



CHARTER TOWNSHIP OF MERIDIAN

MERIDIAN TOWNSHIP ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

History: Where we've been, where we are and where we are heading.

For decades, Meridian Township has been conflicted between development and remaining a rural community. The proximity to the Capitol and Michigan State University, coupled with wooded lots, a dynamic park system, great schools and freeway access made Meridian truly a natural choice for residents of Mid-Michigan, who seek a great place to live, to find much of what they were looking for. The Meridian Mall opened its doors in 1969, and with it, Grand River Avenue in Meridian Township became a commerce center to serve the needs of the rapidly growing population. Between 1960 and 1970, Meridian's population grew a whopping 71.5% and continued growing over 20% by 1980 and again by 1990. Long-term community members spoke out about the township's need to control the growth and preserve what Meridian Township had long meant to its residents – a peaceful place away from the city. Economic growth was happening to Meridian Township and something needed to be done to ensure the changes were supplementing the great community, not detracting from it. Five years ago, this long debate culminated in a new determination to adopt and implement an updated Master Plan.

In November 2017, the Meridian Township Board adopted a new Master Plan. The plan calls for a balance between preserving what the community has long stood for while implementing a tactical strategy to improve the areas the residents deemed not up to community standards. Meridian enjoys an established series of highly desired subdivisions, excellent parks and land preservation programs, nationally recognized public school systems, strong trails for bicycles and pedestrians, and quality public services like libraries and transit. The areas requiring improvement include the eroding, once village-like commercial hubs of downtown Okemos, the four-corners of Haslett and the Carriage Hills shopping centers. These shopping destinations have failed to evolve in the changing world of retail and struggle to maintain occupancy of relevant tenants. Similarly, the Meridian Mall, once a thriving hub for the capital region, also faces significant occupancy challenges. Grand River Avenue, while it has many long-term commercial and professional office tenants, craves connectivity, vibrancy and an infrastructure upgrade to allow for safe and convenient use regardless of whether a citizen arrives by car, transit, bike or foot.

As the Master Plan was being developed, the Township Board was taking bold steps to implement a strategy to fix the largest problem most municipality's face – underfunded pension debt. It would be impractical to consider economic development the primary objective without addressing this looming crisis. In August 2017, the voters approved the strategy that will allow Meridian Township to become a debt-free community within ten years. On the heels of this achievement, the Township Board enacted an action plan for the Fourth Quarter 2017 to not only adopt the Master Plan, but to implement the plan and deliver what the residents requested.

In the fall of 2017, the Township Board adopted a 2018 budget that allowed for the establishment of a Redevelopment Fund and hire an Economic Development Director. The Township created a Brownfield Redevelopment Authority and enrolled in the Redevelopment Ready Communities program via the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. The Economic Development Director, along with elected officials, staff and citizen input, is charged with executing the following economic development strategy as it relates to the Master Plan. Below is a summary of long-term goals for the Township to achieve primarily through the efforts of the Economic Development Director. These goals are meant to be long standing, but will be reviewed annually. The implementation strategy will be a series of annual objective to be completed to accomplish each goal. The Economic Development Director will provide the Township Board and annual summary of objectives met, and suggest new objectives for the coming calendar year.

Economic Development Strategy

Goal: Public Relations & Advocacy

It is critical to engage as many community stakeholders as possible when determining the future of the Township. Master Planning will occur every five years at a minimum where every effort will be made to engage stakeholders on all levels; residents, land owners and business owners, to ensure that the updated vision for the Township reflects the desires of as many community members as possible. As new projects come forth, developers are encouraged to engage with neighbors who are impacted by their proposed development to garner feedback and support before they invest significant time, money and effort to their plans. Township staff will assist when requested or as needed. Public engagement should help the Township and the developer produce a more welcome development project in a more timely fashion with less friction.

The following action steps will be necessary in achieving this goal:

- Utilize our public participation strategy to disseminate information to a wide variety of stakeholders
- Engage with Developers, Land Owners, Business Owners and Realtors to earn the trust required to be looped in early as development projects are considered.
- Work closely with developers in the early stages of projects and connect them to local homeowners associations, business owners and land owners.

Goal: Business Retention, Expansion and Attraction

To have the economic development success we expect, it is critical to retain the businesses we have, advocate for those who are succeeding to reinvest in the Township through renovation, expansion or relocation, and attract new businesses to select Meridian as the community they choose to expand into. If grand openings replace those going out of business, we are simply stagnant which perpetuates the reputation of a community with a transient business base.

In order to achieve this goal, it is critical we execute the following:

- Implement a plan to visit with existing business owners to solicit feedback as to whether their business trend projects them to grow, shrink, close, or stay status quo and react accordingly.
- Uncover obstacles the Township has created that are preventing the business community from having the success they otherwise could have. Advocate for adjustments where practical.
- Engage with the residents of the Township to gather an ongoing wish list of desired commercial, retail, office and dining options not currently available in the Township and solicit those uses to come to Meridian.

Goal: Redevelopment the PICA districts as defined in the Master Plan and assist all of our business districts in remaining vibrant assets in our community (The Mall, Grand River Ave, Okemos & Jolly, Saginaw Business Loop, Hannah Plaza and Haslett Road)

The Master Plan calls for the redevelopment of our potential intensity change areas (PICA) which are defined as Downtown Okemos, the Haslett Four Corners and the Carriage Hills shopping center. Each space is unique, but the common theme is that these once-vibrant districts have fallen into disrepair and are under occupied. The Township has many business districts, but these three are specifically ripe for redevelopment into quaint village-like uses. We are proposing mixed-use in each so the residents of these villages will have many of the desired services and entertainment options within a convenient walk or bike ride. Also, these villages will become destinations for residents living in

nearby subdivisions where they can arrive by transit, car, bike or foot and spend the day. Similar to the redevelopment of the PICA's, our other business districts will require consistent focus, proactive ordinance review and development attraction. The mall will need nearly constant support to evolve from its current form to a more relevant and economically sustainable design. The Grand River Corridor will require implementation of policy that are found in The Capitol Corridor publication of 2014 and the Shaping the Avenue vision of 2017-2018.

For this vision to be achieved, it will be imperative to take the following action:

- Share the vision with developers, commercial realtors, land owners and business owners.
- Utilize the Meridian Redevelopment Fund, the Brownfield Redevelopment Authority and Redevelopment Ready Communities certification, where applicable, as resources to allow for the best possible development projects.
- Facilitate the dialogue between the developer, the Township, utility partners and the Ingham County Road Department and/or MDOT to ensure we maximize quality and accessibility of the development project.
- Review the associated ordinances that govern these critical areas and propose amendments to policy that prohibits or slows development that we've encouraged in the Master Plan.

Goal: Protect what is referred to in the Master Plan as the "eastern third" of the Township from dense and transformational development.

The feedback provided by the citizens of Meridian Township made a strong argument for development in our existing core districts, but asked for the rural character of this area to remain. The focus of Economic Development is to be on infill, not sprawl. As development projects and rezoning applications come through the approval process, we must remain vigilant in this cause.

Goal: Ensure Meridian is complimentary, congruent and competitive with Mid-Michigan economic development initiatives

Meridian Township has a significant role to play in the revitalization of the tri-county region. It is imperative to remain aware of initiatives in surrounding communities so the region can move forward together as a whole. Similarly, Meridian should share its plans with its neighbors to gather feedback and confirm there are limited duplicated efforts. To achieve this goal, the Economic Development Director and certain elected officials and staff should be assigned to attend various regional meetings and trainings to gather and share information.

Goal: Market the Township's community assets and competitive advantages

As more development and employment opportunities arise, Meridian needs to consistently advertise its brand (A Prime Community) to share the story Meridian Township has to tell. While physical involvement in local and regional meetings is critical, in the world of social media and websites, Meridian's story needs to be "findable". One of our best tools to court future businesses and residents can be our digital footprint. We must maximize all communication efforts to share the greatness that IS Meridian Township.

Goal: Follow the process in, and meet the deadlines of, the Master Plan implementation plan