We’re on a roll in Southwest Michigan.

The latest data and accolades are in, and they all point to one thing: Southwest Michigan closed out the decade with a bang! The year 2019 delivered 2,166 new jobs to our region and a steady jobless rate in the lower three-point range. Western Michigan University (WMU) was named the #1 “Hidden Gem” place for study in the U.S., K-12 career and technical education got a thumbs up from voters, and Southwest Michigan was named by Condé Nast Traveler as one of the top 20 places to visit in 2020!

A decade ago, these achievements seemed unattainable. Our region faced an economy burdened by an unemployment rate four times higher than where it stands today. That reality no longer belongs to us. Working together, we have achieved amazing things—things that have the potential to positively impact our region for decades to come. We now face the next decade in a much better place than when we entered it.

We thank you; without the time, talent, and treasure of our partners and supporters, Southwest Michigan First would not have the resources it needs to execute upon its mission—the greatest force for change is a job. As we roar into the next decade (yes, the 20s are upon us!), let’s celebrate together what we accomplished as an organization and community in 2019.

Always Forward.

Ron Kitchens
chief executive officer and senior partner
Southwest Michigan First

LETTER FROM RON
2019’s 12 Best Game Changers and Place Makers

The Year In Review

We identified the best of the best happenings that will undoubtedly change the trajectory of Southwest Michigan’s economy. We wanted to stop at 10, but we added two more for good measure!

Game Changers

2019’s 12 Best

Graphic Packaging International selected Kalamazoo for its massive $600 million investment in facilities and equipment. This investment will support the company’s commitment to sustainable packaging, exceptional quality, and an unmatched cost position for producing coated recycled board.

Countless tours and events showcased Southwest Michigan as a top destination for travelers and tourists in 2019. From a new 133-room luxury apartment complex to the Kalamazoo Public Safety Building, there were numerous projects that will have a positive impact on the region.

Did you know? WMU is the only university in the world with the ability to turn pulp into finished printed paper. Michael Doss—are some of the most technically specialized in the paper industry.

The Exchange Building opened for business! The tallest building to rise from the Kalamazoo landscape in years offers 133 luxury apartments and 60,000 square feet of commercial space.

Kalamazoo ranks in the top three places in the U.S. with the lowest cost of living. It was also named one of the top 10 places to hang your hat and enjoy retirement by SmartAsset.com.

Caledonia breathed new life into the historic Rose Street Paper Mill when it won approval from the Michigan Strategic Fund on what is the state’s second Transformational Bridge Initiative project. Construction is expected to create about 75 full-time jobs.

Cedar and technical education (CTE) got a big shout-out from Kalamazoo and St. Joseph County businesses and residents.

More than $80 million will be invested in the Mill at Vicksburg to give the village’s abandoned paper mill a second lease on life. Southwest Michigan First helped Paper City Development, LLC win approval from the Michigan Strategic Fund on what is the state’s second Transformational Bridge Initiative project. Construction of the November Portage Project will create 221 jobs, hotel and residential space, a microbrewery incubator space, a beer garden, public greenspaces, and more.

The state of Michigan transferred control of several downtown roads to the city of Kalamazoo. This will speed up the process for decisions on how to make streets safer and easier to navigate for drivers and pedestrians. What’s more is that the move could pave the way for turning one-way streets into two-ways.

Make your reservations now! PlaceCopy unveiled plans to rededicate the historic Rose Street Market building and bring a 113-room boutique hotel, 107-room extended stay facility, and approximately 15,000 square feet of office and commercial space to the city’s downtown.

The Michigan Strategic Fund awarded the project a performance-based Michigan Community Revitalization Program loan of over $7.4 million and announced approval for over $34 million of local school and tax capture to alleviate brownfield conditions at the site. The $44 million investment is expected to create about 75 full-time jobs.

Western Michigan University broke ground on its new student housing complex near the Portage East mall.

Michigan’s first microbrewery incubator space, a beer garden, public greenspaces, and more.

Sixty-six minor league baseball teams were named national winners by Best and Brightest Companies to Work For®. This recognition provides an unparalleled endorsement of our companies to potential residents and employees. Southwest Michigan is a great place to work!
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 job can change the trajectory of life for an individual and their family—jobs change “tomorrows” and erase the “yesterdays.”

In 2019, 42 economic development projects of all sizes were announced throughout our region creating 2,166 new jobs that will change 2,166 “tomorrows.” Enjoy this snapshot of the new jobs and investment announcements in which our team had a direct hand; projects led by our economic development peers are not reflected in this report. 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.

### The Jobs Report
**JOBS ANNOUNCED IN 2019**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City/Location</th>
<th>Announcement Amount</th>
<th>Announced Jobs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City of Portage</td>
<td>$50,000,000</td>
<td>924 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Three Rivers</td>
<td>$9,600,000</td>
<td>60 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Portage</td>
<td>$6,300,000</td>
<td>Medical Division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Sturgis</td>
<td>$1,700,000</td>
<td>84 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Kalamazoo</td>
<td>$600,000,000</td>
<td>29 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comstock Charter Township</td>
<td>$2,100,000</td>
<td>28 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of Vicksburg</td>
<td>Investment UNDISCLOSED</td>
<td>25 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of Vicksburg</td>
<td>$80,000,000</td>
<td>221 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Three Rivers</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>30 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Kalamazoo</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>30 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Kalamazoo</td>
<td>New Equipment</td>
<td>6 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of Vicksburg</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>1 Job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of Vicksburg</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>6 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of Vicksburg</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>1 Job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas Charter Township</td>
<td>$3,735,000</td>
<td>10 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Kalamazoo</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>6 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Kalamazoo</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>10 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Sturgis</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>2 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Kalamazoo</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>1 Job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of Vicksburg</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>1 Job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of Vicksburg</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>2 Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of Vicksburg</td>
<td>Skilled Trades Training</td>
<td>3 Jobs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During 2019, the numbers 3, 19, and 3 came to represent some powerful data points describing the city that sits at our region’s center—Kalamazoo. Those numbers reveal some very good news.

### Michigan Cities Showing Positive Median Household Income Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Median Household Income 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kalamazoo</td>
<td>$65,057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Rapids</td>
<td>$58,214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann Arbor</td>
<td>$46,464</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Southwest Michigan Counties Population Snapshot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Population Growth 2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kalamazoo</td>
<td>+0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branch</td>
<td>+0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cass</td>
<td>+0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Joseph</td>
<td>+0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calhoun</td>
<td>+0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Buren</td>
<td>+0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berrien</td>
<td>-0.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Michigan Counties Experiencing Population Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Population Growth 2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kalamazoo</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Rapids</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann Arbor</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livingston</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Did you know that Kalamazoo County ranks among Michigan’s top three counties with positive population growth? While the metropolitan regions of Detroit and Grand Rapids handle the group of Michigan’s fastest-growing places, Southwest Michigan—driven by growth in Kalamazoo County—is more than living up to its name.

Median household income is on the rise in three of the cities where Michigan is seeing population growth—Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, and Ann Arbor. Not only is Kalamazoo among the only three cities in the state with income growth, but Kalamazoo also leads the pack, with income increasing 19 percent over the last 11 years!

### With the third-lowest cost of living in America, it’s easy to see that Kalamazoo’s future is bright! The city’s affordability is making it a key attractor for people and businesses alike.

### Regions that thrive require leaders who focus on growth, jobs, and talent. Over the past two decades, Southwest Michigan First has been “the man on the wall”—ensuring the strength of our community. Our team wakes up every day, focused on economic vitality and the growth of jobs in our region, so that you can sleep soundly and confident in our community’s ability to remain relevant and compete in the global economy.

To accomplish what needs to be done in our region, we have to do the little stuff well and consistently. Here’s a look at the indicators that drive our efforts.
Southwest Michigan First was recognized for our achievements as a team—both in and out of the office—in 2019. We share our appreciation with you to show off the new hardware on our mantle but rather to demonstrate that we honored your investment with us. It is our intent to challenge you to join us in our pursuit of cultural excellence as we work to make Southwest Michigan a region that is home to top workplaces.

**TIME**

Beyond financial impact, our team members are fully committed to sharing their time and valued expertise with many worthy organizations. Our team remains committed to impacting these philanthropic and corporate boards across the region:

- BC/CDF Foreign Trade Zone, Director
- Downtown Kalamazoo, Main Street Policy Council, Chair
- Family & Children Services, Development Committee
- Helen Sibley D.D.S. School of Medicine, Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee
- Impact Lubricant Board of Directors
- International Economic Development Council, Board of Directors

- Kalamazoo Promise, Compact Board
- Kalamazoo Regional Chamber of Commerce, Business Advisory Board, Member
- Kalamazoo County Economic Development Corporation, Board Member
- Kalamazoo Downtown Partnership, Clio, Member
- Kalamazoo Health Resources, Management Association, Participant
- Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Board of Directors
- Kalamazoo Loaves & Fishes, Finance Committee

**TREASURE**

When it comes to community impact, our Chamber division also gives as many reasons to be thankful. Beyond the 26 ribbon cuttings we celebrated at new and budding businesses over the past year, 12 Chamber Connect networking events brought 2,617 members from local teams together and raised awareness and dollars for these local community causes:

- YMCA of Greater Kalamazoo
- Taliesin House Rights
- Ronald McDonald House Charities
- American Red Cross
- Pretty Little Camp
- Kalamazoo Area Council on Prevention

- Hospital Hospitality House
- Gaylord Place
- Kalamazoo Public Safety
- Kalamazoo Leases & Meters
- Community Outreach and Prevention

- N.O.R.C.

**TALENT**

- The Best 101 National Best & Brightest Companies to Work For: Elite Award for Best Small Business
- Michigan’s Best & Brightest Companies to Work For: Elite Award for Best Small Business
- Best & Brightest in West Michigan, Elite Award for Best Small Business
- Inc. 5000 Best Companies
- Crain’s Best Places to Work
- Inc. Best Workplaces
- Crain’s Cost Per Perk

As one year ends and another begins, there is so much to be thankful for.

More than anything, the Southwest Michigan First team is grateful for your support and partnership as we work together to make Southwest Michigan a premier place to live and do business—this just doesn’t happen everywhere. In addition to the many economic development successes of 2019, we would like to take a moment to recognize the other ways Southwest Michigan First is working to lift up the region.

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- N.O.R.C.
Southwest Michigan First’s leadership development and training programs shake things up for more than 5,000 leaders in 2019. Why? Our organization places such importance on ensuring that our communities have leaders who are ready to step up? Because the ever-changing global marketplace requires that all organizations fully engage the talents of everyone on their team and pursue constant innovation in their products and services to remain competitive. Leadership is not about holding strongly but rather being a leader.

From this year’s Catalyst University—where 2-3 hours attended laughed, learned, and were inspired—to the mentorship pairings of First 50 that help arming leaders decade and develop their potential, Southwest Michigan First’s 2019 leadership menu served leaders in the first through fiftieth year of leading.

With 35,000 workers in our region coming of retirement age in the near future, we knew that we need put the focus on getting our younger generation excited about what they will be doing after they graduate high school and college. Helping employers discover how to build exciting internship programs is one way we are working toward filling the hiring gap. Another way is partnering with agencies like Kalamazoo RESA, Michigan Works! Southwest, and Calhoun Intermediate School District, among others, to host Michigan/Quest South. Southeast, a two-day career exploration event where middle school students explore first-hand what living might look like in our region. This year we were high school Catalyst, attended by 3,500 high school students who discovered their personal strengths, explored career pathways, and had a chance to network with business leaders.

Advertising part-time jobs for employees, hosting apprenticeship workshops, and helping to the local classroom to judge innovation competitive at our local schools. As the MIE design initiatives were some of the other ways we handled our workforce engagement initiatives for K-12 students and beyond.

The time to sculpt our future is now. To change, invest, and truly align, to build a strategy that focuses on recruiting and retaining college students, attracting young families, and growing great jobs.

Though our partnerships with business, industry, higher education, philanthropy, and local government, we ensure that we will meet the competitive demands of current and prospective residents alike.

You’re seeing this year’s results, but how did it all happen?

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

Why? We believe that Southwest Michigan’s survival requires the commitment of the entire region—let’s start with Southwest Michigan First. Our risk is not change but the complacency of the status quo. Complacency results in a shortage of people, leaders, buildings, and civic capacity and a shrinking workforce to the tune of 35,000 fewer workers in the next decade.

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The time to develop our future is now. To change, invest, and truly align. To build a strategy that focuses on recruiting and retaining college students, attracting young families, and growing great jobs.
Before you go, know that our expectations are high for the next decade and beyond. Here are ten things we are already looking forward to in 2020:

1. Doors open for business at 80 E. Water St.—the new headquarters of Southwest Michigan First, The Kalamazoo Promise, and more.
3. Raising the beam at Graphic Packaging International’s new Kalamazoo facility, scheduled for April 29th.
4. Seeing you at our State of the Region event in the fall.
5. The 20,000th direct job announced by our team.
6. Catalyst University’s 10th anniversary on May 21 at Wings Event Center in Kalamazoo.
7. The dip commonly serves as their first day of work at our region’s companies.
8. Training and impacting our 80,000th leader at one of our leadership events, programs, or classes.
9. Watching FedEx trucks dispatch to make deliveries out of the distributor’s new Portage location.
10. Holding our 25,000th company consultation.

Who needs binoculars? Not us.
We are at a pivotal moment in our community’s history, and there are incredible opportunities in front of us. The growth of our region depends on leaders who are focused on jobs and talent and who are invested in Southwest Michigan.

To learn more about Southwest Michigan First, call us at 269.553.9588 or visit southwestmichiganfirst.com.