

Interview Synopsis

The following is a synopsis of information conveyed or gleaned through the “stakeholder” or “critical actor” interviews. It is noted that the information does not necessarily reflect the attitudes or opinions of The Chesapeake Group with respect to downtown Fennville, but of those interviewed.

- ✓ There is tremendous optimism about the future of downtown Fennville that is shared by many. There is hope that there will be more small unique businesses in the future than there are at present and that the area will cater to visitors; those from Saugatuck, Douglas, etc.; and local residents.
- ✓ The Fennville area continues to be rural in character, although it is growing. The nature of agriculture in the area has changed over the years. Former fruit farms have been replaced by other agricultural production.
- ✓ While growth in the residential area population in the Fennville area is anticipated; to a large extent, traditional suburban growth (quarter, third, and slightly larger acre lots) are not anticipated. New development is expected at more rural densities, such as one unit per five acres.
- ✓ Changes in surrounding area populations are reported to be happening. Existing units are being bought as second homes and retirement homes.
- ✓ Much concern was expressed for the condition of the school system. Standardized test performances have not been strong. However, it was the consensus that since the hiring of the current school superintendent, that conditions were improving. New facilities are deemed to be needed as well to increase the area’s attractiveness to traditional families.
- ✓ Within certain blocks of downtown, parking is perceived as being an issue. This is particularly true in the block containing the hardware, food store, pharmacy and medical facilities. Some perceive that the solution is to move employees of that area to another location, freeing up interior block parking for patrons.
- ✓ The area has in general suffered over the past few years, with only a few businesses reportedly seeing growth in sales or revenues. The trend was deemed to be reflective of Michigan’s economic problems and loss of employment opportunities or jobs in the nearby Holland-Zeeland area. This area is identified as being where many have worked in the recent past and do work at present.
- ✓ Concern was expressed for the current conditions of some downtown structures, while others were felt to be extremely well maintained.

- ✓ There are significant signs of reinvestment in downtown, including construction of a new and expanded Hispanic supermarket and Mexican restaurant, opening of three new businesses, renovations of a few structures, and additional planned expansion of one business. Yet, all but one of these changes would not have likely occurred without “subsidies”, either by the City/DDA or private benefactors. The subsidies are largely in terms of rent “forgiveness” or rent levels that are too low to generate returns to the property owners (City and private). In one case, the City is directly participating in the investment process. In the other case, where no subsidy is involved, there are likely to be code violations which could impact viability.

(It is noted that it should not be assumed that these policies associated with rent “forgiveness” or “subsidies” are not good. They seek long-term investment return over the short-term. It is noted that the private development industry in major shopping centers has often employed similar strategies to attract anchors and stimulate new business development.)

- ✓ It is noted that long-term successful businesses within the downtown, to a large extent, are those that have served a convenience function. The specialty and general supermarkets, hardware operation, drugstore, insurance agency, and auto services are all examples.
- ✓ Many of the non-convenience operations are struggling. This may have been historically true as well.
- ✓ There are a number of attractions in the area, including the winery, water, and festivals that draw significant numbers of people successfully to areas immediately around downtown Fennville.