

Director's Talk Answers the Question: What Does the Highland DDA Do?

By Crystal A. Proxmire, Editor and Publisher (August 6, 2026) Ferndale, Michigan | Reprinted with permission of Oakland County Times



Highland Township, MI – “My wife and I were watching this Hallmark movie, and it happened to take place at Christmas, and they had all these trees on Main Street, and I thought, we need to do that. In my head, if we can create that Hallmark movie here in Highland, then we’ve hit the mark,” said Highland Township Supervisor Rick Hamil as he shared his memory with attendees of a recent Talk of the Town discussion at Township Hall. “I heard that all the time at the tree lighting. So many people said it’s just like a Hallmark movie.”

Over 600 people attended the annual event last year, enjoying the glow of many trees decorated by local businesses, a market of local crafters, horse-drawn carriage rides, hot cocoa next to crackling bonfires, carols sung by local schoolchildren, and of course a visit from Santa Claus himself!

But if you asked those 600 people who was behind the festive gathering, odds are many would not know. And if you asked them what the Highland DDA is, or does, even fewer would have a clue.



That's why Highland Township hosted a Talk of the Town discussion session for members of the community to learn more about the DDA, which is the Downtown Development Authority, including what they do, how they're funded, and how residents and businesses can get involved in shaping the future of Highland.

WHAT IS A DDA?

DDA Director Melissa "Missy" Dashevich explained that Highland DDA is an organization tasked with using TIF funds to maximize the local economy, for example to "promote economic growth, increase property value, and prevent or reverse property deterioration in downtowns." Downtown is an area defined by certain boundaries. In Highland the district includes a radius of properties along M-59 from Save-A-Lot to the library, Milford Road (Either side of the road) from Wardlow going south to Rowe Road, and Livingston Road from the WOTA building to the railroad tracks. The core area is M-59 to Colasanti's, along with the aforementioned parcels on Livingston.

Throughout Highland property owners pay taxes. In the defined area, tax increases are specifically set aside for reinvestment in the DDA, rather than being sent along to the county and other taxing bodies. This is called a tax capture. It doesn't create new taxes, it simply allocates some of them to the DDA. The area is called a TIF district, which means Tax Increment Financing. The tax capture starts when a TIF district is created, so that as property values rise, so does the amount entrusted back to the DDA for upkeep and investment.



The DDA has a volunteer board, and a paid director. Board members are appointed by the Township Supervisor, and the Township has approval power over their budget.

Oakland County has nearly 30 downtown organizations, which were created for economic vitality. "In the 1970s the malls and strip malls popped up and pulled shoppers



HALL RENTAL



209 N. John Street in Highland 248-887-1717 www.highlandtwp.net

away from our traditional downtowns,” Dashevich said. “You used to go by shoes at a local shoe store. Mom would buy groceries at a mom and pop grocery. But the malls changed that. I’m sure you’ve been to downtowns and you can tell there’s no one looking after them.” Statewide laws enabled downtowns to organize and gave them a funding structure to heal and to compete.

In 2005 the Highland DDA was formed, and in 2004 they were able to put a TIF in place. In 2005 they joined Main Street Oakland County, where organizations come together to share ideas and support, and to collectively utilize county resources in their quests. They’ve also been accredited by Main Street America for 14 years, meaning they’ve stayed true to their mission and met a number of standards of success.

The Main Street Approach is a formula for that success. Many communities, including Highland, are structured around this approach, with four committees that coincide with their goals for the downtown.

The Design Committee creates an inviting atmosphere for all, with people-centered spaces and celebrating historic charm. The Economic Vitality Committee provides resources and education to businesses, and strives to create a strong economic base for the community. The Organization Committee handles tasks like leadership building, relationships both in the community and with other organizations, and encourages engagement. And the Promotions Committee helps to market the district’s assets and unique features.

The DDA partners with a number of organizations on projects and events through the year, as well as with community volunteers. In 2025 volunteers logged 667 hours of donated time.

Highland DDA also tracks other wins, including \$1,107,210 in public investment, \$594,554 in private investment, a net gain of 5 new businesses and 22 new jobs in 2025.



And while those numbers may seem impressive, it’s the more visible accomplishments that the public tends to notice, like beautiful murals, sidewalks, light post banners honoring veterans, landscaping features, and way finding signage. One recent achievement is the new boardwalk in front of Colasanti’s Market, and acquiring the grant money to make it happen. Another way the DDA brightens up the community is through their signage and facade grant program that helps businesses modernize or spruce up a bit.

Soon to come is an extension of the safety path along Milford Road, thanks to a grant through South East Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), and a new sign honoring Highland’s railroad station past.

But the DDA is more than just the things they build or fix,

it's also the connections they create. Events exist to help bring the business community and residents together. The Sounds Like Summer Concert series takes place Tuesday nights. The Highland Farmers Market helps people buy produce, baked goods, and artisan items locally. In October the chance to take selfies with skeletons has residents getting in their steps. Special programs like Ladies Day Out and Food Fight on Main draw people in to local shops and restaurants. On Founders Day a parade and festival celebrates Highland Township's heritage. And a new event this year celebrated a product made locally in the 1800s. The Pickle Run had over 170 people participate.

"At the Township we're known for being the place you pay your taxes and telling people what they can't do with their property. But the DDA can do the good things. People

may not know it's the DDA doing it, but the general public here sees that we're doing a great job here," Supervisor Hamill said. "The DDA is that gift to Highland that gives in so many ways."

Dashevich, who first decided to get involved in the community back in 1997 when she joined the parks committee, has seen the difference through the years. She said that areas of the township "needed some TLC," but when she learned about the DDA and the potential for revitalization, she knew she had to be part of it. "What happens in downtown affects us all," she said. "It's like if Highland is a house, Downtown is the living room of Highland."

THE TEAM

A board of business owners and residents is behind

PARTNERSHIPS

Highland Township
Highland Township Public Library
Highland Township Fire Department
Highland White Lake Business Association
Huron Valley Arts
Huron Valley Chamber of Commerce
Oakland County Sheriff's Department
Oakland County Thrive
West Oakland Transportation Authority (WOTA)



these initiatives, with even more volunteers on hand to help them out. Roscoe Smith is the Chairperson and a resident. Vice Chair is Andy West who owns Vandrey Self Storage. Treasurer is Christian Hamill, who is a CPA. Members include Cassie Blascyk, Taylor De Haan, Dale Feigley, Jennifer Frederick, Dan Walker, Christina Welsh, and Supervisor Rick Hamill who is a member based on his Township position.

There is always room for people who want to volunteer, whether it's serving on one of the four committees or just helping out with events.

Learn more about the Highland DDA at
highlanddda.com/



BOARD MEETINGS

**The Highland DDA Regular
Board Meetings are held
the Second Wednesday of Every Month
At 6:15 pm
In the Historic Steeple Hall
205 West Livingston
Highland, MI 48357**



Annual
Main
Street
Accreditation
meeting
2024

