

► Niles Michigan Cultural Economic Development Plan

September 25, 2009

Attracting creative workers and heritage tourism

Niles' Cultural Economic Development Plan (CED Plan) is intended to identify, strengthen, and strategically employ local and regional cultural assets for economic development.





Acknowledgements

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Local planning was organized by **Niles Main Street/DDA**. Cultural Economic Development Planning in Niles is overseen by the **Niles Cultural Economic Development Steering Committee**. **Dreeszen & Associates** facilitated planning. Cover graphic is by **Arkos Design**.

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Executive Summary

A ten-month planning process coordinated by Niles Main Street/DDA and Dreeszen & Associates identified Niles' area cultural and creative assets, barriers, and strategic opportunities. A Steering Committee, authorized by the Main Street/DDA Board of Directors, developed and endorsed the following Cultural Economic Development Plan for Niles. Niles is one of four leading Main Street Communities in Michigan to develop such a plan sponsored by the Michigan Main Street Program and its partners.

Long-term Cultural Economic Development Goals The Steering Committee determined four, long term goals that will strengthen and employ Niles' local cultural and creative assets to enhance the community's economic development and quality of life. The plan also identifies four key strategies that align with each of the plan's goals and Main Street principles. See the full plan for more strategies and detailed action steps.



Goal 1. Build a Creative Economic Environment Conditions develop for creative individuals and businesses to thrive in Niles.

Key strategy: Niles Main Street/DDA will

demonstrate Niles' attractiveness for creative entrepreneurs by documenting successful redevelopments, leading development of prototype spaces, and marketing these to creative professionals. Other strategies: provide entrepreneurial assistance to creative entrepreneurs; identify sources of capital; recruit creative businesses to vacant industrial space; explore creative incubators, and maximize economic impact of special events.



Fort St. Joseph Museum

Goal 2. Develop Niles Heritage Niles becomes a heritage tourist destination.

Key strategy: Niles Main Street, Council on Tourism, Fort St. Joseph Museum, and Western Michigan University will promote the Niles authentic historical learning experience especially for day-trip visitors from the Midwest. Other strategies: endorse Western Michigan University's collaborative initiative to establish a research and interpretive center and explore the feasibility of an historic district ordinance. The plan also links with US 12 Heritage Trail initiatives, cites the need for more guest accommodations, promotes the Indiana/Michigan trail system, encourages public schools to teach Niles history, urges documentation of oral histories, and considers hiring a city historian or archaeologist.

Goal 3. Promote Niles Niles becomes positioned as a cultural attraction for regional visitors, businesses, and new residents.

Key strategy: The partners convened for this planning will coordinate an internet marketing strategy to enhance the reach and attractiveness of Niles. Other strategies: market the cultural business sector, provide networking for cultural entities, encourage cultural and economic development organizations to help implement marketing, and create a downtown cultural district.

Goal 4. Organize for Cultural Economic Development Niles develops sustained capacity to implement this plan and realize cultural economic development.

Key strategy: Niles City Council and the Niles Main Street/DDA Board will appoint a standing Cultural Economic Development Committee to advise the City and assist with implementing this plan. Other strategies: the Niles Planning Commission should integrate this plan into the City's Master Plan, and the Niles Main Street/DDA should move its offices. The plan also recommends potential funding sources.



Main Street Manager Lisa Croteau and members of the Cultural Economic Development Steering Committee

Cultural and Creative Assets

This plan builds on Niles' considerable cultural resources. These include cultural and creative businesses, heritage and historic attractions, and historic architecture. An attractive and walkable downtown offers dining, specialty shops, and ready access to the St. Joseph River with its park, river trail, and events.

Numerous special events like the Hunter Ice Festival and French Market make downtown, the fairgrounds, and the riverside attractive to residents and visitors year round. Nearby orchards, farms, gardens, vineyards, and specialty food producers create interest in the region and economic opportunity.

Creative enterprises¹ represent nearly six percent of the Niles-Benton Harbor area businesses and nearly seven percent of the region's workforce. Over 4,000 creative workers work in manufacturing, wholesale, retail, information, design, rentals, arts and entertainment, and education. City government is supportive of cultural and creative development. Zoning and permitting accommodate creative enterprises.

A survey, done as part of the planning, found residents had mostly positive attitudes about Niles. They highly value fairs, festivals and special events, natural areas, the library, and film theaters. They associate Niles with these key words: *home or hometown, St. Joseph River, small town, historic, friendly, community, and family.*

Niles is well positioned as an authentic small town with significant historic and cultural attractions. The city's location, central to major markets and the Michiana region with good rail

¹ Niles' cultural/creative economy consists of creative individuals, nonprofits, small businesses, and industries that draw on creativity to create wealth and jobs through generation of ideas, product, and services.

and road transportation, makes its affordable real estate and developable spaces particularly valuable assets for creative sector development.



Niles Bensidoun French Market

Key opportunities Planners identified four critical opportunities for cultural economic development: Cultivate and attract creative professionals: artists, designers, and writers; maximize benefits from festivals and special events; build on heritage strengths: St. Joseph River, Fort St. Joseph, and Four Flags history; and market Niles in the region and beyond.

Limiting Factors While the plan focuses on Niles assets, it also responds to limiting factors. The 2009 recession limits credit and consumer confidence. Residents could better understand and appreciate Niles' cultural resources, which should be better marketed, particularly online. Traffic flow through town is a problem.

Some downtown business owners keep irregular hours and others will neither sell nor develop their properties. Good communication and coordination among cultural, business, and economic development leaders is a priority. The community needs to better tap resources of nearby colleges and universities. Families and young people must be engaged.

The slow economy requires new thinking and approaches. Civic leaders need to prepare for and to manage growth or success will ruin Niles' small town feel.

Niles Michigan Cultural Economic Development Plan

September 25, 2009

Introduction and Context

Niles is one of four innovative Michigan Main Street communities to undertake cultural economic development planning. Faced with a tough economy, this plan will strengthen Niles' local capacity to create jobs and bring money into our community. Our Cultural Economic Development Plan (CED Plan) will identify, strengthen, and strategically employ our cultural assets for economic development. With help from Main Street and other community leaders this plan has mobilized our arts, cultural, and heritage resources to strengthen our economy and enhance our quality of life.



Downtown Niles, Courtesy the Mark Bussler Blog

Results Planning produced an inventory of Niles' arts, cultural, heritage resources and an assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Planning concluded and implementation commenced with the adoption of this Cultural Economic Development Plan. The CED plan documents strategies and specific action steps that expand our economic base by leveraging cultural assets and strengthening partnerships among civic, cultural, business, and economic development organizations.

Assets based planning The planners took an assets-based approach to community assessment and cultural economic development. They believe that each community has unique origins, a distinct culture, and

economic underpinnings that can be reinvigorated even in these challenging economic conditions. This approach does not ignore barriers and problems, but builds on strengths as a way to overcome limitations.

Cultural Resources Defined We consider cultural resources to include history and historic buildings and sites; visual and performing arts producers and presenters; artists and craftspeople; museums, galleries, shops; and studios; historic inns and restaurants; library, writers, and bookstores; and specialty food producers and retail shops. We include creative workers and businesses such as designers, architects, and news media. This plan also considers heritage trails, public art, public spaces, arts and entertainment venues, historic places, distinctive neighborhoods, festivals, recreation venues, arts educators, youth organizations, foundations, and other support systems, etc.

Cultural Economy defined *Niles' cultural economy consists of creative individuals, nonprofits, small businesses, and industries that draw on creativity to create wealth and jobs through generation of ideas, products, and services.* This cultural or creative sector includes four interrelated clusters that create jobs and wealth and are integral to our economy and quality of life.

- *Artists and creative workers* – the creative workforce talent and source of creativity (e.g., designers, architects, writers, craftspeople, singers, etc.).
- *Nonprofit cultural institutions and creative businesses* – that produce or distribute creative goods and services, or make history, arts, and the humanities accessible (e.g., theaters, arts centers, cinemas, heritage sites, bookstores, etc.).

- *Commercial businesses* – that are not inherently creative, yet employ creative talent or create iconic goods or services rooted in local history or heritage (e.g., publishers and manufacturers).
- *Support systems* – the infrastructure of education, funding, services, and public policies that help sustain creative industries (e.g., Main Street, Chamber of Commerce, and other economic development agencies).

National and International Trends

The consulting team identified nine national and international trends in creative economic development that influence this plan².

1. **Cross-sector/Cross-agency Partnerships**
The most compelling trend is cooperation between agencies and sectors and cross-sector partnerships at both the state and local levels, which is shown to leverage additional resources and influence policy.
2. **Support for Individual Entrepreneurs**
Both direct and indirect support for the entrepreneurial efforts of individual artists and other creative economy innovators has been a priority in several states and internationally.
3. **Project Lifecycle Stages**
Segmenting community projects into major lifecycles of economic development and tailoring program support components to the needs of communities and their entrepreneurs has proven to be an effective strategy.
4. **Links To Larger Planning Goals**
Linking creative economy initiatives to larger community/economic development goals has helped several states and communities

to leverage funding and build a larger base of support.

5. **Leverage Through Intermediaries**
Partnerships with intermediaries – nonprofits that are experienced in attracting and managing public and private support from a variety of fields and sectors -- offer a way to “scale up” projects, to draw upon more funding sources, and to function more creatively than government agencies.
6. **History and Identity of Place**
Attention to community aesthetics, as well as a place’s history and sense of identity (place brand), are emerging as increasingly important to the success of local development.
7. **Technical Assistance**
Diagnostic and technical assistance tools have helped both communities and individual entrepreneurs to assess and build on their assets and to develop broad-based creative economy plans that take advantage of broader partnerships.
8. **Art as Business and as Partner to Business**
When positioning artists and arts organizations as businesses in addition to highlighting their capacity to work as partners with local business, skill and resource development efforts have benefited from other partners and resources.
9. **Impact and Evaluation Studies**
Support of impact studies, as well as continued participation in dialogue about evolving measurement standards continues to be a successful strategy.

² Massachusetts Cultural Council, Creative Economy Program Plan Recommendations & Analysis, August 28, 2008, Arts Extension Service, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Niles Cultural Economic Development Assets and Opportunities

Niles Cultural Assets

Creative sector employment

Data on employment, payrolls, and number of establishments from the US Census indicates that the numbers of employees and business establishments dropped between 2004 and 2006.

Changes in creative-sector payroll, creative-sector employment, and creative establishments roughly paralleled changes in all employment, which dropped in the Niles-Benton Harbor MSA.

Using standard definitions of creative enterprises³, we find that in 2006, 214 creative establishments represented 5.9% of the total number of businesses and 4,206 creative-sector employees represented 6.6% of the total workforce. Creative workers tend to be “non-employers” i.e. self employed in a comparable proportion to the rest of the workforce. A nearly steady 15% of creative workers have been self employed from 2004 to 2006. During the same interval, self employment for all workers in the area grew from 15% to nearly 23% of the entire workforce. This suggests entrepreneurs will be critical for the region’s economic recovery.

History and Heritage

The site where the city was built has famously flown the flags of four nations. Four Flags is an important part of City heritage and branding and the name has been adopted by many businesses and institutions. Four flags are displayed throughout the community and in promotions.

Fort St. Joseph is an important historic site, the location for scholarly and public archeology, and historic re-enactments. Western Michigan University is working with the City to develop a

³ Creative Economy NAICS Codes (Core and Peripheral) and overall definition of the Creative Economy are based on the New England Foundation for the Arts publication, *The Creative Economy: A New Definition - November 2007*, <http://www.nefa.org/pubs/index.html>

research and interpretive center.

The Fort St. Joseph Museum preserves and interprets Niles history and artifacts, including its Civil War and military history. The museum has an important collection of Sitting Bull pictographs. The Chapin Mansion (Niles City Hall) is an important historic building with potential to be developed into a museum.

Niles has been an important player in Black history as a site of the Underground Railroad, with citizens who stood up for former slaves. African American leaders are interred in Silverbrook cemetery and the city is home to Ferry Street School, and the nation’s first Black Masonic Lodge.

Native American history and the nearby contemporary Pottawatomi tribe remind residents and visitors of an older culture that still contributes to the unique sense of place in Niles.

Niles is a destination for heritage tourism. The City is well known for antiques shopping.



Niles Historic Train Depot

Railroads were a critical part of Niles history with a nationally significant historic depot used as a set in several films. The railroad continues to connect Niles with major population centers. Once high-speed rail is established, Niles will become even more accessible and attractive for creative businesses with ready access to major markets.

Famous citizens include: automotive pioneers John and Horace Dodge, the retailer Montgomery Ward, and author Ring Lardner.

Niles District Library

The Niles District Library is a valued public resource for books, information, and community events. They offer public meeting space. The Library has a curated exhibition space that shows local artists. The Library will host the central cultural information portal described in this plan.

Authentic Home Town Feel of Niles

Survey results indicate most residents feel Niles is a great community with a small town feel. It is on the verge of renaissance. There are many long-time family-owned businesses, with some carried on by new families. These assets should be featured by telling the Niles story(ies) associated with these businesses and historic buildings. People have a welcoming attitude and are generally tolerant of diversity (important to attract creative businesses.) Events are family friendly. Many people describe Niles as a great place to raise families.

Main Street

Niles Main Street/DDA is an active Main Street program, recognized by the state as a leader. Significantly, Main Street and downtown property owners removed aluminum skins and restored historic building facades. Streetscape improvements have been completed. Downtown historic architecture is mostly intact and has earned a National Historic District designation.

Downtown is compact and walkable. There is direct access from Main Street to the river and park. Restaurants, cafes, and specialty shops are starting to repopulate buildings. Two film theaters attract regional audiences.

Second and third floor spaces are well suited to development for residential, cultural/creative, and commercial development. There is some infill potential.

Special Events

Niles is well known for family-friendly cultural events. These include: the Hunter Ice Festival, Youth Performing Arts Festival, French Market and Artisan Faire, Bluegrass Festival, Free Summer Movies in the Park, Free Summer Concert Series with over 24 concerts in the park, Arts in Motion Celebration of the Arts, Riverfest, Niles Haunted House, Four Flags Area Apple Festival, and Downtown Holiday Homecoming.



Location

Niles is the center of the Michiana region with ready access to large markets in South Bend, Chicago, and Detroit. Niles is a transportation hub with the existing Amtrak -- potential high-speed rail link between Chicago and Detroit, and major highways. Niles is near major universities and colleges.

Population

Niles is home to an estimated 11,258 people (US Census 2008 estimate), down slightly from 12,204 in 2000.

Affordable real estate

Commercial and residential real estate is available and more affordable in Niles than in nearby cities. Affordable real estate in proximity to major markets demonstrates potential to attract creative businesses who can establish in Niles. An artist relocation program could work, especially if one or more spaces could be prepared as a creative incubator. The former Simplicity factory would be ideal for a film studio.

Artists and creative workers

Niles is home to many fine visual and performing artists, filmmakers, and craftspeople, some with national reputations. Design firms and architects have located here. There is good potential for one or more clusters of creative professionals related to design and fine papers.

Agriculture

Fruit belt orchards, farmers' markets, U-pick farms, and nearby vineyards make specialty food producers an important part of the economy. There is good potential for home vineyard development. The Riverfront Café is an example of a local business that serves locally produced foods and wines. The Niles Bensedoun French Market is a big attraction and an opportunity for local food producers. There is potential for cultural/horticultural trips and tours (as in North Carolina). Farms and orchards also create attractive landscapes surrounding Niles.

Environmental resources

Niles has always been a river town and the St. Joseph River is an important part of the town's history that is still a major resource. The community has largely maintained open access to the river. Cultural events, outdoor recreation, dining, entertainment, and new developments are located along the river. The River trail is a great attraction and an expansion is planned.

The Fernwood Botanic Garden and Nature Preserve offers a nature center, trails, gardens, conservatory, art gallery, gift shop, and café. There are snowmobile trails managed by the Four Flags Snowmobile club.

City supportive of cultural development

The City of Niles and Niles Main Street/DDA have been proactive to redevelop downtown, to recruit creative businesses, and to produce cultural events. The City has streamlined permitting processes. City leaders realize the potential of cultural economic development and are open to integration of cultural economic development plan into Master Plan. Niles Main Street/DDA board and staff have taken excellent advantage of this cultural economic development planning to identify and mobilize cultural resources for economic development.

Limiting Factors

The Steering Committee identified factors that limited cultural economic development:

- In the current economy, funding is limited.
- Local residents should better appreciate what is here and value the community.
- Residents and visitors need education about Niles' cultural resources.
- Niles could be marketed to better advantage.



Little Information for Visitors at a Closed Visitor Center

- Traffic flow is a problem, as it is not clear where visitors should go to visit attractions.

- Highway traffic through downtown is controlled by the state Department of Transportation.
- Some downtown business owners keep irregular hours so visitors cannot count on their being open.



"Closed Early due to Birthday Party"

- Some building owners will neither sell nor develop and others do not use spaces with good potential.
- Good communication and coordination among cultural, business, and economic development leaders is a priority.
- Simple ways to exchange information and coordinate efforts are needed to prevent fragmented efforts.
- Nearby universities are great resources. The question is how to best tap these resources.
- The new economy requires new approaches, not business as usual.
- Families and young people need to be engaged.
- Civic leaders need to prepare for and to manage growth or success will ruin Niles' small town feel.

Planning methods

Community Selection The Michigan Main Street Program invited four well-established Michigan Main Street Communities to apply for participation in a pilot Cultural Economic Development initiative. Niles Main Street/DDA was one of four successful communities that also include: Boyne City, Marshall, and Calumet.

Consulting Team After a national competition, Dreeszen & Associates, Northampton Massachusetts, was awarded the contract to facilitate planning. The consulting team of Dr. Craig Dreeszen, Tom Borrup, Erik Takeshita, and Maren Brown conducted assessments, facilitated planning, and helped write plans and reports. Researchers Heidi Wagner, Kia Momtazi, and Jesselyn Dreeszen Bowman collected and analyzed cultural and economic resource data.

Assessments Consultants started the assessment in advance of the first site visit by communicating with the Niles Main Street/DDA staff and reviewing community histories, economic data, databases, directories, mailing lists, and web sites likely to identify cultural resources. Main Street manager Lisa Croteau recruited a steering committee of business, cultural, and civic leaders to oversee and help develop key strategies of the plan.

Site visits Dreeszen made two site visits in February and May 2009. He met with the Main Street manager and CED Steering Committee (15 people); facilitated the initial public meeting (February 10 with 28 people); met with Main Street board of directors; and interviewed the mayor and city manager, CEO of French Paper, owner of two local film theatres, architect, landscape architect, librarian, restaurant owners, and other civic leaders. Dreeszen toured and photographed cultural resources.

Marketing Analysis Planners gathered and analyzed marketing materials, approaches, and Web presence for each of the four communities.

Maren Brown talked with the Main Street manager and set up conference calls with business, economic development, and tourism leaders in each community. Brown documented findings and recommendations in a separate report.



Niles CED Steering Committee members Nancy Studebaker, Juan Enrique Ganum, and Carol Bainbridge developing marketing strategies

Cultural Economic Assessment Survey The planners designed, distributed, analyzed, and reported a cultural economic development survey with advice from SHPO, MMS, and four local Main Street managers. The local manager distributed invitations to the survey with the help of local economic development partners. The response rate in Niles was excellent.

Cultural Economic Data Analysis The planning team researchers downloaded and analyzed county business pattern data for the statistical areas surrounding each of the four MMS communities. They extracted creative economic sector employers and employees using standard definitions of the sector. Planners identified trends in creative sector employment, compared these with the entire workforce, and identified clusters of creative businesses with potential for further cultural economic development.

Cultural and Economic Resource Inventory Dreeszen & Associates designed and built a

comprehensive database of cultural and economic resources (using Dabble.com). Sources include: IRS non-profit 990 reports (through Guidestar.com) using standard NAICS codes⁴ for cultural and creative organizations; Referenceusa.com business directory; telephone directories; brochures, calendars, and local published directories; and attraction web sites.

Plan Development The Steering Committee met in a May 5 planning retreat to review assessment findings and generate CED strategies. Dreeszen & Associates refined retreat results into a first-draft CED plan. The Steering committee met again June 23 to review and edit the first-draft plan. Dreeszen & Associates revised the draft and submitted it for review by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, Michigan State Historic Preservation Office, and Office of Cultural Economic Development. The planners revised the plan, which the state partners, local Main Street Manager, and Steering Committee reviewed. This Cultural Economic Development Plan has been developed consistently with the Main Street Four-Point Approach of Design, Economic Restructuring, Promotion, and Organization.

Plan Approval The Niles Cultural Economic Development Steering Committee meets September 21 to formally approve the plan and recommend its adoption by local Main Street/DDA Board, Planning Commission, and Niles City Council.

Implementation The Niles Cultural Economic Development plan outlines strategies and key responsibilities for implementation.

⁴ Creative Economy NAICS Codes (Core and Peripheral) and overall definition of the Creative Economy are based on the New England Foundation for the Arts publication, *The Creative Economy: A New Definition* - November 2007, <http://www.nefa.org/pubs/index.html>



February Public Meeting



Steering Committee Members Hear Public Input

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However, the contents and opinions herein do not necessarily reflect the views of policies of the Department of the Interior or the Department of History, Arts, and Libraries, nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products herein constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior or the Michigan Department of History, Arts, and Libraries.

Nondiscrimination This program receives federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of

the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of color, national origin, disability, or age in its federally assisted programs. Michigan law prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, marital status, or disability. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility as described above, or if you desire further information, please write to: Office for Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC 20240.

Goals, Outcomes, and Strategies for Niles Cultural Economic Development



Goal 1. Build a Creative Economic Environment

Conditions develop for creative individuals and businesses to thrive in Niles.

Rationale: Niles is ideally poised to attract and cultivate creative professionals and creative businesses. Niles' proximity to major markets, rail and road transportation, high speed internet access, affordable properties, and authentic small-town ambience are significant assets. This is an attractive combination for creative entrepreneurs, except that there is not yet a significant local market for creative products, or a full complement of creative services. Creative businesses like designers, architects, software developers, writers, and artists can establish businesses and homes in Niles and be close to major markets. Ideal pioneering candidates would not be initially, or entirely, dependent on

local services or markets but would help build a growing local market to supplement their regional or national reach. This CED strategy works now and would be significantly enhanced if high speed rail is realized. A phased development attracts more self-reliant creative businesses in the first phase, followed by developing businesses and those requiring a more local market later as the Niles cultural and creative economy develops.



Downtown Niles Michigan

Outcomes and Strategies

- 1) **“Re-build it and they will come”**
Demonstrate the attractiveness of Niles as a site for creative entrepreneurs with documented case studies of successful redevelopments; documented hypothetical developments that demonstrate feasibility of re-building, permitting, and financing; and at least one fully redeveloped site ready for occupancy. Niles Main Street/DDA lead, high priority, short term timeframe.
 - a) Document successful redevelopments of one or more downtown properties (including upper stories) into businesses and residences with photos, cost summaries, financing, and permits. Niles Main Street/DDA lead, short term.

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- b) Develop a guide to property development and building codes. Niles Main Street/DDA and City Planning office lead, short term.
 - c) Develop one or more hypothetical development cases to illustrate what various redevelopments would require to achieve city permits and financing. Niles Main Street/DDA and City planning Office lead, short term.
 - d) Develop an actual demonstration site – an upper floor Main Street location -- to be ready for creative business and residency occupancy in three potential scenarios: Niles Main Street/DDA negotiates long-term lease of upper stories or whole buildings with current building owner(s); Niles Main Street/DDA purchases building; or Niles Main Street/DDA encourages current building owner to redevelop. Rental revenues help finance second and subsequent building developments.
 - Niles Main Street/DDA board approves the concept.
 - Niles Main Street/DDA conducts an in-person survey of a few likely business owners to assess interest.
 - Niles Main Street/DDA seeks capital from local banks, Capital Access Program and New Market Tax Credits, and private investors.
 - Niles Main Street/DDA negotiates long-term lease or purchase agreement and/or encourages building owner to redevelop. (With Niles Main Street/DDA control, occupancy costs can be protected from gentrification effects that typically displace creative workers as property values increase.)
 - e) Niles Main Street/DDA contracts for redevelopment to create live/work spaces in one or more combinations of office, studio, and residences.
 - Insist on high quality design commensurate with Main Street principles, Niles historic character, and expectations of targeted demographics.
- Plan for sustainable, energy efficient buildings. Re-build green.
 - Avoid overbuilding so that rents remain reasonable and so that entrepreneurs may adapt their spaces to fit their specific needs.
 - Engage with the river.
- f) Niles Main Street/DDA markets the new spaces to creative professionals, seeking clusters of complementary creative businesses -- (web and graphic designers, printers, architects, landscape architects, technical support, framers, printers, writers, software developers, videographers, artists, etc.), ideally with existing regional or national markets, who can establish businesses in Niles.
 - Develop prospectus.
 - Market directly to alumni of Notre Dame, St. Mary's, and other area schools.
 - Advertise in business publications that target high-potential creative professionals.
 - Invite existing creative businesses to recruit.
 - Present concept during realtor and prospect tours of vacant spaces (July 2009).
- 2) Provide entrepreneurial development assistance.
 - a) Niles Main Street/DDA continues to offer business start up and professional development for existing businesses with Michigan Economic Development Corporation and Small Business and Technology Development center.
 - b) Niles Main Street/DDA matches new and developing businesses with mentors recruited from established Niles area businesses.
 - c) Niles Main Street/DDA develops a how-to-develop creative business seminar to stimulate artists and other developing

creative businesses.

- 3) Identify sources of capital to match with property and creative business developers and to implement this CED plan.
 - a) Banks Tap banks' community reinvestment funds to help fund DDA upper story development.
 - b) Venture capitalists Help inform potential investors about cultural economic development opportunities.
 - c) Foundations Invite foundations to help support high priority cultural economic development initiatives.
 - d) Microenterprise loan program Niles Main Street/DDA has requested entitlement funds to establish a small business development loans program.
- 4) Recruit a major film studio or other creative business to occupy the vacant Simplicity plant. Niles Main Street/DDA works with SMEGA and the MI Film Office to recruit a film studio to occupy the Simplicity plant as a sound stage or production facility. Niles Main Street/DDA lead, ongoing.
- 5) Explore the feasibility of developing a Creative Industries Incubator Space that would nurture developing artists and other creative workers and small creative businesses.
- 6) Maximize Economic Impact of festivals and special events.
 - a) Review the schedule of festivals and special events to identify significant gaps or opportunities.



Four Flags Area Apple Festival

- b) Seek funds to establish a Special Events Program through which Main Street/Niles Main Street/DDA would solicit proposals from nonprofit organizations, community groups, and businesses for endorsement and seed funding to host special events.
- c) Identify incentives to entice event visitors to patronize local businesses and return to Niles.
 - Continue to encourage downtown businesses to remain open during and after special events.
 - Identify open businesses with prominent banners.
 - Create incentives like discount coupons that event organizers could award as premiums to event visitors (e.g., as prize for completing evaluation surveys).

Goal 2. Develop Niles Heritage

Niles becomes a heritage tourist destination.

Rationale: Niles is blessed with a rich, well-documented history. Prehistoric and Native American heritage is interpreted at the Fort St. Joseph museum. The Fort St. Joseph River connected the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River and was the water route from Quebec to Louisiana. Western Michigan University archaeologists re-discovered Fort St. Joseph. Four sovereign flags have famously flown over Niles: France, Spain, England, and the United States. Niles was active in the Underground Railroad and abolitionist movements and has a rich African American history. The Sauk Trail became US 12, a heritage trail corridor. Niles was central to early stage and rail transportation and Niles remains an important railroad stop. Downtown Niles retains a significant streetscape of 19th century commercial architecture. Niles has an authentic history with significant cultural and economic benefits, especially with additional research and interpretation, and more cohesive promotion. If the Fort St. Joseph Museum is to be a central heritage coordinator and promoter, it will need additional support and facilities investments.



Chapin House/City Hall


Outcomes and Strategies

- 1) Provide an authentic historical learning experience especially for day-trip visitors from the Midwest.
 - a. Educate visitors about the people who lived in the Niles area in the past and provide a comprehensive experience that includes cultural leisure experiences (museums, cuisine, art, craft, antiques, books, etc.).
 - b. Link visitors to physical leisure experiences (bike, hike, canoe, kayak, fishing, wine tours, etc.).
- 2) Tap Niles history, heritage, and St. Joseph River to attract heritage tourism.



One of Many Historic Plaques in Niles

- a. Develop more interpretive resources like interpretive panels or kiosks.
- b. Develop iconic images (river, fort site, re-enactors, archaeologists, etc.) and compelling, concise stories that can be incorporated into

- promotional materials.
- c. Encourage traditional craftspeople to develop and market functional products relating to Niles' authentic heritage.
 - d. Market Niles as an African American heritage tourism site.
 - Niles has an important Underground Rail Road History and a history of the community coming together to protect the black population in the area from slave hunters.
 - As CED progresses in Idlewild MI, an historic African-American resort community in Lake County (see HAL/CED/Idlewild web site: <http://www.michigan.gov/hal/idlewild>) Niles could partner in tourism marketing as a distinctive destination for visitors from Chicago, etc., traveling to Idlewild. The Idlewild centennial is in 2012, so this is timely.
 - Develop interpretive materials and promotions.
- 3) This plan endorses the City of Niles and Western Michigan University's collaborative initiative to establish a research and Fort St. Joseph interpretive center in Niles.
- 4) The City of Niles should conduct research on historic districts, explore the impact of historic districts in comparable communities, and gauge local support. If feasible, propose an historic district ordinance on Main Street and adjacent blocks to protect historic commercial buildings, enhance heritage tourism, and access historic tax credits.
- 5) When City government develops new office space, the Chapin House should be converted into a City-owned and managed historic house museum.
- 6) More fully develop heritage tourism with a message that tells an integrated Niles heritage story, linking indigenous peoples, the St. Joseph River and Fort, and Four Flags branding. Council on Tourism and Museum lead.
- a. Develop a St. Joseph River Trail system with promotions, historic site signs, and designated launch/landing spot(s) in Niles. Encourage boat outfitters and livery businesses (to carry boats to/from parking and launch sites).
 - b. Link Niles to wine tours (as start or destination of tours).
 - c. Recruit and promote traditional craft artists to the French Market to enhance the Fort St. Joseph open house event (as done with the Rendezvous).
- 
- 7) Connect with US 12 Heritage corridor initiatives to promote Niles historic and cultural attractions.
- 8) Actively encourage developers to create more hotel and B & B accommodations to build Niles' capacity to welcome heritage visitors.
- 9) Take advantage of Indiana/Michigan trail system.
- 10) Encourage colleges and Niles schools to reinstate Niles history into its curriculum. The Museum could provide a curriculum and scope and sequence with an outline of field trips and volunteer docents.
- 11) Document oral histories of elders so that Niles stories are not lost.

- 12) City should consider hiring a city archaeologist or city historian to educate about heritage and coordinate heritage promotions and activities. These activities can fall under the responsibilities of the Fort St. Joseph Museum with additional staff capacity and facilities.



Fort St. Joseph Museum



Support the Fort Education Days

Goal 3. Cultural Destination

Niles becomes positioned as a cultural attraction for regional visitors, businesses, and new residents.

Rationale: Niles has many historic sites and cultural attractions, festivals and special events, trails and river, and specialty shops of interest to visitors, residents, and entrepreneurs who may locate businesses here. An analysis of marketing efforts found good print promotions but not a robust internet presence. Effective marketing can capitalize on Niles' proximity to large population centers, rail and roads, and the many cultural attractions in Niles.

Outcomes and Strategies

- 1) With the acknowledgement that each organization has its own web presence (and overall marketing strategy), a coordinated/consolidated web presence will enhance the reach and attractiveness of the Niles community
 - a) Identify the mission of each organization, its current marketing strategy and the resources dedicated to achieving that strategy (Underway in the CED cultural resource inventory).
 - b) Identify the expertise and ongoing manager to create a coordinated web site. (Library? Local developer?)
- 2) Identify marketing opportunities for creative business sector. Create webpage with links media marketing/community calendars/media contacts etc.
- 3) Market to the cultural business sector.
 - a) Stress the locational attributes of the Niles community

- 4) Provide networking opportunities for Niles cultural entities
- 5) Present the cultural plan to cultural and economic development organizations and invite their participation in implementation.
- 6) Create and promote a cultural district around the library, Chapin Mansion, Fort St. Joseph Museum, and Ready Theatre.



Fernwood Botanical Gardens

Goal 4. Organize for Cultural Economic Development

Niles develops sustained capacity to implement this plan and realize cultural economic development.

Rationale: The cultural economic development planning steering committee tapped community enthusiasm to further Niles community and economic development. Much good work has been done including establishment of a strong Main Street program, restoration of downtown Niles building facades, development of festivals and special events, and attracting partners such as WMU. This CED plan has established outcomes and strategies. However, there is no public agency or other entity charged with cultural economic development. Niles Main Street/DDA is understaffed. In the absence of an organized and sustained effort, these good intentions could remain a well-intended document. This plan needs endorsement, integration into the City's Master Plan, and support from partnering organizations (City, Library, Historical Society, etc) and a structure to organize advocates, and allies.



Downtown Niles Creative Businesses

Outcomes and Strategies

- 1) The Niles Main Street/DDA Board and Niles City Council should formally accept the Niles Cultural Economic Development plan
- 2) The Niles Planning Commission should integrate the CED plan into the City's Master Plan and attract other partners to participate in developing the Cultural Economic Development Plan.



Main Street Manager Lisa Croteau working on this plan with CED Steering Committee members Joe Chabot, James Flood, and Arvin Delacruz

- 3) Niles Main Street/DDA should move into a readily-accessible downtown location, co-located with the City Planning Office, with shared administrative support staff.
- 4) The City Council and Niles Main Street/DDA board should appoint a standing Cultural Economic Development Committee to advise Niles Main Street/DDA, the Mayor, and City Council on cultural economic development and to advocate for and assist the implementation of this plan.
 - a. Continue to attract new partners who can add capacity to these initiatives.
- 5) Fund this Cultural Economic Development plan.

- a. Main Street develops a budget to implement priority strategies.
- b. Main Street seeks funding partners.
Potential funders include:
 - Western Michigan University
 - Local and regional banks (for development of Main Street properties and incubators for creative business)
 - Local developers as partners in incubator and creative business development
 - Michigan state agencies (as financial conditions improve): [generate list]
 - Federal sources: US Department of Interior, National Endowment for the Humanities, and National Endowment for the Arts
 - Local and Regional Foundations

Appendix

Visual Assessment

The planning consultant, Dr. Craig Dreeszen, shares his visual assessment of Niles in this section.

Niles is an attractive community along the St. Joseph River amid the rural and picturesque farms, orchards, and vineyards of the Michiana region.



Niles and the St. Joseph River © Google Earth 2007

Visitors approaching downtown Niles from the north on Route 51 are greeted with residential neighborhoods, some industrial spaces, and a welcome sign. As one proceeds to downtown, Ready Theater (under renovation in 2009) is the first downtown building encountered. Coming into town from the south from South Bend on Route 12/South 11th Street, visitors experience an unattractive stretch of strip malls before encountering another welcome sign and then a well-landscaped entrance and directions to downtown Main Street.



Welcome Sign on Route 51 South 1

Downtown Main Street is a compact, four-block area with mostly intact 19th century two and three-story commercial buildings.



The Ready Theatre and historic Four Flags Hotel anchor Main Street at the top of a hill that descends to the St. Joseph River and River Park at the bottom.



Historic Four Flags Hotel

Niles Main Street and its business partners recently completed a major façade and streetscape improvement. They transformed downtown aesthetics by uncovering two blocks of historic building facades.



Niles Main Street with Restored Building Facades

Main Street businesses and buildings are largely well maintained and attractive, though there are a few empty spaces. Several Main Street buildings contain creative businesses.



Main Street Antique Mall, a Cultural Business



Richard Hunt Sculpture

Public art is rare in Niles. Niles' one piece of public art, the Richard Hunt Sculpture, is tucked under the approach to the Main Street Bridge along the River.



Frame of Mind Gallery, a Cultural Business

Only one building remains as an unattractive reminder of what was the norm for decades.



Last Un-restored Building Façade

Streetscape improvements included planters, plants, and new sidewalk paving stones reminiscent of the river.



Niles Main Street Flowers, photo Niles Main Street

There is a potential cultural district around City Hall (in the historic Chapin House,), the Fort St. Joseph Museum, and the Niles District Library, and the Ready Theater, which are all clustered close together on Main Street.



City Hall in Chapin House



Fort St. Joseph Museum



Niles District Library

Creative businesses, historic attractions, and cultural attractions are generally attractive and welcoming to visitors. Renovations underway to the Ready 4 Theater will restore an iconic landmark. The Wonderland Cinema is housed in

an unsightly concrete block building near the St. Joseph River.

Main Street meets the St. Joseph River at the bottom of the downtown hill. The River Park and River Walk are attractive and much appreciated by residents and visitors. The City has largely retained views and public access to the river and new developments. The YMCA and Riverfront Café are sited along the river.



River Park

An unattractive strip mall on the south side of Main Street as it crosses the river diminishes the river view and access.

Consultant's Aesthetic Recommendations

- 1) The City should seek opportunities to install lasting public art. Niles has very little permanently installed public art, but a strong reputation for high quality ice sculpture. The Richard Hunt sculpture should be sited in a more prominent location.
- 2) Niles Main Street should continue its façade restoration program and extend streetscape improvements onto sides streets.
- 3) The City should continue to reclaim its riverfront, extend the river trail, and encourage development that protects views of and access to the St. Joseph River.
- 4) The City, Main Street, and property owners should extend the pocket park on Main Street westward to improve the gap between buildings left by fire until the lot is developed.

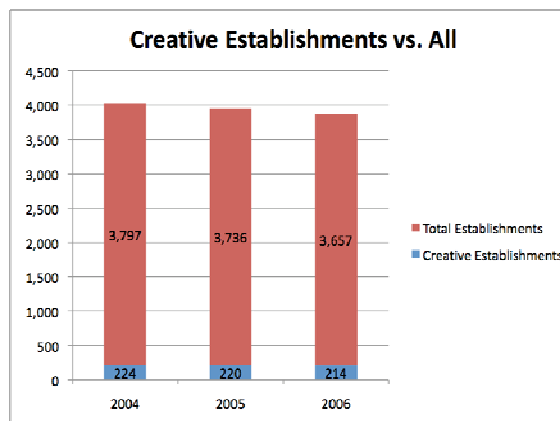
Creative Economic Data

US Census County Business Patterns Data for Niles-Benton Harbor MI MSA

Data on employment, payrolls, and number of establishments from the US Census indicates that the numbers of employees and business establishments dropped between 2004 and 2006.

Creative sector employment By extracting information from creative businesses, using standard definitions of creative enterprises⁵, we find that changes in creative-sector payroll, creative-sector employment, and creative establishments roughly paralleled changes in all employment in the Niles-Benton Harbor MSA.

In 2006, 214 creative establishments represented 5.9% of the total number of businesses and 4,206 creative-sector employees represented 6.6% of the total workforce. Creative workers tend to be “non-employers” i.e. self employed in a comparable proportion to the rest of the workforce. A nearly steady 15% of creative workers have been self employed from 2004 to 2006. During the same interval, self employment for all workers in the area grew from 15% to nearly 23% of the entire workforce. This suggests that entrepreneurs may be the source of job growth that critical to economic recovery.



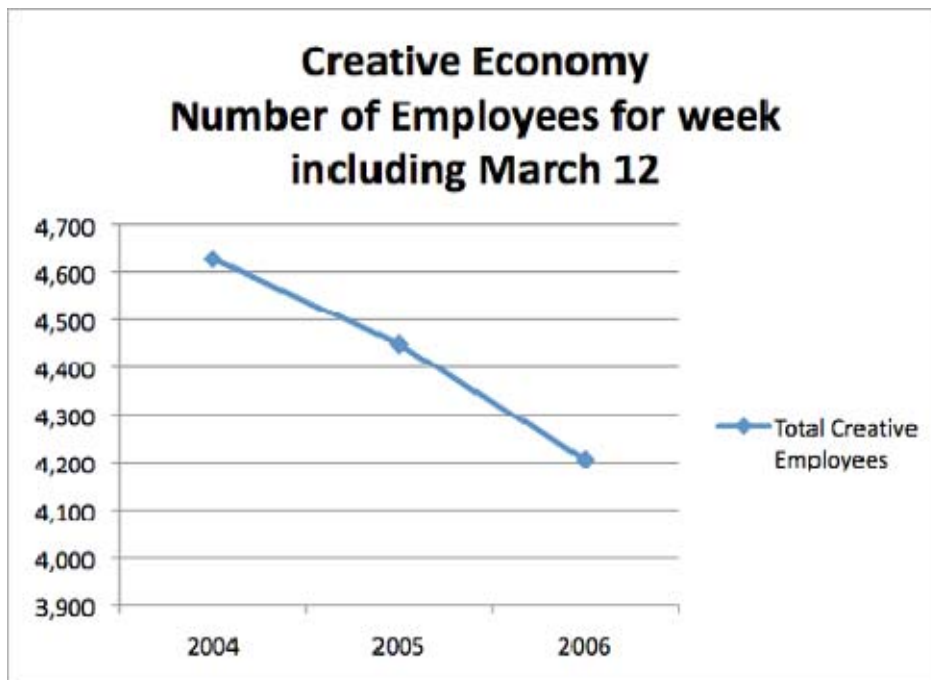
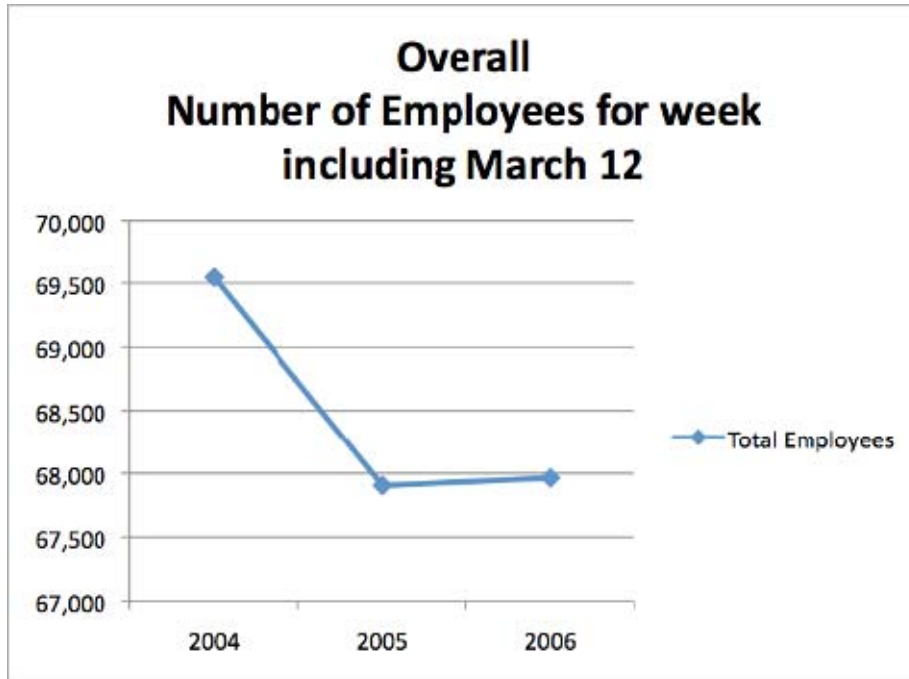
Creative Industries Niles-Benton Harbor area creative industry employers include:

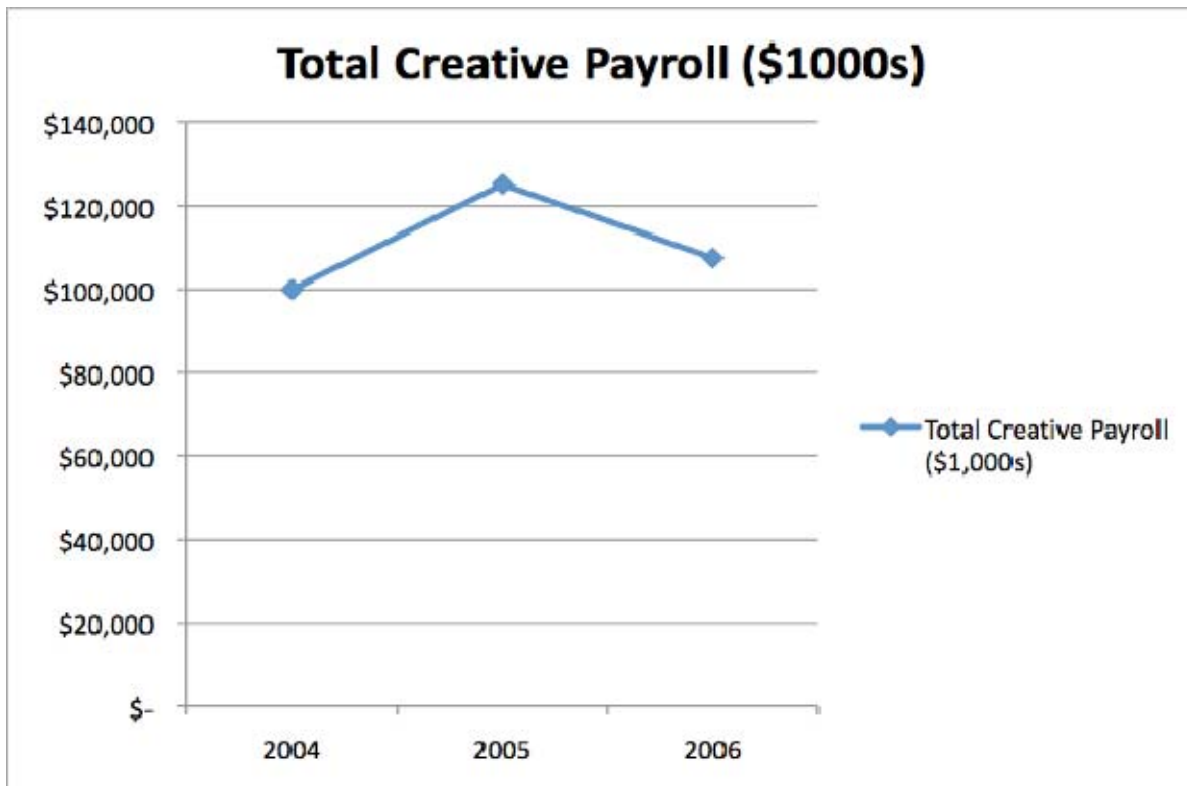
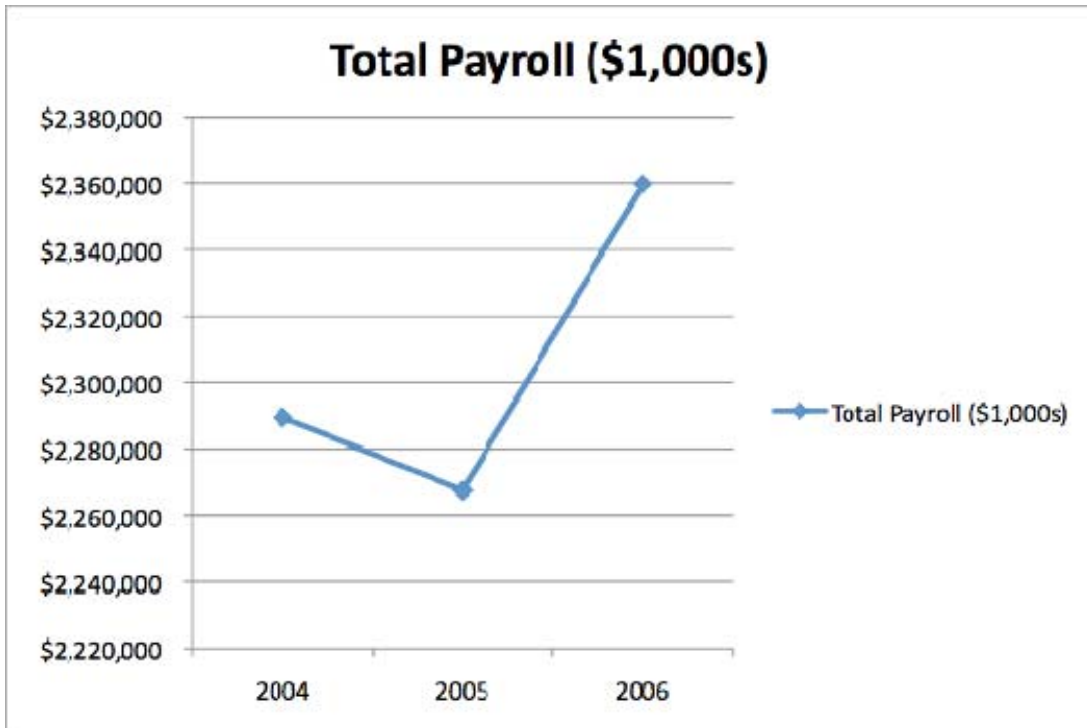
- Manufacturing: 23 creative-sector establishments employing 1,360 workers in manufacturing, primarily in printing and printing services, glass and stone
- Wholesale: 6 creative-sector establishments employing 129 workers in jewelry and books
- Retail: 67 creative-sector establishments employing 550 workers in retail including electronics, jewelry, books, gifts, and art dealers
- Information: 26 creative-sector establishments employing 853 workers in newspapers, books, periodicals, software, film and video recording
- Rentals: 14 creative-sector establishments employing 115 workers renting videos, and CDs, and costumes
- Design: 51 creative-sector establishments employing 706 workers in scientific and technical services including, advertising and public relations, architecture, interior design, graphic design, and photography
- Education: 4 creative-sector institutions employing 38 workers
- Arts and entertainment: 14 creative-sector establishments (and 94 non-employers) employing 392 artists, writers, and workers in visual and performing arts organizations, museums, and historic sites
- Accommodations and food: 8 creative-sector establishments employing 26 workers

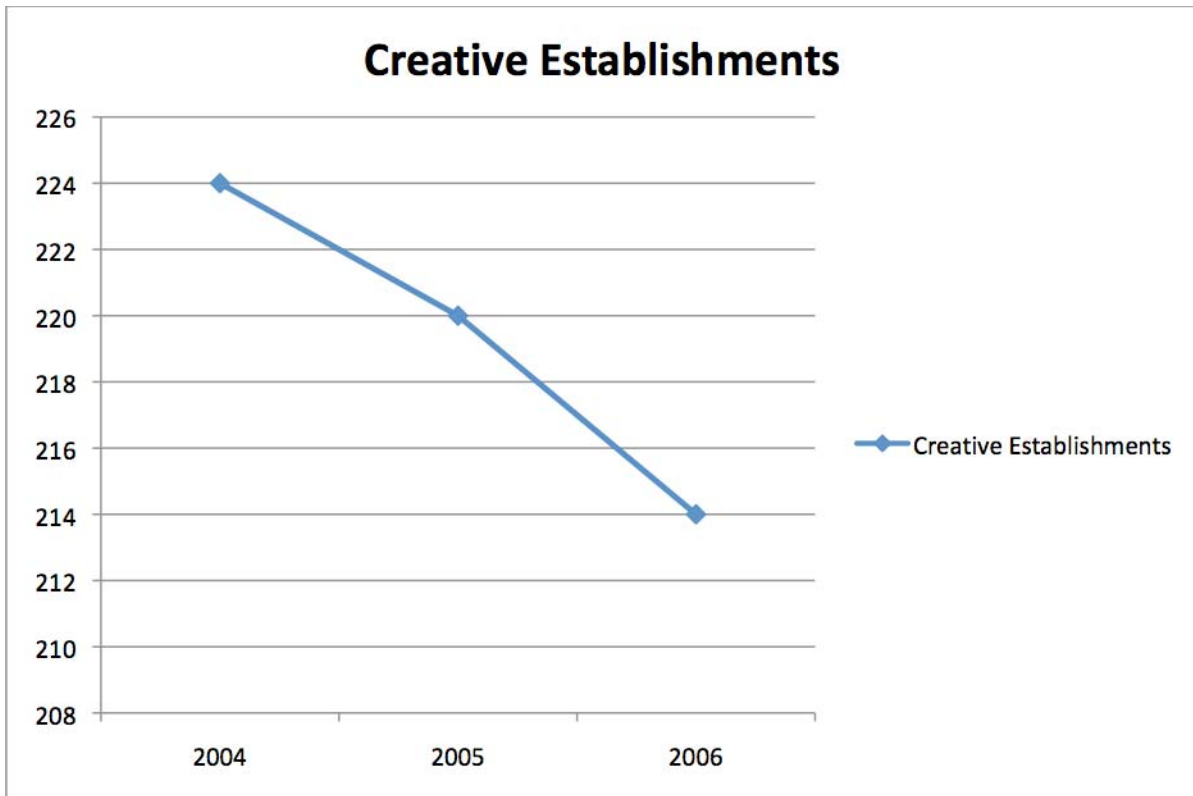
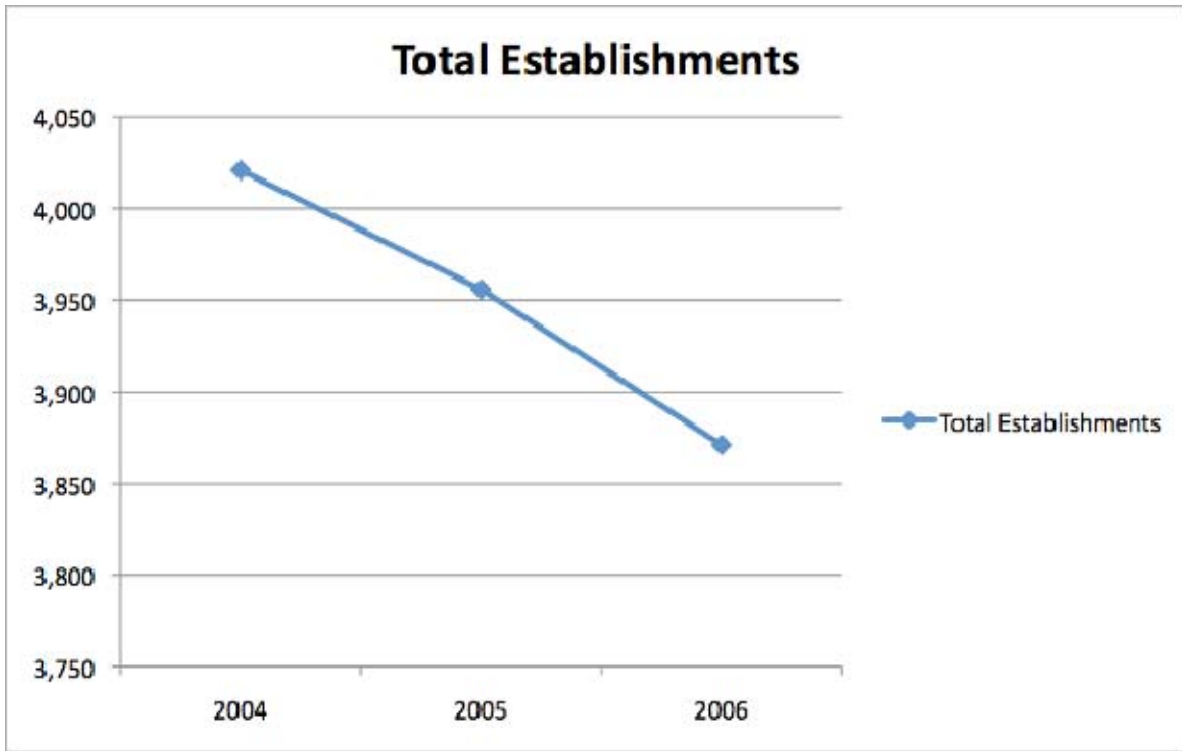
⁵ Creative Economy NAICS Codes (Core and Peripheral) and overall definition of the Creative Economy are based on the New England Foundation for the Arts publication, *The Creative Economy: A New Definition - November 2007*, which can be found online: <http://www.nefa.org/pubs/index.html>

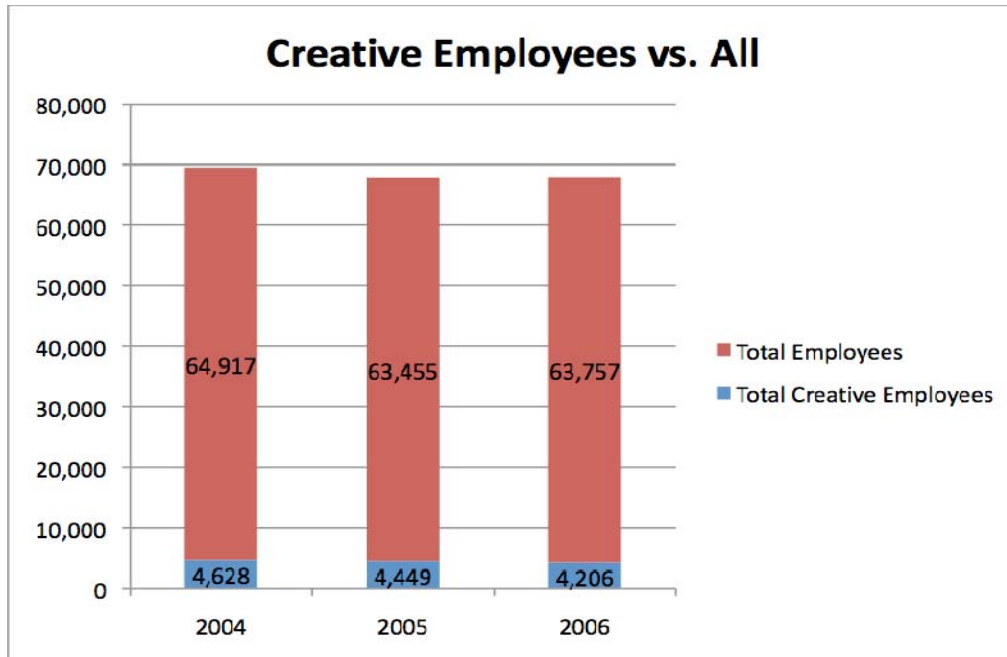
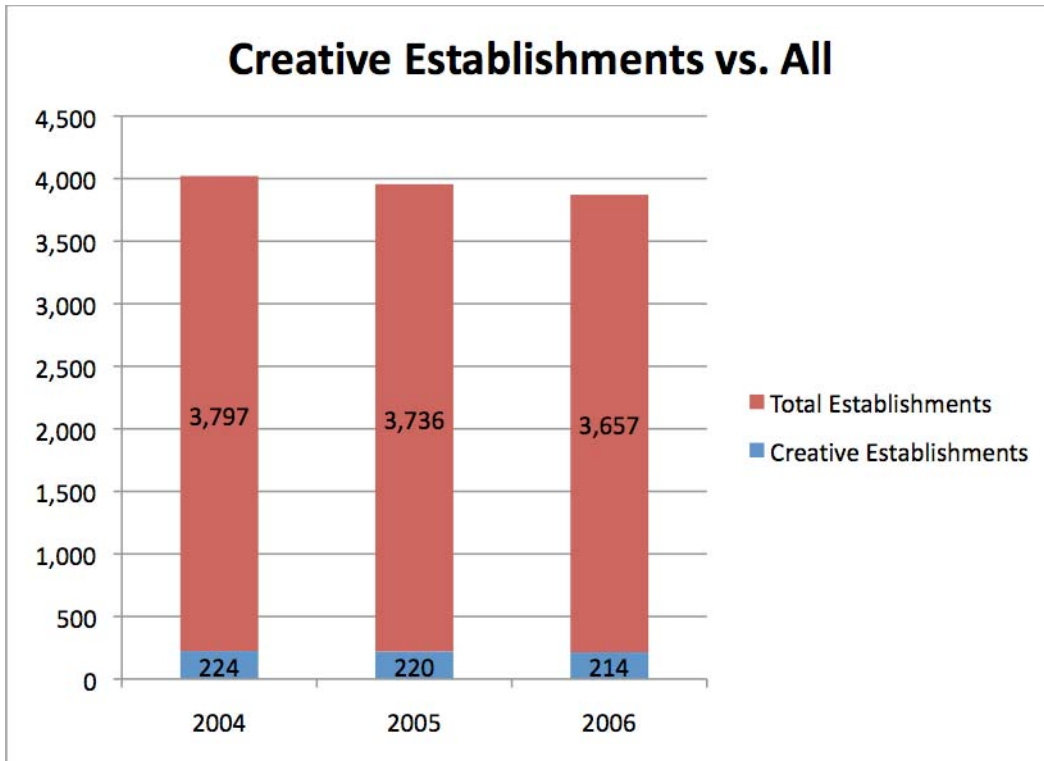
Change in Employment, Payroll, and Establishments from 2004-2006

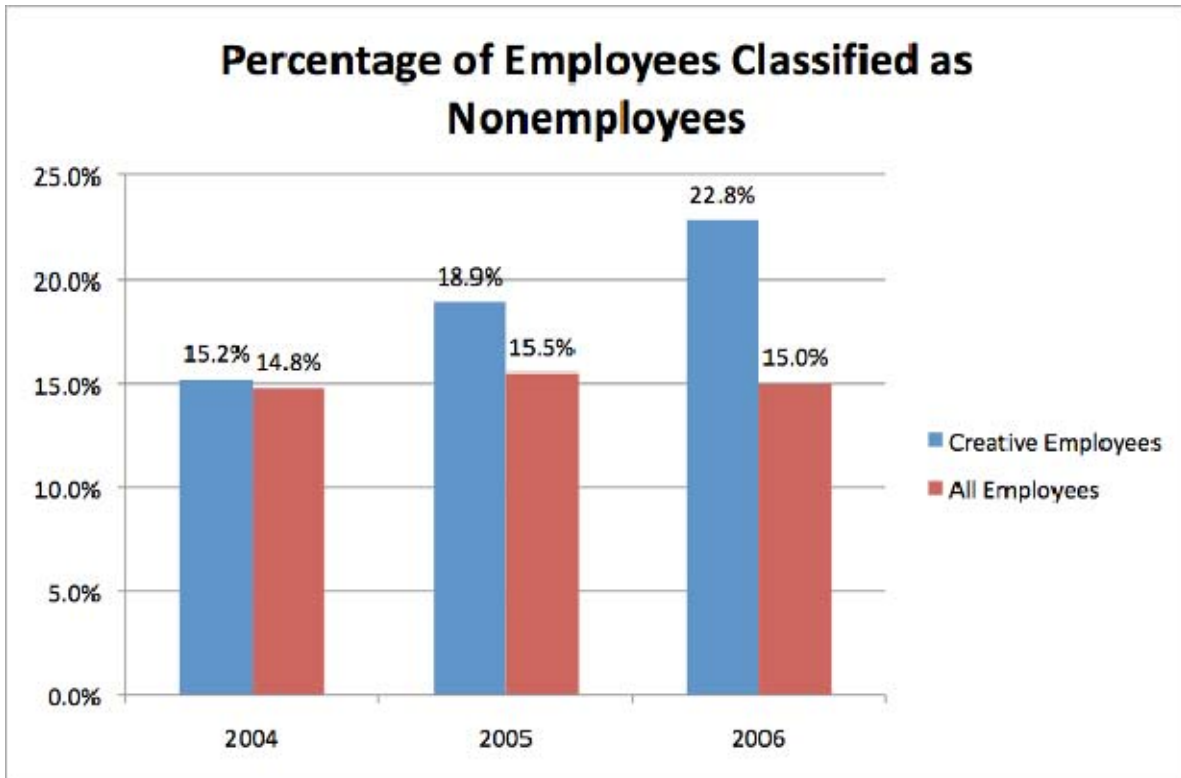
	All	Creative
Employees	-2.27%	-9.12%
Payroll	3.07%	7.55%
Establishments	-3.73%	-4.46%











[NOTE. Data based on the 2004- 2006 County Business Patterns. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see Survey Methodology.]

All data from the US Census Bureau at <http://factfinder.census.gov>; annual economic surveys. Creative Economy NAICS Codes (Core and Peripheral) and overall definition of the Creative Economy are based on the New England Foundation for the Arts publication, *The Creative Economy: A New Definition - November 2007*, which can be found online: <http://www.nefa.org/pubs/index.html>

Assessment Survey Executive Summary

Methods This report documents the opinions of 401 Niles area residents to a survey assessing cultural assets and cultural economic opportunities for the region. Niles Main Street distributed an invitation to respond to an online survey. The invitation went to Main Street members, Chamber of Commerce members, and to the constituent lists of members of the Cultural Economic Development Plan Steering Committee. The survey opened March 16 and closed March 31, 2009.

Demographics of respondents Three quarters of survey respondents live in Niles and 10% live in Indiana. The others are primarily from other communities in the region. Survey respondents were 95% white, two thirds female, and mostly married with children, college educated, employed, and middle income. The average age is 50 years.

Common Niles word associations For survey respondents, Niles is most commonly associated with these positive key words: *home or hometown, St. Joseph River, small town, historic, friendly, community, and family*. Also frequently mentioned are: *quaint, Four Flags, ice festival, safe, downtown, and quiet*. Fewer cited negative concepts and these were primarily: *boring and struggling*.

Significant products, services, or attractions By a wide margin, survey respondents most frequently cited the St. Joseph River or riverfront development and events as Niles' most significant attractions. Next most often, they named: movies, Apple Festival, Hunter Ice Festival, Riverfest, antiques, Veni's, French Market, train depot, restaurants, and Fort St. Joseph.

Downtown Niles' Strengths Respondents ranked downtown shopping and businesses. The strongest feature by far was "familiar faces – I know the people and they know me." Downtown

businesses are thought to be equal or stronger for customer service, authentic experience, cleanliness, and attractiveness. Downtown businesses are thought to be weaker in selection and variety and open hours. Factors for which the downtown is seen as about equal are convenience, price and value, and parking.

Importance of cultural attractions Fairs, festivals, and other special events are thought to be the most important of Niles' cultural attractions. Next most often, survey respondents named: parks and natural areas, the library, and film theatres as most significant.

Contributions to culture Nearly four in ten survey respondents (39%) recently made a cash (or cash equivalent) contribution to a local area arts, heritage, or cultural organization.

Purchase Michigan art Three in ten (30%) of survey respondents had purchased a local or Michigan work of visual art within the last twelve months.

News media sources Survey respondents report they mostly get information about area news, events, businesses, and cultural attractions from the daily newspaper, email from Main Street, and word of mouth. (Note: this will have been skewed due to the distribution of the survey by email from Niles Main Street.) Other important sources are television, posters, central web sites, and radio.

Business owners Just over a quarter of respondents (26%) operated or intended to open a business. The following section reports opinions of 106 Niles area business people.

Conducting business in Niles

Business owner respondents rated Niles' business climate. They most strongly agreed with four statements: Niles' small town look and feel are important to our customers. Business significantly improves on days of festivals and most other special events. Niles' downtown

facade and street improvements have really helped business. Niles' reputation as an historic and cultural center attracts customers.

Local business Niles businesses generally derive most of their business locally. Twenty percent of Niles businesses generate as much as three quarters of their revenues from outside a 50 mile radius of Niles. Half of businesses generate less than a quarter of their revenues from outside the area.

Most would recommend Niles to new businesses Over half of business owners responding to the survey (54%) would recommend Niles as a place to start or relocate a business. Over a third however, was not sure. Another eight percent would not recommend Niles. Inadequate customer traffic to sustain a retail storefront business was the most frequent reason cited for not recommending Niles to new businesses. Parking and the low-buying power of local residents were cited by a few business owners.

Improvements to climate for business Niles business owners most frequently called for more shops, a better mix, or more variety of retail shopping to improve the climate for business in Niles.

Creative workers Nearly a quarter of respondents (23%) described themselves as a professional creative worker (visual or performing artist (any discipline), craft person, designer, writer, historian, librarian, cultural manager, or other cultural or creative worker. The following section represents opinions of 88 creative workers in the Niles area.

Employment Seven in ten creative workers are self employed. Forty nine Niles-area creative businesses employed

or contracted an average of 3.27 workers per enterprise and ranged from 0-26 workers per business. Nineteen employed no workers.

Regional market Over half of creative workers describe the Michiana region as their primary market. About a third market locally and 17% serve a primarily international market.

Multiple jobs Nearly two thirds of creative workers (65%) work at other jobs to help support themselves or their family.

Creative worker needs Creative workers describe their primary needs as: increased sales or earnings, stimulation of creative experiences, marketing, and finding equipment, materials, or supplies.

Export businesses Creative workers were twice as likely to derive their revenues from outside the local region (wider than 50 mile radius) as other businesses. Artists, designers, and other creative businesses export their work, import cash, and are less dependent upon local markets.

Cultural organizations Fourteen percent of respondents were staff, board, or other volunteer leaders of a local area cultural organization (arts, humanities, heritage, or environmental). Fifty three cultural organization representatives answered questions in the following section.

Cultural organization needs Niles nonprofit cultural leaders described the most important needs of their cultural organizations. Most important are: volunteer development, operating funds, programming funds, information, training/assistance in funds development, and public information/advocacy.

Nonprofit funding trends

Representatives of nonprofit cultural organizations report funding from all sources are down. Contributions and sponsorships from business dropped the most significantly. Earned revenue from tickets, sales, or other enterprises was up somewhat for over a quarter of organizations, but this was offset by about the same proportion that reported decreases. Grants from governments and foundations were largely unchanged or down somewhat.

What would help nonprofits We asked, “What would most help your cultural organization make a greater contribution to the community’s economic development?” Most often responding leaders cited increased funding, new or expanded facility, and more public awareness and participation.

focused on identifying and stimulating cultural attractions and creative businesses.

Economic organization funding trends

Organizations serving business and economic development report no consistent funding trends over the past two years. Contributions from business and individuals are trending down somewhat. Membership fees or dues are up for some though this increase is offset for a similar decrease for others.

What is needed There were no common or often repeated clusters of suggestions for what would help economic and business development organizations improve the local economy. Respondents cited need for volunteers, jobs, community support, and coordination.

Economic and Community Development Organizations

Fifteen percent of respondents were staff, board, or other volunteer leaders of a local area economic development, community-development, or other civic improvement organization. Fifty seven representatives of economic, community development, and other civic improvement organizations answered questions in the following section.

Economic development organization needs

Leaders of economic and business development organizations cited five primary needs: Programming funds, Operating funds, Training/assistance in funds development, Volunteer development, and Recruiting board or council members. Least important is providing assistance to artists or other creative workers or help with business incubators or start ups. This lack of interest in creative workers or start-up businesses may be significant, given this cultural economic development planning is

Cultural and Economic Development Resources

The consultants identified 783 cultural and economic development resources in Niles’ primary and secondary market areas. These are documented in a separate *Directory of Niles Area Cultural and Economic Development Resources*.