

Downtown Area Housing Conditions and Potential

Comparative analysis of United States Census Bureau Census 2000 housing data for the City of Niles and the area within and immediately surrounding the Niles Main Street District study area provides insight on current occupancy trends and the area's appeal as a place to live.

Census 2000	City of Niles		Downtown Area	
	Count	Pct.	Count	Pct.
Total Housing Units	5,531	100.0%	388	100.0%
Occupied	5,096	92.1%	348	89.7%
Vacant	435	7.9%	40	10.3%
Tenure				
Owner-occupied	3,041	59.7%	43	12.4%
Renter-occupied	2,055	40.3%	305	87.6%
Vacancy Status				
For Rent	201	46.2%	27	67.5%
For Sale Only	66	15.2%	1	2.5%
Rented or Sold, not occupied	41	9.4%	1	2.5%
For Seasonal, Recreational or Occasional Use	27	6.2%	3	7.5%
For migratory workers	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Other	100	23.0%	8	20.0%
Age of Householder - Occupied				
15 to 24 years	354	6.9%	52	14.9%
25 to 34 years	911	17.9%	53	15.2%
35 to 44 years	1,021	20.0%	46	13.2%
45 to 54 years	915	18.0%	57	16.4%
55 to 64 years	641	12.6%	46	13.2%
65 years +	1,254	24.6%	94	27.0%
Data Source: United States Census Bureau Census 2000; Compiled by Downtown Professionals Network. Downtown Area figures based on data for area comprised of: U.S. Census Tract 205, Berrien County, Blocks 3008 – 3001, 3025 – 3039, 3048, and 3051 – 3058; and Tract 207, Blocks 1005, 1006 and 1024.				

Census 2000 data indicates that 5,096 of 5,531 (92%) housing units located in the City of Niles were occupied. Of the 388 housing units located in the downtown area, 348 (90%) were occupied and 40 (10%) were assigned a vacant status based on U.S. Census Bureau criteria, as compared to 8% defined as being vacant in the City of Niles sample. Of the 40 downtown area units reported as vacant, 27 (68%) were available for rent, and 3 (8%) were identified as being for seasonal, recreational or occasional use. Only 1 housing unit in the downtown study area was identified as being "For Sale Only." 10 units (20%) located in the downtown area were defined as being "Other Vacant" which, according to U.S. Census Bureau definitions, indicates that vacant units do not fall into any of the vacant classifications. For example, this category includes units held for occupancy by a caretaker or janitor, and units held for personal reasons of the owner.



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Consumer survey results lend support for the continued development of new housing of various styles in the downtown area. 66 consumer survey respondents (17.6%) indicated that they would consider living in new housing developed in the downtown area.

Consumer Survey Question No. 14 Would you consider living in new housing that might be developed in the downtown Niles area?						
Response	Total		Intercept		Telephone	
A. Yes	66	17.6%	31	17.1%	35	18.0%
B. No	233	62.1%	101	55.8%	132	68.0%
C. Maybe/Don't Know	76	20.3%	49	27.1%	27	13.9%
Total	375	100%	181	100%	194	100%

Those indicating that they would consider living in the downtown area expressed interest in a variety of housing styles and in both rental and owned units. 29 respondents (44%) expressing an interest in living downtown indicated that they would consider a town house rental, while 28 respondents (42%) indicated an interest in upper-level apartment and loft rentals – a potential opportunity for redevelopment in the upper levels of downtown commercial properties. Respondents were also favorable to condominium units (36.4%) and town house purchase (34.8%). The findings are detailed in the following table.

Consumer Survey Question No. 14.1 If yes, which of the following housing options would you consider?						
Housing Options Considered	Total		Intercept		Telephone	
A. Upper-level rental apartment/loft	28	42.4%	13	41.9%	15	42.9%
B. Town house rental	29	43.9%	17	54.8%	12	34.3%
C. Town house purchase	23	34.8%	12	38.7%	11	31.4%
D. Condominium	24	36.4%	11	35.5%	13	37.1%
E. Live/work unit	18	27.3%	9	29.0%	9	25.7%
F. Other	12	18.2%	6	19.4%	6	17.1%

Data Note: Multiple responses allowed. Percentages based on sample indicating "Yes" to Question No. 14.

Population and household projections anticipate that the number of housing units in the primary trade area will increase by more than 1,700 housing units from 2004 to 2009. More than 1,400 of the additional housing units are anticipated to be owner occupied. The anticipated growth and trends are illustrated in the following table.

Housing Units: Primary Trade Area					
	2004 Estimate		2009 Estimate		2004 – 09 Change
Housing Units	46,240	100.0%	48,005	100.0%	+ 1,765
Owner Occupied Units	34,588	74.8%	36,035	75.1%	+ 1,447
Renter Occupied Units	8,739	18.9%	8,961	18.7%	+ 222
Vacant Housing Units	2,913	6.3%	3,009	6.3%	+ 96

Source: ESRI BIS Market Profile; Compiled by Downtown Professionals Network.

Housing trends and projections suggest a potential demand for 50 to 100 new downtown Niles area housing units of various styles, both renter and owner-occupied, through 2009. Based on trends and projections, an emphasis might be placed on potential proposals to create owner-occupied housing catering to a target market likely to be dominated by 1- and 2-person households concentrated in the 50+ age groups, and in the upper middle to high income brackets. Most of these units would likely be of a joined or multi-unit housing style – including town houses and condominiums. Ideally, these units might feature views and/or easy access to the riverfront.

Trends, projections, and consumer survey findings also suggest potential for the continued development of upper level rental units – in a range of 20 to 30 units through 2009 – that could provide additional opportunities for the redevelopment of upper level commercial spaces as apartment and loft units. These 1- and 2-person units would likely be most attractive to a younger, upwardly mobile population concentrated in the 20- to 30-years age group in the middle to upper-middle income brackets.

First Steps Implementation Strategy

The Downtown Niles Market Study provides a snapshot of the downtown area today and explores opportunities for the future. The time frame for planning and implementing projects based on findings and opportunities identified as part of this study could extend up to ten years – or even more.

Because downtown revitalization and redevelopment occurs within a dynamic environment, no set of specific implementation steps can remain valid for such a long time. Even in the short term, changing economic, social, political and cultural conditions may dictate a different sequence of events. Some projects might be implemented earlier if the right set of opportunities present themselves, or the community may determine that a project should be tabled as new opportunities emerge and others take priority. Because of these limitations, an implementation strategy can only be a general guide for implementing key aspects of the study.

The First Steps Implementation Strategy summarizes and prioritizes projects and activities that, undertaken as part of a comprehensive and incremental approach to downtown revitalization, will advance long-term redevelopment and revitalization goals for downtown Niles.

Key market study findings and implications are summarized and potential “Action Steps” are organized in the areas of the Economic Restructuring, Marketing & Promotion, Design and Organization – a format consistent with Niles Main Street’s organizational structure and its 4-point approach to downtown enhancement. By the very nature of the market study, implementation strategy actions are primarily focused in the areas of economic restructuring and promotion.

Economic Restructuring

Business Retention and Expansion

Business retention and expansion efforts are among the most cost-effective economic development initiatives that can be undertaken by a community, and set the stage for successful business recruitment efforts. Programs designed to assist businesses with expansion, relocation and building improvements in the downtown area, could effectively stimulate increased levels of private investment and reinvestment from existing downtown Niles business and building owners.

Business retention efforts should be focused on enhancing communication and cooperation among downtown businesses as a means of promoting the sense of downtown as an entity. Business-to-business networking, marketing and trade opportunities should be promoted. Other retention efforts should be directed toward familiarizing businesses with local, regional and state business assistance and technical resources and facilitating access to these resources.

Niles' business survey found that 73% of respondents indicated "high" or "some" likelihood for the potential expansion of their business to expand over the next one to two years. A relatively high percentage of business survey respondents reported plans to increase marketing, expand hours, hire new employees or start or complete building improvements.

Business expansion efforts should seek to identify specific businesses expressing interest in expansion opportunities and should target assistance and incentives at those business that have the greatest potential to expand and fill "gaps" in product and service lines identified in this report. Business visitation programs are often a good first step in efforts to identify specific expansion prospects.

Based on business survey responses, programs and incentives that could potentially catalyze business expansion opportunities include:

- Low interest building improvement loans
- Business marketing consultations
- Low interest line of credit
- Free or low cost building improvement design services
- Business assistance seminars
- E-Commerce website assistance

Partnerships with local financial institutions should be pursued to explore possibilities for low interest loan pools and line of credit programs. Michigan Main Street program partners, including Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) and the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) should be engaged in discussions and an exploration of project and program alternatives on a continual basis. Resources available through the regional Small Business Development Center (SBDC) should be identified and promoted as part of an ongoing Niles Main Street business assistance program.

Business Succession Planning

Anticipating changes that could occur in the downtown business mix as a result of businesses expanding, relocating and closing within the downtown area will help to position Niles Main Street to play a pro-active role in business development.

Business survey results show that 10 respondents indicated plans to sell, relocate or close their business within the next few years, while 2 indicated they would be interested in assistance to sell their business or building.

Niles Main Street business succession programs and assistance should be promoted as a means to identify specific businesses that may be contemplating a change in location or the closure of their business. Services and assistance offered should generally be focused on providing referrals and directing business owners to available resources, including commercial realtors and brokers, prospective investors, and agencies providing technical assistance appropriate to the situation.

Business Recruitment

Business development and clustering strategies proposed in this study provide direction as to the types of businesses that might be encouraged and pursued and the preferred geographic placement for each business type. Results from the market analysis provide preliminary leads for new and expanded business types that trade area consumers have indicated they would patronize, that existing downtown businesses view as having the potential to increase the downtown's market share, and that show the greatest potential for expansion based on analysis of current and projected market trends.

In general, the best recruitment prospects for the downtown Niles business district will likely possess one or more of the following characteristics:

- Have two to five business locations, with at least one operating within a 100-mile radius of Niles
- Have at least one location that has been in operation for at least three years in a setting similar to the downtown Niles business district
- The business is well capitalized and the owner has at least five years ownership or management experience
- The ownership takes an active management role in business operations and purchasing
- Typically occupy 800 to 2,000 square feet

Business recruitment is a highly competitive field that can consume large amounts of time and financial resources – with little or no immediate results. The success of downtown Niles business and investor recruitment strategies will largely hinge on the ability to meet the following objectives:

- Demonstrate consumer demand. Maintain current market information and demographics data and present information in such a way as to make a compelling case for the viability of downtown Niles business ventures. ESRI BIS reports, business and consumer survey results, and market study findings contained in this report provide a strong base of information.
- Demonstrate the availability of appropriate sites. Maintain a current inventory of available sites and their characteristics. Provide information to investors and entrepreneurs in a professional, visually appealing and easy to understand format.
- Demonstrate current downtown assets already in place. Make prospects aware of completed and imminent improvements, existing activity generators, neighboring complementary businesses and facilities, plans for new downtown housing, and other features of downtown Niles that enhance the viability of downtown business ventures.
- Demonstrate an enthusiastic, progressive city government and financial community. Highlight investments and active roles played by the City of Niles, community organizations and financial institutions in downtown enhancement efforts.
- Demonstrate a cooperative regulatory environment. Clearly explain processes, regulations, restrictions and guidelines that are relevant to investing and doing business in downtown Niles. Work as a liaison to assist prospects and to simplify application, review and permitting processes.
- Demonstrate an active downtown enhancement effort in place. Highlight accomplishments and capitalize upon progress being made as part of Niles' downtown revitalization program. Emphasize partnerships and cooperation between Niles Main Street, Niles Area Chamber of Commerce, City of Niles, and other community development programs.
- Demonstrate an effective promotional program in place. Highlight special events, festivals, and cooperative marketing efforts that attract people to, and focus positive attention on, downtown Niles. Provide examples of downtown marketing materials.
- Demonstrate readiness for redevelopment. Pursue appropriate pre-development research and action on sites and spaces targeted for redevelopment that might require special attention to address environmental issues, parking issues, access issues, and other issues and challenges that could affect the marketability and viability of prospective business and investment ventures.
- Promote available incentives and assistance. Provide information on programs available to downtown investors, developers and businesses, as might include design assistance, tax credits, low interest building improvement loans, and low interest lines of credit or business start up loans that might be made available through Niles Main Street, through a consortium of local financial institutions or in partnership with agencies such as MEDC.

The success of downtown Niles business development efforts will depend, in part, on the design, content and distribution of marketing tools and collateral to reach quality prospects and business types targeted for expansion and recruitment. Examples of business recruitment marketing materials and tools that might be considered as part of an aggressive business expansion and recruitment campaign include:

- **Business Recruitment Marketing Materials.** Collateral materials should be designed and produced to include the most recent market data and information on downtown business opportunities. A condensed, promotional version of this market study and readily customized and updated fact sheets that could be produced in-house might be considered as the centerpiece of a marketing portfolio. Other contents should be developed to meet the described business and investor recruitment objectives.
- **Downtown Niles Internet Website Feature.** An on-line version of the business recruitment packet might be developed as a prominent feature of Niles Main Street's Internet website, Niles Main Street's current Internet presence appears to be limited in content, primarily consisting of a limited webpage linked to the City of Niles website. Consideration should be given to developing a dedicated Niles Main Street website with expanded content and interactive features, such as a website visitor fill-in form for prospects to request additional information or a personal contact. Reciprocating links should be established with other community and economic development related websites.
- **Cooperative Advertising.** An advertising program could be developed to advertise Downtown Niles investment and business opportunities. Owners and agents of other available downtown area properties might be invited to participate in the program, with advertising expenses distributed equally among the participants. Advertising would be most appropriately placed in surrounding regional and metropolitan area business and real estate newspaper sections and trade journals.
- **Finder's Fees.** Finder's fees might be offered as an incentive for people to provide qualified leads and appropriate prospects to fill vacant properties. Niles Main Street and the City of Niles could work cooperatively to develop criteria and a profile of desired business types to fill available spaces. "Reward" and "Wanted in Downtown Niles" posters could be posted at the site and the program could be publicized using the website, newsletters, news releases, advertisements and other communications tools. Partnerships with local financial institutions, utility providers and other interested parties might be pursued as a means of funding a reward program to be offered and awarded to any person providing a lead that resulted in a successful recruitment venture.
- **Incentives.** Incentives to catalyze business expansion and recruitment goals should be created and packaged through local public-private partnerships. Examples of possible incentives include design assistance, tax credits, low-interest building improvement loans, and low-interest lines of credit or business start-up loans that might be made available through Niles Main Street, and partnerships with local financial institutions. An aggressive effort should be undertaken to pursue assistance and resources that could be available through Michigan Main Street and other regional and state economic development agencies. Available incentives and business start-up programs should be thoroughly researched by Niles Main Street and summarized in fact sheets or a brochure.

Beyond financial resources, marketing activities and development incentives, successful business recruitment efforts require "product" knowledge and an unyielding determination to doggedly pursue desirable business prospects. A recruiter should be prepared to knock on a hundred doors to get a single positive response. Often times, landing the first recruit is the most difficult task: others tend to follow as "success breeds success."

Redevelopment Opportunities

Niles' setting on the banks of the St. Joseph River, vacant and underutilized parcels in the Main Street District, and the upper levels of downtown commercial buildings, offer tremendous potential for redevelopment and reinvestment. Properties with access and views to the waterfront, in particular, promise to attract an increasing amount of attention on the part of prospective investors and developers who, based on residential development trends and projections, might seek to develop new housing options of various styles to meet a growing demand.

Housing trends and projections through 2009 suggest a demand for 50 to 100 new downtown Niles area housing units of various styles. Population projections and consumer survey findings also suggest potential for the development of a limited number of rental units – in a range of 20 to 30 units through 2009 – that could provide opportunities for the redevelopment of upper level commercial spaces as apartment and loft units. Upper level commercial spaces also have potential for adaptive reuse to accommodate an anticipated increase in demand for office space in the Main Street district.

As strategies for downtown area housing are considered, special consideration should be afforded to provisions for public access to the waterfront and for maintaining views to the river. The Niles Main Street Economic Restructuring Committee should work closely with the Design Committee, the City and other community development partners to plan and implement a proactive initiative for maintaining and enhancing public access to the waterfront through development agreements, easements, right-of-way acquisitions and other available means. Additional consideration should be given to mixed use development options for potential redevelopment sites located along the waterfront, as could include concepts for retail and eating and drinking establishments. Consideration might also be given to vertical zoning provisions that encourage public and commercial uses for ground level spaces in properties in close proximity to the waterfront.

Pro-active planning and advance consideration of downtown management-related issues can help to pave the way for upper level commercial and residential development. Special attention should be devoted to ensuring that appropriate building codes and zoning provisions are in place. City building officials should be involved early in the planning process to troubleshoot potential barriers to upper level redevelopment, and zoning ordinances should be reviewed and, if necessary, revised to accommodate desired residential and commercial uses. Parking provisions and management policies for downtown housing tenants and business employees should also be reviewed and issues that might revolve around the need to accommodate long-term employee and resident parking should be resolved in advance.

The downtown area's infrastructure relative to current and future business needs is another aspect that will impact business development and redevelopment opportunities. The state of the downtown area's telecommunications infrastructure, in particular, could prove significant to long-term strategies for locating quality service and office tenants in the downtown area. The technology could also be vital for certain retail businesses that could benefit and enhance their prospects for long-term success through the application of global marketing and E-Commerce technologies. The availability of an advance telecommunications infrastructure could be used as a key feature for retaining and attracting quality business tenants.

Niles Main Street should work cooperatively with local community development partners to assess the condition of the current downtown telecommunications infrastructure and to develop a long-term plan for its enhancement and maintenance. Partnerships with utility providers, area educational institutions and MEDC should be pursued as a means of exploring options and pursuing desirable alternatives.

Tourism Impacts

Niles' geographic position within the larger, well-populated Michiana region, its close proximity to the larger Chicagoland market, its existing business mix, its historic architecture and setting along the banks of the St. Joseph River, combine to position the downtown to capture an increasing share of an already existing tourism market. Day-trip style tourism is already a key component of the downtown's economy and it will, inevitably, continue to impact business development and redevelopment opportunities. Long-term business development and redevelopment strategies should consider trends and capitalize on new opportunities presented by growth in the tourism industry.

The Niles Main Street Economic Restructuring Committee should work closely with the Main Street Promotion Committee and other community development partners to position the downtown as a featured visitor attraction and to capture an increased share of the region's tourism industry trade. Examples of Economic Restructuring Committee activities that could help to position the downtown to maximize benefits from the tourism industry include:

- Providing an ongoing hospitality training course for owners and employees of downtown businesses
- Encouraging redevelopment opportunities that enhance and maintain public access to the riverfront
- Identifying merchandise lines and services that might offer opportunities for existing businesses to expand based on increases in demand brought about by growth in the tourism industry

Niles Main Street should build and maintain strong partnerships with local, regional and state tourism development and marketing organizations to remain apprised of trends and to anticipate impacts on the downtown district.

Economic Restructuring Action Steps

Action Description	Priority Level
1 Distribute a summary version of the market study to existing downtown business and property owners, and to potential business prospects and investors	0
2 Update and maintain the downtown property and business inventory; maintain a current list of available properties and businesses and distribute the list to area realtors and brokers as changes occur	0
3 Refine and maintain the business clustering concept as a tool to guide business expansion and recruitment efforts	0
4 Review city land use plans, zoning ordinances, building codes and development policies to ensure compatibility with business development goals and strategies	1
5 Work with the Design Committee and City to develop or update a Main Street District land use plan that provides direction for appropriate and desirable development within the district and, especially, properties located in proximity to the riverfront, including provisions to enhance and maintain public access and views to the riverfront and pedestrian links between the river side and the downtown area	1
6 Devise fact sheets or similar written materials that can be readily updated to describe and promote available business programs and incentives, such as façade design assistance, façade improvement loans and grants, management and marketing consultations, and property and client referrals	1
7 Organize a Business Visitation Program as the first step toward a business assistance program that engages downtown businesses, promotes available resources, and facilitates the delivery of business assistance resources	1
8 Develop business promotional materials and a dedicated Niles Main Street website as a tool for passive and active recruitment of targeted business prospects	2
9 Work with local financial institutions to create low-interest loan and line-of-credit programs that can be used with available technical and design assistance to leverage increased levels of investment in downtown buildings and businesses	2
10 Identify and assist businesses for expansion based on prospects identified in the market study	2
11 Identify and actively recruit specific businesses based on prospects identified in the market study and the availability of appropriate spaces	2
12 Prepare redevelopment concepts and work with property owners to actively market potential infill and redevelopment sites based on a Main Street District land use plan and business types targeted for expansion and recruitment	3
13 Facilitate cooperative advertising and marketing efforts that involve property owners and agents to market available space and potential infill and redevelopment opportunities	3
14 Complete an assessment of the downtown telecommunications infrastructure and work with community development partners to devise a long-term strategy for its improvement and maintenance	3

Priority Level Key:

0 = Immediate and/or Ongoing 1 = Within 1 Year 2 = Within 2 Years 3 = Within 3 Years

Marketing and Promotion

Marketing Strategies

Niles Main Street's Promotion Committee might best begin to approach the dual challenge of appealing to residents as well as visitors and tourists by subjecting the downtown calendar of events to an evaluation in an attempt to determine whether existing promotions and events are designed to appeal to visitors and tourists or to residents of the area. While such a review may in some cases suggest additional events, in other cases it may only suggest that a component be added to an existing event that may be of particular appeal to an under-attending consumer market segment. In other cases an event evaluation may simply suggest that targeting event advertising to a specific consumer market group may increase their attendance.

Notwithstanding the tourism industry's positive impacts on the downtown, business survey results show that 91% of businesses identified Niles area residents as their primary customers, and consumer survey results show that over 74% of intercept survey respondents identified themselves as Niles area residents. The findings suggest that marketing and promotion efforts that are designed to appeal first to populations within the identified trade areas should be a priority.

The Niles Main Street District's geographic location within the Michiana region and on the far outskirts of the Chicagoland area is a major contributor to the downtown economy. The district's position as a "day-trip" destination within this region points to continuing marketing and promotion efforts that target the important tourists market. Tourism undoubtedly is, and will continue to be, a strong factor in the success of downtown Niles.

Target Market

The analysis of prevalent market segments identified in ESRI BIS Tapestry reports, along with input provided by consumer survey responses, provides keen insight on consumer market segments within the trade areas. Marketing and business development efforts that recognize demographic trends and target households that share similar lifestyle traits and characteristics will best serve efforts to increase downtown Niles' market share and to capitalize on existing and evolving business opportunities.

The diverse mix of retail and service uses in downtown Niles' business district provides for a variety of experiences that cater to residents and visitors of all walks, incomes and lifestyles. To that end, downtown Niles has, and should continue to maintain, an identity as an authentic hometown downtown and Michiana area day-trip destination with a warm welcome for all who come to enjoy its features.

Opportunities to increase the downtown's market share are weighted based on demographic trends and findings from the analysis of prevalent neighborhood clusters within the downtown Niles primary and secondary trade areas. Findings point toward business development and marketing strategies that key on commonalities in demographics, income levels and lifestyle characteristics within those trade areas.

As an aggregate group and "target market," the people and households within the trade areas are fairly diverse in terms of lifestyle characteristics, with percentages spread across groups that range from urban to rural, from wealthy to modest means, from the retired to the college student. These consumers, as an aggregate market, might best be described as representing a cross-section of Midwestern near-urban to rural span. The Niles Main Street Promotion Committee should take great care to consider the diversity of the market – and their lifestyle choices – when reviewing the promotional calendar and to target specific groups with specific events – or components of events. The same consideration should be given to choice of media employed to reach specific target markets.

Festivals and Events

The long-term prosperity of the downtown Niles business district will rely, in part, on the quality of Niles Main Street marketing and promotion activities – and the ability to appeal to diverse consumer groups. High quality marketing and promotional activities, as exemplified by the recent Hunter Ice Festival, orchestrated to expound upon local heritage and resources – both natural and built – can effectively help to build a positive image and, in essence, effect positive changes in the market.

Festivals and events could also be used to enhance the downtown's "entertainment factor" and even to experiment with different forms of entertainment that might be considered and desired on a permanent basis. For example, an outdoor film series, film festival or performing arts series might be produced to gauge consumer reaction and measure attendance that could help assess the feasibility of a movie theater, dinner theater or performing arts center facility.

Primary & Secondary Market

The majority of Niles area residents may be well familiar with the existing downtown business mix. However, as successes – both big and small – are realized through the implementation of this plan and other community development initiatives, it will be important to communicate and "celebrate" those successes in ways that capture attention and enhance the image of the downtown Niles area.

Festivals and special events that enhance and maintain a strong sense of "local flavor" can deliver powerful messages that provide emotional links to the past and nurture new downtown traditions – and customers. Analysis of ESRI BIS Tapestry reports and key market analysis findings point to activities oriented to singles, families, and couples at or nearing retirement age that:

- Celebrate Niles' small town, home town heritage
- Emphasize the community's "Four Flags" heritage
- Connect with the waterfront
- Include hands-on activities and live entertainment for all ages
- Provide opportunities for the trade areas diverse groups to interact

The downtown Niles events calendar includes a number of festivals and events that capitalize on these features throughout the year including:

- Hunter Ice Festival
- Downtown Open House/Lighting Ceremony
- Summer Concert Series
- Niles Bluegrass Festival
- Dragon Boat Racing

The Farmers Market planned for 2005 could potentially grow to become a pivotal event for downtown Niles, as such an event might appeal to many of the diverse lifestyle groups within the trade area. Examples of other new and expanded events and activities that could build on the existing events calendar and heighten the downtown's appeal among targeted trade area consumer market segments include:

- Fine (Native) Arts Shows and Artisan Demonstrations
- "Senior Prom" for "Retired Students"
- "Build a Boat & Float" Competition
- Town Picnics, Ice Cream Socials, Street Dances and Sock Hops
- Pumpkin Carving and Decorating Contests, Downtown Trick or Treat event, Costume Parade, etc.
- Winter Sports and Demonstrations – (In possible combination with Ice Festival) Snow Volleyball, Polar Plunge, Cross-Country Grand Prix, etc.
- Antiques Fair

Tourism Market

Festivals and special events that promote a strong sense of local culture and history, as well as those that maximize opportunities presented by Niles' geographic location on the St. Joseph River, can capitalize upon heritage tourism and recreational tourism opportunities. These might include events and activities that:

- Capitalize on downtown Niles' location and scenic surroundings
- Emphasize the community's heritage
- Include hands-on activities and live entertainment for all ages

Examples of other new and expanded events that could appeal directly to the area visitors and tourists market include:

- Fine (Native) Arts Shows and Artisan Demonstrations
- Water Sports & Demonstrations
- Street Fairs, Dances & Markets
- Heritage Festivals and Living History Events
- Antiques Fair

These and other ideas for new events that are consistent with marketing and promotion strategies might be considered as new components of existing events and festivals, as the main feature of a new festival, or as part of an ongoing promotional series.

Niles Main Street should continue to work closely with downtown and area visitor attractions, and the downtown business community, to expand regional and tourism-oriented marketing programs and advertising campaigns that feature the downtown area as a prominent visitor attraction. Ongoing and long-term activities might include:

- Working with area lodging facilities, as well as downtown restaurants, retailers and other visitor-oriented establishments to assemble a Downtown Shopping and Attractions Guide with coupons and special offers from downtown establishments for placement and distribution at visitor-oriented facilities located throughout Michiana
- Organizing visitor-oriented businesses and facilities to participate in cooperative advertising opportunities and leveraging participant dollars to gain prominent placement in tourism publications
- Organizing and hosting familiarization (FAM) tours for travel agents, tour operators, travel writers, and other tourism professionals
- Developing and "planting" feature articles and editorial content promoting downtown as a visitor attraction in tourism publications and newspaper travel sections
- Creating and maintaining high quality visitor-oriented Internet website content that promotes the downtown area as a "must see" visitor attraction on a dedicated Downtown Niles website and through reciprocating links with appropriate websites
- Working with downtown antique businesses to advertise downtown Niles as a special antique experience, as could include producing and compiling a guide to an Antiques Day Trip in downtown Niles

Cooperative Advertising and Marketing

Cooperative advertising programs could offer a cost-effective approach to institutional advertising that conveys a quality image of downtown and that broadens the community's awareness of products and services available from downtown Niles businesses.

A common graphic should be developed and employed in all Niles Main Street-produced promotional materials. Thought might be given to creating a graphic to specifically reference and visually associate "Downtown Niles" with the riverbank and the core downtown area's historic architecture so that, with time and frequent and consistent use of the graphic, the downtown itself will become identifiable as a "brand" associated with a special place.

The downtown business community could also benefit from creative cooperative and cross-marketing techniques and partnerships that recognize the diversity of downtown Niles' targeted consumer markets and that capitalize on both retail and non-retail traffic generators – a strategy that could be particularly effective in appealing to residents. Cooperative advertising and cross-marketing examples include:

- Coupon for a restaurant discount with a new bank or investment account
- Coupon for a discount on fudge with a gas station fill-up
- Downtown Business & Services Directory brochure for local distribution
- Downtown Shopping and Attractions Guide with special merchant coupons and offers
- Downtown Antiques & Collectibles Guide

Marketing and Promotion Action Steps

Action Description	Priority Level
1 Review promotional calendar for appeal to both local and visitor market segments	0
2 Work and support efforts to enhance and maintain existing downtown festivals and events and to introduce new events and activities – or new event components - that are consistent with downtown Niles marketing principles and that appeal to targeted market segments	0
3 Work closely with local, regional and state tourism organizations to promote downtown Niles as a regional visitor attraction	0
4 Support, promote and facilitate downtown business community cooperative advertising and cross-marketing efforts	1
5 Create a Downtown Niles Shopping and Attractions Guide for placement and distribution at visitor-oriented facilities throughout Michiana	2
6 Create a Downtown Niles Antiques & Collectibles Guide for placement and distribution at visitor-oriented facilities throughout northern Michiana	2
7 Create and maintain feature content for a Downtown Niles Internet website and to share with other community and visitor-oriented websites	2
8 Work with the Economic Restructuring Committee to identify possible festival and event components or events series that might be used to enhance the downtown's "entertainment factor" and to help assess the feasibility of potential entertainment-oriented businesses	3

Priority Level Key:

0 = Immediate and/or Ongoing 1 = Within 1 Year 2 = Within 2 Years 3 = Within 3 Years

Design

Historic Preservation and Aesthetics

Historic preservation is a key element of most, if not all, successful downtown revitalization programs in the United States. Communities across the country have come to recognize that their historic resources are integral to maintaining a strong sense of place and a distinguishable identity in the market place. Preserving downtown's historic character, improving the downtown's aesthetics, and addressing building and other maintenance needs should be among the highest priorities pursued as part of this study's findings.

Results from consumer and business surveys indicate strong support for downtown revitalization efforts to restore and preserve the downtown's historic character. Moreover, repeated suggestions to "finish" the work already begun in restoring downtown buildings points to widespread community awareness of, and approval for, recent efforts in this regard. These results were consistent with comments from residents, business people and community leaders participating at public forums held throughout the various phases of this plan's development. Bolstered by 29% of business survey respondents indicating they have plans to start/and or complete business improvements within the next year or two, and 21% of respondents indicating interest in low-interest building improvement loans, these results tend to cumulatively suggest that momentum is strong, and the opportunity to leverage private dollars into a "peak" period of building restoration is now. Fostering this momentum and guiding individual building improvements during this prospective restoration boom, in order to achieve the desired effect for the district as a whole, should be the pivotal effort of the Design Committee's work plan over the next few years.

Niles Main Street's Design Committee should work swiftly to ensure that efficient processes and procedures are in place to apply recently adopted design guidelines to downtown projects. The application of downtown design guidelines, along with design assistance being provided by the SHPO in association with Michigan Main Street, will promote quality building improvements and the preservation of Nile's historic assets – among its most distinguishable and marketable features.

In addition to the high number of business survey respondents who indicated plans to start and/or complete building improvements, appropriate application of design guidelines could also take on increasing levels of importance as interest in potential infill construction and riverfront area redevelopment promises to build on the success of downtown Niles' comprehensive downtown revitalization program.

Plans to tie guidelines with incentives targeted at projects that comply with the intent of the guidelines will help to ensure more enthusiastic compliance. This would enable Niles Main Street and the City to "test" the application of the guidelines, perfect related design review and approval processes, and complete at least two or three showcase projects that set a high quality standard to be emulated by others. This approach could ultimately enhance opportunities to introduce and establish a local historic district for the downtown area and, with it, open the door for property owners to take advantage of the State of Michigan historic preservation tax credits.

The Design Committee should work closely with the Niles Main Street Economic Restructuring to promote a business- and investor-friendly regulatory environment in the downtown area. A complete review of city land use plans, zoning ordinances, building codes and development policies should be performed to ensure compatibility with both community historic preservation goals and with downtown economic development goals,

Appearance and Maintenance

The downtown's appearance received high marks from consumer survey respondents, with "Attractiveness" and "Cleanliness" gathering the largest number percentage of "Stronger" responses to questions asking survey respondents to compare the downtown with other places they frequently shop and do business. Niles Main Street should adopt a "Disney Mentality" to maintenance and cleanliness to ensure that the downtown is always perceived in such a positive light, particularly as it pursues tourism development strategies to bring more and more first-time visitors to the downtown area. Their first impression of the downtown area – based largely on impressions of the downtown's appearances – will be a determining factor in whether they choose to return.

Recent enhancements to the downtown’s appearance through improvements addressing the streetscape and public spaces have also been remarkable and help to optimize the pedestrian experience as well as the district’s appearance. Efforts to place “finishing touches” on these elements might address opportunities to add flowers and plantings, banners, flags and other decorative elements that add color and help to tell the “downtown story.” Decorative features can also be incorporated in streetscape furnishings and way finding signage that extend design elements throughout the district, thus helping to reinforce a sense of downtown as a unified district and a unique place within the community. A special emphasis should be placed on streetscape elements that help to connect the downtown with the waterfront, building on design features such as those already incorporated in the district’s core.

Parking Management

With over 51% of consumer survey respondents indicating an opinion that parking is “stronger” or “equal” to other shopping areas they frequent, the current supply of parking in the downtown area appears to be adequate based on current uses and demands. However, with 37% indicating it is “weaker,” attention might be directed to parking management policies. The downtown’s supply of parking and how it is managed should be monitored continuously, particularly as patron traffic increases in the downtown and as uses intensify with the success of business development efforts. Parking studies might be required to assess the impact of proposed infill and redevelopment projects in order to assess the possible need for additional parking or a change in parking management policies to accommodate the short- and long-term parking needs of downtown customers, residents and employees.

Design Action Steps			
Action	Description	Priority Level	
1	Work with the City to ensure adequate and proper maintenance of the downtown streetscape, furnishings and public spaces	0	
2	Monitor parking to determine the need for a parking study and/or to establish or revise parking policies to address the needs of downtown patrons, employees and residents	0	
3	Maintain ongoing historic preservation education efforts designed to enhance the community’s awareness of, and appreciation for, the preservation of downtown historic architecture and resources	0	
4	Apply downtown guidelines and standards to guide and compel quality downtown building improvements and infill construction and development.	0	
5	Assemble, package and promote available incentives and downtown building improvement assistance programs	0	
6	Work with Economic Restructuring Committee and City to review city land use plans, zoning ordinances, building codes and development policies to ensure compatibility with business development goals and strategies and to promote a business- and investor-friendly regulatory environment	1	
7	Work with City and the public to develop a plan that enhances and maintains public access and strong visual connections between the downtown and the waterfront	1	
8	Perform research and promote proposals, as appropriate, for the creation of a local historic preservation district and ordinance for the Niles Main Street District	2	
Priority Level Key:			
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Organization

The strategies and projects outlined for implementation in this study are ambitious, and the Organization Committee's roles as partnership builder, resource locator and publicity machine will be absolutely vital to ensuring the success of Niles downtown revitalization efforts. In some cases this role may require the Organization Committee to locate or develop entirely new sources of funding to execute an Economic Restructuring Committee project, or to find a new volunteer source to ensure that a Promotion Committee Project is adequately staffed. In other cases, it might require the organization to re-assess priorities and existing budget allocations as projects may shift in priority based on findings of this study.

Funding

Some of the projects outlined in this study will require additional and unusual amounts of funding – in some cases for a one-time project. The Organization Committee, in cooperation with the Niles Main Street Board of Directors, should work with each of the committees to review project funding needs and to formulate a strategy for meeting those needs. As with all Main Street projects, meeting funding requirements does not necessarily entail writing a check. Assisting the Design Committee, for example, to fund a downtown "Clean-Up & Cook-Out" might instead involve enlisting sponsors to donate garbage bags and food. For larger-scale projects, sponsorships, grants, one-time appeals, and donations of technical expertise and services are all sources of project funding that should be rigorously investigated and pursued.

Volunteers

Some of the projects recommended in this study will require extraordinary volunteer resources. Whether the project is the addition of a new festival or event, an effort to network businesses, or an attempt to rehab a downtown building, the Organization Committee should work with the relevant committee to find unique ways to acquire new volunteers – and even engage them in the process. For the above examples a new flower planting project might engage the local garden club in volunteering for the effort.

Partnerships

While Niles Main Street can and should take the leadership role in facilitating projects adopted as a result of this study, the group's continued success in forming partnerships with entities such as the City, the local Chamber of Commerce, Michigan Economic Development Corporation and other local, regional and state organizations, will prove essential to the achievement of long-term downtown revitalization and management goals

Niles Main Street should serve as a steering committee, helping to manage resources and coordinating projects proposed in this plan with appropriate organizations and groups, and monitoring implementation of each project component. Each Niles Main Street committee might pursue projects proposed as part of this study in collaboration with several other groups. Some groups and entities are specifically identified in this study as being key partners, but the list is not exhaustive. The Organization Committee members, in consultation with other Niles Main Street committees, should work to identify – and recruit – additional organizations, businesses and individuals that share an interest in community downtown revitalization goals.

Leadership Development

Niles Main Street volunteers and staff will find themselves embarking on new territory, working in areas and dealing with challenges and issues that have not been encountered before as they pursue opportunities and projects proposed in this study. Niles Main Street staff, in particular, will be involved at a high level and responsible for important tasks that will have a major impact on the organization's success. The Main Street Manager, for example, will be extensively involved in business expansion and recruitment proposals selected for implementation.

The Niles Main Street Organization Committee, working with the Board of Directors, should allocate sufficient funds for staff and volunteer training that will help to nurture their leadership skills and enhance their abilities to work effectively, execute projects, and generate intended results. Consideration should also be given to the possible need for Main Street office support staff that could become apparent as the organization pursues new opportunities and projects and as the Main Street Manager takes on an increasing workload.

Public Relations

Keeping projects that have been adopted as a result of this study before the public eye will be key to keeping the study from gathering dust on the shelf. The Organization Committee should work consistently to publicize plans and progress being made through the implementation of projects originating from this study – and *always* celebrate successes achieved as a result. Public relations efforts might include regular “progress reports” delivered at city meetings, news releases under a unifying banner or theme, town meetings, stakeholder meetings, monthly downtown merchant coffees to discuss projects, plans and results, and a monthly or weekly update on a local radio show or cable access television show.

Priority Action Steps – Organization

Action Description	Priority Level
1 Work with Main Street Committees and the Board of Directors to identify appropriate funding requirements and pursue funding sources	0
2 Allocate sufficient funds for volunteer and staff leadership development and technical training	0
3 Monitor the need for Main Street office support staff and budget and act accordingly	0
4 Work with Committees to review volunteer requirements, identify potential sources for volunteers, and assist the committees in the recruitment and training of volunteers	0
5 Work to involve residents, downtown business people, elected officials, community leaders and representatives from other community organizations in all phases of downtown planning, implementation and management	0
5 Maintain an aggressive, ongoing public relations program to publicize plans, projects and results	0

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