

Is the Downtown Development Authority the Right System for Harbor Springs?

A look at whether the standard DDA model fits a unique town.

- The question this report asks: Are our downtowns becoming more alike?
- Across peer communities, you see similar agendas, projects, and planning tools.
- Are these systems encouraging similarity over uniqueness?

Northern Michigan peer towns – the Pattern

- Harbor Springs, Petoskey, Charlevoix, Boyne City
- Elk Rapids, Traverse City, Alpena
- All operate under the same DDA framework
- Same structure. Same planning tools. Similar outcomes.
- The question is whether that serves a town like Harbor Springs well.

Nearly identical agendas

- Across towns, DDA board meetings follow the same formal format:
- Call to Order → (*Public Comment - Three Minutes*) → Agendas → Financials
- Old Business → New Business → Adjournment
- Same decision-making process everywhere.
- Does a standardized process fit every town equally well?
- When every town gets the same streetscape package, what makes a place feel like itself?

Same project categories, same look and feel

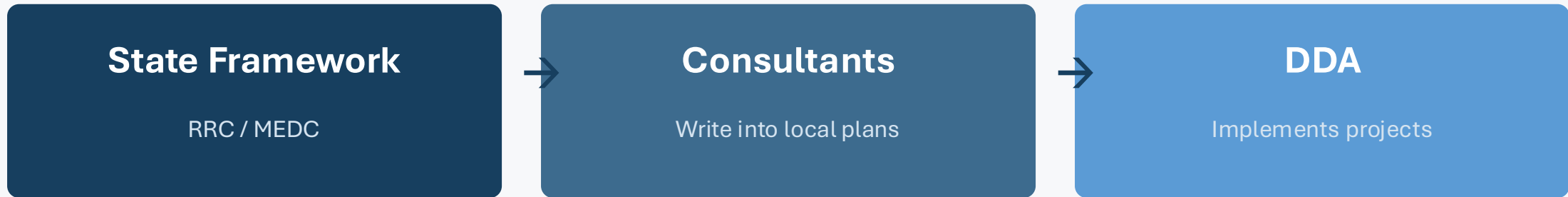
- Streetscape & infrastructure
- Wayfinding & signage
- Street furniture
- Streetlights
- Façade improvement grants
- Non-Motorized infrastructure
- Events & promotions
- Strategic plans
- Business incentives

All guided by shared state frameworks

These categories repeat across nearly every DDA in Michigan and the downtowns begin to share a similar visual identity.

How the system works

The DDA is part of a larger system with a chain of influence:



- Each level has a role, but they are connected.
- The state sets the framework, consultants write it into local policy, and the DDA carries it out on the ground.

Branding and events follow too

- Typical DDA activities across towns:
 - Seasonal events
 - Banner programs
 - Marketing campaigns
 - Tourism promotion
- The DDA town's identity becomes program-driven, rather than place-specific – replacing 120 years of Harbor Springs character with a program-driven identity that could belong to any town

The real questions for Harbor Springs

- Is the standard DDA approach: Right for Harbor Springs?
- Is the standard DDA approach scaled appropriately?
- Is the standard DDA approach aligned with community priorities?

- Or — are we applying a standard model to a non-standard town?

Will the community stand up for what makes Harbor Springs unique?