

Economic Diversification Study & Strategic Plan

Lake County, Michigan
May 2025



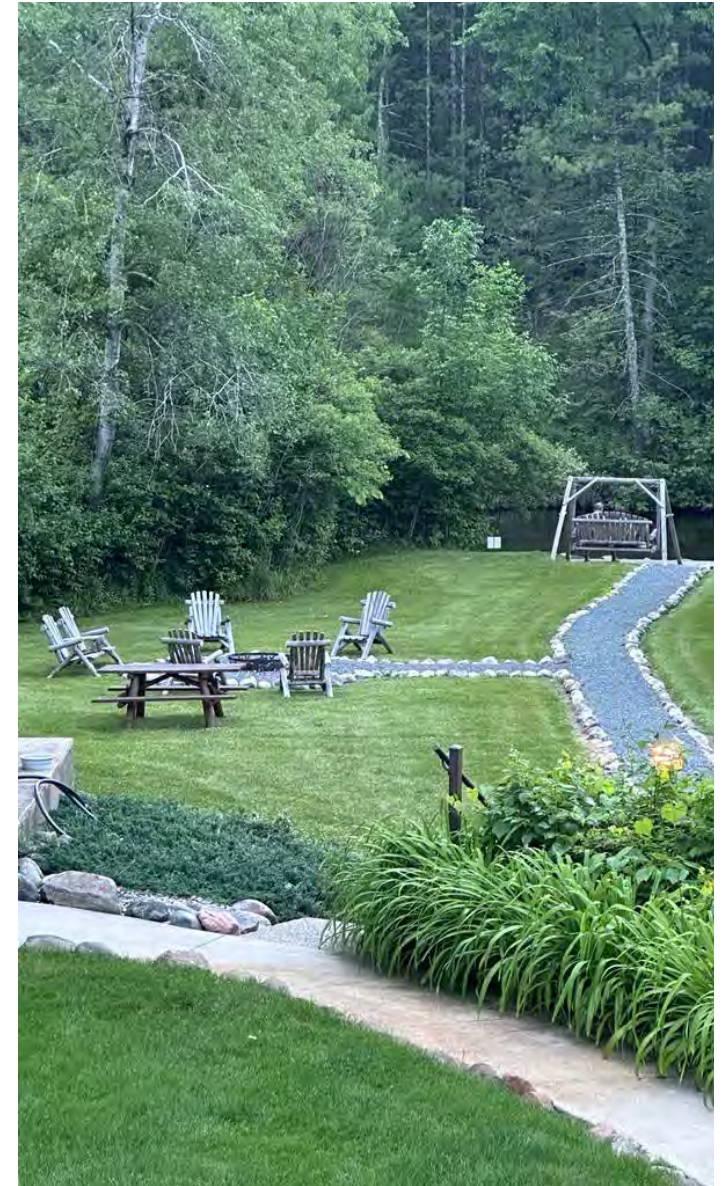
Prepared by:



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The Lake County Economic Diversification Advisory Group

This committee was specially formed for this grant work. It is made up of the full Lake County Economic Development Alliance Board and the following additional community members:

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TPMA provides professional consulting services and delivers insights to the complete workforce, education, and economic development ecosystem that allows them to move forward, together. TPMA envisions a world that thinks strategically, works collaboratively, and acts sustainably. TPMA's Economic Development and Community Resiliency Team provides expertise in assessing markets, identifying business sector opportunities, building entrepreneurial ecosystems, and conducting housing assessments to assist communities in developing solutions for local housing challenges consistent with community and economic development objectives.

INTRODUCTION

In April 2024, Lake County partnered with Indianapolis-based consulting firm TPMA to prepare an economic diversification plan with funding from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) in the aftermath of the closing of its largest employer and taxpayer, Geo Group's Northlake facility per Executive Order. The privately owned prison has had a history of opening and closing, leaving the community's residents and municipalities negatively affected. Since the start of this diversification study, the facility once again announced the reopening of the facility to support its new federal contract to provide services to the Federal Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This intended reopening does not eliminate the need for economic diversification but rather demonstrates the uncertainty of the facility's role in the county's economy and the opportunity costs it creates from the unreliability of its long-term operations.

This locally focused action plan provides a framework for economic growth and community development with five interrelated elements:

- Infrastructure Inventory
- Municipal Utility Assessment
- Core Community Entrepreneurial Hub Feasibility
- Economic Recovery Strategy
- Recommendations for Industrial and Commercial Vacancies

TPMA worked on the project closely with the Lake County Economic Development Alliance (LCEDA) Executive Director. Input from community stakeholders and feedback from the Lake County Economic Diversification Advisory group were gathered to develop the reports' content. The content was divided into four separate documents for ease of use:

- Economic Diversification Study and Strategic Plan
- Infrastructure Inventory and Utility Assessment
- Industrial and Commercial Vacancies
- Entrepreneurial Hub Feasibility Study

A Report of Findings and Recommendations was prepared for presentation to stakeholders and the Board of Commissioners.



Recommended Target Industries

The project team was tasked with developing an Economic Diversification Study to identify the most promising existing industries for expansion and potential new industries for development. The goal is to strengthen Lake County, Michigan's economic base and ensure long-term sustainability.

Across all identified industries, the greatest opportunities for success lie in fostering and expanding small, locally owned businesses. Though the following industries were highlighted through this analysis, it should not be assumed to exclude consideration for other industry contributions to local economic diversification.

Existing Industries

HEALTHCARE

Baldwin Family Healthcare is a major employer in the local healthcare industry, offering medical, dental, vision, and behavioral health services. Additionally, the Grand Oaks Nursing Center provides further healthcare career opportunities and essential services for the community. These businesses serve as anchors for potential healthcare industry growth through additional employment opportunities and expansion and/or attraction of facility and service gaps.



TOURISM AND OUTDOOR RECREATION

Tourism plays a vital role in Lake County's economy, drawing visitors to its natural landscapes, abundant recreational opportunities, and cultural heritage. A significant attraction is Historic Idlewild, an African American resort community that flourished in the early 20th century, attracting legendary figures and performing artists. Several cultural events are hosted each year, particularly summer music events.

The county is home to over 100 lakes and 200,000 acres of public land, including the Manistee National Forest and the Pere Marquette State Forest. The Pere Marquette River and the Pine River are both designated as National Wild and Scenic Rivers. The Baldwin River, a tributary of the Pere Marquette, was the first location to introduce brown trout into U.S. waters. Lake County is a popular destination for year-round fly fishing, with several areas designated as "flies only." The area is renowned for its trout and boosts that reputation with guided fly-fishing experiences, fishing competitions, and community events like "Troutarama." Lake County is also a magnet for ATV/ORV riding due to its extensive and well-maintained trails. The county boasts over 300 miles of trails across four trail systems, complete with trailhead parking and staging areas. In 2024, the county debuted its ORV Training Park with four designated areas that allow new riders to learn to safely maneuver vehicles. Lake County is also a haven for hiking, hunting, canoeing, kayaking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and even dog sledding. Tourism-related businesses are prevalent in Lake County with lodging, restaurants, retailers, tours, and more.

The potential is high for tourism growth, though the county currently lacks a dedicated tourism organization to leverage resources for marketing, amenities, and visitor infrastructure.

New Industry Opportunities

MANUFACTURING

Lake County has potential for expanding light manufacturing, particularly in mineral products, metals, and specialty manufacturing. Currently, only two manufacturers operate in the county, indicating substantial room for growth.

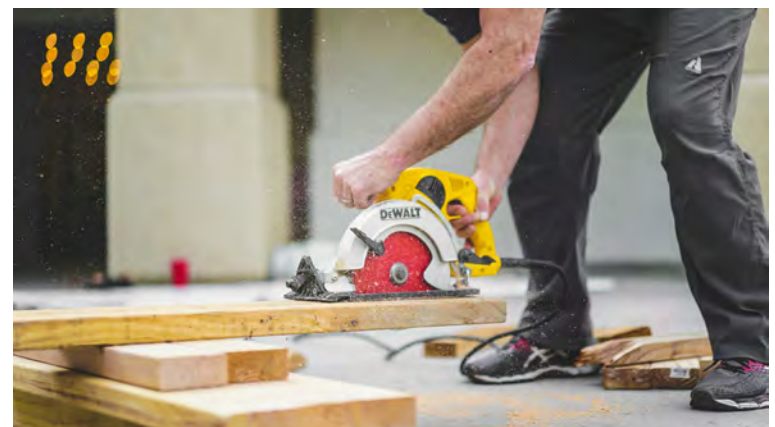
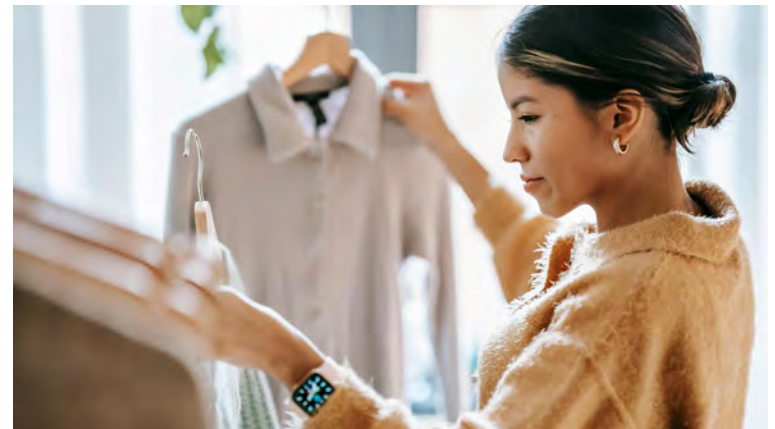
RETAIL

Retail development presents another promising opportunity, as indicated by the industry analysis and stakeholder feedback. Expanding local retail options—such as food and beverage, general merchandise, clothing and accessories, sporting goods, furniture, and health and personal care—would benefit both residents and the growing number of visitors.

CONSTRUCTION AND HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

With the rising national demand for housing, Lake County has the potential to develop a robust construction sector. Opportunities exist in heavy and civil engineering, building construction, and specialty trade contracting, addressing both residential and commercial needs.

By strategically expanding these industries, Lake County can enhance its economic resilience, create new job opportunities, and ensure sustainable growth for the future.



CURRENT SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Demographic Overview

Population Trend

The population in Lake County has grown steadily in recent decades. Between 2000 and 2020, the population grew by approximately 760 people, (6.73%). As is the case in many rural communities, future growth in the county is uncertain. Some models (such as Lightcast) project substantial population growth over the next ten years. Others (such as Esri) estimate that the population will fall slightly.

In reality, the trajectory of population growth in Lake County will be largely dependent on a variety of factors over the same period. Specifically, the population in small communities responds sensitively to changes in workforce, industry, infrastructure conditions, and the economic landscape. How Lake County and the rest of the WMSRDC region plan for and respond to any economic shifts or shocks will most likely determine whether the county realizes positive or negative growth over the next decade.

One example is the cyclical nature of the opening and closing of the North Lake Correctional facility operated by The GEO Group on behalf of federal departments and enforcement. The facility has opened and closed through contracts with alternative federal and state administrations since 1998. After years of being shuttered, GEO recently announced it will be re-opening the 1,800-capacity facility (1,400 detainees/400 staff) in the near future through a newly minted contract with the Federal Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Workers for the facility will likely be pulled from other Lake County and regional employers.

Lake County Population Trend

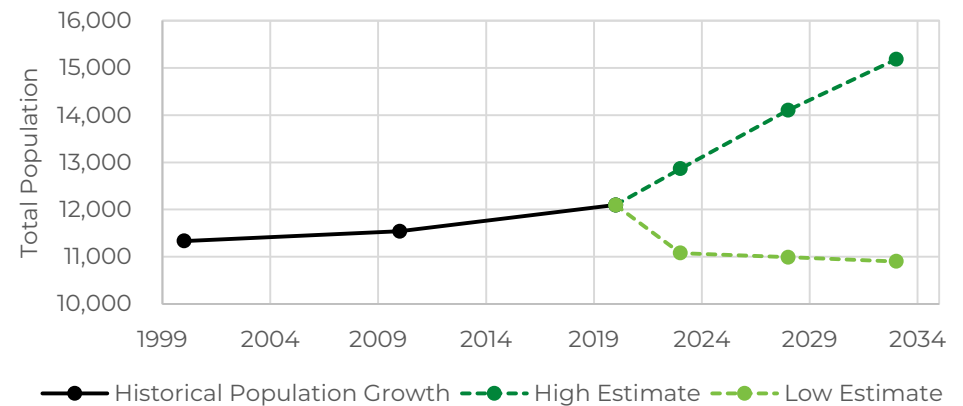


Figure 1: Population Trend. Source: U.S. Census, Lightcast, and Esri, 2024

Age Demographics

The age demographic has changed considerably over the last ten years. Perhaps most importantly, the county has seen an increase in the percentage of the population over the age of 65 years. In 2012, roughly 23.9% of the population was 65 years or older; in 2022, the same age group comprised about 27.8% of the overall population. Conversely, the population under the age of 15 years fell between 2012 and 2022, from 14.5% to 12.3%. Shifts in the local age distribution can affect various aspects of the economy, such as the workforce, the housing market, and the healthcare industry. A proactive strategy for addressing these demographic changes can ensure the community is well prepared to accommodate residents for years to come.

Lake County Age Demographics

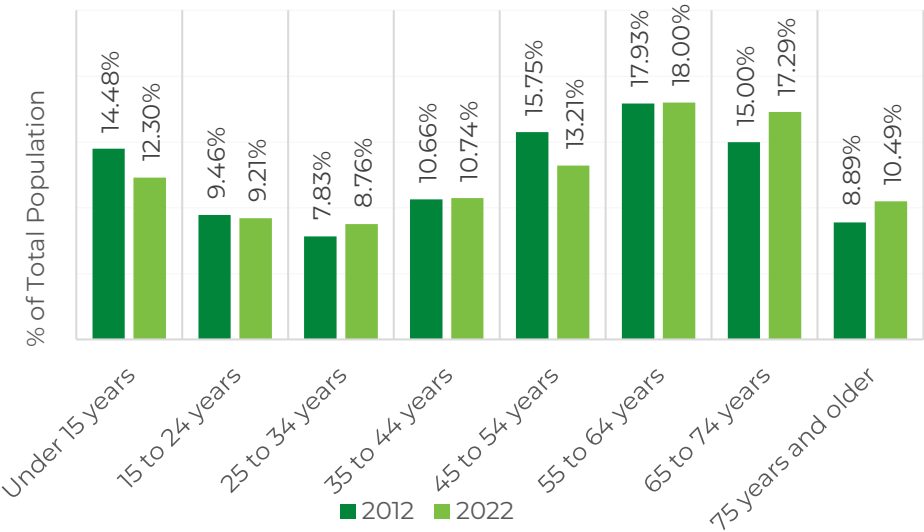


Figure 2: Age Demographics. Source: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates





Educational Attainment

When compared to state levels, educational attainment in Lake County is low. Approximately 17.8% of the population over the age of 25 years has not completed high school nor earned any certificate of equivalency. While nearly one third of Michigan residents have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, only about 12.1% of Lake County residents have earned the same. There are many training programs and educational certifications that are not represented in this data; for example, much of the population without a formal education could find employment as a skilled tradesman, which would not require any university education. Nevertheless, developing a skilled workforce is an important component of any economic development strategy and one which could spur new economic growth.

Highest Level of Education Attained

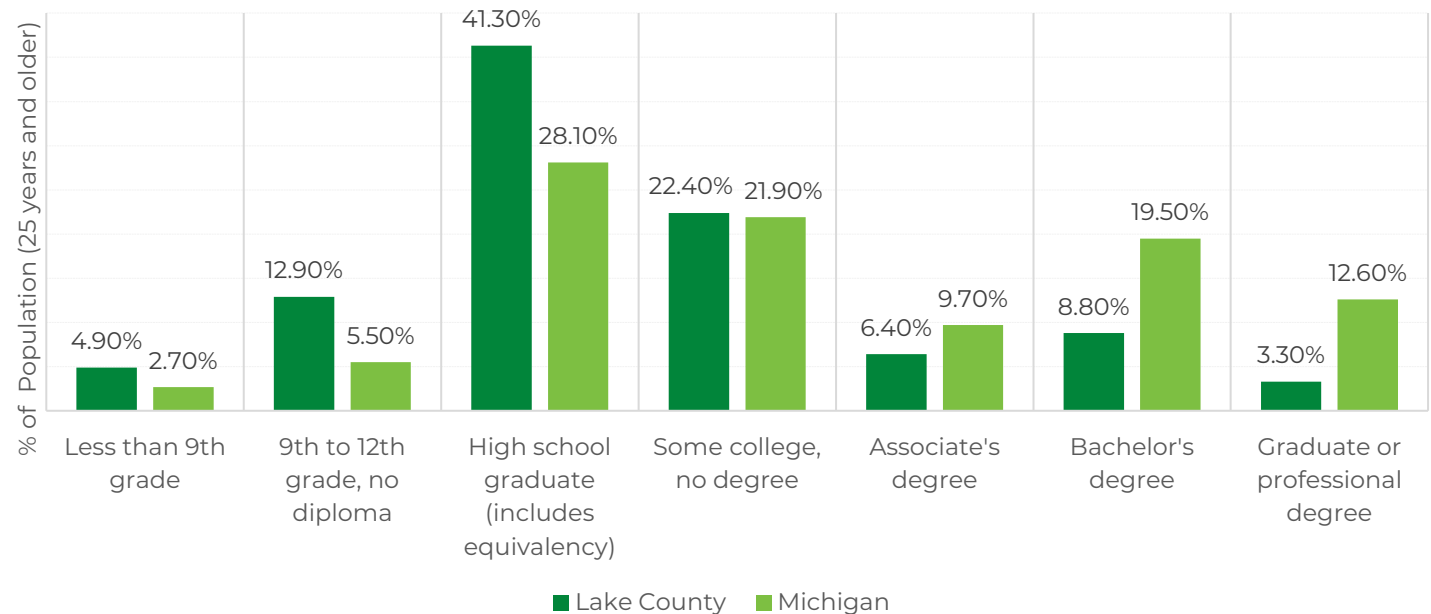


Figure 3: Educational Attainment. Source: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

*Additional data and findings for Lake County, including more demographic information, can be found in the appendices.

Economic Landscape and Labor Market

Labor Force And Unemployment

Between 2022 and 2024, Lake County’s unemployment rate hovered between 5% and 9.5%. Its highest level was reached in the beginning of 2023, when it climbed to 9.3%. As of October 2024, the unemployment rate was 6.6%. This is about 2 percentage points higher than the state’s unemployment rate of 4.6% in the same month.

Lake County Monthly Unemployment Rate, Nov 2022 - Oct 2024

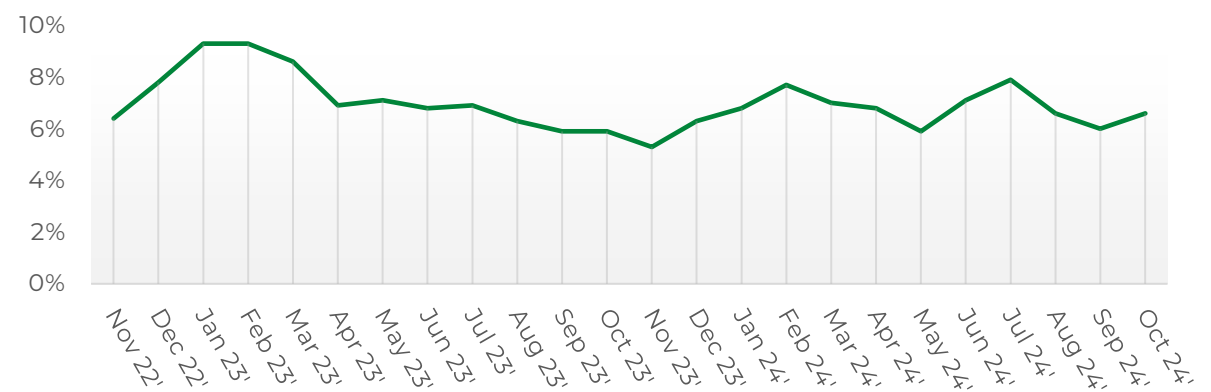


Figure 4: Lake County Monthly Unemployment Rate November 2022-October 2024, Source: Michigan Department of Technology, Management & Budget

Labor force levels have climbed steadily in Lake County over the last couple of years. The labor force includes both employed workers and workers who are actively seeking employment, all of whom are over the age of 16 years. In November 2022, there were about 3,900 people in Lake County’s labor force. By October 2024, that figure had surpassed 4,300.

Lake County Labor Force, Nov 2022 - Oct 2024

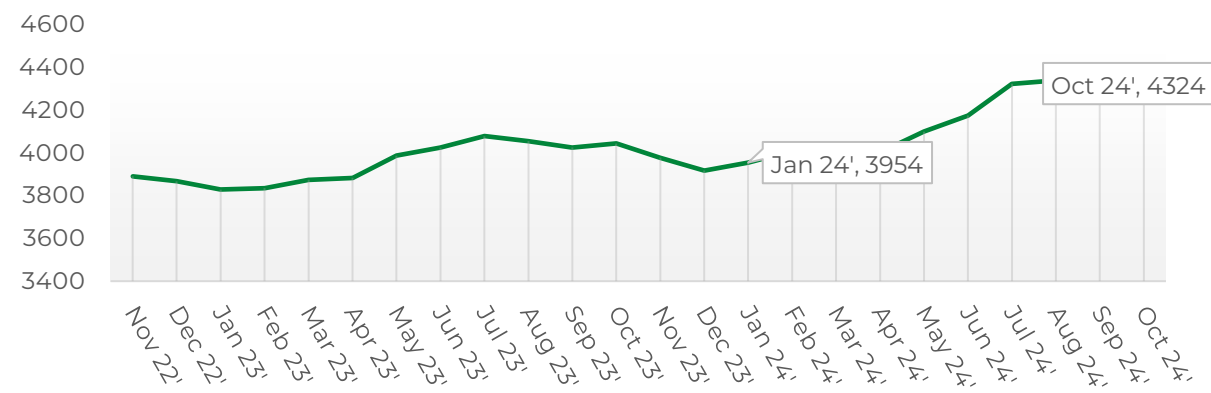


Figure 5: Lake County Labor Force November 2022-October 2024, Source: Michigan Department of Technology, Management & Budget

Industry Characteristics

LARGEST INDUSTRIES BY EMPLOYMENT

Public industries, such as the Local Government, State Government, and Federal Government industries, employ a significant share of Lake County's workforce. In 2024, about 430 workers were employed across those three industries in the county. Food Services and Drinking Places was the second-largest industry in the county, employing about 250 people in 2024; this industry is projected to grow by nearly 20% over the next ten years. Healthcare, construction, and some manufacturing industries also employ significant portions of the county's workforce.

Lake County Top Industries

Industry	2024 Jobs	10-Year Projected Job Growth	Employment Concentration
Local Government	289	-2%	1.75
Food Services and Drinking Places	254	18%	1.70
Nursing and Residential Care Facilities	199	7%	5.38
Ambulatory Health Care Services	154	-28%	1.57
Specialty Trade Contractors	102	16%	1.34
Gasoline Stations and Fuel Dealers	76	12%	5.92
Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing	73	55%	3.75
State Government	72	16%	1.13
Federal Government	69	-2%	1.23
Social Assistance	58	61%	0.89

Table 1: Lake County Top Industries, Source: Lightcast 2024



*Industries in the Nursing and Residential Care Facilities Subsector provide residential care combined with either nursing, supervisory, or other types of care. Facilities are a key part of the production process, and the care provided is a mix of health and social services, primarily nursing.

**Industries in the Ambulatory Health Care Services subsector provide health care services to ambulatory patients, as opposed to inpatient services. Practitioners provide outpatient services, with facilities or equipment not usually being the most significant part of the production process.

LARGEST OCCUPATIONS BY EMPLOYMENT

In alignment with the demands of the second-largest industry in the county (Food Services and Drinking Places), the largest occupation in the county is Food and Beverage Serving Workers. Retail Sales Workers, Healthcare Aides, and Construction Trades Workers are among the next largest occupations.

Of the top ten largest occupations in the county, more than half have median annual earnings of less than \$40,000/year. This metric can be useful for understanding the local population's ability to afford various services or amenities.

Lake County Top Occupations

Occupation	2024 Jobs	10-Year Projected Growth	Employment Concentration	Median Annual Earnings
Food and Beverage Serving Workers	171	18%	1.99	\$25,898
Retail Sales Workers	128	20%	1.32	\$28,734
Home Health and Personal Care Aides; and Nursing Assistants, Orderlies, and Psychiatric Aides	115	23%	1.75	\$33,836
Construction Trades Workers	103	10%	1.49	\$38,892
Other Management Occupations	78	20%	1.36	\$58,173
Information and Record Clerks	70	-2%	1.06	\$33,433
Healthcare Diagnosing or Treating Practitioners	67	-32%	0.93	\$91,775
Cooks and Food Preparation Workers	61	21%	1.37	\$27,477
Building Cleaning and Pest Control Workers	52	9%	1.16	\$30,666
Preschool, Elementary, Middle, Secondary, and Special Education Teachers	49	8%	0.99	\$67,875

Table 2: Lake County Top Occupations, Source: Lightcast 2024

Top Employers

1. Lake County
2. Baldwin Family Care
3. Grand Oaks Nursing Facility
4. Baldwin Community Schools
5. U.S. Forestry Service
6. Stealthcraft Boats
7. Lake Osceola State Bank
8. Yates Dial-A-Ride
9. Peacock Industries
10. Fox Motor Sports - Peacock



MARKET LEAKAGE

Using regional sales and demand data, a market leakage analysis estimates the amount of potential revenue lost to out-of-region vendors. Table 3 provides demand estimates for Lake County consumers for each industry in the “Total Demand” column. This figure is an estimate of the dollar amount of goods or services demanded from each industry by Lake County consumers. In the “Demand met In-Region” column, the amount of local demand met by Lake County businesses is estimated; in the “Demand met by Imports” column, the amount of local demand met by businesses outside of Lake County is provided.

In all but two industries, a larger share of the consumer demand in the county is met by out-of-county vendors than by vendors in Lake County. The only two industries which met more than half of the local demand were the “Real Estate and Rental and Leasing” and “Accommodation and Food Services” industries.

Overall, about \$752 million in goods and services were demanded by Lake County consumers in 2024. Of that, about \$577 million, or 77%, was met by out-of-county vendors. The fact that so much of the local demand is met by imports indicates a potential for Lake County to develop local industries and capture a greater share of sales within county limits.

Market Leakage by Industry

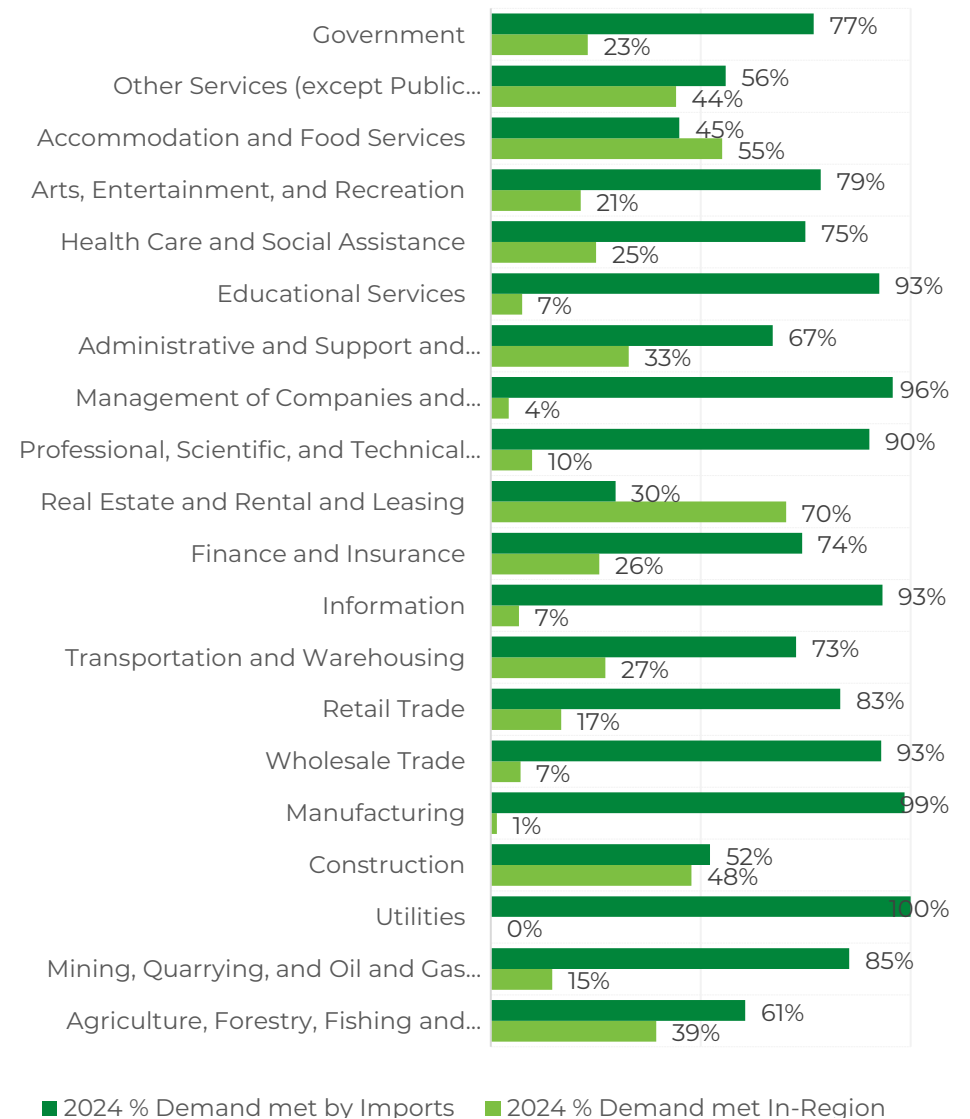


Figure 6: Market Leakage by Industry. Source: Lightcast 2024

Market Leakage by Industry (Expanded)

NAICS	Description	2024 Demand met In-Region	2024 % Demand met In-Region	2024 Demand met by Imports	2024 % Demand met by Imports	2024 Total Demand
11	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	\$2,963,060	39%	\$4,554,880	61%	\$7,517,940
21	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	\$435,851	15%	\$2,553,723	85%	\$2,989,574
22	Utilities	\$0	0%	\$9,378,555	100%	\$9,378,555
23	Construction	\$16,398,969	48%	\$17,914,523	52%	\$34,313,492
31	Manufacturing	\$998,571	1%	\$69,496,761	99%	\$70,495,332
42	Wholesale Trade	\$2,243,875	7%	\$29,699,461	93%	\$31,943,336
44	Retail Trade	\$9,472,627	17%	\$47,039,385	83%	\$56,512,012
48	Transportation and Warehousing	\$5,185,334	27%	\$13,834,005	73%	\$19,019,339
51	Information	\$2,049,025	7%	\$28,485,178	93%	\$30,534,204
52	Finance and Insurance	\$14,136,344	26%	\$40,546,268	74%	\$54,682,612
53	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	\$16,769,015	70%	\$7,075,707	30%	\$23,844,721
54	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	\$3,109,489	10%	\$28,605,749	90%	\$31,715,237
55	Management of Companies and Enterprises	\$240,824	4%	\$5,467,353	96%	\$5,708,177
56	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	\$4,276,930	33%	\$8,737,906	67%	\$13,014,836
61	Educational Services	\$729,694	7%	\$9,110,460	93%	\$9,840,154
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	\$18,532,469	25%	\$55,419,196	75%	\$73,951,665
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	\$1,785,377	21%	\$6,567,562	79%	\$8,352,938
72	Accommodation and Food Services	\$16,742,246	55%	\$13,643,536	45%	\$30,385,782
81	Other Services (except Public Administration)	\$8,365,181	44%	\$10,609,232	56%	\$18,974,414
90	Government	\$50,459,397	23%	\$168,327,584	77%	\$218,786,981
		\$174,894,278	23%	\$577,067,021	77%	\$751,961,299

Table 3: Market Leakage by Industry (Expanded). Source: Lightcast 2024

Workforce Characteristics

Lake County Commuting Patterns

Top Inbound Commuter Origins	
Osceola County	260
Mason County	194
Newaygo County	148
Mecosta County	95
Manistee County	84

Top Outbound Commuter Origins	
Osceola County	475
Kent County, MI	413
Mason County, MI	210
Manistee County, MI	199
Mecosta County, MI	178

Table 4: Lake County Commuting Patterns, Source: U.S. Census OnTheMap

DEMOGRAPHICS OF LAKE COUNTY WORKFORCE

The following looks at the demographic makeup of individuals working in Lake County. It is important to note that this does not include individuals who live in the county but work elsewhere and does include individuals who work in the county but live elsewhere.

Lake County’s workforce age skews considerable younger than the national average. 61% of the county’s workforce is aged 25-54, generally considered the prime working age group, compared to 49% of the nation’s total workforce. And 10% less of the county’s workforce is over the age of 65 than the national average.

Notably, Lake County’s workforce has a considerably higher proportion of women, 8% higher than the national average. Conversely, the county’s workforce is much less diverse than the national average, with just 15% of all people working in Lake County being non-white and non-Hispanic, compared to 39% of the nation’s workforce.

Workforce Gender Distribution, 2023

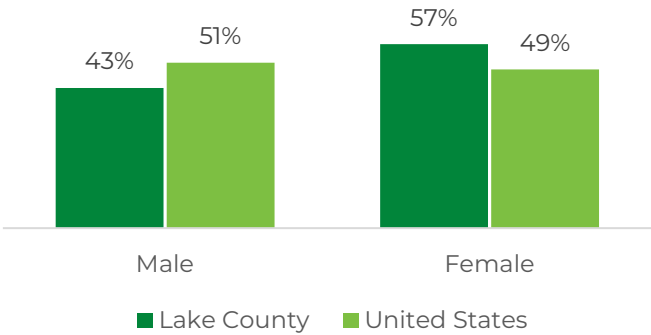


Figure 7: Workforce Gender Distribution, 2023. Source: Lightcast 2024

Workforce Age Distribution, 2023

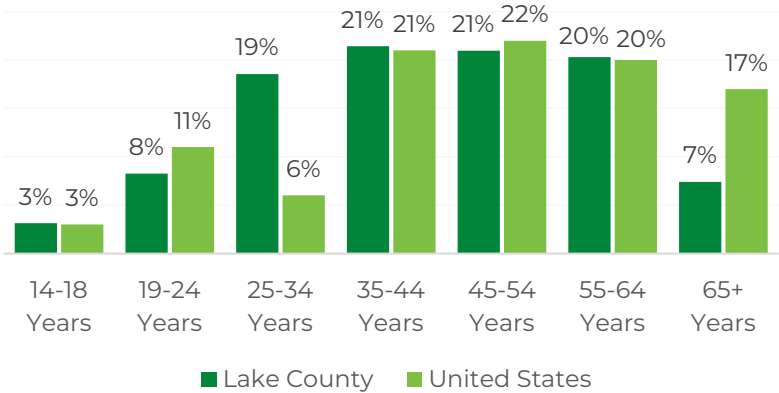


Figure 8: Workforce Age Distribution, 2023. Source: Lightcast 2024

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder Work Sessions

Two work sessions were held with 24 participants in total, including representatives from local businesses, education, workforce, economic development, and local government. The following section summarizes the feedback received from stakeholders during those sessions.

DIVERSIFICATION AND RESILIENCY

Participants in the workshops would like to see industry diversification related to tourism (e.g., a conference center, hotels, event venues), education (childcare/daycare, homeschooling resources, culinary education/commercial kitchen), retail, business support services, and community services (primarily restaurants, various retailers, and support services for seniors), manufacturing (furniture, ORV, food production, automotive, forest products), and more.

Regarding resiliency, stakeholders said that access, communication, transparency, and inclusion are key to Lake County's resiliency and sustainability efforts. Stakeholders were keen to change negative perceptions of the county believed to be held by both residents and non-residents, such as poor, uneducated, and focus on attainable, incremental progress. Mentorship and succession planning were very important to participants.

*More information on the stakeholder work sessions is available in the appendices.

Stakeholder Interviews

In addition to the work sessions, TPMA spoke with 18 stakeholders in individual and group interviews about the challenges and opportunities for economic diversification in Lake County's rural, tourism-based setting. In these

conversations, stakeholders shared that they largely thought Lake County's strengths include its vast natural resources, outdoor recreation potential (particularly around motorized trails and fly fishing), affordable property, and unique community assets, such as Idlewild and the Baldwin Promise program.

They noted the most significant challenges for economic prosperity include tourism dependence, limited infrastructure, workforce challenges, and a problematic internal culture characterized by resistance to change and organizational conflicts. Key infrastructure limitations as identified by stakeholders include restricted internet access (particularly for students and adult learners), public transportation that ends at 6 pm daily, and insufficient housing options that discourage new residents and businesses from relocating to the county.

Economic diversification strategies that stakeholders suggested primarily focused on building upon existing strengths, particularly in outdoor recreation industries and tourism. The creation of a visitor's bureau, perhaps in connection with an existing asset such as the Chamber of Commerce or a new small business support or entrepreneurial hub, was identified as a priority. Additional sectors stakeholders were interested in including childcare, eldercare, light manufacturing, and agricultural processing. Along with these, they recommended developing targeted workforce training programs and investing in affordable housing and community infrastructure.

The overarching recommendation is to foster collaborative approaches by celebrating the wins they do have, unify a vision for the future, and build economic momentum through strategic, incremental development that demonstrates tangible benefits to the community.

*More information on the stakeholder interviews is available in the appendices.

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Natural Beauty
- Rural Nature
- Outdoor Recreation
- Secluded Lifestyle
- Historic Idlewild

WEAKNESSES

- Seasonal nature of tourism
- Lack of workforce
- Low educational attainment
- Lack of quality, affordable housing
- Lack of shovel-ready/developable sites
- Lack of collaboration/coordination

OPPORTUNITIES

- Tourism expansion
- Improved education and training
- Community marketing
- Increased collaboration/coordination
- Infrastructure improvements

THREATS

- Resistance to change
- Resistance to collaboration/alignment
- Demographic fluctuations
- Shifts in state and federal resources

INDUSTRY ANALYSIS

Methodology

To create recommendations for industry diversification in Lake County, the project team first analyzed general industry data at the county and regional levels. Then, stakeholders were interviewed, and their feedback was compared to the findings of the initial data analysis. Next, a more focused evaluation of several industry clusters – each identified as a potential focus for industry diversification – was conducted. Finally, after considering all the data and feedback gathered throughout the process, a handful of industry clusters were selected as having the highest potential for growth within the county. Additional analysis was then conducted regarding potential industry development and was then prioritized by growth potential, job creation, workforce alignment, and area needs.

Data Analysis

Current Major Industries: Regional and state-level target industry clusters are identified, and general industry trends are analyzed at the county and regional level.

Employment Trends: Various labor force, occupation, and job posting data are analyzed.

Wage Levels: An annual earnings analysis is provided for various industries in the county.

Educational Attainment: Educational attainment of workers in the county is evaluated to understand the skills possessed by the local workforce.

Stakeholder Feedback

High-Potential Industry Identification: Stakeholders participated in a brainstorming session in which a variety of business ideas were proposed. These business ideas generally fell into four categories:

- Tourism
- Community Amenities/Services
- Manufacturing
- Other

Cluster Prioritization

High-Growth Potential: Evaluate which industries are projected to realize substantial local or regional growth.

Local Workforce Alignment: Evaluate which industries pay livable wages and can employ workers already located in the county.

State and Regional Alignment: Evaluate which industries that support state and regional targets.

Local Needs: Evaluate which industries fill gaps in the local service economy, attract and retain residents, and align with stakeholder interests.

Current Industry Clusters

The Michigan Economic Development Corporation and West Michigan Economic Development have identified industry clusters for the state and region to target. The project team has also gathered current top local industries for Lake County and adjacent counties.

Michigan Economic Development Corporation

- Advanced Manufacturing
- Life Sciences and Medical Devices
- Mobility and Automotive Manufacturing
- Professional and Corporate Services
- Technology
- Engineering, Design, and Development
- Semiconductor
- Defense
- Aerospace

West Michigan Economic Development

- Food Processing
- Office Furniture
- Automotive
- Aerospace

Top Regional Industries¹ By Employment (3-Digit Naics)²

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Local Government | • Hospitals |
| • Food Services and Drinking Places | • Administrative and Support Services |
| • General Merchandise Retailers | • Specialty Trade Contractors |
| • Food Manufacturing | • Ambulatory Health Care Services |
| • Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services | • Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing |

¹ | Region includes Lake County and surrounding counties (Newaygo, Oceana, Mason, Manistee, Wexford, Osceola, Mecosta, and Missaukee Counties)

² | Lightcast 2024

Top Industries Lake County By Employment (3-Digit Naics)³

100+ JOBS

- Local Government
- Food Services and Drinking Places
- Nursing and Residential Care Facilities*
- Ambulatory Health Care Services**
- Specialty Trade Contractors

50-99 JOBS

- Gasoline Stations and Fuel Dealers
- Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing
- State Government
- Federal Government
- Social Assistance

30-49 JOBS

- Sporting Goods, Hobby, Musical Instrument, Book, and Miscellaneous Retailers
- Administrative and Support Services
- Credit Intermediation and Related Activities
- Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services
- Religious, Grantmaking, Civic, Professional, and Similar Organizations
- General Merchandise Retailers
- Construction of Buildings
- Repair and Maintenance
- Real Estate

3 | Lightcast 2024

Top Industries in Lake County (by GRP)⁴

The following industries contributed just over 60% of the county's GRP at \$100,080,954. They employed 1,193 people in 2024, making up 67% of the county's workforce.

- Local Government (\$19.9 million)
- Nursing and Residential Care Facilities (\$11.3 million)
- Real Estate (\$11.1 million)
- Ambulatory Health Care Services (\$10.8 million)
- Federal Government (\$8.1 million)
- Food Services and Drinking Places (\$8.1 million)
- Credit Intermediation and Related Activities (\$8.0 million)
- Crop Production (\$7.9 million)
- Gasoline Stations and Fuel Dealers (\$7.7 million)
- State Government (\$7.1 million)

**Industries in the Nursing and Residential Care Facilities Subsector provide residential care combined with either nursing, supervisory, or other types of care. Facilities are a key part of the production process, and the care provided is a mix of health and social services, primarily nursing.*

***Industries in the Ambulatory Health Care Services subsector provide health care services to ambulatory patients, as opposed to inpatient services. Practitioners provide outpatient services, with facilities or equipment not usually being the most significant part of the production process.*

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Stakeholder Suggestions

The following table represents the types of businesses that stakeholders suggested would be beneficial to Lake County.

Lake County Stakeholder Recommended Business Development

Tourism	Community Amenities/Services	Manufacturing	Other
Conference Center and hotel	Grocery	Furniture	Call Centers
Camp Facilities (for youth programs, conservation camp, traditional summer camp)	Services such as home repair, auto repair, car wash, and yard maintenance	Outdoor rec specialty manufacturing (ORV, sporting equipment and gear, boat design, fishing/hunting, EV Sports)	Business and professional services (web design, marketing, print services)
Idlewild Historic Recreation	Transportation	Automotive	Aerospace
Adventure Resort	Gym	Tool & Die	Housing
Casino	Healthcare (including suppliers)	Forest products and other natural resource exploits	Renewable energy, battery recycling
Restaurants and catering	Gas station (Luther)	Vehicle/Boat upholstery	Correctional Facilities
Entertainment (movies, bowling, etc.)	Small-scale and home-based businesses	Construction supplier (green building, sawmill, lumber)	Regenerative agriculture (hogs, chickens, large farms)
Retail (clothing, outfitter, formal wear, gas, grocery)	Childcare/elder care	Agricultural processing and storage	

Table 5: Lake County Stakeholder Recommended Business Development

Industry Analysis

Business retention, expansion, and attraction are all important parts of any strategic plan for economic growth. Practically, though, these efforts can be difficult to advance. Which businesses should be prioritized? While the West Michigan region aims to support the development of several manufacturing-related industries (including aerospace, automotive, food processing, and office furniture industries), the unique economic conditions of Lake County differ from those of the rest of the region. Which industries, then, are most likely to contribute to growth in Lake County? A target industry analysis can help guide local economic development efforts in pursuing a handful of specific industries that are judged to have high potential for growth in the local business environment.

The following analysis describes industry clusters, which are collections of industries related by knowledge, skills, inputs, and demand.⁵ These target industry clusters were selected through an iterative process, utilizing quantitative data as well as stakeholder feedback to ensure that the identified clusters align with Lake County's existing assets and community goals. Nine target industry clusters have been identified as being well-positioned for growth in Lake County, and in the sections to follow, brief analyses of each of these industry clusters are provided.

These lists are simply intended to provide a framework for building out the clusters in Lake County. Industry clusters are fluid and can be adjusted over time as local conditions shift. These clusters should be used as a general guide for economic development efforts, and not as specific criteria for drawing hard lines between industry clusters; many of them are inter-related, and it is often the case that action taken to support one cluster will benefit many others.

Outdoor Recreation

The Outdoor Recreation cluster is a long-standing asset in Lake County's economy, as the natural environment lends itself well to a variety of recreational uses. As the name suggests, Lake County is home to many lakes. Some estimates put the total number over 150, depending on how one defines a lake. Some of the biggest lakes in the county include: Big Star Lake, Big Bass Lake, Wolf Lake, Pere Marquette River, Little Manistee River, Pine River, Baldwin River, and Sauble River. The county is known for its premier fly-fishing experiences and extensive trail system. These and other outdoor activities attract both residents and visitors.

Many established businesses in the cluster are pillars of the local economy, providing jobs and generating revenue which is funneled into local accounts. The existing base of businesses in this cluster can serve as a foundation for new growth in years to come.

At the state level, outdoor recreation is a significant economic driver. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), outdoor recreation accounted for 2% of the state gross domestic product (GDP) and 2.7% of all jobs in 2022. Between 2021 and 2022, jobs in the cluster increased by 7.2% and compensation increased by 8.5%.

Given Lake County's rural environment and its existing network of businesses, the county is well-positioned to support new, local growth in this industry cluster.

5 | Defining Clusters of Related Industries. Delgado, M., Porter, M. and Stern, S. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 20375.

In Tables 6 and 7, data released by the BEA in 2022 details value added in the outdoor recreation cluster in the state, categorized by activity and industry. At the state level, the activities which generated the most value in the cluster were “Conventional outdoor recreation activities,” “All other supporting outdoor recreation,” and “Other outdoor recreation activities.” These activities are somewhat vague, which means that much of the outdoor recreation activity is variable and does not fit nicely into a specific category. The top industries which contributed to value-add in the outdoor recreation cluster include the retail trade, manufacturing, and arts, entertainment, and recreation industries.

Michigan Recreation Activities

Outdoor Recreation Activity	Value Added (thousands of dollars)
Total outdoor recreation activities	\$12,358,949
Conventional outdoor recreation activities	\$5,134,219
Boating / fishing	\$1,133,133
RVing	\$1,139,429
Snow activities	\$130,041
Other outdoor recreation activities	\$2,758,422
Amusement parks / water parks	\$164,090
Festivals/sporting events/concerts	\$354,585
Game areas (including golf and tennis)	\$566,689
All other supporting outdoor recreation	\$4,199,339
Government expenditures	\$266,969

Table 6: Michigan Outdoor Recreation by Activity. Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022



Michigan Recreation Industries

Industry	Value Added (thousands of dollars)
Total outdoor recreation industries	\$12,358,949
Private industries	\$12,058,080
Manufacturing	\$1,932,015
Retail trade	\$4,114,851
Finance, insurance, real estate, rental, and leasing	\$851,201
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	\$1,263,617
Accommodation and food services	\$1,170,074
All other private industries	\$2,726,323
Government	\$300,869

Table 7: Michigan Outdoor Recreation by Industry. Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022

Hospitality And Tourism

Hospitality & Tourism industries are closely connected to industries in the Outdoor Recreation cluster. These industries help create a sense of place and can be useful for attracting new residents or retaining the existing population. Businesses in this cluster could include restaurants, lodges, bed-and-breakfasts, small retail shops, and tour companies.

Historically, industries in this cluster have served the Lake County economy well.

In 2017, about \$140 million was spent by visitors in the county; by 2022, that figure had increased by about 58% to reach \$221 million. Such significant growth over a relatively short period of time indicates high potential for additional growth in the county.

In Table 8, annual visitor spending figures are provided for 2017-2022.

While lodging is listed as the top use of visitor spending, it should be noted that this figure includes second home valuations and is likely inflated. Food and beverage businesses capture the next highest portion of visitor spending, followed by transport (which includes local and air transportation) and recreation. More than \$20 million in state and local tax revenue was generated in 2022 by visitor spending in Lake County. Overall, visitor spending increased by about 6.6% between 2021 and 2022.

Visitor Spending, millions					
2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
\$139.90	\$144.30	\$147.90	\$136.70	\$207.90	\$221.60

Table 8: Visitor Spending by Year in Lake County. Source: Tourism Economic Impact; Pure Michigan, 2022

Visitor Spending, millions					
Lodging	F&B	Retail	Recreation	Transport	Total
\$67.50	\$52.50	\$31.70	\$33.10	\$36.70	\$221.60

Percent Change	State and Local Tax Revenue
(2021/2022)	(millions)
6.60%	\$20.20

Table 9: Visitor Spending by Category in Lake County. Source: Tourism Economic Impact; Pure Michigan, 2022



Manufacturing

Industries in the Manufacturing cluster have long been drivers of Michigan’s economy. **Although the cluster has changed over the years, several industries are seeing new growth in the region.** In Table 10, data are provided for five manufacturing industries which are projected to realize substantial growth in the region over the next ten years.

Manufacturing industries typically demand a variety of qualifications from workers. Some of the positions would be entry-level and suitable for workers with minimal skills or qualifications, like production workers or machine operators, while others would require formal training or considerable experience, such as plant managers or mechanical engineers. More in-depth data collection and analysis should be considered to inform future workforce development planning.



Regional Growth Expectations in Manufacturing

Description	2024 Jobs	2034 Jobs	2024 - 2034 Change	2024 - 2034 % Change
Nonmetallic Mineral Product Manufacturing	719	993	274	38%
Miscellaneous Manufacturing	475	706	230	48%
Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing	1,751	1,973	222	13%
Primary Metal Manufacturing	930	996	66	7%
Other Electrical Equipment and Component Manufacturing	77	136	59	77%
Nonmetallic Mineral Mining and Quarrying ⁶	211	295	84	40%

Table 10: Regional Job Growth in Top Manufacturing Industries. Source: Lightcast 2024.2

In addition to the industries spotlighted in the table above, many stakeholders identified several other types of manufacturing businesses as having high potential within the county. Specialties of interest included furniture, tool and die, upholstery, and outdoor recreation specialty manufacturing. The absence of data to indicate high potential for growth in these industries should not be a reason to disqualify them; in rural areas, data analysis is not always the best way to evaluate this potential. If niche manufacturing businesses can support other elements of the local economy, they’re worth supporting.

6 | This industry, while technically not a manufacturing industry, includes potash mining, which is an important industry in the region.

Healthcare

Access to high-quality healthcare is important for ensuring the well-being of the local population, and rural communities often struggle to support the healthcare providers their residents depend upon. Across the country, demand for the services provided by a variety of healthcare providers is increasing. A major driver of this trend is the fact that the population is aging; as the Baby Boomer generation – or those born between 1946 and 1964 – becomes older, a greater share of the population requires greater access to reliable healthcare.

As can be seen in Figure 9, this trend applies to Lake County.

Between 2012 and 2022, the share of the population over the age of 65 years increased by about 4 percentage points; that’s equal to an increase of about 650 people in the age group. That increase could be enough to put a strain on existing healthcare infrastructure if the industry does not grow to meet the demand.

As the market leakage report presented earlier in the report demonstrates, approximately 75% of the demand for Healthcare and Social Assistance in the county is already met by out-of-county providers. As the market leakage report presented earlier in the report demonstrates, approximately 75% of the demand for Healthcare and Social Assistance in the county is already met by out-of-county providers.

The growth of the healthcare cluster could have a direct, positive impact on Lake County residents, and it could also lead to new job creation. Regionally, several industries in the cluster are projected to grow over the next ten years. Overall, the cluster is expected to add about 530 new jobs by 2034, and some of that growth will happen in Lake County. Within the county, the “Nursing and Residential Care Facilities” industry is the fastest growing, and local employment in the industry is expected to increase by 7% over the next ten years.

Lake County Senior Population

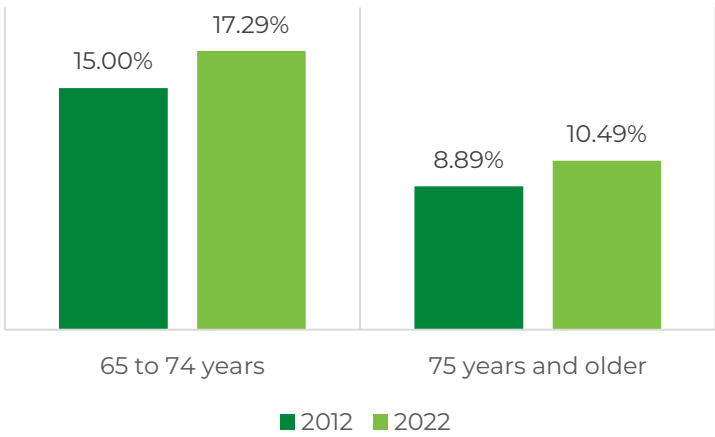


Figure 9: Senior Population in Lake County. Source: ACS 2022 5-Year Estimates

Regional Healthcare Jobs

Description	2024 Jobs	2034 Jobs	2024 - 2034 Change	2024 - 2034 % Change
Hospitals	2,245	2,351	107	5%
Nursing and Residential Care Facilities	1,183	1,372	189	16%
Ambulatory Health Care Services	1,843	1,986	144	8%
Social Assistance	916	1,006	90	10%

Table 11: Regional Growth of Healthcare Industries. Source: Lightcast 2024.2

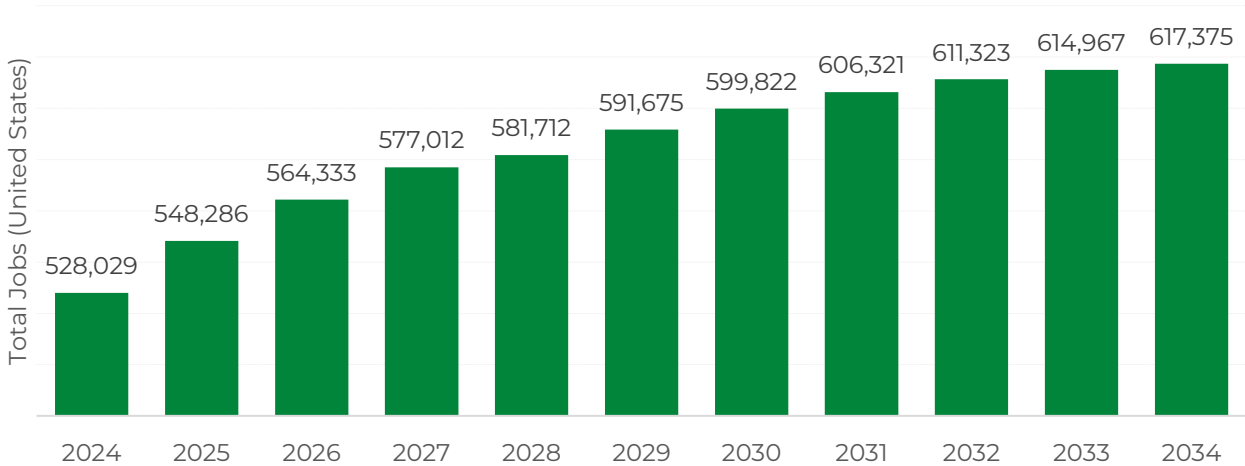
Data Processing & Hosting

As the economy becomes increasingly digitized, demand is growing for infrastructure that supports a variety of data-processing activities. AI innovation is driving economic shifts by leveraging disruptive technology, fostering growth initiatives, and adapting to changing customer preferences.

Residential and commercial operations alike are dependent upon the existence of large-scale cloud storage facilities, commonly called “data centers.” Data centers host, process, and protect data. These facilities contain large amounts of technical equipment—such as routers, servers, firewalls, storage systems, and more—that ensures data is safely stored and can be shared as smoothly as possible between networks.

At the national level, employment in the “Data Processing, Hosting, and Related Activities” industry (which includes data centers) has increased significantly.

National Growth of the Data Processing, Hosting, and Related Services Industry



As technology continues to develop, the demand for the services this industry provides is only expected to increase. In 2024, there are about 528,000 people employed in the industry; by 2034, that figure is projected to surpass 617,000. The additional 89,000 jobs created through this industry – an increase of about 17% over the ten-year period – will be dispersed around the country. However, these jobs might not be uniformly distributed; many data centers have chosen to settle in rural communities, and they’re finding that these low-population geographies are well-suited to support their operations.

In many rural communities, there remains much undeveloped land, but low population figures translate to a relatively small workforce. While a small workforce size can be a barrier for the development of some industries, data centers typically do not require a substantial number of workers.

A data center could develop on available land, take advantage of the local workforce to meet its minimal staffing needs, and some of the profits generated by the company would be captured by Lake County through local taxes. An important caveat is that data centers often require extensive supportive infrastructure.

Since vast amounts of energy are transmitted through the facility, mechanisms that cool the equipment are required to maintain operations. In addition, a reliable (redundant) internet connection is required to ensure that connectivity to the broader cloud network is maintained. Data centers also require significant acreage that could otherwise be developed by industries that could provide a more positive economic impact to the community than a data center.

Figure 10: National Growth of the Data Processing, Hosting, and Related Services Industry. Source: Lightcast 2024.4

Forestry & Logging

In Lake County, the Forestry & Logging industry cluster has long been a staple of the local economy. Given that much of the land is blanketed in lush hardwood forests, the availability of timber and related products has driven growth in the past.

Today, the industry employs only about two dozen workers in the county. However, since businesses in the Forestry & Logging cluster are highly concentrated in the county – relative to surrounding regions – the cluster exports much of its sales. In 2023, about \$4.69 million in total sales were made in the Forestry & Logging industry; of those, \$4.61 million were exported. In other words, about 98% of the sales made by businesses in the industry are being made to out-of-county buyers, which allows the county to capture sales revenues that might otherwise be inaccessible.

Another benefit of the cluster’s presence in the county is that it provides high-wage jobs; in 2023, the average industry worker earned more than \$59,000 per year, which is considerably higher than the county average.

However, there are several indications that the industry cluster might not be well-positioned to realize sustained growth in the future. Between 2024 and 2034, the Forestry & Logging industry workforce is projected to be reduced by more than half in Lake County. This is likely due, in part, to the shifting environment within which the industry operates. Market demand for goods provided by the industry could change, and increasing pressure to harvest forest products in a more sustainable way is forcing the industry to adapt its practices. In addition, much of the forested land within the county is federal- or state-owned property; as such, private companies interested in working with those tracts of land are required to collaborate with public agencies, which involves more administrative work and could discourage prospective businesses from locating in Lake County.

Forestry and Logging Industry

	Avg. Earnings Per Job	2024 Jobs	2034 Jobs	2023 Total Sales	2023 Exported Sales	2023 Total Demand	2023 Demand met In-Region
Lake County	\$59,105	24	11	\$4,694,766	\$4,610,533	\$93,759	\$84,232
Region	\$64,337	240	241	\$67,269,191	\$39,103,416	\$40,144,064	\$28,165,775

Table 12: Forestry & Logging Industry Data. Source: Lightcast 2024.4

Agriculture

There are two industries which comprise this cluster within the region: Crop Production and Animal Production and Aquaculture. There are more workers employed in the Crop Production industry in the region, and total employment was estimated at 1,402 in 2024. There were about 843 workers employed in the Animal Production and Aquaculture industry in the same year; industry employment is projected to remain relatively stable over the next ten years.

One advantage to develop the Agriculture cluster within the county would be to meet local demand for the products provided by it. The county should note the revenue leakage due to imports required to meet current customer demand within the county. An estimate of this revenue loss would act as an incentive for the county to develop a program to assist agriculture producers to meet the internal county customer demand.

In 2023, regional consumers demanded \$162.6 million and \$359.3 million in products from the Crop Production and Animal Production industries, respectively. Much of that demand was met by imports, which means the profits generated by those sales are leaked to out-of-region suppliers. In developing this cluster further, demand could be met on a more local level.



Regional Agriculture Cluster

Industry	Avg. Earnings Per Job	2024 Jobs	2034 Jobs	2023 Total Demand	2023 Demand met by Imports
Crop Production	\$47,581	1,402	1,405	\$254,139,841	\$162,587,813
Animal Production and Aquaculture	\$50,929	843	805	\$436,645,782	\$359,376,566

Table 13: Regional Agriculture Cluster Data. Source: Lightcast 2024.4

Construction & Housing Development

As the county’s economy grows, demand for new buildings and infrastructure development is likely to increase. To meet this demand at a local level, the expansion of the Construction and Housing Development cluster could be prioritized.

There are several specific industries that could be included in this cluster, such as the Construction of Buildings, Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction, and Specialty Trade Contractors industries.

This cluster captures a variety of businesses, each with the ability to provide specific services in a general construction or development context. A well-rounded approach to developing this cluster will support businesses and workers of several trades.

All three of the industries listed above are projected to grow within the county over the next ten years.

In 2024, about 170 workers are estimated to be employed in the cluster; by 2034, that figure is projected to reach 195. Workers in the Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction industry earn, on average, the highest annual wages (\$63,800 in 2023). Average workers in the Construction of Buildings and Specialty Trade Contractors industries earn \$40,600 and \$45,400, respectively.

As in many other industries, the local demand for services provided by businesses in this cluster has largely been met by imports in recent years. Collectively, this demand was estimated at about \$32 million in 2023; about \$16.9 million of that demand, or more than half, was met by imports. This indicates an opportunity for new or growing Lake County businesses to serve the local community and capitalize on the demand for construction and housing development services.

Construction & Housing Development Job Growth by Industry

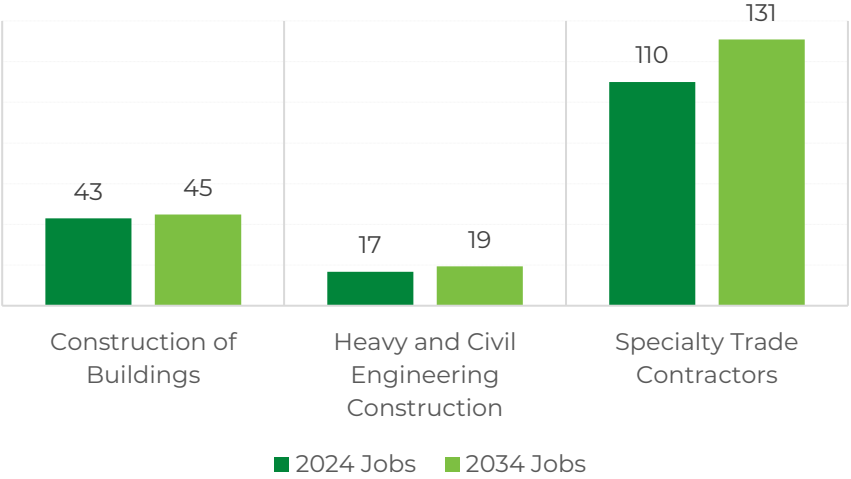


Figure 11: Construction & Housing Development in Lake County -- Job Growth by Industry. Source: Lightcast 2024.4

Lake County Construction & Housing Development Cluster

Industry	2023 Total Demand	2023 Demand met by Imports
Construction of Buildings	\$7,926,885	\$4,333,650
Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction	\$4,430,227	\$3,491,065
Specialty Trade Contractors	\$19,733,325	\$9,077,359

Table 14: Construction & Housing Development Cluster Demand in Lake County. Source: Lightcast 2024.4

Retail Trade

Retail jobs are not often high-wage occupations, but they are essential to local economies and the communities of which they are a part.

The expansion of retail offerings in the county was a common suggestion made throughout stakeholder engagement. Available retail directly impacts a resident's quality of life, and sufficient access to food and other basic necessities affects an employer's decision to locate in a region.



Lake County Retail Jobs

Description	2024 Jobs	2034 Jobs	2024-2034 Projected Change	Average Earnings Per Job
Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers	14	17	2	\$71,038
Building Material and Garden Equipment and Supplies Dealers	29	39	11	\$47,984
Food and Beverage Stores	14	13	(1)	\$32,781
Furniture, Home Furnishings, Electronics, and Appliance Retailers	0	0	0	\$0
General Merchandise Retailers	37	44	8	\$31,821
Health and Personal Care Retailers	<10	<10	Insf. Data	Insf. Data
Gasoline Stations and Fuel Dealers	85	101	16	\$35,372
Clothing, Clothing Accessories, Shoe, and Jewelry Retailers	<10	<10	Insf. Data	Insf. Data
Sporting Goods, Hobby, Musical Instrument, Book, and Miscellaneous Retailers	36	49	13	\$27,844

Table 15: Retail Industry Jobs in Lake County. Source: Lightcast 2024.4

In order to determine what retail the county is currently lacking and where there may be an opportunity to expand, an analysis of the existing demand, capture, and leakage was performed.

Lake County Retail Industry Demand and Leakage

Description	2024 Total Demand	2024 Total Sales	Capture/ Leakage	Capture Rate
Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers	\$11,081,729	\$3,685,112	\$ (7,396,617)	33%
Building Material and Garden Equipment and Supplies Dealers	\$4,308,335	\$5,032,735	\$ 724,400	117%
Food and Beverage Stores	\$8,030,812	\$2,055,187	\$ (5,975,625)	26%
Furniture, Home Furnishings, Electronics, and Appliance Retailers	\$3,905,841	\$371,098	\$ (3,534,743)	10%
General Merchandise Retailers	\$8,157,263	\$3,260,881	\$ (4,896,382)	40%
Health and Personal Care Retailers	\$5,024,044	\$1,075,579	\$ (3,948,465)	21%
Gasoline Stations and Fuel Dealers	\$4,677,806	\$15,470,550	\$ 10,792,744	331%
Clothing, Clothing Accessories, Shoe, and Jewelry Retailers	\$5,070,610	\$804,324	\$ (4,266,286)	16%
Sporting Goods, Hobby, Musical Instrument, Book, and Miscellaneous Retailers	\$6,255,572	\$4,586,874	\$ (1,668,698)	73%

Table 16: Retail Industry Demand and Leakage in Lake County. Source: Lightcast 2024.4

The retail space in Lake County had a net leakage of \$20,169,672 in 2024, with a total capture rate of 64%. The retail industries with the largest leakage include Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers, Food and Beverage Stores, and General Merchandise Retailers. Given the site-related limitations in the county, Motor Vehicle, and Parts dealers, most often car dealerships, are unlikely to be a good fit. However, Food and Beverage, General Merchandise, and Clothing Retailers offer a potential opportunity to capture additional market share and meet the needs of residents.

ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION & RESILIENCY STRATEGIC PLAN

The following plan outlines recommended actions to create the economic conditions needed to diversify the Lake County industry mix and build resiliency to economic shocks. Suggested partners and resources have been identified to help the community tackle tough challenges in the future. Please note that timelines are estimates, which may shift based on various internal and external factors. While estimated timelines are provided for up to 5 years, they reflect the amount of time it might take if efforts to accomplish the task are started now. In some cases, the actions outlined are already in progress.

For best implementation results, the project team recommends that the plan be officially adopted and used as a guide for committee meetings. Providing progress updates for each strategy at regular meetings can help the community stay focused on desired impacts. This allows the plan to be amended as needed to remain responsive to internal and external influences or changes in capacity.



#1 – ALLOCATE SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE.

TACTICS	PARTNERSHIPS AND RESOURCES	TIMELINE
Leverage resources (such as EDA funding) for infrastructure projects.	Partners: LCEDA; local business leaders; WMSRDC; MEDC Resources: Completed studies and assessments for use in grant applications and funding requests; EDA	Short-term 0-1 year
Coordinate the transfer of the new GIS infrastructure map tool to Lake County control.	Partners: Lake County's GIS vendor; TPMA Resources: GIS map	Short-term 0-1 year
Prioritize wellhead protection.	Partners: Michigan Department of Environment; EGLE; Village of Baldwin; Pleasant Plains Township; other townships as applicable Resources: EGLE	Ongoing
Increase reliability of electrical infrastructure, especially to Astor Road sites.	Partners: Consumers Energy; Great Lakes Energy; Village of Baldwin; Lake County; Pleasant Plains Township; WMSRDC, other townships as applicable Resources: MPSC; EGLE; BIL; USDA	Short-term 0-1 year
Expand the DTE gas line to Astor Road properties (approx. 488 feet underneath railroad right of way).	Partners: DTE; Marquette Railway (Genesee & Wyoming); Village of Baldwin; Pleasant Plains Township; affected businesses and residents; WMSRDC Resources: MIC; Michigan Rural Development Fund	Medium-term 2-3 years
Annex the larger 19.2-acre parcel on Astor Road (currently owned by the Baldwin DDA) into the village. Facilitate access to water and wastewater. Adjust zoning.	Partners: Pleasant Plains Township; Village of Baldwin; affected businesses and residents	Medium-term 2-3 years
Expand infrastructure investment south on M37 to increase development opportunities in Pleasant Plains Township.	Partners: WMSRDC; Pleasant Plains Township; Village of Baldwin; Webber Township, Idlewild, affected businesses and residents Resources: MIC; Michigan Rural Development Fund; MDARD <i>(This expansion could increase opportunities related to the Baldwin Municipal Airport and also take advantage of reported excess capacity of wastewater treatment plant. There could be potential for directing flows from Idlewild.)</i>	Long-term 4-5 years
Continue efforts to expand broadband and cellular service throughout county.	Partners: WMSRDC; townships; Spectrum; Point Broadband; True Stream; Hughesnet; Viasat; Micom; ISTV; ATT; Verizon; T-Mobile Resources: MITTEN; CMIC; ROBIN; BEAD	Medium-term 2-3 years
Allocate resources to pave Lake County roads especially in Yates Township, Irons, and Chase.	Partners: Lake County Road Commission; townships; WMSRDC Resources: MDOT	Long-term 4-5 years

#2 - IMPROVE APPROACH TO BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY ATTRACTION, EXPANSION, AND RETENTION.

TACTICS	PARTNERSHIPS AND RESOURCES	TIMELINE
Elevate the Village of Baldwin's status with Michigan Economic Development Corporation's Redevelopment Ready program from Community Essentials to Certified.	Partners: MEDC; LCEDA; Village of Baldwin; Resources: miplace	Medium-term 2-3 years
Develop marketing for target industries that will help diversify the local economy. Include a prospectus for individual sites and pitches highlighting persuasive selling points for the community. Invite developers and site selectors to experience Lake County.	Partners: MEDC; LCEDA; Village of Baldwin; townships; marketing firm/professional Resources: IEDC; Site Selectors Guild and similar organizations; prospectus and pitch examples from other communities	Medium-term 2-3 years
Encourage incremental, small, and infill developments. Create a list of small developers in the region and continue to build relationships.	Partners: LCEDA; Village of Baldwin; All Townships; developers; businesses Resources: MEDC; Strong Towns; Inc Dev	Medium-term 2-3 years
Work closely with current anchor businesses on retention and expansion efforts, including potential for assistance with environmental assessments and infrastructure upgrades/extensions.	Partners: LCEDA; All Townships; local businesses; Nonprofit partners; WMSRDC; EGLE Resources: MEDC; EGLE; Main Street America; Strong Towns	Medium-term 2-3 years
Provide small business services through a central contact, such as an entrepreneurial hub, that would serve as a visible one-stop shop to facilitate connections to resources and assistance in navigating processes and pathways.	Partners: MEDC; LCEDA; Village of Baldwin; townships; local businesses; nonprofit partners Resources: EDA; MEDC; Entrepreneurial Hub Feasibility Study	Medium-term 2-3 years

#3 – EXPLORE POTENTIAL FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT INCENTIVES.

TACTICS	PARTNERSHIPS AND RESOURCES	TIMELINE
Implement a microloan program or other funding mechanism to support local businesses, especially those in tourism, healthcare, manufacturing, construction, and retail industries.	Partners: LCEDA; Village of Baldwin; townships; local businesses; foundations Resources: NC3; examples from other communities	Medium-term 2-3 years
Reduce/Waive fees for small-scale developments in priority areas for diversification. These can include permitting and inspection fees, utility connection fees, etc.	Partners: Village of Baldwin; townships; utility companies	Short-term 0-1 year
When possible, infrastructure upgrades can be considered for priority areas. Be sure to conduct a cost/benefit analysis, including long-term maintenance costs, with this option before committing to a project.	Partners: Lake County; Village of Baldwin; townships; utility companies; MEDC; WMSRDC	Long-term 4-5 years
Develop a regenerative grant/loan fund for façade and other improvements within the Baldwin DDA and the Village of Luther.	Partners: LCEDA; Village of Baldwin; Village of Luther; MEDC; local businesses; foundations	Long-term 4-5 years

#4 – CREATE A DEDICATED COMMUNITY MARKETING PLAN.

TACTICS	PARTNERSHIPS AND RESOURCES	TIMELINE
Consider the creation of a dedicated tourism organization to leverage resources for marketing and improve the visitor experience.	Partners: LCEDA; EDA; Pure Michigan; Lake County Chamber	Short-term 0-1 year
Develop a positive brand for the community that reflects its values, strengths, and potential. This will help to shape Lake County's identity in many ways. Showcase what the community excels at, such as natural beauty, local craftsman and artisans, cultural traditions, unique products, community champions, students, and entrepreneurs.	Partners: Pure Michigan; MSU Ext.; local businesses; community Resources: marketing firm; FIT program; strengthen ties with neighboring areas to share resources/ideas.	Short-term 0-1 year
Invite journalists and influencers to experience Lake County and share the positive aspects they see in the community. Write your own pieces and share them with partners (especially Pure Michigan and MEDC) and through a variety of communication channels. Engage outdoor recreation and sporting groups, nature enthusiasts, etc. Send your success stories and highlights to regional and national news outlets.	Partners: Pure Michigan; MEDC; local businesses Resources: marketing firm; media contacts; writers/experts	Medium-term 2-3 years
Leverage support from Pure Michigan to showcase Lake County's distinct attractions. Arrange visits for their representatives to meet with local tourism businesses and community leaders, ensuring more tailored guidance on resource utilization and promotional strategies.	Partners: Pure Michigan; local businesses	Short-term 0-1 year
Incorporate business attraction strategies into the marketing plan.	Partners: LCEDA; local committee Resources: marketing firm	Medium-term 2-3 years
Mitigate negative views of Lake County. Addressing adverse perceptions in a small, rural, and economically disadvantaged community requires a multifaceted approach that fosters collaboration and changes the narrative. Understand why these perceptions exist (e.g., economic challenges, lack of visibility, outdated stereotypes). Develop campaigns to inform and stay connected with the community.	Partners: LCEDA; local committee Resources: marketing firm; professional facilitator feedback gathered from local and regional residents and partner organizations to identify specific negative perceptions.	Long-term 4-5 years

#5 - BUILD LOCAL WORKFORCE SKILLS THROUGH STRATEGIC EDUCATION AND TRAINING EFFORTS.

TACTICS	PARTNERSHIPS AND RESOURCES	TIMELINE
Invest in education and youth. Consider a marketing campaign around the Baldwin Promise and other educational programs and incentives. Incorporate entrepreneurial programs in Baldwin Schools.	Partners: Baldwin Schools; Michigan Works; local businesses Resources: marketing firm	Medium-term 2-3 years
Partner with technical training providers focused on providing more local opportunities. Through these partnerships, Lake County could potentially utilize available vacant spaces for training activities related to manufacturing, healthcare, culinary skills, hospitality, construction, and other trades.	Partners: LCEDA, Michigan State University, West Shore Community College, Baldwin Community Schools, Ferris State University, Michigan Works	Medium-term 2-3 years
Share success stories and anything that excites students about learning or evokes a sense of school/community pride.	Partners: LCEDA; Michigan Works; marketing firm; local committee Resources: media contacts	Short-term 0-1 year
Consider a thorough assessment of the county's current and future workforce training needs.	Partners: LCEDA; employers; Michigan Works; West Shore Community College; Baldwin Community Schools; Ferris State University	Short-term 0-1 year
Invest in childcare facilities and early childhood education training.	Partners: LCEDA; West Shore Community College; Michigan Works; education partners; local businesses Resources: Childcare Innovation Fund; CFMF	Medium-term 2-3 years

#6 - CONCENTRATE ON STRENGTHENING CROSS-COUNTY AND REGIONAL COLLABORATION.

TACTICS	PARTNERSHIPS AND RESOURCES	TIMELINE
Provide education tailored to the specific challenges and hesitations that organizations and townships face regarding coordination. Emphasize the why—demonstrating the long-term importance of collaboration for Lake County's success.	Partners: LCEDA; local committee Resources: marketing firm; professional facilitator	Long-term 4-5 years
Engage with local organizations and townships individually to understand their unique goals and perspectives within the county. Discuss the obstacles they encounter and explore opportunities for partnership and alignment. Identify underlying barriers to collaboration and address them through structured meetings that facilitate open discussion and information sharing. Encourage local organizations to develop strategic plans and utilize nonprofit leadership training.	Partners: LCEDA; local committee Resources: marketing firm; professional facilitator	Medium-term 2-3 years
Continue to strengthen partnerships with neighboring communities and regional agencies. Maintain consistent communication with key partners, including Pure Michigan, USDA Rural Development, Michigan State University Extension, and WMSRDC, to stay informed about available programs and resources.	Partners: LCEDA	Short-term 0-1 year

APPENDIX

Document Review

Introduction

To help establish an understanding of current conditions in Lake County, the project team collected and reviewed a variety of local and regional plans and reports. Additionally, websites were reviewed pertaining to the economic ecosystem surrounding Lake County, including partner organizations and resources. Within this process, research was focused on current strategies, existing and planned projects, strengths and assets, and community support.

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

- 2023-2024 Michigan's Roadmap to Rural Prosperity
- 2024-2028 West Michigan Shoreline Economic Development District Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy
- 2024 Lake County Housing Needs Assessment
- 2023 Baldwin Downtown Visioning Plan
- 2023 Lake County Master Plan
- 2023 ALICE Report
- 2023 Lake County Strategic Plan
- 2023 Historic Community Plan
- 2022-2023 Idlewild Historic Planning Report
- 2013 MSU Student Tourism Development Study
- 2009 Idlewild Cultural Resources Management Plan
- 2018 Economic Assessment of the Expansion and Marketing Potential of the Four-County Region Trail Network

WEBSITE REVIEW

- Lake County
- Lake County Chamber of Commerce
- The Right Place
- Michigan Works West Central
- West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission
- Pure Michigan
- Michigan Economic Development Corporation
- Michigan Labor and Economic Opportunity High-Speed Internet Office and Broadband Map
- Michigan Department of Natural Resources
- Michigan State Housing Development Authority
- Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
- Michigan Small Business Development Center
- Michigan State University Lake County Extension Office
- Ferris State University
- Westshore Community College
- Westshore Educational Services District
- Baldwin Community Schools
- Reed City Public Schools
- Pine River Schools

Lake County Overview

Demographic Overview

INBOUND MIGRATION

An understanding of the populations which have recently moved into the county can be helpful for estimating the trajectory of various economic indicators over the next several years. In Figures 12, 13, and 14, the age, educational attainment levels, and earnings of inbound migrants are provided, respectively. These figures estimate the number of individuals in each group who moved into the county between 2017 and 2022 from another county, state, or country.

Of roughly 1,100 people who moved into Lake County over the five-year period, about 145 were over the age of 75 years. 208 were children under the age of 18 years, and the remaining 746 inbound migrants were a “working age,” or between the ages of 18 and 65 years.

Age of Inbound Migrants

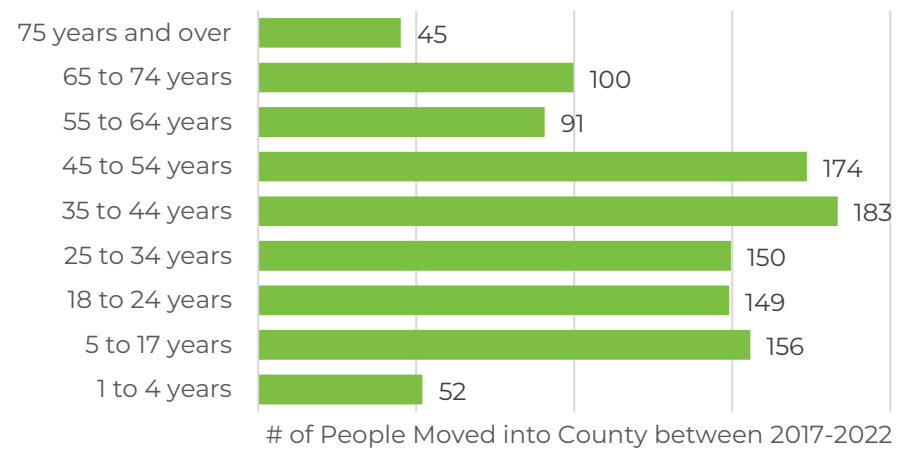


Figure 12: Age of Inbound Migrants. Source: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Approximately 742 people over the age of 25 years moved into the county between 2017 and 2022. Of those, about 20% hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. An additional 20% have not graduated high school nor earned a certificate of equivalency. The remaining 60% of inbound migrants over the age of 25 years have graduated high school or completed some college coursework (or earned an associate’s degree).

Educational Attainment of Inbound Migrants

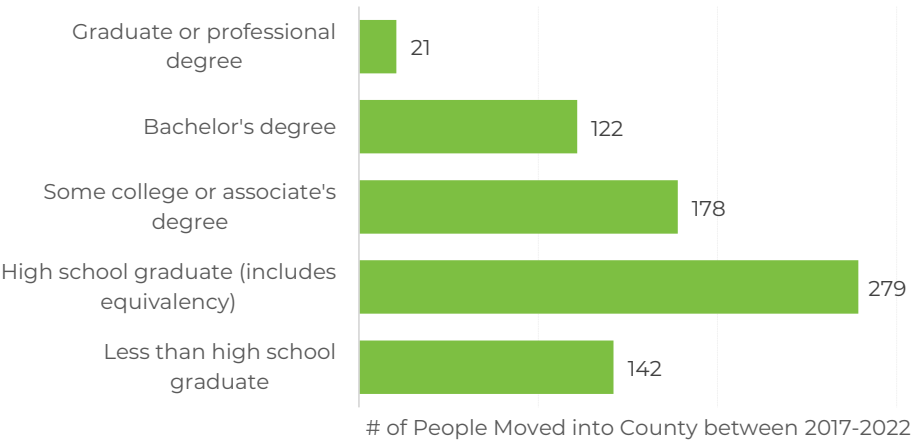


Figure 13: Educational Attainment of Inbound Migrants. Source: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Income levels of inbound migrants vary widely. It is important to note that the income figures presented in this graph represent individual earnings, and not household earnings, which are presented in a previous graph. In addition, data in this graph are only representative of the population over the age of 15 years. Of this population, about 10% is earning less than \$10,000 per year; these individuals might be retired or otherwise unemployed. Just over 48% of the inbound migrant population is earning higher wages than the median annual earnings of the existing population (\$23,745). This means that the population which moved into Lake County between 2017 and 2022 is, financially, similar to the existing population.

Earnings of Inbound Migrants

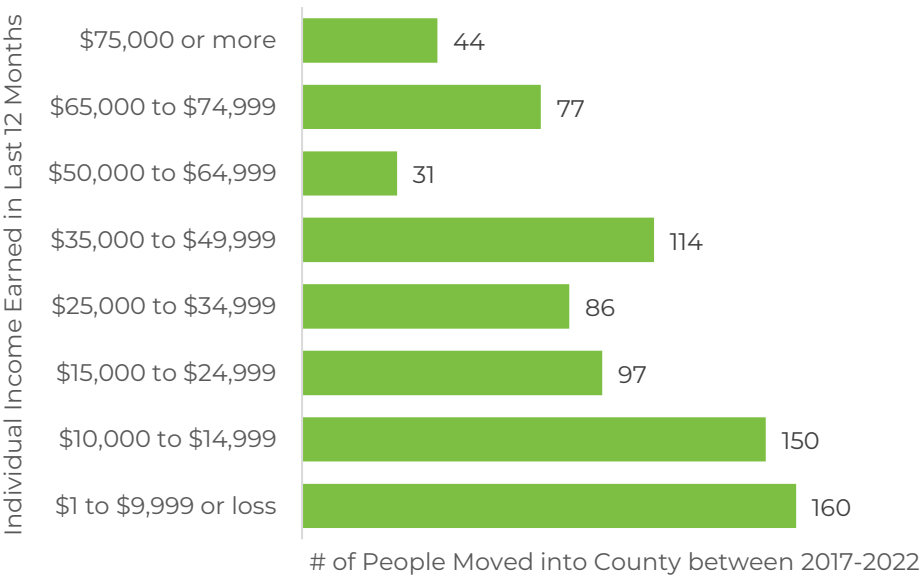


Figure 14: Inbound Migrants by Earnings. Source: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

POVERTY

In 2022, about 2,400 people were estimated to be living in poverty in Lake County. Figure 15 organizes the impoverished population into age categories. Most people living in poverty are between the ages of 35 and 64 years. Roughly 470 people under the age of 18 years are impoverished, as are an additional 540 people between the ages of 18 and 34 years. Roughly 400 people over the age of 65 years have been determined to be living below the poverty level.

Poverty Levels

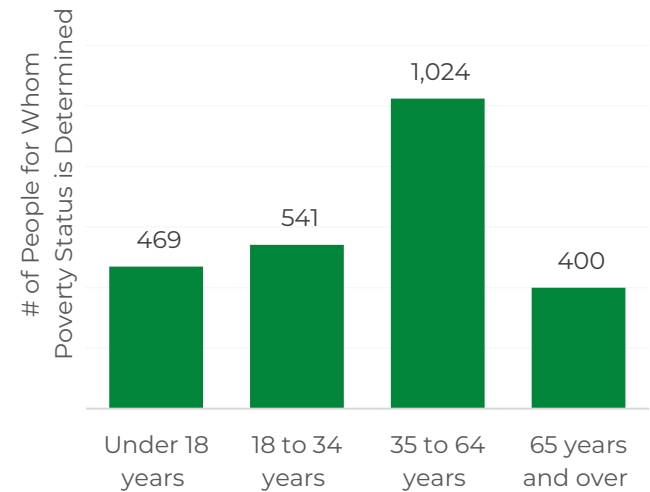


Figure 15: Poverty Levels. Source: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

VACANCY RATES

Interestingly, vacancy rates in Lake County are remarkably higher than both the state and national levels. This is likely because a large portion of homes in the county are not used as the owners’ primary residence. In 2022, about two thirds of Lake County homes were reported as vacant. That such a substantial portion of the housing stock is vacant can affect the economy in various ways; the utilization of existing housing or the development of new housing to support a local residential population could help support new economic growth in the county.

The exceptionally high vacancy rates in the county can be seen to be a product of the seasonal nature of local residency. Of the 8,911 vacant units in 2022, about 8,100 were estimated to be used solely for recreational purposes. These homes, then, are not accessible for existing or prospective residents, and the owners do not participate in the local economy for much of the year.

Vacancy Type

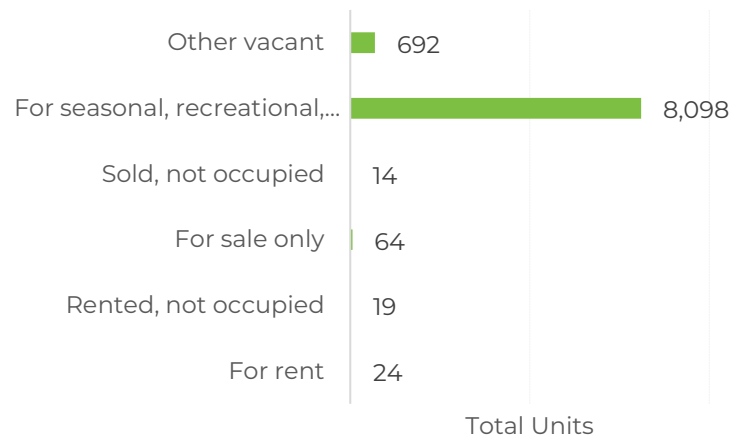


Figure 16: Vacancy by Type. Source: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Housing Cost Burden

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines a cost-burdened household as any household which spends more than 30% of its income on housing costs. A household which spends more than 50% of its income on housing costs is considered to be extremely cost burdened. Figure 17 presents figures on housing cost burden in Lake County in 2012 and 2022, categorized by housing tenure.

Over a ten-year period, the number of cost-burdened households in Lake County decreased by about 50 households. This change occurred mostly in owner-occupied units. In 2012, 1,031 homeowner households were estimated to be cost burdened; in 2022, that number had fallen to 965. The number of cost-burdened renter households increased slightly over the same period, from 357 households in 2012 to 371 households in 2022. For both owners and renters alike, the incidence of extreme cost burden has been reduced.

Housing Cost Burden by Tenure

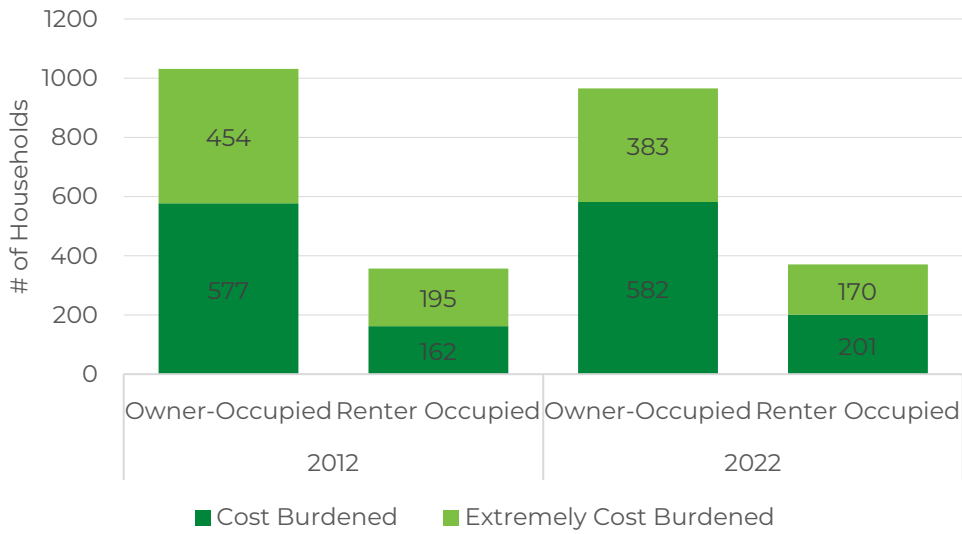


Figure 17: Housing Cost Burden by Tenure. Source: 2012 & 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Figure 18 presents housing cost burden data by income level. Unsurprisingly, low-income households are more likely to be burdened by housing costs than higher-earning households. In Lake County, about 14% of households earning less than \$20,000 per year were cost burdened in 2022. Only 0.10% of households earning more than \$75,000 per year were cost burdened.

Housing Cost Burden by Income

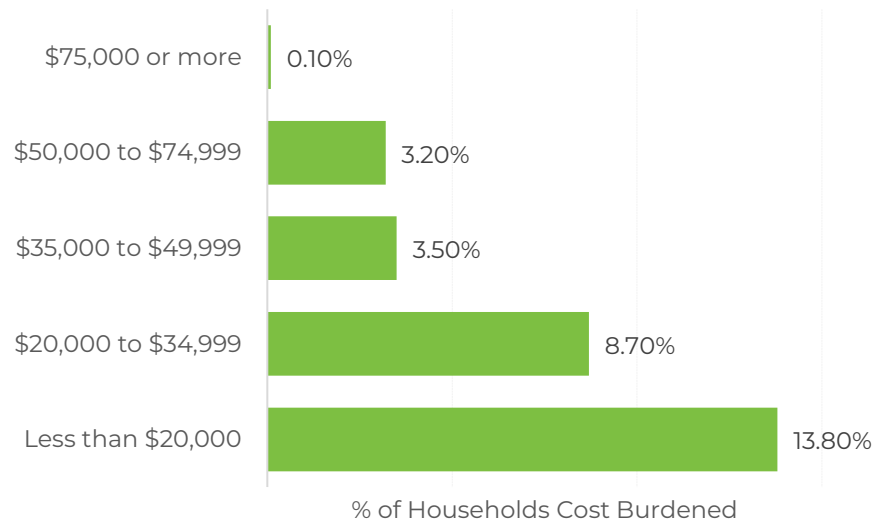


Figure 18: Housing Cost Burden by Income. Source: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates



Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder Work Sessions

Lake County partnered with national consulting firm TPMA to facilitate the development of an Economic Diversification study, including the stakeholder workshops. On August 5th and 6th, 2024, Lake County held two stakeholder workshops to inform its Economic Diversification study. In total, twenty-four (24) stakeholders participated in the sessions. This summary aggregates the feedback collected in the workshop sessions. While this does not represent the extent of the ideas and feedback received, it provides an overview of the emerging themes.

BUSINESS SUPPORT RESOURCES

The Question

What business support resources are currently in place but missing from the list?

The Response

- Universities and colleges
- USDA
- Wealthworks
- Baldwin Promise Program (underutilized)
- Baldwin Community Schools
- MSU Extension
- Dial-a-ride
- Tech help services

The Question

What business support resources are still needed within Lake County?

The Response

Stakeholders listed the following resources:

- Marketing effort for Lake County in general to increase tourism
- Centralized marketing/advertising platform to help small businesses, housing, nonprofits, and event planners connect local SCORE chapter
- Making the small business and entrepreneurship support known
- location for startups, incubator hub (commercial kitchen)
- Rural development
- Mentoring program to engage and connect to community, skilled contact, large group of retirees
- Networking opportunities/groups
- Businesses open in the morning besides retail (i.e., breakfast) to get people in the area
- Technical literacy and tools - tech services to help small businesses navigate the online business world
- Support to create grant money (where it is, support to fill it out, reporting)
- Ancillary services (childcare, transportation for the youth and elderly, mentorship, etc.)

ENTREPRENEURIAL HUB

The Question

What is your vision for an entrepreneurial hub?

The Response

For the vision statement, we take a step back from specific services provided and look at the entrepreneurial hub from an aspirational perspective. With that in mind, the following vision is a sample based on the responses from participants:

"The entrepreneurial hub is a one-stop shop for the community to generate ideas, learn, explore, create, develop, and grow businesses in Lake County for a more sustainable and viable tomorrow."

The Question

What services could be provided?

The Response

The top five answers among individual participants were clear:

1. Education and training
2. Flexible, high-tech, community and coworking space
3. Business consulting (including business plan assistance and startup support)
4. Assistance with legal, financial, insurance, and administrative issues
5. Commercial kitchen, food-related training and production

The Question

Who/What businesses could the hub serve?

The Response

Participants relayed that they want an entrepreneurial hub to have a level of benefit for all businesses and the community. The most popular reference was to existing businesses that need various types of support, including technical assistance, expansion, space for research and development, etc. Startups and potential entrepreneurs closely followed this. Participants want to see the hub serve the community in various ways.

The Question

Which entities could help with the hub?

The Response

The most popular answers were:

- Local businesses
- Banking/Finance professionals
- Postsecondary Education
- Local Schools
- Chamber of Commerce
- Youth
- Michigan Works
- County officials and staff
- DDA
- Community members/Retirees

This portion of the session concentrated specifically on economic diversification and gaps. Stakeholders worked together and in groups to create a list of ideas based on their experience.

DIVERSIFICATION

The Questions

Which new industries or businesses would be a good fit for Lake County?

The Responses

Stakeholder responses fell into 6 general categories. The most mentioned industries and businesses were:

- Tourism-related
 - Conference Center
 - Event center/venues for weddings, music, conferences
 - Hotels
 - Retail, restaurants, delivery options
- Education
 - Childcare
 - Homeschooling resources
 - Culinary education and commercial kitchen rental/classroom
- Manufacturing and Construction
 - Furniture
 - Manufacturing supplier
 - ORV/Outdoor gear/recreation-related manufacturing
 - Food production and processing
 - Automotive
 - EV supports
 - Construction-related (supplier, green building, sawmill and lumber)
 - Forest products and other natural resource exploits
- Other industry recommendations
 - Agriculture – regenerative, hog/chicken/large farms
 - Business and professional services – web design, print services, marketing
 - Auto care/repair
 - Healthcare – senior care/home, professional services, suppliers

RESILIENCY

The Questions

How might we overcome some of the challenges Lake County faces for resiliency and sustainability?

The Responses

Image:

1. Reputation as the poorest county in Michigan – try to rebrand with positive news stories focusing on new initiatives, start promoting all the good (can't accomplish through multiple facebook pages)
2. Negative image of school system – outcome with marketing the Baldwin Promise program and current expansion, create home school resources that collaborate with public schools so both win.
3. No marketing or central platform - show benefits of rural/small/natural environment, promote businesses, communities, promote strengths, agritourism, natural resources, events to draw younger folks, open conversations, inclusivity, more youth opportunities

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP, AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

1. Lack of Capacity – ability to staff to meet the needs of all, dispersing information and hitting all communities in the county, speak with existing businesses on challenges and support growth, start with small, useful steps, reduce risk by incremental results
2. Lack of succession planning –empower generational leaders (encourage young people, include HS seniors in the conversation, not just Lake County, yearly alumni meet and greet, create exposure for all levels from trade school to doctoral), encourage more collaboration with middle-aged and younger generations to serve on boards, have board seats reserved for younger folks,
3. Effective and leadership - board training with clear expectations and well-run meetings, adjust meeting times
4. Need for community involvement – create a unified vision, broad support, communicate and ask for growth, ask the community, research with all age groups, inclusivity, invite broader group to engage in process, discuss challenges regularly and brainstorm ideas and collaboration opportunities, involve senior population and history, connect aging population with youth to create engagement and prosperous pathways.
5. **Lack of acceptance to change** – transparency, open conversations, need to be openminded to those with new ideas and understanding that the old way doesn't mean it's the best way, community support for change and growth,

RESOURCES:

1. Lack of infrastructure: transportation, housing, internet, and cell services – offer volunteer drivers or bus tokens, grant opportunities, sponsorship, convert motels to housing, pressure politicians to legislate access. Obama did this in big cities under public health
2. Need for zoning changes – change to create live/work space, short-term rentals, restrictions to serving on planning commission (allow tax payers (not just property owners to serve)
3. Lack of funding – Provide grant funding education, diverse funding streams
4. Need to capitalize on natural resources – value-added manufacturing (not just shipping raw products out); trails, woods, lakes, multi-day stays, all-seasons to maintain economic prosperity
5. Lack of public gathering spaces – create more non-drinking public gathering spaces
6. Need to attract new business/Many people commute out of the county – invest in education and infrastructure, increase housing to support/attract workforce, opportunities for buying/maintaining existing and refurbishing buildings, overcome “investment hesitation” by sharing success stories, mentoring new business prospects
7. Need for services - facilities for autistic/mentally-challenged residents, daycare, assist with homeless population – provide basic needs and employment training

The Questions

How might we improve county-wide collaboration and inclusion?

The Responses

- Gather – create a gathering place that is public and accessible, pavilion, library, Pure Markette so people regularly interact from all parts of county, host events like farmer’s market, workshops, blood drives, hikes, side-by-side runs passport programs, design events with equal parts connection and planned activities so people feel comfortable jumping in
- Engage – look for shared vision, seek public input, increase transparency (constant communication), expand opportunities to participate, key stakeholders and also active community members who are invested in the expansion of the county opportunities, provide platform for voices, visit Lake County township meetings to canvas all stakeholders, go into all impacted communities, bi-annual “celebration” (invite counties, townships, businesses, look for shared vision, use waterways to create identity across town lines
- Accessible Meetings – hold various meetings in different townships, commissioners, all meetings, Yates Dial-a-Ride, make meeting times possible for all, virtual and in person, alternate meeting dates/times/locations, share meetings and involvement online for community to see, move meetings around the county with different businesses to host meetings, special invites to target certain people
- Community champions – communicate shared vision for economic growth, development, and overall investment in the residents (create a living document that promotes the vision for the county), node of efforts, transparency, education and focus on attaining common goals, regular county-wide gatherings of locally leaders (socially and focused on a project), get township supervisors involved

- Current Projects and Change – provide updates about what is currently happening (and progress), concentrate on practical project work of increasing scales, certain projects need to be turned over for new ideas and fresh perspectives. When municipal positions/board positions become open, rally for change agents, get people to run for seats
- Resource mapping – intentionality, outside resources, improve on what we have, entrepreneurial hub, county-wide tourism board, and a platform for cross-promotion, review case studies to see what successful business/counties are doing and how they've overcome adversity
- Education – Convince all geographic areas of the school system that improving it (starting with millage for construction bond issuance) will help all
- Collaboration – housing, workforce, and childcare challenges

The Questions

How might we ensure our efforts are sustainable?

The Responses

- Funding - long-term financial plan, tap into state and federal resources and experiment early on in every new venture/project, financial sponsorship, stay relevant, build business model into efforts (not only reliant on grant funding), funding is adequate for operational millage AND promise for a paid-for college/trade program, etc. by being a student here for 4 years of high school
- Invest in the next generation – education, engage youth and middle-aged residents and workers, succession planning, term limits for positions, new leaders that aren't over-worked, emphasize inclusion, new faces and perspectives, make it easy and fun, be opportunistic

- Do the research beforehand, come to the table with said research, provide the data up front that would establish what are the needed benchmarks to assure long-term success
- Strategic planning with strong vision, counsel from retired/long-time business owners, community support, SMART goals, implementation, and outcomes, metrics for success, accountability checks, realistic, achievable outcomes (not too many "hail Marys"), take steps to achieve desired outcomes, don't start off with multiple large projects, create one and watch it be successful then expand, explore nature-based solutions, build a system - not just individuals but partnerships/collaborations so not one person or organization controls all
- Implement changes that can have lasting impact – education, infrastructure, build talent/WF pipelines, regular communication/project updates, branding campaign to promote wins, nature-based solutions, resource centers (mentors, funding, training, existing businesses), stack value of external and circulate internal (train, apprentice, create in addition to build) by locally creating what is consumed (to the extend possible)

The Questions

How can I support these efforts?

The Responses

Stakeholders are prepared to help with the efforts in terms of assistance with contracts, investments, connections, strategic assistance/planning, resilience hub creation with advanced manufacturing and regenerative agriculture, public relations, information sharing, marketing and branding, supporting Pure Markette, becoming more educated, bringing more people (including kids) together to share ideas, being willing to mentor, attending meetings, being prudent, being positive, asking questions, and otherwise staying involved and joining "the band wagon."

Interviews

PARTICIPATION:

TPMA spoke with 18 stakeholders in individual and small group interviews with stakeholders across Lake County, representing diverse perspectives, including local businesses, business support organizations, economic development entities, education and workforce organizations, and community members. The stakeholders ranged from local residents and business owners to regional and state-level representatives with an interest in the county's development.

According to the stakeholders, the county's most celebrated asset is its natural beauty and rural character. Stakeholders unanimously praised the forests, trails, and Pere Marquette River as the foundation of the county's identity, attracting visitors through outdoor recreation activities like trout fishing, hunting, and ORV excursions. The secluded lifestyle, affordable property, and strong community spirit were additional draws. Unique local assets emerged as particular strengths, including Idlewild, the historic African American community, the Baldwin Promise scholarship program, which provides full college scholarships to local high school graduates, and long-standing events, such as the Blessing of the Bikes and Troutarama.

However, stakeholders also noted that Lake County faces significant barriers to economic growth, many of which stem from its rural nature and internal dynamics. The tourism-dependent economy presents challenges, with seasonal outdoor recreation creating unpredictable economic cycles, particularly in industries like snowmobiling that rely on specific weather conditions. Infrastructure limitations were consistently highlighted, including restricted internet access, limited transportation (with public transit ending at 6 pm daily), and utility constraints that discourage manufacturing investments.

Workforce challenges emerged as a critical concern. Stakeholders identified multiple barriers, including a perceived lack of motivation among residents and limited entrepreneurial spirit. Workforce training was highlighted as crucial to supporting economic development. Recommended training programs included hospitality and culinary services (leveraging two commercial kitchens at the local school), certified nursing, more or bolstered commercial driver's license (CDL) programs, and a variety of small business supports. Stakeholders emphasized the need for technical assistance for entrepreneurs, including help with business plans, employment resources, and professional development tools.

The lack of quality and affordable housing was repeatedly noted as a significant obstacle to attracting new residents and potential employers. One concrete example illustrated this challenge: a quality candidate for a school administrative position had recently turned down a job offer due to insufficient housing options. Stakeholders report that there has been local resistance to new hotel investments despite the contention that existing lodging options are insufficient to support growth for local events and tourism.

A particularly stark challenge was the county's internal culture of resistance to change and collaboration. Stakeholders described deep-seated conflicts that impede economic development, including long-term feuds and unhealthy rivalries. Of particular note was the dysfunction between key organizations; the Chamber of Commerce and the Historical Society were described as being in a state of ongoing conflict, with leadership issues further complicating local business support. Some stakeholders went as far as to suggest potential misuse of public funds. Stakeholders also noted that obtaining necessary permits was more difficult in this county compared to neighboring areas, speculating that the culture of the county is the cause of the extra difficulty. This is compounded by the lack of capacity—those who are involved tend to be involved in everything and are stretched thin.

While there are those in the County who do not want to see change, some of the stakeholders thought that new voices, ideas, and hands would be greatly beneficial to the county.

Despite these challenges, stakeholders identified several promising opportunities for economic diversification. The outdoor recreation sector emerged as a primary area for potential expansion, with specific recommendations including soft goods manufacturing (such as vehicle/boat upholstery), ORV after-market parts, and fishing equipment production. Stealthcraft was cited as a successful local manufacturer in this space that could be used as a model for a potential new business. Beyond outdoor recreation, stakeholders identified several potential growth industries: childcare and eldercare services, light manufacturing (particularly tool and die), agricultural processing and storage, and car wash services.

To support economic growth, stakeholders proposed several strategic infrastructure and organizational developments. The top recommendation was establishing a visitors' bureau to coordinate county-wide tourism efforts and develop a central marketing message. Additionally, stakeholders suggested

creating a combined visitors' bureau and small business support system, potentially in coordination with the Chamber of Commerce. Pure Michigan offers resources at no cost that could be used to strengthen Lake County's position in the state. Additionally, investment in Idlewild, which sets Lake County apart from similar rural communities, was advised.

For both existing residents and potential new residents, investment in quality and affordable housing was deemed critical, as was the potential development of a community center to help retain residents. Eventually, making downtown Baldwin more walkable, particularly by adding sidewalks around Baldwin Community Schools, would make Baldwin a more attractive place for visitors and residents alike.

The overarching recommendation was to start small and build momentum. Stakeholders suggested celebrating incremental wins, such as the successful Pure Markette Farmer's Market, and demonstrating how new initiatives could benefit different community groups. They stressed the importance of engaging actors beyond Baldwin to create a county-wide impact and overcome the existing culture of isolation and resistance to change.