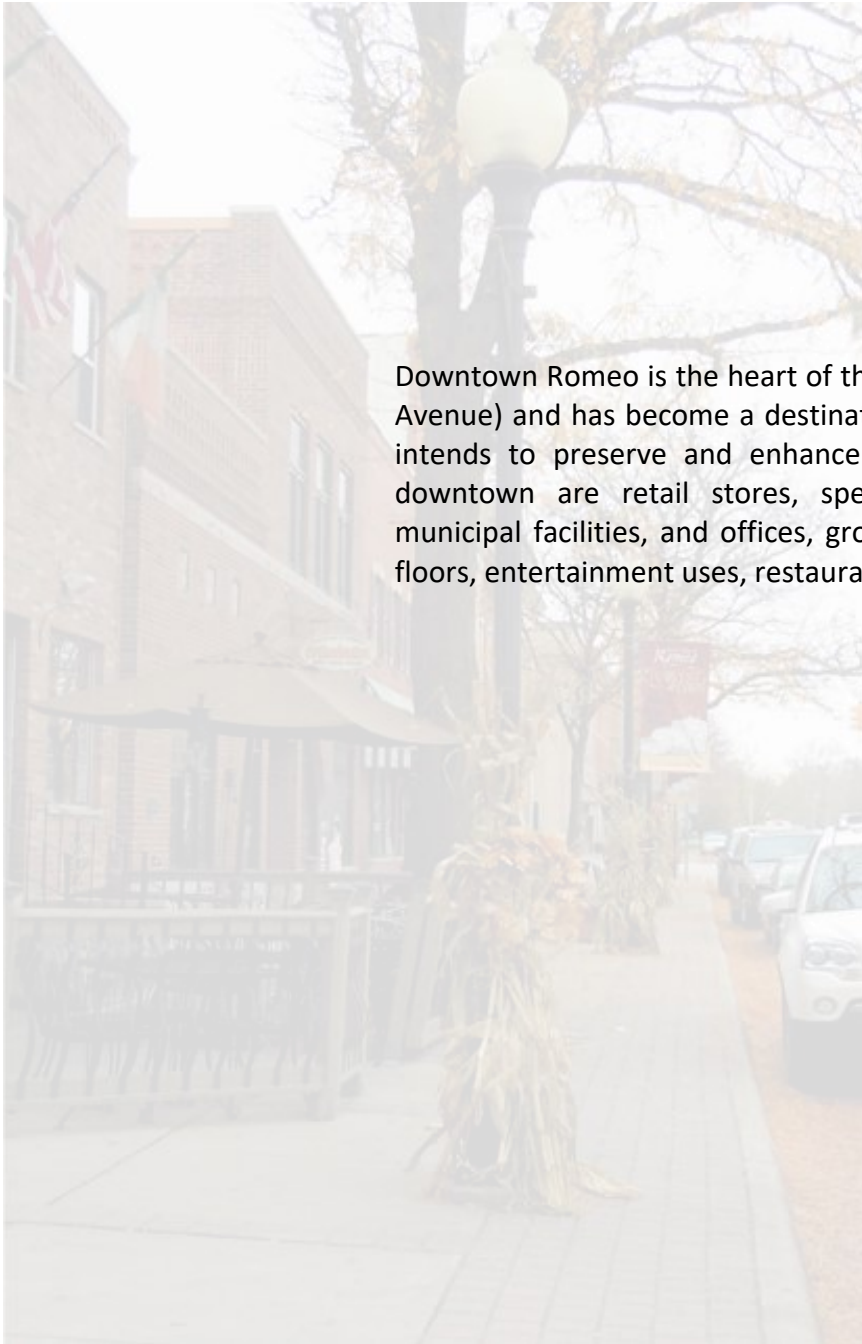


# Chapter 5

## Downtown Vitality

Downtown Romeo is the heart of the Village. It is attractively located along Main Street (Van Dyke Avenue) and has become a destination for residents and many regional visitors. This Master Plan intends to preserve and enhance this great asset. Desirable land uses and elements in the downtown are retail stores, specialty shops, personal service establishments, restaurants, municipal facilities, and offices, ground floor retail with office and residential uses on the upper floors, entertainment uses, restaurants with live entertainment, and public gathering places.



## CORE OBJECTIVES

- 🎯 Romeo's Downtown will be a vibrant, mixed use, pedestrian oriented environment, that values and builds upon its cultural and historical assets.
- 🎯 Romeo's Downtown will serve as a hub of community activity, providing a unique and hospitable location for area events, social interaction, and commerce.



## HISTORIC DOWNTOWN

Romeo is fortunate to have a vibrant historic downtown, pedestrian in scale and architecturally interesting. Within the downtown area, the walkways, decorative streetscape elements, and the one and two-story historic brick buildings provide Romeo with a truly unique image that many communities strive for today.

It is inevitable that changes to structures in the downtown area will occur over time. However, it is absolutely essential that these changes do not damage the historic building fabric and character of the downtown. Restoration of neglected storefronts and preservation of intact storefronts will improve the overall character of the downtown, strengthen its position as a regional destination, and strengthen its value to the community.



The historic buildings in the downtown area were constructed according to a common architectural tradition. While the style of each building may be unique, there are commonalities that all of the historic downtown buildings share. These common design elements are rooted in a centuries-old tradition of village/town building. Such centuries-old traditions develop over time in response to the needs of human activity.



### ACTION STRATEGY

*Future building renovation or alteration, no matter the planned use, must retain the overall design integrity of the historic building by protecting or restoring the original features, and design elements.*

## ADAPTIVE REUSE

Adaptive reuse is developing a new use for an older building or a building originally designed for a particular or specific purpose. Many of the existing historic buildings were designed for use different than the market would support today. The goal is to repurpose the building to benefit the community, such as commercial space, office space, or residential units.

The struggle with adaptive reuse of buildings can meet current building codes for the new use. While historic buildings tend to be structurally sound and exhibit the kind of architectural features, exterior design, and building form for which communities might strive, the cost of upgrading electrical, plumbing, and fires suppression systems can become burdensome for future developers.

Though putting a project together to do a reuse project can be complicated, the Village must make this an attractive opportunity by supporting or participating in the process. The historic designation is one crucial step that allows structures within the area to qualify for specific grant and loan programs. Additionally, the Village should update the Zoning Ordinance to be less restrictive with land use regulations, incentivizing developers to consider rehab projects.

### *Physical Characteristics of Successful Downtowns*

- ◆ *Pedestrian-friendly environment*
- ◆ *Clean, well-maintained streets and sidewalks*
- ◆ *Greenery: trees, shrubs, flowers, planters, etc.*
- ◆ *Traffic slowing features that force drivers to slow down*
- ◆ *Availability of public restroom facilities*
- ◆ *Street furniture, such as benches and seating*
- ◆ *Substantial street lights and well lit areas*
- ◆ *Trash and recycling bins*
- ◆ *Directional signage (parking, destinations, etc.)*
- ◆ *Easy access to adequate parking facilities*
- ◆ *Bike lanes, paths, and racks*
- ◆ *Open public space such as a park*
- ◆ *Preservation of historic character, including historic sites and reuse of existing historic buildings*
- ◆ *Maintenance of a consistent scale for buildings/streetscapes*
- ◆ *Outdoor cafes or restaurants that draw patrons outside, increase pedestrian traffic, and create a highly visible gathering place*
- ◆ *Attractive storefronts that encourage window-shopping*
- ◆ *Playgrounds and play areas for children*

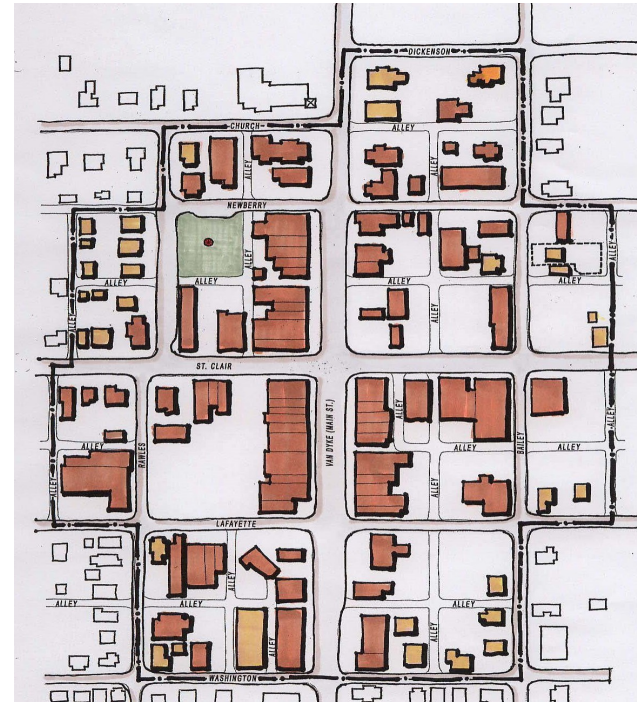


## ***Romeo Downtown Development Authority***

*On April 21, 1986, the Village of Romeo Downtown Development Authority (DDA) was established by the Village Council pursuant to Michigan Public Act 197 of 1975, and Romeo Ordinance No. 415.*

*The DDA was established in order to prevent actual and potential deterioration of property values in the downtown district, to eliminate the causes of economic and physical deterioration, and to promote economic growth and development.*

*The adjacent map shows the boundaries of the Downtown Development District.*



## **BLUEPRINTS FOR MICHIGAN DOWNTOWNS**

In 2006, the Village of Romeo participated in the Blueprints for Michigan's Downtowns Program, a partnership effort between the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA), the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), and the Michigan Municipal League (MML). The program contracted with a planning and design firm, Hyett Palma, to prepare a downtown strategy for the Village of Romeo. The purpose of the strategy was to create a downtown vision and then develop action steps to implement the vision. Suggested actions focused on revitalizing the Downtown, attracting people, and creating new private jobs and investments. Many of the plan's recommendations are still relevant and achievable today.



### **ACTION STRATEGY**

*The DDA should review the Downtown Blueprint Plan to determine which of the recommended strategies are still relevant today, and develop a plan for implementation.*

## MIXED-USE BUILDINGS

Mixed-use downtowns were the hearts of our communities for decades. However, in the early 20th century, with the advent of Euclidean zoning (which separates different land uses into districts) and the rise in popularity of the automobile, the urge to separate retail from residential grew. Most community zoning ordinances prohibited the mixing of retail and residential uses, and it was one of the prime factors prompting the decline of our downtowns.

By the 1990s and 2000s, urban planners realized that mixed-use development was something to be embraced. They saw that vibrant downtowns had mixed uses and that the most active downtowns were the ones that had "high energy" businesses, such as restaurants, bars, coffee houses, nightclubs, salons, theaters, live music venues, and similar-type uses.

There has been a lot of discussion regarding the current zoning ordinance regulations that restrict first-floor units on Main Street in the Downtown to retail. While first floor retail, if properly designed, can increase activity Downtown, Romeo needs to be mindful that there is a finite amount of retail space that can be supported. It is, often, worse to have vacant buildings than to occupy ground floor units with non-retail businesses.

Office uses are essential to Downtown because they are "demand anchors" for retailing along the street, especially in the morning and afternoon. Professional tenants such as doctors and lawyers are very desirable because they steadily attract visitors, employ office staff, and serve neighborhood residents—all of whom are potential shoppers.



### ACTION STRATEGY

*Consider designating a core area within the Downtown, perhaps those parcels abutting Main Street, and one block north and south of St. Clair Street, as an area where the first floor can only be utilized for retail, eating and drinking, and entertainment-type uses. Beyond that area (but within the Downtown), there would be no restriction of uses on the first floor.*

## DOWNTOWN RETAIL GAP ANALYSIS

A retail gap analysis compares the availability of goods and services (supply) with consumer expenditures (demand). When consumers spend more than existing businesses can accommodate, this means that need is greater than supply. When this occurs, local households and daytime workers are spending money outside of the market area. This is referred to as a retail market leakage and can represent a potential opportunity for growth. Conversely, when the supply is greater than consumer expenditure (supply is greater than demand), there is saturation or a surplus.

The Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI), an international supplier of geographic information systems, software, and geodatabase management applications, provides Market Retail Gap data for locations throughout the world. The chart on the following page pertains to the Village of Romeo. On the chart, the bars to the right of the center indicate leakage or demand for services. The bars to the left of the center show a surplus or oversaturation of services. According to the information presented, there appears to be a market demand in Romeo for businesses such as specialty food stores, non-automotive motor vehicle sales, general merchandise stores, and lawn & garden equipment dealers.

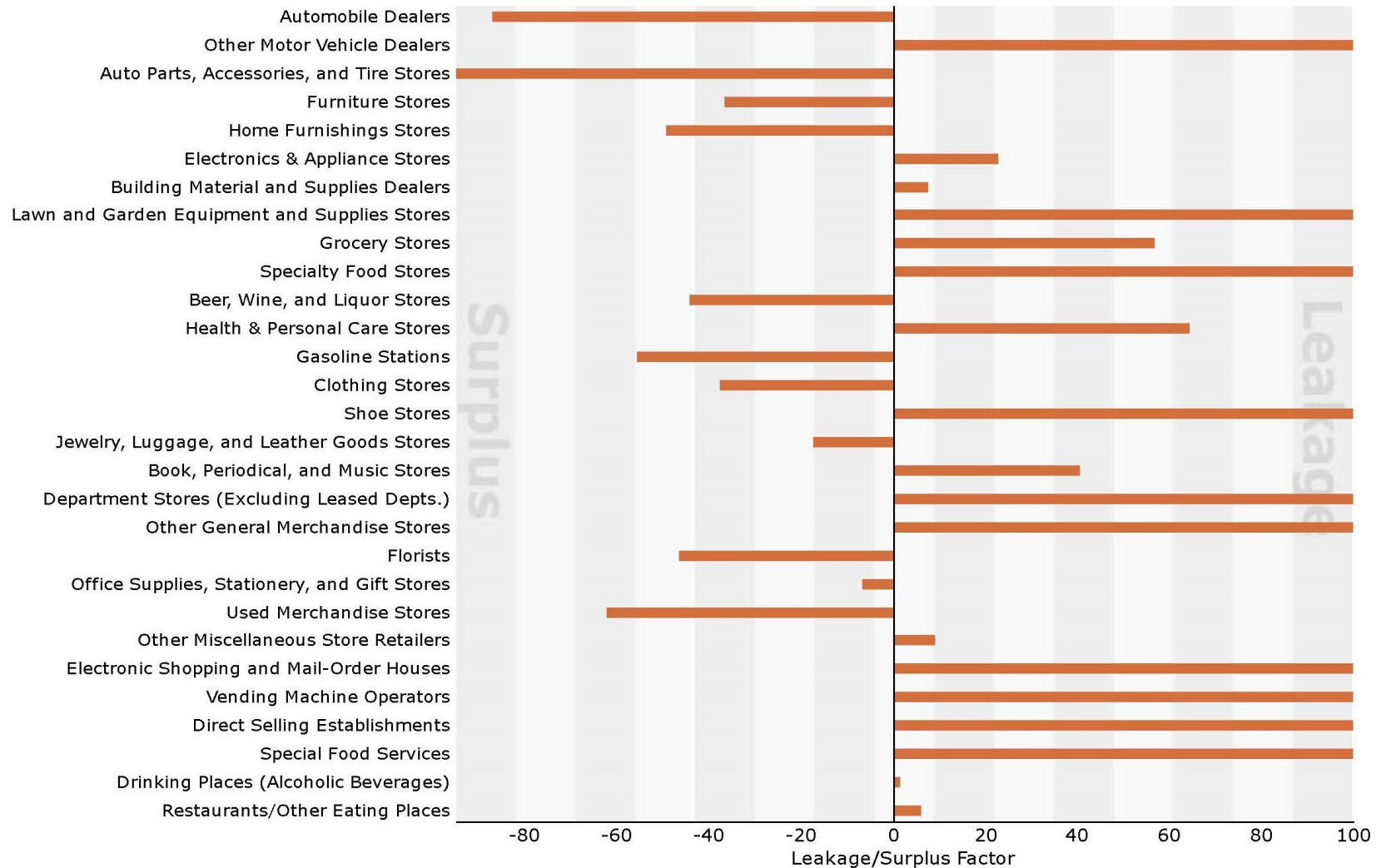
The Village administration and Downtown Development Authority should utilize this information when marketing the downtown to potential businesses. However, it is essential to note that other factors such as competition, demographics, business climate, site availability, access, and infrastructure will dictate whether this potential can be captured in Romeo or if retail will develop elsewhere to capitalize on existing unmet market demand. Competition with other communities in the area will be the most significant factor in determining future retail growth.



### ACTION STRATEGY

*The Downtown Development Authority and the Planning Commission should take an active role in marketing available commercial spaces in the downtown to potential and existing businesses in the region that might seek to expand or open a new facility. Assembling data on the available commercial properties, including information on their internal layout and square footage, potential uses, and provision of utilities, is one key step that could be taken.*

## Market Demand



**Source:** Esri and Infogroup. Esri 2019 Updated Demographics. Esri 2017 Retail MarketPlace. Copyright 2019 Esri. Copyright 2017 Infogroup, Inc. All rights reserved.



## ATTRACTING ENTREPRENEURS

To support a thriving, growing local economy that successfully attracts and retains businesses in the Downtown, Romeo must focus on attracting new entrepreneurs. For this to occur, the Village must be prepared with the necessary infrastructure, urban setting, and facilities to support business development. Romeo should undertake the following recommendations to establish it as a business-ready community:

- ◆ Promote Romeo as a live, learn, and earn community.
- ◆ Improve broadband by ensuring that high-speed internet access is available in all parts of the community. Fast, reliable internet is essential for most businesses as it directly impacts the speed and efficiency of communication and work.
- ◆ Provide business incubator space in proximity to downtown to support new and developing businesses with coworking spaces, affordable office spaces, and business mentorship and training programs.



### ACTION STRATEGY

*Work with downtown building owners to identify space that could provide reasonable priced lease options, shared services, and technical assistance to start-up businesses.*

## Business Incubators

*A major challenge for small businesses is having sufficient operating capital to make it through the first year or so. One way to mitigate this challenge is by starting business incubators. A business incubator is a facility that provides flexible space near or below market cost; shared services; access to computers, fax machines and general office equipment; and technical assistance to entrepreneurs and early-stage businesses. The primary goal of a business incubator is to develop successful business operations that will outgrow their start-up space in the incubator and leave to establish viable, freestanding business operations within the Village.*



The Launch Factory Incubator, Charlotte, North Carolina

## DOWNTOWN PARKING

Parking and land use regulations are closely related. To achieve the goals of a land use plan, adequate parking must be available to meet the needs of a dense downtown setting, while facilities should be located so as to minimize the impact on the vibrancy of the downtown and the pedestrian environment.

In order to maximize the use of the core and promote a pedestrian-friendly environment, parking demand for businesses in the downtown is considered collectively rather than on a business-by-business basis. Downtown property owners may be required to provide on-site parking or are responsible for meeting parking demands by participating in a public-private funding structure that provides for the construction of shared customer and employee parking.

Parking is a costly asset; accordingly it is important to ensure that the use of parking spaces and facilities are maximized. It is important to note that it is not practical to provide enough parking spaces to meet the absolute peak demand. Therefore parking management strategies focus on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing parking supply and should be utilized to address short-term parking needs in the downtown.

Parking in downtown Romeo is served by several private and public parking lots and on-street parking. It is critical that a balance of parking types be maintained throughout the downtown to meet the needs of various users. While public parking lots offer the most flexibility for visitors and employees, private parking lots offer unique opportunities for businesses to promote parking options directly to their customers.



The perceived shortage of parking in downtown Romeo has been identified as a major concern by some community members. Other residents have indicated that there is not a parking shortage, but only a parking management issue. Regardless, of which side is right, there remains a parking concern that needs to be examined and addressed. In this regard, a parking study should be performed that answers the following questions:

- ◆ Is there enough available parking in the downtown to serve both the existing businesses and anticipated future businesses?
- ◆ Are the existing lots being used most efficiently?
- ◆ What parking management options should the Village pursue to maintain a quality downtown, while protecting the nearby neighborhoods?
- ◆ How best to fund the construction of additional parking areas, if needed, and how best to fund the maintenance and management of existing parking areas?



#### **ACTION STRATEGY**

*Contract with a qualified company to undertake an analysis of downtown parking supply and demand, and based upon the findings, recommend specific, achievable, implementation measures.*

## FORM BASED CODES

Form-based codes are a zoning tool that can be used to achieve mixed-use development in a contextually appropriate manner that can be catered to the character or desired character of a particular area of the Village.

Form-based Codes focus on physical form as the organizing element of regulation. Building types and dimensions, building and parking location, and the relationship of building façades to the public realm are all elements of physical form that are considered when crafting a Form-based Code.

Under conventional zoning, land use is regulated by districts often segregating uses that may otherwise be compatible. Use regulations in the form-based code recognize that building forms can accommodate a variety of uses. Therefore, uses are organized by broader use groups, which are groupings or categorization of compatible uses which exhibit similar characteristics. Because the district is more permissive and buildings are designed and located in such a way to accommodate more uses, these developments tend to be more sustainable as they are more easily adapted to new uses in the future.

The entire Main Street and St. Clair Street corridors are obvious candidates for a Form Based Code overlay zone. These areas have a mix of historic homes and commercial/office buildings interspersed with new commercial establishments. These new commercial buildings are often single-story with parking in front; they do not fit with the historic development patterns. Creating a Form Based Code would address building size, placement, and height, as well as other components of the public realm.

### ***Form Based Codes***

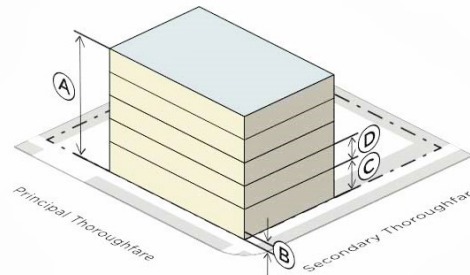
*While not in the scope of this master plan update, the Village of Romeo has expressed interest in exploring the possibility of adopting a Form Based Code for its Downtown.*

*Form Based Codes are a method of regulating development to achieve a desirable urban form. They create a predictable public realm, primarily by controlling physical form with a lesser focus on land use through ordinance regulations.*

*Form Based Codes focus on the quality of spaces and can target a specific development or entire portion of the community. They are vision-based, unique to individual places, and can be applied to undeveloped or redevelopment areas.*

## Typical Form Based Code Regulations

### 2.2.5. Height



#### Building Height

A	Stories (min/max)	2 stories / 8 stories
	Height (min/max) <sup>1</sup>	28' / 110'

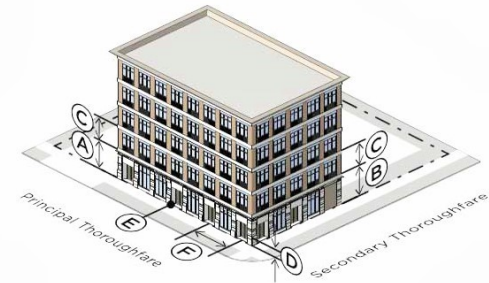
#### Story Height

B	Ground floor elevation (min/max)	0' / 2'
C	Ground story height, floor to floor (min)	16'
D	Upper story height, floor to floor (min)	12'

<sup>1</sup> Where any 40 foot or taller building is proposed on a site which abuts an R1, R2, or R3 zoning district, the upper stories of the building must be stepped back from the respective interior side or rear lot line by at least one foot for each additional foot above the first 40 feet of building height.

Source: City of Olean, NY

### 2.2.6. Transparency



#### Transparency

A	Ground story transparency, front facade (min) <sup>2</sup>	70%
B	Ground story transparency, corner side facade (min) <sup>2</sup>	40%
C	Upper story transparency, front and corner facades (min) <sup>2</sup>	25%
D	Ground story window sill height, front and corner facades (min/max) <sup>2</sup>	0.5' / 2.5'

#### Pedestrian Access

E	Main entrance location (required)	Front facade
F	Entrance spacing along front facade <sup>2</sup>	At least 1 entrance for each 30' of facade width

<sup>2</sup> Non-commercial buildings are exempt from transparency, window sill height, and entrance spacing requirements.



## ACTION STRATEGY

*Prepare and adopt a form-based zoning code for Downtown Romeo.*



## TRASH DUMPSTER CORALS

Dumpster corrals are generally incorporated in a designated, central area. They can be attached to the side or back of a building, or at the end of a parking lot. Their location provides benefits by making it easier and more convenient to access by residents or employees. Its location also averts illegal trash dumping, which is a frequent problem for commercial buildings in urban areas.

Another great advantage to the location of a dumpster corral is odor and waste management. Many commercial properties do not want their guests, customers, or clients smelling the rotting odors of garbage as they enter the premises. Furthermore, it can be unsanitary to have garbage within range of guests. A dumpster corral can mitigate odor and safeguard against unhygienic environments.



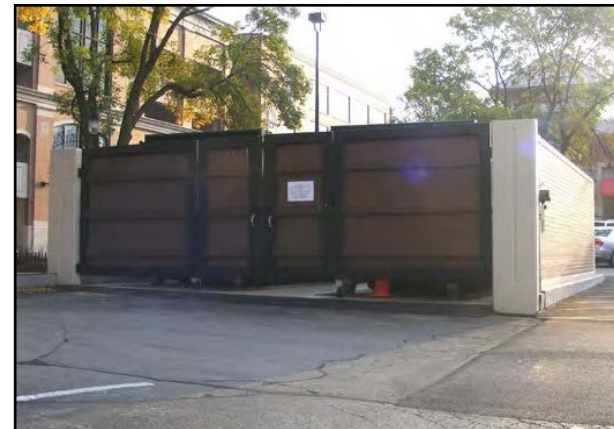
### ACTION STRATEGY

*Identify locations, and construct dumpster corrals in each of the four quadrants of the downtown. Establish ordinance requirements for their shared use.*

## ***Naperville, Illinois Case Study***

*In January 2010, the Naperville City Council authorized the construction of a shared refuse enclosure at the end of a surface parking lot. The enclosure was sufficiently sized for two garbage compactors and grease receptacles to serve the businesses bordering the parking lot.*

*Constructing the enclosure allowed dumpsters that had been located in the parking lot to be removed, producing immediate aesthetic benefits (e.g., reducing unpleasant odors currently experienced during warmer months) and functional benefits (e.g., increasing the number of available parking spaces and reducing the number of different trucks servicing the lot).*



## DOWNTOWN GATEWAYS

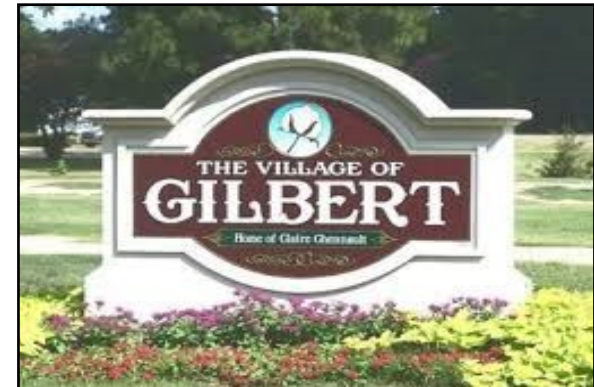
Gateways into the Village currently do not effectively announce arrival or communicate the sense of pride and the character that embodies the area. Gateways are physical symbols of community or district limits that express a sense of territory to those entering.

Understanding the importance of identifying boundaries in the Village, the reintroduction of the entry signs is seen as a necessity. These signs should reflect the historical nature of the Village, and help provide an aesthetic entry, utilizing quality landscaping and signage materials.



### ACTION STRATEGY

*Construct architectural features that clearly identify the entrances to Downtown from all directions on Main Street and St. Clair Street.*



## DOWNTOWN WAYFINDING

Wayfinding refers to the process of finding one's way from point to point. Good wayfinding systems direct traffic flows across all transportation modes to key areas or destinations. Great wayfinding systems not only accomplish these goals, but they also promote a community's brand or identity. This brand or identity helps establish a sense of place by communicating a certain message to residents and visitors alike. Great wayfinding systems use consistent designs to further promote a positive image of a community.

Well-designed and well-placed signs create aesthetic harmony in a community and work to:

- ◆ Help visitors find their way
- ◆ Promote a pedestrian-friendly environment
- ◆ Link uses, destinations, and districts
- ◆ Enhance a community's identity



### ACTION STRATEGY

*Develop a system of wayfinding within the Village that appropriately directs motorists, bicyclist, and pedestrians to various locations. Signage should reflect the historical heritage of the community.*



## STREETSCAPES

Streetscapes include natural and built features that influence the quality of the street and its visual effect. This includes roads, sidewalks, signs, lighting, and other elements that often influence public places where people can engage in various activities and interact with each other. In the public meetings conducted for this Master Plan, respondents indicated a desire for the revitalization of the downtown, business development, and attractive community gathering places. Many of these features are influenced by the streetscape, as it provides transportation and the setting in which people can live, work, and play.

The following elements contribute to an active and equitable streetscape:



**Safety.** Downtown Romeo should offer safe access for a variety of transportation modes, including vehicles, bicycles, and foot traffic. Safe travel can be supported through crosswalk demarcation, sidewalk maintenance, curbing, and measures for traffic calming.

**Walkability.** Accessibility is a key value for people and businesses; areas that offer proximity to various services and destinations are more likely to be convenient and active. Walkable places are often associated with increased density, more transportation options, and mixed land uses. Therefore, an environment conducive to walking, is especially important Downtown. Walkable spaces will support business viability and active community centers.

**Aesthetics.** A streetscape's visual appearance largely influences the downtown experience, helping define the economic activity, community health, and sense of place. Streetscapes can be enhanced through features such as lighting, outdoor seating, clean streets, and landscaping. Although much of Romeo's downtown has minimal building setbacks, landscape planters or pedestrian lighting with hanging baskets can offer greenery. Aesthetics should encourage residents and visitors to interact with the environment, others, and businesses.

## FAÇADE IMPROVEMENTS

The historic appearance of a majority of downtown buildings establishes the distinct visual character of the area, and is recognized as the hallmark asset and attraction to many downtown visitors. It is vital to implement a program to encourage building owners to maintain, preserve, restore, renovate and/or improve their buildings and businesses in a way that does not limit architectural variety, but rather encourages designs that will respect existing historic buildings.

## BEAUTIFICATION AND LANDSCAPING

To maintain the attractiveness of the downtown, and to preserve its historic charm, a comprehensive beautification program should be implemented. This can include such things as: the maintenance of streetscape features; landscaping improvements (planting of trees, shrubs, and the hanging of flower baskets); installation of banners; installing and maintaining street furniture; and, the installation and maintenance of lighting.



### ACTION STRATEGY

*The DDA should take a lead role in enhancing the streetscapes and building facades in the Downtown. Programs that encourage private investment should be developed.*



## PUBLIC SPACES AND GATHERING AREAS

One of the most important aspects of the perception of a downtown, are the public spaces in which residents, employees, visitors, or shoppers can gather. These places can take the form of sidewalks, plazas, alleys, parks, etc. These spaces not only provide areas for pedestrian movement and congregation, but they also enhance the architectural variety that promotes the identity of the downtown.

The Village has several good examples of public spaces and gathering areas within the downtown. These include the pedestrian alleys which have been created in each quadrant of the downtown, and the Village Park. The alleys not only continue the pedestrian sidewalk and brickscape found on the main sidewalks of downtown, but also provide extensive landscaping and visual intrigue. The Village Park provides an extensive gathering area, including the pavilion, park benches, and table. Large-scale landscaping protects users against excessive sun or other harmful elements.

The Village should continue to maintain, and where appropriate increase the number of these vital areas.



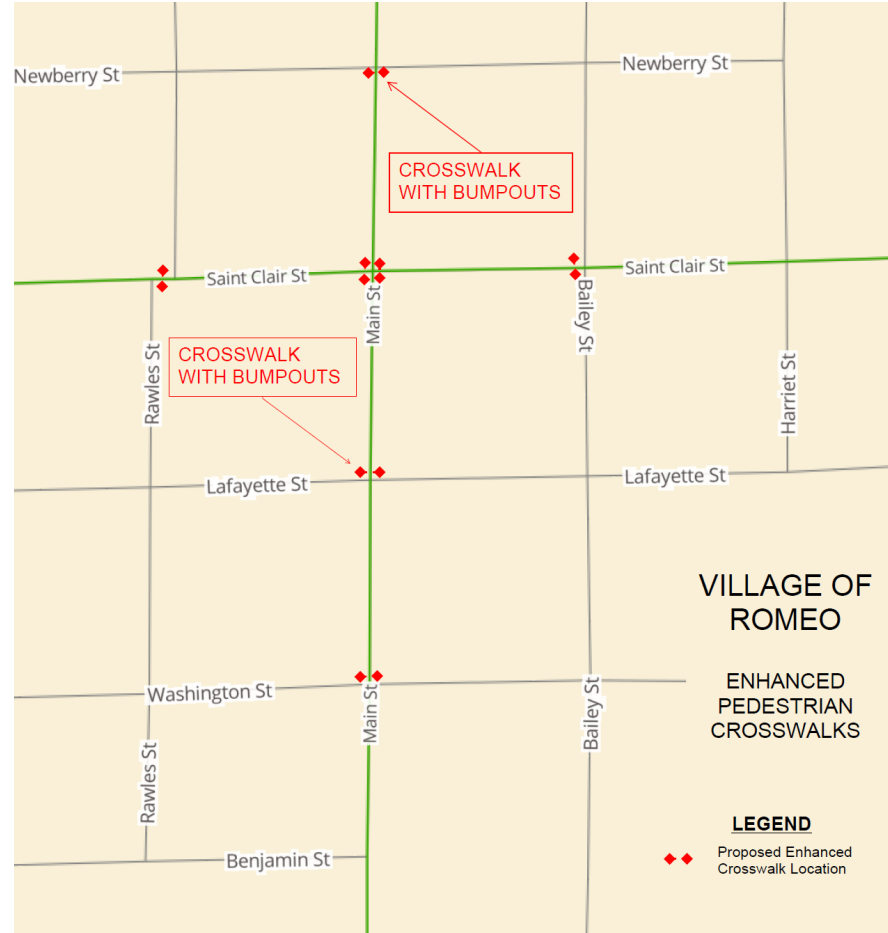
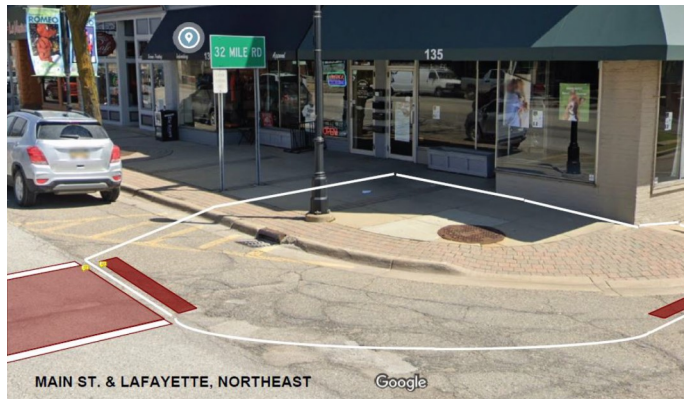
### ACTION STRATEGY

*Additional public gathering spaces should be identified and constructed, and existing public gathering spaces should be enhanced and promoted for use.*

## DOWNTOWN PEDESTRIAN CROSSINGS

The walking experience downtown should be simple, enjoyable, and safe. Streets must balance both the needs of the pedestrian and the automobile. Traffic must be calmed, and pedestrian amenities must be enhanced, to achieve a vibrant downtown.

An essential component of pedestrian safety is having delineated crosswalks. Romeo has contracted with Rowe Engineering to develop a crosswalk plan for the downtown area. Their plan identifies 7 crosswalks (as shown on the adjoining map), including “bumpouts” at Main St. and Lafayette St, and Main St. and Newberry St.



Source: Rowe Engineering



### ACTION STRATEGY

*The Village should seek appropriate funding (including grants) to develop the needed crosswalks identified by Rowe Engineering.*

## PROXIMITY TO THE MACOMB ORCHARD TRAIL

In 2017, the Macomb County Department of Planning and Economic Development, along with LSL Planning, developed a report entitled, “Mobilize Macomb”, which evaluated the existing trail network within the county.

The report found that a gap existed in the trail network between the Macomb Orchard Trail (which crosses the northeast portion of the Village), and Downtown Romeo. It further recommend that “The Macomb Orchard Trail crossing should be brought up to new design standards to include wayfinding and a bike lane leading to downtown along 32 Mile Road”.



### ACTION STRATEGY

*The Macomb Orchard Trail is a great asset that should be promoted to generate additional pedestrian and bike traffic into the Downtown. A safely designed pathway should be developed along 32 Mile from Romeo Trailside Park to Main Street. In addition, advertising materials should be made available at the park, promoting Romeo’s current events and businesses.*

*“Cultures and climates differ all over the world, but people are the same. They’ll gather in public if you give them a good place to do it.”*

— Jan Gehl, Architect