newhall Klein.

Get Into the MIX of It All

A CELEBRATION OF INNOVATION IN THE YEAR MADE FOR IT

Designers, creatives, and innovators throughout the world were called to action this year to rethink every part of life. In our region alone, professionals and students alike worked to develop products and methods of production essential to our now and our future.

The year saw MIX, powered by Southwest Michigan First, continue down its path of delivery of design-based programming, albeit digitally, from talking up the theory of evolution to its annual year-end Innovation Celebration & Creative Crash. The group is empowered by our Board of Directors to bring awareness to the importance of design-based innovation, leadership, talent, and entrepreneurship in Southwest Michigan and gather the creative community to advance the region. While it may come as a surprise to many (but not us), the state of Michigan and our area, in particular, are fortunate to be home to a vast community of designers. Based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Michigan continues to lead with the highest employment of commercial and industrial designers, boasting nearly 4,500 positions (followed by California with about 4,000).

Throughout 2020, MIX brought **647 of Southwest Michigan's most creative minds** together.

54 bright minds engaged in a thought-provoking conversation on pivoting.

The unsettling but necessary topic of constant disruption was tackled by **111 leaders in the industry**.

A MIX Design Thinking Workshop led by expert facilitators from Stryker and New Futures Lab provided **53 designers** with the mindset, framework, and set of tools needed to put the customer and their context at the heart of innovation efforts.

75 designers enjoyed a two-day exploration of how design has evolved throughout history.

At the annual Innovation Celebration & Creative Crash, **153 registrants** benefited from presentations from the top three student projects of Western Michigan University's 2020 Innovation Expo, a part of the "Industrial and Entrepreneurial Engineering 3010: Product and Service Design" course in the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences.

After offering a year jam-packed with great content, MIX's final celebration did not disappoint. During the "Crash," local companies shared new projects developed throughout the year. Updates from Landscape Forms, Stryker, Newell Brands, and Tekna featured a behind-the-scenes look into products like the Stryker ProCuity Bed Series and Tekna's AvaUV.

And, as always, the Western Michigan University (WMU) portion of the event was the most anticipated. Each of the university's three featured student group projects focused on easing our new way of life during COVID-19. The winning project, "Clean Case," was developed by an all-woman team called "Safe Masks" and featured a travel-size carrying and UV light sanitizing case for face masks.

So, with the year 2020 reversing the old saying, "In like a lion, out like a lamb," one thing is certain: As the world continues to adapt to whatever comes next, the team at Southwest Michigan First and the like-minded leaders we encounter every day will undoubtedly continue to support and celebrate every potentially game-changing innovation.





Keeping Southwest Michigan Informed

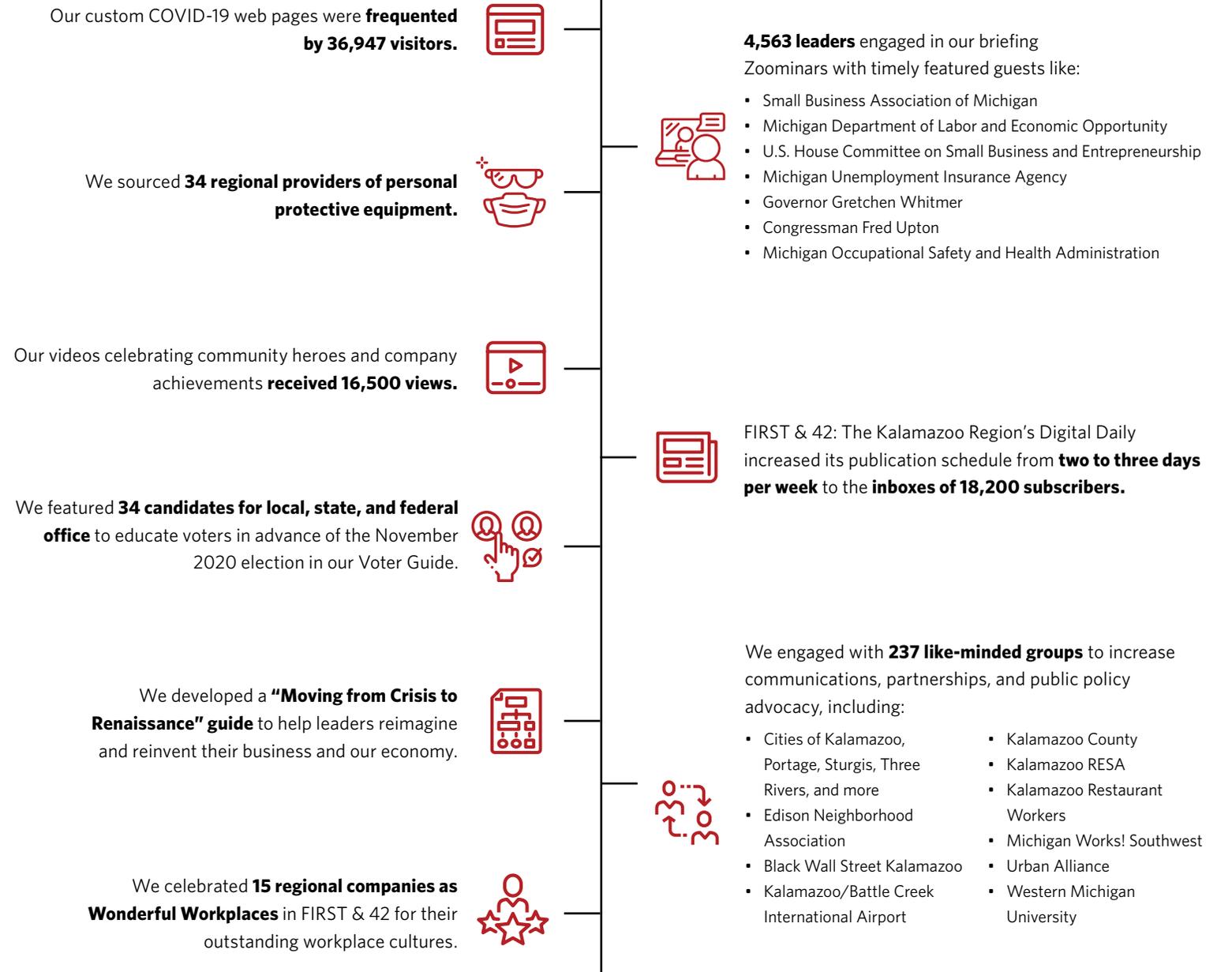
HOW COVID-19 AFFECTED THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE

Effective communication is key to all healthy relationships—personal and business. This is especially so for the Southwest Michigan First team, as we feel strongly that business is personal.

Crises come in different intensities. And the COVID-19 crisis was and is pretty intense. With many individuals suddenly working from home or finding themselves in a new socially distanced space as an essential worker, we all found ourselves at one time or other with little to no face-to-face interactions, except with our immediate families. The pandemic created great uncertainty, elevated stress and anxiety, and prompted tunnel vision, forcing business leaders to focus more on pressing needs rather than executing against a plan forged the prior year.

During this ongoing crisis, there have been times when information has been unavailable or inconsistent, and when people have felt unsure about what they know or anyone knows. Knowing there would be a strong human desire for transparency, guidance, and making sense out of what has happened, we chose to share our words wisely based on informative sources and often with our customers and clients in daily memos, weekly briefings, and digital sources. Our intent was to create clarity, build resilience, and promote positivity and a deeper sense of purpose in Southwest Michigan.

HOW WE'VE COMMUNICATED THROUGH COVID-19



Ten Years in the Making

AN UNSTOPPABLE CATALYST UNIVERSITY CAPPED OFF OUR YEAR



When everything seems up in the air, one thing is certain: We've got you!

While the team at Southwest Michigan First had been talking about leading during disruption for the last couple of years in our one-on-one meetings with you and cohort programs, we must admit, the level of disruption that hit us square in the face in 2020 wasn't what anyone expected. In a shockingly short time frame, almost everything changed. But there is one thing that didn't change, and that was the need for dynamic, confident, empowered, creative, and courageous leaders in our business and communities.

With so much information flying around and changing daily, it was easy to get overwhelmed and go into survival mode. The truth is, like many of you, we did our best in 2020 to navigate unfamiliar and foreign territory. As we entered 2020, we planned to continue our delivery of custom, in-person leadership building events, including the 10th anniversary of Catalyst University. Then, boom! We were suddenly forced to reimagine our leadership programming, which was a decade in the making and predicated on face-to-face experiences. Not only did we have to embrace digital educational delivery platforms faster than the market, but when it came to Catalyst University, we had to side-step, pivot, and communicate our change of direction many times—moving the date back not once, but twice, and then having to completely blow up what we had planned to deliver what our audience craved virtually over three days in early December.

Now that the dust has settled, here are five ways we exponentially helped you lead in 2020.

★ **13 professionals navigated the first five years of their careers** by gaining access to the tools, best practices,

and key leadership insights to move from questioning to confident during our First Up program.

★ Another **34 leaders experienced Leadership Kalamazoo**, our region's premier civic leadership development program that has been helping high potentials build their strengths, talents, knowledge, and relationships since 1989.

★ **We consulted virtually with 967 leaders** seeking resilience training, inspiration to bring about their own renaissance, and instruction on how to pace themselves while attempting to lead both at work and at home simultaneously.

★ **19 individuals motivated others** with stories from their personal leadership journey in our Leadership Spotlight features in FIRST & 42.

★ And **1,312 leaders joined us** on our unstoppable journey to deliver what many thought would be impossible: Catalyst University 2020! By the time the event ended with a toast of "Chase Your Dreamsicle" during our sponsor debrief and virtual happy hour, many cried for an encore of the inspiring leadership event headlined by what many called the best event speaker line-up ever. It featured best-selling author of "The Energy Bus" Jon Gordon, Co-founder of The Ritz Carlton Hotel Company Horst Schultze, Co-founder and Co-CEO of Sseko Designs Liz Forkin Bohannon, New York Times bestselling authors and motivational speakers Jon Acuff and Patrick Lencioni, Miss America 2020 Camille Schrier, fan favorite spoken word poet Amena Brown, and nine others! Oh, and as for our sponsors, **we hold immense gratitude in our hearts for our legacy sponsor Consumers Energy and the 31 other committed companies who made it all possible.**



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