

Battle Creek: a city reborn

By Rod Kackley | MiBiz
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BATTLE CREEK – Economic developers are revisiting a plan that is credited with changing the landscape and fortunes of downtown Battle Creek. A public meeting scheduled for April 16 at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation offices will be the beginning of that process.

In 2003, Hyett/Palma helped guide the Battle Creek community through a community vision session. Focus groups were assembled, marketing surveys and interviews were conducted, and data from previous studies was gathered and reviewed.

The result was the Downtown Blueprint, a five-year action plan. Specific recommendations were made and incorporated into yearly work plans for the **Battle Creek Downtown Partnership**.

“This helped us immensely and we have accomplished so much in just four years. We have relied on this document to guide us,” said Downtown Development Director Kathleen Eriksen. “Now it is time to reconnect with the community to ensure that we are still on the right track and to address new issues that have arisen.”

She told *MiBiz* that the blueprint’s action plan was aggressive and really helped rebuild downtown Battle Creek

“The vacancy rate on Michigan Avenue was 60 percent. Now it is 20 percent,” Eriksen said. “We created a retail incentive recruitment program to attract new businesses.”

The Downtown Blueprint also led to improvements to 10 buildings, added Eriksen. “And we have acquired historic property and are moving forward on a residential development in downtown Battle Creek.”

Battle Creek Unlimited, the Downtown Partnership’s parent organization, has created a limited liability corporation to develop the riverfront condo development project to which Eriksen referred. The first phase of the riverfront condo project is now underway.

The partnership has attracted more than 30 new businesses to downtown Battle Creek. “Mostly entertainment venues, restaurants, bars - that kind of thing,” Eriksen said.

It also added a long list of events like concerts and a farmers’ market to the downtown event calendar. But that would all go for naught if Battle Creek’s light was hidden under a bush.

That is why a new logo was created for downtown Battle Creek as part of an aggressive redesign and redeployment of the district’s marketing materials and a campaign that included co-op advertising.

If you build it and tell them about it, they will come. The net result has been an increase in pedestrian traffic in the evening.

“We also improved the aesthetics. There is a new streetscape on Michigan Avenue and new landscaping. People are pleasantly surprised to see how beautiful downtown has become,” said Eriksen. “It has all contributed to a new vibrancy in what has become a very walkable, warm environment.”

Following the kick-off meeting April 16, the Downtown Partnership will host a number of meetings and focus groups to gather feedback from the community and downtown stakeholders.

One of the focus groups is the Retail Customer Focus Group. Eriksen said she needs names and contact information of frequent, repeat customers.

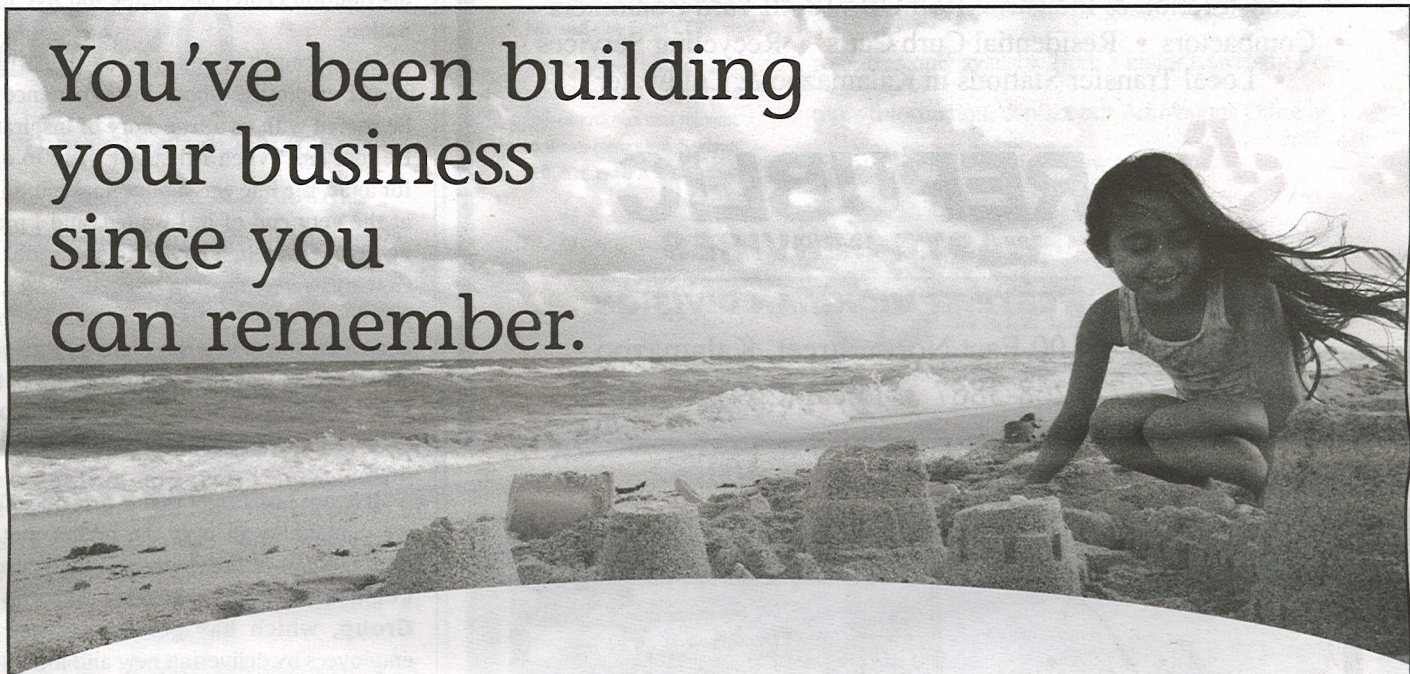
“If you know of a frequent, repeat customer of the downtown that might be interested in participating in a one-hour focus group session - please forward their names and contact information on to me,” she said.

For more information contact: Kathleen Eriksen, Downtown Development Director, Battle Creek Downtown Partnership, 115 West Michigan Avenue, Battle Creek, MI 49017. Phone 269-441-1663, fax 269-441-2274, e-mail: eriksen@bcunlimited.org. **MiBiz**



Kathleen Eriksen (foreground) and Downtown Project Manager Karen Knack in the Downtown Partnership’s newly renovated office space in downtown Battle Creek. The renovation was paid for with the help of a Cool Cities grant from the state of Michigan.

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