

The Goal of This DDA Review and Report

- This report examines how the streetscape project was initiated, what triggered it, and what Beckett & Raeder were hired to do.
- It reviews how DDA committees operate, where decisions are shaped, and what transparency the public can expect.
- The goal is not to stop downtown investment - but to ensure Harbor Springs develops in a way that reflects its character and values.

The Streetscape Project — how it was born, what triggered it, what Beckett & Raeder were hired to do

Here is a detailed breakdown of how the streetscape project mandate evolved between the City Council and the DDA:

- The City Council directed the DDA to develop a comprehensive "master streetscape plan" to avoid piecemeal beautification efforts, with the understanding that the actual implementation and physical construction will be completed in close cooperation with the City.
- The Push for a Comprehensive Plan: For several years, the DDA attempted to implement various downtown aesthetic improvements in phases, such as the "Unification Beautification Project," which included ordering new trash cans, benches, bike racks, and attempting to paint the downtown lamp posts.
- However, at the October 6, 2025, City Council meeting, the Council halted the DDA's specific request to paint the lamp posts blue. During this meeting, the Council officially directed the DDA to pause these isolated efforts and instead "come up with a comprehensive plan that includes public input, a detailed color schematics of posts and other features in the downtown and surrounding areas".

The Streetscape Project (continued)

- The DDA acknowledged this directive, with members noting that the City Council wanted a "total streetscape plan" presented to everyone before moving forward so that the city is not forced to repeatedly tear up sidewalks or move trees.
- Hiring a Consultant for the Master Plan To satisfy the City Council's request, the DDA took the administrative step of hiring consultant Beckett & Raeder to build the design.
- During a February 11, 2026, DDA meeting, the DDA board approved a proposal from the city planning consultants, Beckett & Raeder, to develop this master streetscape plan. The DDA budgeted \$20,000 to \$22,500 for this consulting work, with the expectation that Beckett & Raeder will deliver the finalized master plan on or before August 2026.
- “Implementation Will Be a Cooperative Effort ”, what does that mean for Harbor Springs?

The Streetscape Project (continued)

- While the DDA is currently responsible for managing and financing the planning phase, the records make it clear that the DDA will not be solely responsible for scheduling, hiring out, and executing the physical construction of the streetscape.
- According to the DDA's own development plan, the streetscape project—which will address new trees, garden features, seating, tree grates, sidewalks, lighting, and irrigation—is defined as a "long range project that may be implemented in phases and will be completed in cooperation with the City of Harbor Springs".
- The exact structure of this cooperation remains undetermined. The DDA Director explicitly noted that "how that cooperation will be structured financially is unknown at this point, but it will likely depend on the estimated costs that come from the plan that we hope to determine in 26".
- Furthermore, any final streetscape plan developed by the DDA and Beckett & Raeder must still be vetted by the community, the Planning Commission, and ultimately receive final approval from the City Council before any construction is scheduled or hired out

Next ?

- The goal isn't to stop downtown investment, but to ensure Harbor Springs develops in a way that reflects its character and values.
- We're asking the community whether a DDA remains the right tool—or whether it's time to consider a different approach to the DDA.
- But before that, lets look at where and how the DDA Committees make decisions?

The DDA Committees Work Behind the Scenes

- **Downtown Promotions Committee:** The mission of this committee is "to provide community events and marketing activities that enhance the image of the Downtown community and promote the Downtown businesses".
- **Downtown Enhancement Committee:** The mission of this committee is "to support projects that sustain the user experience, respect the historic character, expand the premier and unique sense of place, and add to the existing beauty of Downtown Harbor Springs"

DDA Committees

- A Committee is appropriate IF:
- It brings multiple options on a project back to the full board
- The board has real discussion and choices in full public view
- A DDA Committee often:
 - Selects concepts
 - Narrows options
 - Work with consultants
 - Brings back a near-final plan to the full Board
- A DDA Committee can become a problem IF:
- It brings back one “final” plan or a plan that appears “final”.
- Then, the DDA board is effectively approving, not deciding

Are DDA Committees Open to Open Meetings Act (OMA) ? YES

DDAs can form these Committees, but when those groups of board members take on substantive work or effectively shape decisions, they may be subject to the Michigan Open Meetings Act.

We are asking that the Enhancement Committee be Zoomed so the public can follow along during the Streetscape Project.

Recent case law reinforces that if key analysis and direction occur at the committee level, those discussions should be open to the public.

Real Time Comments Made on the Streets

- “Decisions made at committee meetings appear to be summarized at board meetings. Like the paint colors, the purchases of extra hot dogs or the location and planting of flowerpots.”
- “These committees appear to be dismissive on execution of projects - they seem to have a tight hold on who does what and what should be investigated and who should be in charge.”
- “Behavior towards audience members, at meetings or board members that ask too many questions or that push back against an idea sounds unprofessional and not kind”.
- “Art on the Walls project - this action will move forward following DDA models elsewhere around the state and an out-of-town artist will be invited to Harbor Springs before the community even knows about the art program.”
- “The DDA uses members as experts and dismiss other board members feedback or input. Is this a conflict of interest ? Can this be stopped?”

Observations

When Committees become tightly controlled: participation narrows, diverse perspectives are excluded, decision-making becomes internally reinforced rather than publicly tested.

Even when technically compliant, perceived decision-making outside public view can erode trust - resulting in skepticism, disengagement, and reduced community cooperation.

This creates a governance structure where a small group effectively directs outcomes, oversight by the full board becomes passive, new ideas or legitimate concerns are filtered out early.

Non-Local Artists Painting Murals in Downtown Harbor Springs

Why This Matters

If a direction is set at the DDA Committee level:

- The full DDA board may only see a refined, single option
 - Public input happens after direction, like art walls, is already established
 - The final vote becomes procedural rather than deliberative
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- The DDA is considering hiring an artist to paint walls and flat surfaces
 - This work was currently being discussed at the committee level

Permanent Visible Changes to Downtown – How Does That Occur?

1. Full Board Deliberation

- Scope, cost, and locations presented publicly
- Multiple options considered—including no action

2. Clear Decision Points

- Defined agenda item
- Transparent discussions and making sure contractors know the expectations
- Formal vote

3. Public Participation

- Opportunity for public input **before decisions are made**
- This isn't about whether people like murals, art on utility boxes or a merchant walkway. It's about making sure a visible, permanent change to downtown is discussed, costed, and decided in full public view—not shaped in a DDA committee and moved through as a foregone conclusion.

Is this Harbor Springs? What DDAs do in Other Michigan Towns

1. Rogers City – “Murals on Main” (DDA-style downtown initiative)



- Multi-wall mural program transforming blank downtown buildings
- Funded through grants + local development efforts
- Designed to “energize downtown” and attract visitors

MEDC

2. Trenton, MI – DDA Mural Festival / Public Art Program



- Partnered with artists to paint large-scale murals

More to the Story?

This is not just about one mural. It is about a pattern - where state planning frameworks shape local decisions before the community has been asked.

Even where these concerns are present, the DDA can still be viewed in a constructive and positive light when its efforts are understood in context.

Committees are often formed to allow focused, efficient work on complex projects, helping volunteer board members and staff manage detailed planning that would be difficult to accomplish in full board meetings alone.

In many cases, what may appear as tight coordination is often a focus on efficiency, timelines, and responsible use of public funds. Paired with greater transparency and communication, these structures can produce thoughtful, accountable improvements for the entire community.

Our Challenge to the DDA

Downtown Development Authorities (DDAs) are a key implementation tool within the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) and its Redevelopment Ready Communities (RRC) framework — a system designed to promote consistent economic development practices across Michigan communities.

While these tools provide structure and efficiency, they are intended to be adapted not applied uniformly.

For smaller, built-out communities like Harbor Springs, the responsibility is to ensure these frameworks serve the town — not shape it in ways that move away from its established character.

DDA can be viewed in the best light

- It's true that these concerns are valid, and the DDA can still be viewed in its best light as a group of committed volunteers and staff working to move projects forward in a small community with limited time and resources.
- Committees are often used not to exclude, but to handle the detailed, time-intensive work needed to keep initiatives progressing between formal meetings.
- Providing Zoom access to Committee meetings would increase transparency while preserving the efficiency and timelines that makes this work possible.
- DDAs can be a practical, accountable tool that delivers thoughtful decisions, responsible stewardship of public funds, and visible improvements for year-round and second-home residents, property owners, and visitors to Harbor Springs. It's up to the community to decide what is best.

Closing Thoughts

Harbor Springs has been shaped over 100 years through community-driven decisions.

As new tools and structures are applied:

The question is not whether they work - but whether they reflect what makes this place unique?

Should Harbor Springs follow a standardized economic model or prioritize a more locally directed, distinctive path?

We are Harbor Springs. We are home. Public Participations works for you.