

Michigan

MUNICIPAL REVIEW

September/October 2003

Inside:

- The Dexter Story – Bringing life back to downtown
- Makeovers to transform four Michigan downtowns
- The Michigan Downtown & Financing Association
- 13 lessons to protect your community from bio threats

THE DEXTER STORY

Bringing life back to downtown

by John R. Iacoangeli, AICP, PCP

Like all great stories, Dexter's has modest beginnings. In 1992, downtown Dexter served a resident population of 1,600 and a trade area population of 8,000 to 10,000. The downtown had two banks, a hardware store, a pharmacy, the post office, a grocery store and two breakfast/lunch restaurants. Unfortunately, it also had several first floor vacancies and many upper story vacancies.

One night, as they met for their regular session in a small room on the second floor of the former First of America bank building on Main Street, the Downtown Development Authority collaborated to develop a long-term revitalization plan for the downtown. The effort was led by the DDA chairman at the time, Ed Coy, a local realtor.

Lacking funds to prepare a comprehensive strategic plan for the downtown, the DDA explored with the business owners what critical improvements would be necessary to improve the economic health of the downtown. The result of these conversations was the formulation of a program identifying issues influencing the physical and functional condition of the downtown; issues impairing the economic vitality of the downtown; opportunities for the downtown; a consensus on a vision; and an achievable implementation schedule.

Past attempts by the DDA to implement a downtown streetscape had failed because of a lack of support from residents and the business community. With this in mind, the DDA knew this downtown revitalization plan needed to start small in order to build credibility and success. Projects outlined in the plan included new public parking lots, intersection improvements, streetscape enhancements, and façade and building renova-

tions. In addition, the plan suggested revising the village zoning ordinance to permit upper story apartments and residences, and creating a new "downtown-sensitive" sign ordinance.

Parking improvements

Unlike in many downtowns, where parking deficiencies are only perceived, Dexter really had a lack of parking. In fact, its primary off-street parking was in a privately owned gravel lot behind a row of historic commercial buildings on Main Street.

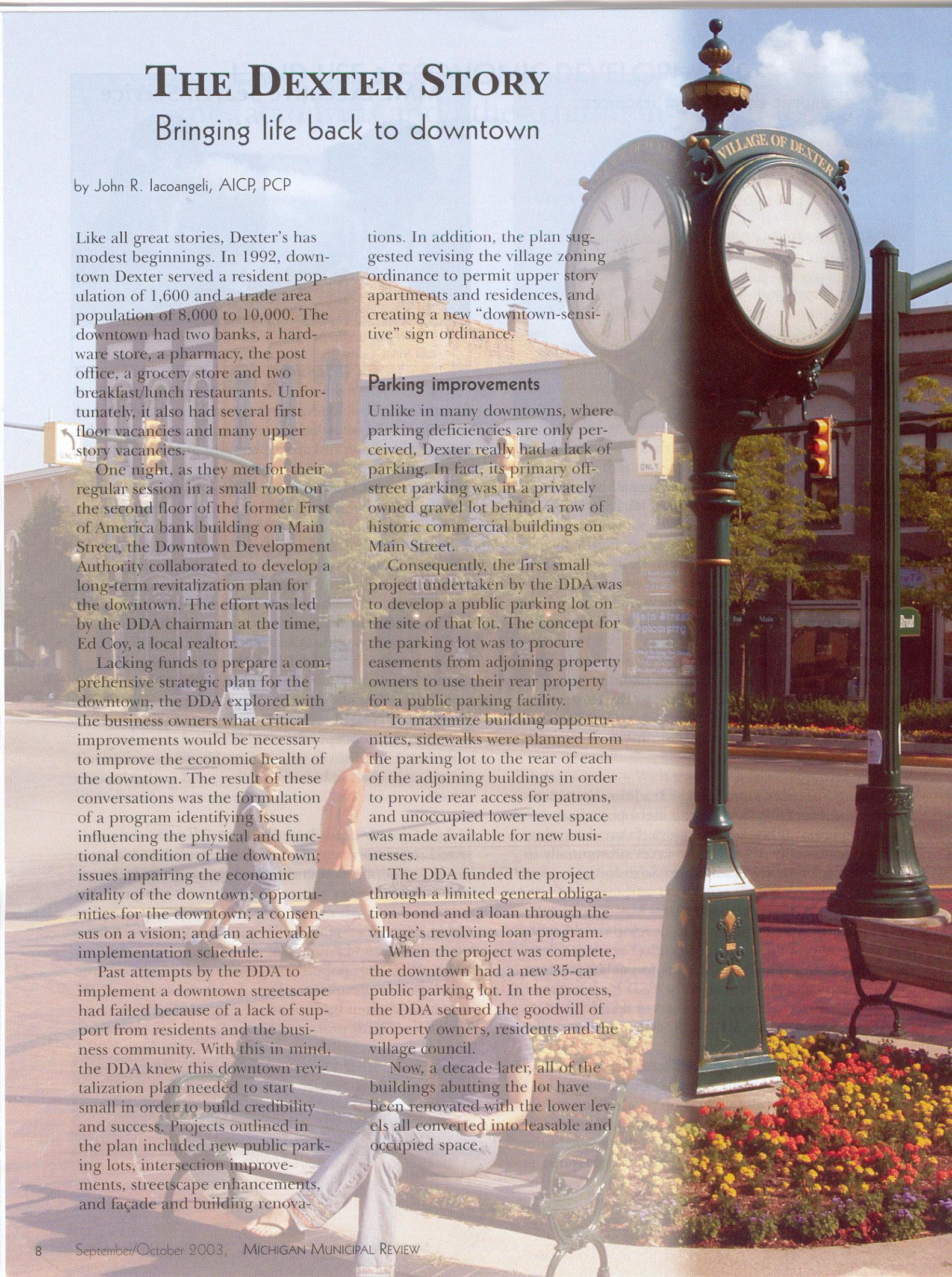
Consequently, the first small project undertaken by the DDA was to develop a public parking lot on the site of that lot. The concept for the parking lot was to procure easements from adjoining property owners to use their rear property for a public parking facility.

To maximize building opportunities, sidewalks were planned from the parking lot to the rear of each of the adjoining buildings in order to provide rear access for patrons, and unoccupied lower level space was made available for new businesses.

The DDA funded the project through a limited general obligation bond and a loan through the village's revolving loan program.

When the project was complete, the downtown had a new 35-car public parking lot. In the process, the DDA secured the goodwill of property owners, residents and the village council.

Now, a decade later, all of the buildings abutting the lot have been renovated with the lower levels all converted into leasable and occupied space.



Dexter's revised zoning ordinances

With one project under its belt, the DDA offered the planning commission suggestions to revise the zoning ordinance provisions dealing with signage and upper story use. As a result, the Planning Commission prepared what is now known as the Village Center Zoning District, which provides for a mixture of land uses, and encourages the use of upper stories for residential development.

The changes to the signage provisions corrected two outstanding issues affecting downtown properties by allowing projecting signs, and prohibiting internally illuminated signs.

Streetscape enhancements

By 1994 the DDA had acquired property for another surface parking lot and was in the planning stages for streetscape enhancements. Prior to embarking on the streetscape project, the DDA solicited input from the community on the scope of the project.

The outcome of these meetings enlarged the initial scope of the streetscape project to include improvements along the DDA's two corridors and realignments at four key intersections.

In addition, the DDA realized that the water main, sanitary sewer and storm sewer under Main Street needed to be upgraded. Discussions with the village indicated a need for a larger infrastructure improvement program, so the DDA financed the preparation of loan and grant applications to the Rural Development Administration for infrastructure funding.

The combined budgets for the corridor and streetscape enhancements, and the infrastructure improvements amounted to over \$5 million. At this juncture in the process, the DDA decided it needed more community support to finance the improvements and asked voters for additional millage to revitalize the downtown.

Experience Matters

We've been meeting the growing needs of governmental agencies and school districts for the past 50 years. Our Governmental Services group specializes in auditing and preparation of annual financial reporting forms for townships, villages and cities, as well as local and intermediate school districts. Here's what our team of expert professionals offers:

- Extensive School District/Municipal auditing experience
- Continuity of service
- Person-to-person relationships
- Technology consulting and education

Hungerford, Aldrin,
Nichols & Carter, P.C.
CPAs AND CONSULTANTS
Where Good Ideas Add Up.[®]
616.949-3200 www.hanc.com

In order to garner the needed support for the enhancements, the DDA, with the village's help, formed the "Enhancement Committee." This group included a cross-section of interests in the village, and took on the task of educating the community about the positive benefits of downtown revitalization and the need to take a comprehensive approach.

Voters would be asked to contribute \$1.8 million toward the project and the downtown businesses would contribute \$805,000 through a special assessment district.

For the project to proceed, voters needed to approve the general obligation issue and 51 percent of the downtown property owners were required to sign the special assessment district petition. In the fall of 1995 both groups gave their approval for the project.

At the same time, the village was notified by the Rural Development Administration to submit a full application for infrastructure funding, and the DDA funded its second limited general obligation bond.

During 1996 through 1998, the downtown infrastructure, corridor

and streetscape enhancements were undertaken and completed.

Focus on occupancy

In 1998 the DDA decided to construct a second parking lot, and to financially assist the village with the acquisition of a gas station property located in the middle of downtown.

As projects progressed from the drawing table to getting off the ground, downtown properties began to sell. New owners, who noted the village's efforts to revitalize the downtown and contribute public funding for reinvestment, responded with private reinvestment in buildings and new businesses. Buildings that had been purchased for \$30,000 to \$40,000 in the 1970s were now commanding prices in the high \$200,000s and low \$300,000s range.

Upper stories were converted to apartments, and new retail businesses and eating and drinking establishments opened for business.

As private reinvestment increased, and with more building space being occupied, the DDA began to acquire other properties for parking. In 2000 the DDA col-

Who's smarter... you, or the birds?

**BLAST BIRDS AWAY
WITH ULTRASONIC
FULL-CIRCLE ATTACK**

NEW QUADBLASTER QB-4 bombards birds with pulsating ultrasonic sounds they can't stand but people can't hear. Birds leave your building and don't come back. **Guaranteed to solve your bird problem. Don't settle for third-rate imitations!**

800-662-5021

300 N. ELIZABETH ST. DEPT. MRV
CHICAGO, IL 60607
312-BAN-BIRD
FAX 312-226-2480
WWW.BIRD-X.COM



THE BIRD CONTROL "X-PERTS" SINCE 1964



Take a Closer Look! Municipal Benefit Services

Programs designed to meet your needs since 1987.

Health Benefits Program

Underwritten by Blue Cross and
Blue Shield of Michigan

Short Term Disability

Underwritten by Fort Dearborn Life

Group Life Insurance

Underwritten by Fort Dearborn Life

Associated Programs

- COBRA Compliance Systems
- ICMA-RC Retirement Plans
- Flexible Benefit Programs
Provided by Harbor Benefit Services

To learn how these programs
can benefit your community call

1-800-247-7236

laborated with the village to secure two parcels for parking lots behind the former gas station property. Together, the parcels ultimately became an 84-car parking lot and redevelopment site on Main Street.

Because valuations within the DDA district increased, the DDA pledged funds toward another limited general obligation bond to finance this project, the development of on-street parking improvements, and a farmers market.

Continuing partnerships will guarantee future success

Working in partnership with the community, property owners, the village council, planning commission, chamber of commerce and local development finance authority, the Dexter DDA has been able

to accomplish over \$5 million in public projects, increase the valuation of downtown properties by 158 percent since 1993, and create 65 jobs in the downtown.

Today, downtown patrons and residents enjoy the benefits of a traditional pedestrian-friendly historic business district. But the story isn't over. The DDA is looking in the future to partner with the village on reuse of the Mill Pond, assisting with the redevelopment of the former gas station property, and providing additional parking to support the ever-growing demand.

Since the preparations of the initial downtown revitalization plan in 1993, two additional chairmen have led the DDA: Fred Schmid, owner of Dexter Pharmacy, and Dan O'Haver, owner of Hackney

Hardware. Both individuals have stayed the course of implementing the plan and continue the tradition of collaborating with other agencies and commissions on the improvement of Dexter's downtown. ♦

John R. Iacoangeli, AICP, PCP is a partner in the engineering, planning and landscape architecture firm Beckett & Raeder, Inc., an Associate in the Michigan Municipal League's Business Partnership Program. You may contact John at 734-663-2622 or jri@bria2.com.

At the Village of Dexter, please contact DDA Chairman Fred Schmid or Village President John Coy, through the village office at 734-426-8303.