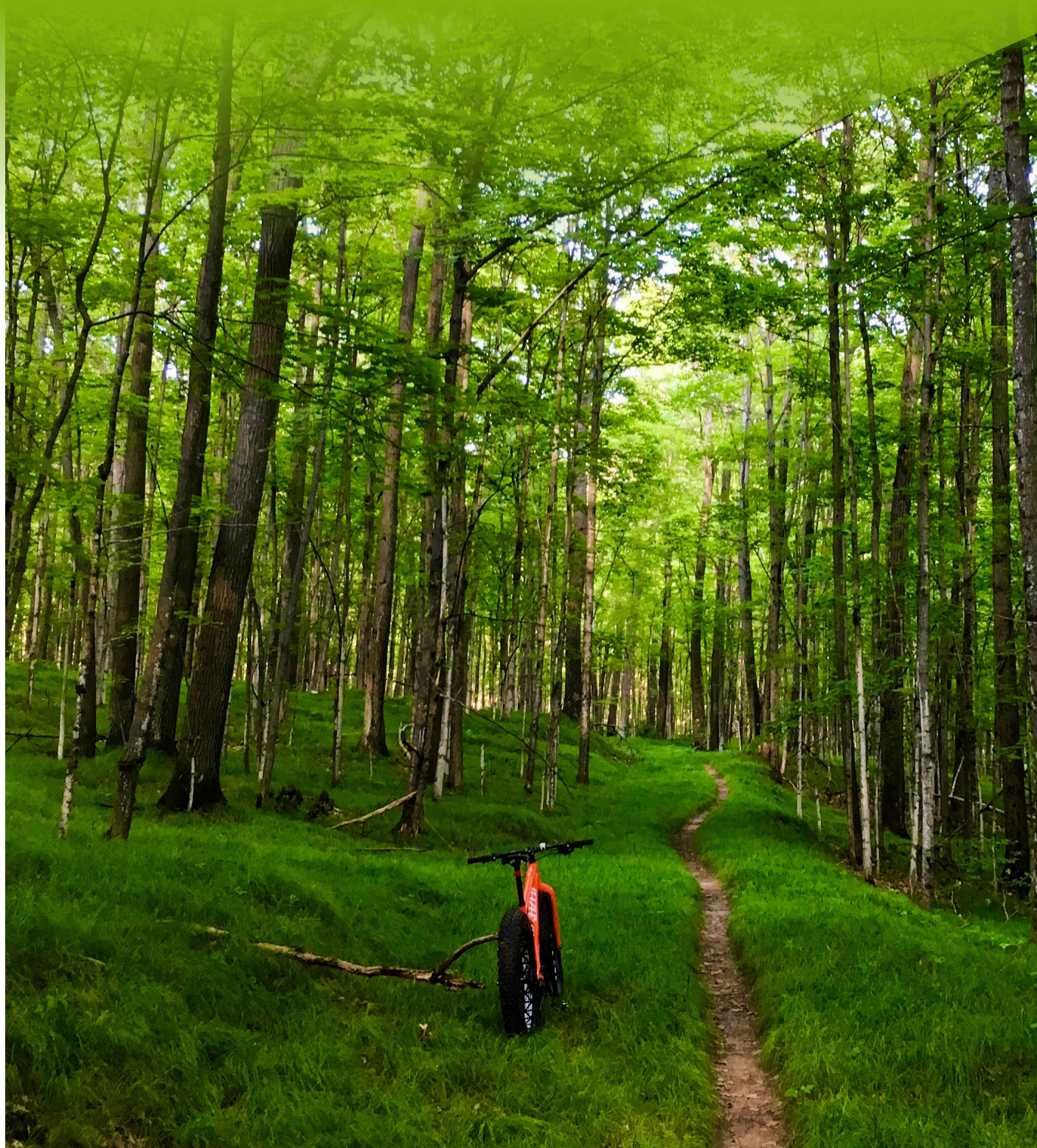




A NEW BREED OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPER





Written by David H. Caldwell

Despite the increasing growth of larger urban centers, newer micropolitan areas are rising to compete. In Michigan's Dickinson County, on the state's Upper Peninsula, the Dickinson Area Economic Development Alliance (or DAEDA) has forged strong, private sector-led connections between businesses, educational institutions, and government agencies to help usher in a new era of growth for the region.

As a smaller micropolitan area, Dickinson County and its surrounding areas had fallen under the purview of a combined chamber of commerce/economic development organization. But when local business owners believed progress in the region was slowing, they realized a new type of organization was needed.

"It was always tough to get things done," recalls Chairman Russ Kassin. "We really didn't move a lot of things in the right direction, and we didn't have private sector engagement."

In response, the newly created DAEDA would be a bottom-up agency fronted by the private sector and dedicated to creating and maintaining new economic growth in the Dickinson area.

Today, the DAEDA serves the market area that encompasses Dickinson County and border areas in Wisconsin. This showcases the alliance's private sector leadership, emphasizing regional economic development even across state lines.

While local units of governments are involved, Kassin affirms that the alliance is business-first. "It's important to have that collaboration," he says, "but the private industry is driving the bus now, which is where it should be."

Twenty percent of Dickinson's workforce is in manufacturing, significantly higher than Michigan's average of thirteen to fourteen percent. "You just don't find that in a lot of locations," remarks Alliance Executive Director Lois Ellis. ►►



John Jamar
CCI Systems CEO



Lois Ellis
DAEDA Executive Director



Russ Kassin
DAEDA Chair

► The area's manufacturing base is comprised of diverse sectors like electrical panels, heavy machinery such as snowplows, commercial construction and technology communications solutions, all of which support the Dickinson County Healthcare System, the region's largest employer. These sectors, combined with the area's vibrant recreation options, moderate cost of living, and the lowest unemployment rate in the Upper Peninsula, gives the region all the ingredients to be an economic powerhouse. It has also created a thriving tax base and an economy diverse enough to weather changing economic trends.

Many of Dickinson County's local businesses are headquarters of nationwide or international brands. The presence of these companies, Ellis notes, puts Dickinson on the map as a rising economic center. "Many of them are doing business across the country, if not the world, bringing that economic strength back to our community."

The county is also proud of its many natural amenities, including waterfront and wooded areas providing skiing, fishing, hunting, and golfing.

The region's busy Ford Airport, which serves the western and central Upper Peninsula as a whole, now offers daily flights to and from Minneapolis and Detroit. "You can get there efficiently, which is huge for our business travel," Kassin says.

Rather than giving tax breaks or other state-approved mandates, the DAEDA works business-to-business to foster business retention and growth. No fewer than five separate committees work through the region, bringing forth private and public sector resources for the betterment of the community. These committees, made up of local business and community leaders, address infrastructure and housing; talent and education; marketing and branding; business retention and growth; and advocacy and government relations. This sharp division of responsibilities

creates a clear vision of purpose, ensuring committee cross-communication and safeguarding the alliance's progress forward.

As Ellis explains, this collaboration, with private-sector leadership, is helping the DAEDA's member business build its own community, with the state government providing advice and funding where applicable. She points out that area businesses are the best candidates to develop their communities. "The private sector has been engaged to help us make the best use of not only their financial resources but also their expertise," she says, "to help us craft strategies that are very meaningful."

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The alliance has seen recent success in reviving its brownfield development strategy for land use that will create and update sites for development and redevelopment. In addition, DAEDA was in support of the county establishing a new land bank authority that will help administer useable sites in the community, working hand-in-glove with local municipal governments and other private-sector employers. Ellis says these steps ensure that the alliance takes advantage of the current economy while building a strong future to ensure future growth and stability. "Everybody has a seat at the table and is working to move forward," she says.

Local geographic information system (GIS) surveys of nearly all development sites are available on a publically accessible online database. "If a developer wants to check to see what's available, they can do that," Kassin explains. "No matter where they are, they can just click on the website and go."

Additional collaboration with local businesses and high schools strengthens working relationships and ensures the alliance remains focused on its goal without duplicating the work of other area agencies.

Thankfully, the alliance's task has met with community support. John Jamar, Chief Executive Officer of major local employer CCI Systems and a member of the DAEDA's leadership team, relates that local community leaders took interest in a failing community center. "We raised over \$4.6 million locally to bring it up to speed as a local YMCA, with close to 3,000 members represented," Jamar recalls. "It feels like the entire community has a sense of wanting to see the community evolve."

Part of this evolution is the education and development of the next generation of American laborers and business professionals. Local community college Bay de Noc College (colloquially known simply as Bay College) is now in the second year of its newly inaugurated Leadership Academy, having graduated its first class last year. Ellis says the program teaches all aspects of leadership, therefore making it useful for both newcomers and experienced professionals alike. "These candidates, they might be earlier in their careers, but they might be later in their careers as well," she says. ►►

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- ▶ The program has been well received, as students learn valuable business skills and gain knowledge of the vital interconnectedness of local economies. Above all, Ellis hopes the program will keep Dickinson County's best and brightest at home, rather than luring them to larger economies in Chicago and Lansing. "We are really fortunate they're helping us create that next generation of talent," she says, "which really helps local companies advance and keep talent here and gives those students new opportunities thanks to the skills they learn."

"The alliance applies strategic planning processes used by businesses, rather than government agencies, further facilitating communication between the DAEDA and its partners."

This new generation of business professionals will further expand and diversify Dickinson County's economy, building a stronger micropolitan area with solid internal commercial support. "We've got a lot of great coffee shops," Jamar admits, "but we have yet to have the kind of shopping support or other such businesses that the community desires." The growing base of new young leaders with energy and ideas should raise the region's economic stature.

Bay College is also operating a welding center in conjunction with the local school district. Combining county resources and expert instructors from private businesses, the program acts as a feeder for local employers. "The goal is to have a really well-equipped technical center to get kids interested in the trades," Ellis explains.

Another collaborative program, Heavy Metal Tours, provides tours, camps, and open houses to educate students on the manufacturing trades. This collaboration with the state program Michigan Works and the non-profit CDFI Northern Initiatives, along with private companies, presents a true public-private partnership.

These initiatives continue to help Dickinson County and the surrounding region address its most pressing challenge: the cultivation and retention of talented workers. Ellis explains that DAEDA's cornerstone is to build common strategies to foster common growth. "That's been our rallying point," she says, "and why we all got together and decided to collaborate in new ways to address that need."

But in the classic catch-22 of development, workers will not flock to an area without supporting infrastructure and vice versa. To that end, the DAEDA has been working with both municipal authorities and housing proprietors to keep rent levels acceptable and maintain the area's moderate cost of



living, while encouraging new housing development options. Results are slow, Jamar says, but promising.

"We're starting to see some positive expansion, not only in the outlying areas but also in the downtown area." This growth will, in time, lead to direct commercial support structures and new neighborhoods, providing new locations for families.

The alliance is building on the momentum gained through its local relationships. Because of its private-sector leadership, the alliance applies strategic planning processes used by businesses, rather than government agencies, further facilitating communication between the DAEDA and its partners.

"It translates very well here," Ellis explains, "because it's the language that our manufacturers are speaking, and that helps them be even more engaged." Now, she and her colleagues are poised to lead the region to new and responsible economic prospects. "We'll never be the size of some of the bigger cities," Jamar concludes, "but we can be multiple times stronger than we are today without sacrificing the great things about our community." ■

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