



McKenna Associates' Michelle Aniol has served as Williamston's Community Development Director since 2007 through the firm's on-site services program. For more about McKenna's on-site offerings for planning and other services, call 888.226.4326.

Michelle Aniol, community development director (left) and Michelle Hynes, mayor of Williamston, at the city's industrial park.

by Sarah E. Wardell. Photo by Terri Shaver.

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Good News From Williamston

While we can turn on any news station or pick up any newspaper in the country and hear gloom and doom about the economy, the Williamston community has turned negative news into positive change for their historic mid-Michigan town. Included here are some of the developments Williamston has in the works, with the intention of boosting the local economy and creating jobs in our region.

Williamston Industrial Park

According to Michelle Aniol, Williamston's community development director, Williamston is constantly working to make the city attractive. "We do things at the DDA to constantly market our industrial park and our community," she says. Apparently they are doing something right because Centurion Medical Products Corporation, a medical products and services supplier located in Howell, is currently building a facility in Williamston's industrial park.

"Our company has continued to be successful, even in hard times," says Kelley Kuehne, project manager at Centurion Medical. "We've designed the facility in Williamston to accommodate up to 200 and we're planning on moving 120 employees from our current headquarters in Howell." At this point, the building is estimated to be completed by December 2009/January 2010, and Kuehne says the company's goal is to have the building be LEED Gold certified.

Further development of the park, including funding for a public road to connect the north and south industrial parks (previously there was farmland dividing them), was secured through the efforts of Chris Hnatiw, economic development planner with the Tri-County Regional Planning office.

The project has received federal funding through the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA). "Our office worked with the EDA to secure funding for the road. It was the EDA who contacted me, from their Chicago office, in an attempt to bring federal dollars into our region for construction projects," says Hnatiw.

"They [EDA] have regular grants available for low income, high unemployment (or other special needs) within a region. The need here is the trickle-down effect of General Motors issues. The EDA gives dollars based on job creation—this is the key."

Old made new: 109 Building

If you're familiar with Williamston, you know right where the 109 building stands; it's a historic structure, one of the oldest in the downtown area.

"The inside is completely gutted, it needs a new roof, it needs substantial rehab on the outside," says Aniol. Williamston is in partnership with developer Steve Iker; his partner is Bobby Mason, owner of the Michigan Brewing Company. The

city is in the preliminary process of obtaining funding through the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), and the process will be completed sometime in the next few months.

Michelle Hynes, mayor of the City of Williamston, says the effort points to the benefit of partnerships. "Bobby Mason started out with a dream and worked hard at achieving it. By providing a revitalized downtown a healthy environment is created; the economic growth we're experiencing is a great benefit to the community. It's a tremendous opportunity for all when partnerships are established."

Neighborhood stabilization

We all know that Michigan has one of the highest foreclosure rates in the country, but Williamston's Economic Development Corporation is working to turn around foreclosures in the city.

A neighborhood stabilization program, using pre-Obama federal stimulus funds, will be applied to rehabilitating and selling abandoned, foreclosed homes. Rehab will be done through a partnership between Williamston and Ingham County Habitat for Humanity, who currently leases space from the city for a Re-Store.

"We are stopping the ripple effect of foreclosures to keep the viability in the city that it needs," Aniol states. "We aren't just going to sit down and let the economy take advantage of us; we're taking this opportunity and running with it."

Pete Porciello, chair of Williamston's Economic Development Corporation, says there are applications available now. "Working together with Habitat for Humanity, we can work to rehab any home within the city limits that has been vacant for 90 days...the benefit to the community is great."

Williamston has applied for and is anticipating approval of about \$800,000 from MSHDA for the stabilization project, and in the spirit of urban renewal, the Ingham County Housing Commission has recently awarded a grant of over \$200,000 to the City of Williamston for downtown housing and development projects.

Hynes adds that there is a unique synergy happening in Williamston. "With dedicated service groups, a diligent chamber of commerce, amazing school district and outstanding residents...we have a winning team, no question about it."

"When you put that recipe together, you're going to obtain uncommon results." ■

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