

Action Plan 2026-2028

ROAD TO REGIONAL PROSPERITY

southwest michigan  first



Strategic Action Plan

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Southwest Michigan First's Achievements:
(2023-2025)

1,000+

Events engaging over
18,000 participants

4,900+

Jobs created or retained

\$500M+

Catalyzed for the
Kalamazoo Event Center

\$100M+

Catalyzed for the KRESA
Career Center Campus

\$3.3M+

In Strategic Site Readiness
deployed

\$4.2M+

In Revitalization and
Placemaking Investments

\$1M+

Across 48 Industry 4.0
technology grants

27%

Growth in participating Investors

75

Regional leaders on our
Board of Directors

97%

Advancement of strategies in our
previous action plan

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WHY THIS ACTION PLAN?

Southwest Michigan is at an economic crossroads.

We're navigating a time of both promise and uncertainty. Powerful economic opportunities are emerging alongside persistent challenges, rising instability, and growing headwinds. In this environment, the call to action is clear. Now more than ever, we need a bold, opportunity-forward strategy for economic growth and an organization ready to lead through disruption and unlock long-term prosperity.

That's where this action plan comes in.

Since launching *The Path to Regional Prosperity* in 2023, we've redefined what's possible for regional economic development in Southwest Michigan. Through unprecedented engagement, converging regional leadership, expanded collaboration, and measured growth, we've begun to reshape how Southwest Michigan is seen—and how we see ourselves.

Still, our work is far from over. Too many opportunities remain just out of reach for too many people who call Southwest Michigan home. Though we've accomplished much in the last three years, there's a lot of work left to do.

The groundwork is done, and we're ready for the road ahead.

Momentum is powerful, but momentum alone is not enough. To meet the demands of a fast-changing economy, we must continuously innovate—developing new ideas, strengthening existing partnerships while forging new ones, and finding even more ways to drive impact that is both measurable and felt. That's why we partnered with Hickey Global Consulting, a nationally recognized leader in economic development strategy, to lead the most comprehensive and data-driven planning effort in our organization's history.

We sought input from all seven counties. We listened to more than 400 business, civic, and community leaders. We studied leading economic development models from across the country to identify best practices that could sharpen our strategy. Through rigorous research, we gained deeper insights into the inner workings of our regional economy and uncovered areas with the highest potential for growth.

What you are looking at is the result: a strategic action plan built not just for the challenges ahead, but for the opportunities within our reach.

Alongside this new action plan, we've crafted a bold and compelling set of catalyst initiatives that, if supported, could significantly accelerate our growth and further our regional impact.



It's time to move from a path to a road.

It's time to move Southwest Michigan forward. Our foundation is firmly established, and momentum is on our side. But we can't do it alone.

Our Road to Regional Prosperity Action Plan.

In the pages that follow, you'll find a clear, actionable plan: one that's bold in vision and ready for implementation.

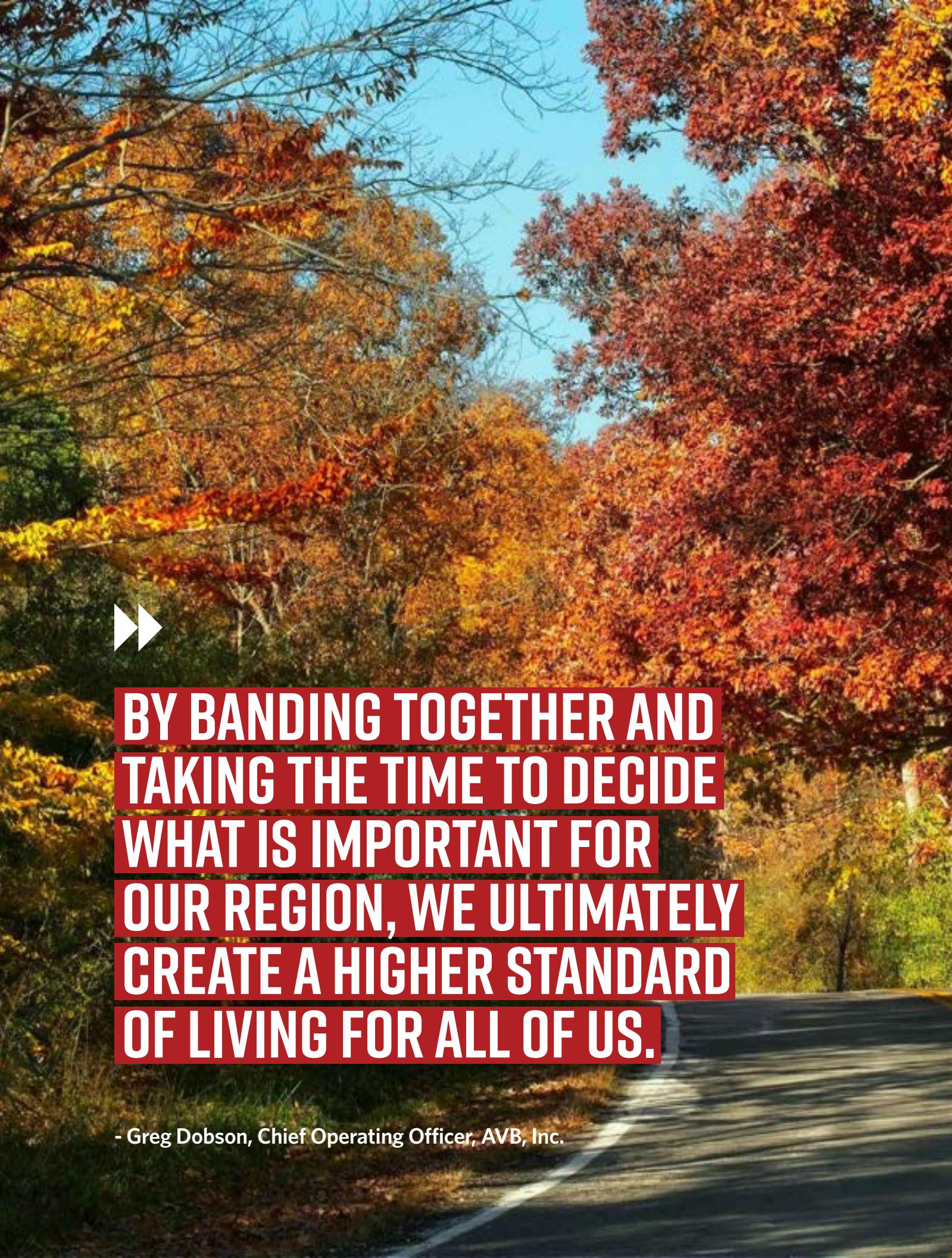
Rooted in collaboration and designed for impact, this strategy is built around a set of synergistic focus areas, practical strategies, and high-leverage opportunities. This isn't a document filled with vague platitudes or ambiguity. It's a direct roadmap designed to accelerate progress and move our region forward.

With your continued collaboration and support, we're ready to bring these strategies to life. Together, we can further the mission of increasing economic prosperity for all in Southwest Michigan.

This action plan:

- Is a clear vision of what we aim to achieve
- Contains measurable outcomes and performance indicators
- Aligns organizational structures to ensure effective execution

We invite you to travel this road with us and shape the future of our region, with Southwest Michigan First as your guide.



**BY BANDING TOGETHER AND
TAKING THE TIME TO DECIDE
WHAT IS IMPORTANT FOR
OUR REGION, WE ULTIMATELY
CREATE A HIGHER STANDARD
OF LIVING FOR ALL OF US.**

- Greg Dobson, Chief Operating Officer, AVB, Inc.

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WHO WE ARE

MISSION

Increase prosperity for all in Southwest Michigan.

VISION

We envision Southwest Michigan as one of the most economically prosperous regions in Michigan and the United States.

MOTTO

The greatest force for change is a job.

We pursue our mission by collaboratively advancing regional strategies and catalyst initiatives in the following areas:



BUSINESSES

Retaining, expanding, and attracting businesses



PEOPLE

Preparing, aligning, and empowering our workforce



PLACES

Advocating for, enhancing, and promoting vibrant business environments and communities

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WHAT WE BELIEVE

VALUES



Leadership

We believe in the transformational power of leadership. Our work is advanced by harnessing the collective power of our existing leaders while cultivating, fostering, and equipping the next generation.



Excellence

We provide the highest level of service and value to the region and believe that we can achieve more when we collaborate and work together. We value and develop our employees' diverse talent, initiative, and leadership to provide superior quality in all that we do.



Inclusivity

We believe that diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities and workplaces create greater vibrancy and engagement. We value everyone and treat people with respect, dignity, and professionalism.



Integrity

We build trust through honest and transparent relationships. We make responsible decisions that support community vitality and are ethical.



Innovation

We research, anticipate, and respond to emerging trends to ensure a vibrant future for the region. We believe that the future is bright, and we can curate the future through curiosity, collaboration, and unwavering commitment to challenge and change our best every day.

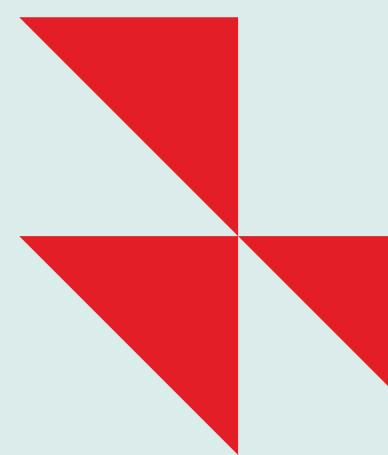
OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

As Southwest Michigan's regional economic development organization, we are committed to fulfilling our mission to increase economic prosperity for all in our communities through inclusive and equitable actions that support businesses, entrepreneurs, and residents of all races, ethnicities, ages, sexual orientations, gender identifications, beliefs, disabilities, and backgrounds. When we feel free to be ourselves, we all thrive.

We will support these ongoing efforts by actively working to:

- Increase wealth creation opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and other historically underserved communities through our programming and community engagement.
- Integrate diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging within all areas of the Southwest Michigan First organization and its work.
- Provide equitable access to economic growth opportunities for all who live and work in Southwest Michigan.
- Strengthen and support partner organizations who share similar commitments.

Our work will continue to evolve as we listen, learn, measure, and collaborate with our regional communities to increase economic prosperity for all.



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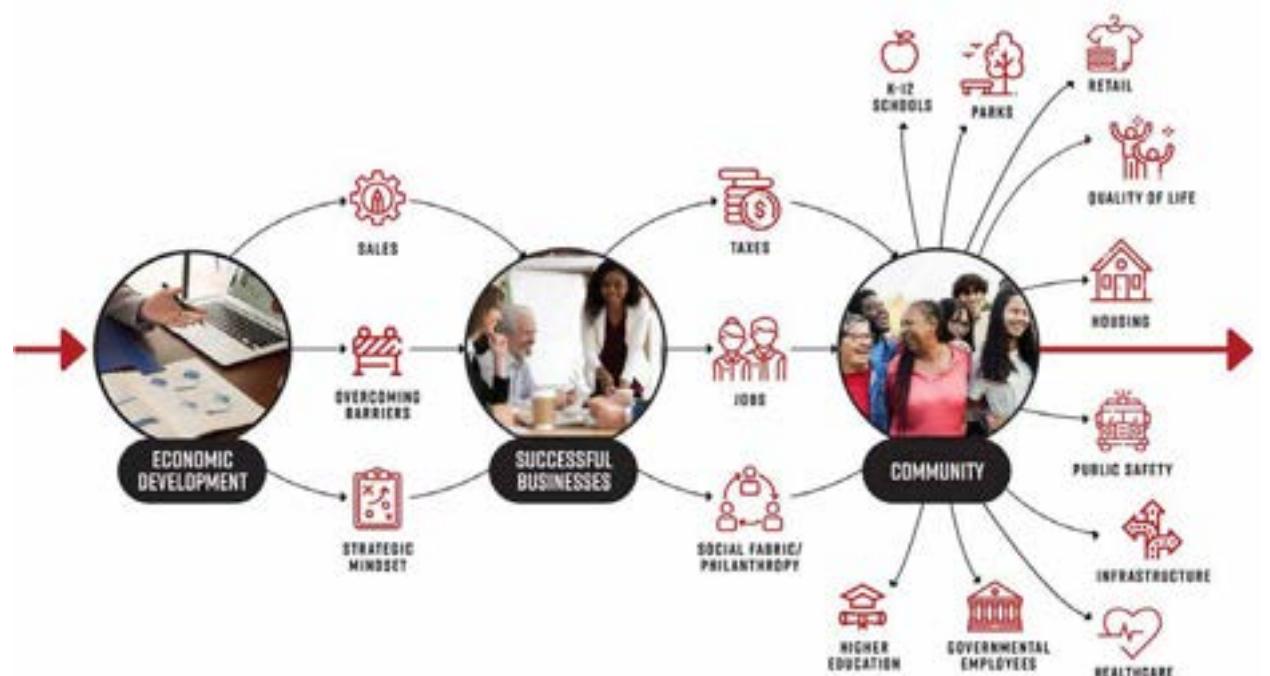
BUILT ON A PROVEN PLATFORM

A few years ago, we launched our previous action plan with a simple belief—stronger businesses are the foundation for thriving, vibrant communities.

Through our economic development work, we've helped companies grow and be more successful. Those companies provide the tax base, job opportunities, philanthropic support, and innovation that fuels community growth. Ultimately, when we start with job creation and successful

companies, we get more vibrant communities, with bustling downtowns and thriving neighborhoods. Great schools, safe streets, quality healthcare, and parks filled with opportunity soon follow. Communities flourish where everyone has a fair shot at success.

Three years later, we've proven that our belief was right. And now, we have a proven foundation to build upon together.



WE RIDE TOGETHER

At Southwest Michigan First, we believe economic development is most effective, and most transformative, when it's done together. Regionalism is more than a philosophy; it's a strategic advantage in a very competitive marketplace. And leadership isn't defined by titles, but by a shared commitment to building a better future. Together.

When leaders across Southwest Michigan align around a shared vision, the benefits are far-reaching:

- **More Jobs and Capital Investment** – More opportunities for people and increased prosperity for communities
- **Greater Political Influence** – Speaking with one voice strengthens our messages and increases our ability to advocate, influence, and win.
- **Collective Problem Solving** – Regional collaboration empowers us to tackle challenges too big for one community to solve alone.
- **Stronger Market Intelligence** – Sharing insights and data leads to better, more informed decisions.
- **Aligned Programs and Efficient Execution** – Reducing duplication, allows us to maximize impact and deliver results more efficiently
- **Expanded Marketing Reach** – A unified region tells a more compelling story to people, businesses, and community leaders.

This is what happens when we work together as one region. And in Southwest Michigan, that work has already begun.

DRIVING LANES

Throughout our planning process, we heard many great ideas, creative strategies, and passionate input from stakeholders across Southwest Michigan. But to maximize our impact, we must focus our efforts.

After extensive listening and careful evaluation of our region's greatest challenges and opportunities, we've identified five strategic focus areas that we're calling driving lanes. We believe this is where our work can deliver the greatest results. These lanes are designed to guide the work, align our efforts, and accelerate prosperity across the region:

1. **BUSINESSES** – Retain, expand, and attract businesses to grow our regional economy.
2. **PEOPLE** – Prepare, align, and empower our workforce to meet current demands and future opportunities.
3. **PLACES** – Advocate for, enhance, and promote vibrant communities and business environments.
4. **OPERATIONS** – Sustain operational excellence to deliver on our mission with integrity, agility, and impact.
5. **CONSULTANT CONNECT** – Deliver innovative consulting services to support and strengthen economic development organizations across the country.

These driving lanes position us to focus on our mission, lead with clarity, measure our results, and move our region forward. Together.

STRATEGIC SHIFTS

Throughout this action plan, you'll find a range of new and enhanced strategies, each designed to narrow our focus and expand our impact. Some of these go beyond any single tactic. We call these our **Strategic Shifts**—bigger, purposeful shifts, that cut across multiple focus areas and are designed to elevate priority areas of our work:

- **Accelerate High-ROI Strategies** – Prioritize, invest, and scale the initiatives that deliver the greatest measurable results for our region
- **Deepen Regional Partnerships, Unity, and Alignment** – Strengthen regional collaboration to advance shared goals
- **Enhance Small Business and Entrepreneurship Support** – Align and expand resources, networks, and opportunities for entrepreneurs and small business owners to power innovation, resilience, and inclusive economic growth
- **Pursue Catalyst and Accelerator Initiatives** – Explore bold, high-impact projects that accelerate results and further transform our region long term

These strategic shifts help us work more effectively and adapt with intention. They reflect a move toward innovation, positioning ourselves to make the most of the opportunities ahead.



LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Across the country, regions rise or stall based on the vision, courage, and collaboration of their leaders. In Southwest Michigan, we are fortunate to have exceptional leadership and generous support from many of our region's most influential business, academic, and nonprofit leaders. These leaders are deeply committed to building a stronger future for all.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Danielle Mason Anderson

Miller Canfield

Dan Bartholomae

Western Michigan University

Brian Bellware

Gibson

Jamauri Bogan*

Bogan Developments

Fritz Brown

Treystar

Steve Carlisle

Wightman

Joe Cekola

Imperial Beverage

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AAM

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Mark Jones

Lake Michigan Capital

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Goodwill Industries

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Western Michigan University

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Tim Rayman

Greenleaf Hospitality Group

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Beacon Health System

John Rosenberg*

Stryker Corporation

Mike Rozewicz

Re:Build TEKNA

Terry Rubenthaler

Midwest Energy & Communications

Greg Salisbury

Consumers Energy Corporation

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WMU Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine

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Marc Schupan

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Beth Stewart

Huntington Bank

Sara Sweers*

Kruggel Lawton CPA

Becky Thompson

Pfizer

Nancy Turtle

Mercantile Bank

Natalie Valentine

Peregrine Company

Jim Valk*

UHY Advisors

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Whirlpool Corp.

John Waldron

Southern Michigan Bank & Trust

Tom Webb

TW LLC Advisors

Matt Weishaar

Sturgis Molded Products

Sean Welsh

PNC Financial Services Group

Perry Wolfe

Greenleaf Trust

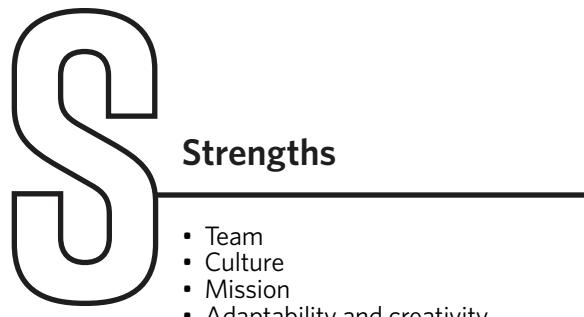
Aaron Zeigler

Zeigler Auto Group

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STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, THREATS (SWOT)

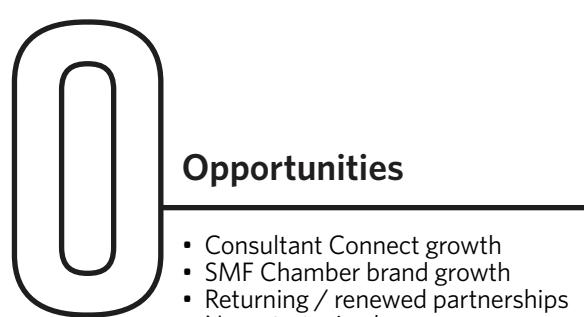
ORGANIZATIONAL SWOT



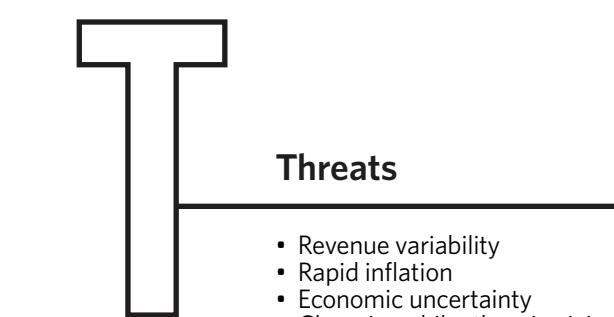
- Team
- Culture
- Mission
- Adaptability and creativity
- Office and event space
- Site selector relationships
- Private sector funding
- Board engagement
- Programming
- Excellent network
- Elevated stakeholder engagement and events



- Major Investor variability
- 1-Year Investor commitments
- Broad scope of work
- Limited regional collaboration
- Limited integration of operational systems
- Staff turnover / open positions
- Incomplete / limited state approved regional operating structure
- Board diversity

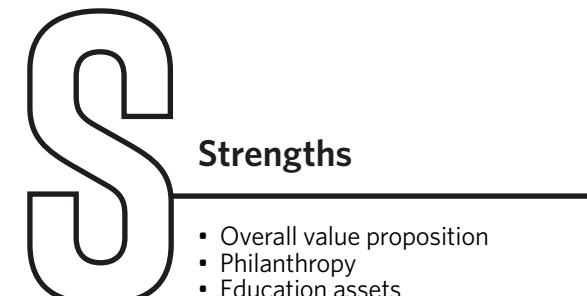


- Consultant Connect growth
- SMF Chamber brand growth
- Returning / renewed partnerships
- New strategic plan



- Revenue variability
- Rapid inflation
- Economic uncertainty
- Changing philanthropic giving
- Federal funding program changes
- Political uncertainty

REGIONAL SWOT



Strengths

- Overall value proposition
- Philanthropy
- Education assets
- Quality of life amenities
- Affordability
- Cluster focus: manufacturing, medical device, food and beverage, health sciences
- Core capabilities: research and design, business services, logistics
- Proximity to major markets



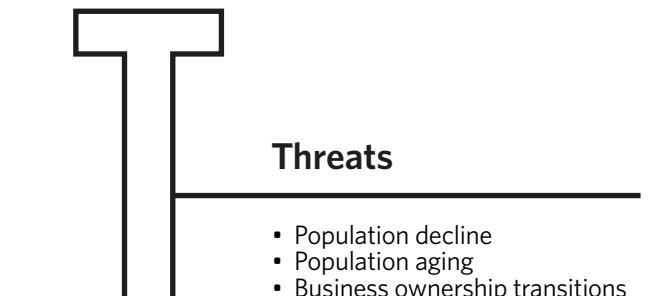
Weaknesses

- Limited labor force availability (specific to skills gaps)
- Limited industrial buildings and sites
- Limited residential development
- Limited regional alignment
- Lack of state-approved regional operating structure
- Limited regional alignment
- Limited visibility
- Limited cultural diversity
- Limited childcare
- Limited rural infrastructure
- Talent retention
- Loss of Right to Work Law and addition of ESTA
- Availability of air services



Opportunities

- Regionalism
- Training and education capacity alignment
- Increased momentum of Western Michigan University
- Momentum from major projects (Ford BlueOval, Kalamazoo Event Center, Palisades Power Plant)
- Improved storytelling
- Catalyst projects



Threats

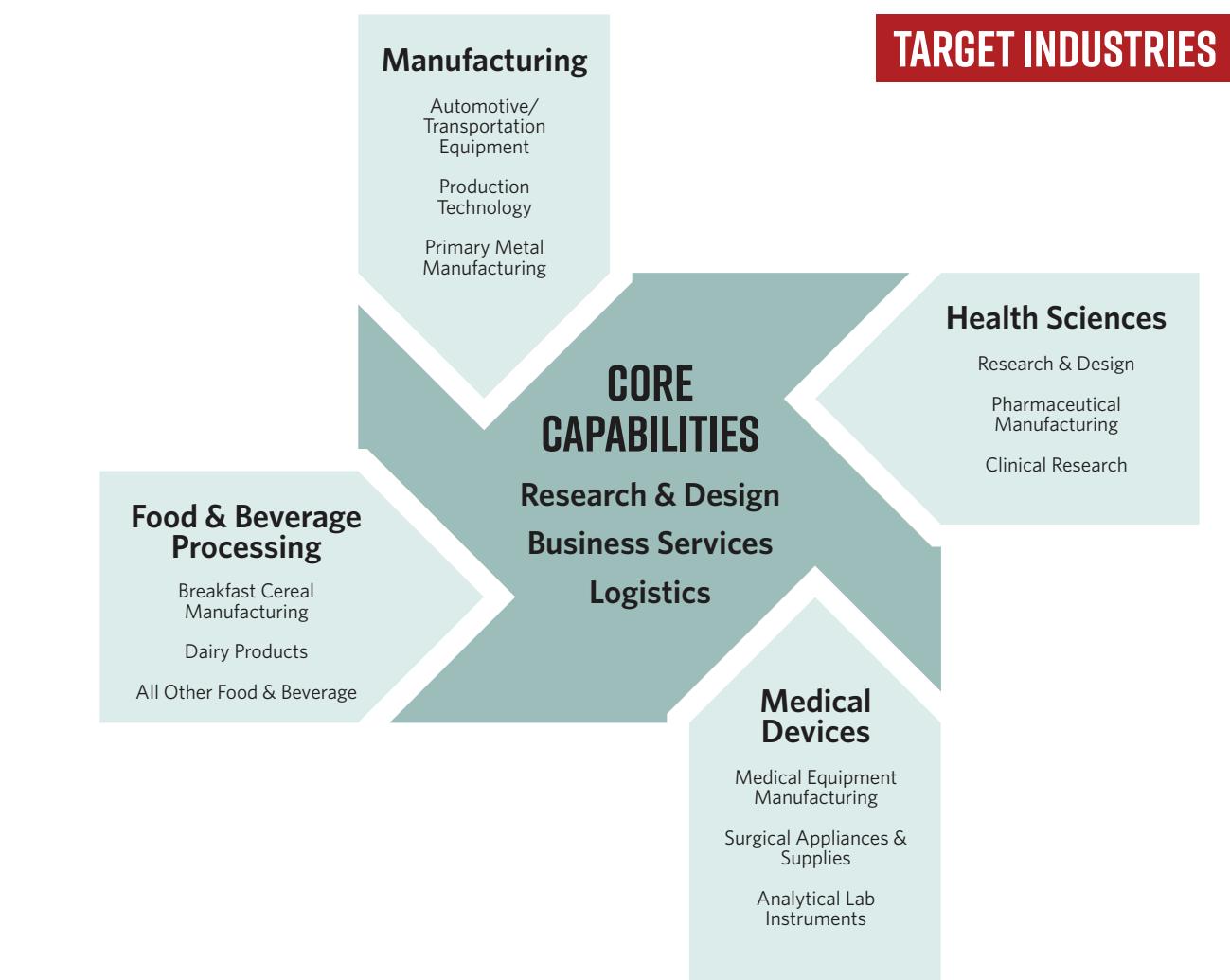
- Population decline
- Population aging
- Business ownership transitions
- Global economic uncertainty
- Inflation
- Higher education enrollment decline
- Tariffs
- State funding reductions for economic development programs and tools
- Elevated competition from adjacent regions and states
- Increased competitiveness throughout the Midwest
- Immigration issues

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GROWTH ENGINES

We're committed to helping all companies grow and thrive. And yet, we recognize that Southwest Michigan holds many distinct competitive advantages over other regions in certain business sectors. Our region is uniquely qualified because of the mix of established companies, strategic assets, robust infrastructure, and capabilities that have been built over time. Through years of investment and collaboration, our region has developed deep knowledge and expertise in key industries that continue to drive regional economic prosperity today. We call these our growth engines. These are the industries that, we believe, represent the greatest opportunities for future growth and development across our region.

Our recent Target Industry Analysis (see Appendix 3) takes a closer look at these sectors, identifying the highest potential opportunities, what is driving that momentum, and how we can best accelerate growth where we have the greatest competitive advantage. By aligning our resources with our greatest strengths, we're not just growing—we're growing smarter.



WHAT WE DO



FOCUS AREA 1: BUSINESSES

Imperative: Retain, expand, and attract businesses to grow our regional economy

1. Retain, support, and expand existing businesses
2. Identify and attract new companies, jobs, and investment
3. Support and grow small businesses and entrepreneurs
4. Provide market intelligence to key stakeholders
5. Strengthen and leverage site selector relationships
6. Engage community and business leaders in the economic development process
7. Improve alignment of local, regional, and state economic development organizations



FOCUS AREA 2: PEOPLE

Imperative: Prepare, align, and empower our workforce to meet current demands and future opportunities

1. Inspire and equip local leaders
2. Align education and training partners with industry needs
3. Strengthen community and business leadership networks
4. Attract and retain talent in Southwest Michigan
5. Connect employers and employees



FOCUS AREA 3: PLACES

Imperative: Advocate for, enhance, and promote vibrant communities and business environments

1. Advance pro-business policy at all levels of government
2. Promote Southwest Michigan as an ideal location to live, work, and engage
3. Support and catalyze site and building development
4. Support and advance community development strategies
5. Accelerate innovative marketing tactics
6. Identify and track community and economic vitality
7. Strategically promote SMFs role, accomplishments, and impact



FOCUS AREA 4: OPERATIONS

Imperative: Sustain operational excellence to deliver on our mission with integrity, agility, and impact

1. Secure adequate funding to deliver results; responsibly steward funds
2. Attract, develop, and retain an extraordinary team of people
3. Maximize impact of The Catalyst Center event space
4. Operate effectively and efficiently



FOCUS AREA 5: CONSULTANT CONNECT

Imperative: Deliver innovative consulting services to support and strengthen economic development organizations

1. Provide site selector engagement services to economic development organizations
2. Host engaging and relevant events
3. Empowering economic developers through strategic service offerings
4. Deliver awards and recognition for economic development leaders
5. Diversify and explore new revenue streams





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