



Downtown Management Report : 2024

Sparta TODAY (Consisting of Sparta DDA, Sparta Chamber & Sparta Events)



COMMUNICATION

- 747.3k Views on Facebook
- 46,097 Sessions on the Sparta Chamber website
- 30,843 New visitors to the Sparta Chamber website
- 18.4k Accounts reached on the top reaching Facebook post
- 197 New Blog Subscribers
- 45 Local businesses who attended our monthly "What's Brewin" events, which are now mobile



EVENTS

- 70+ Days of Special Events
- 55+ Businesses that donated, volunteered, or helped out
- 45 Round Haybales decorated by the community
- \$128,600 Sponsorships and foundation grants raised
- 600+ Over 600 Volunteer Hours clocked to help make great things happen in Sparta
- 5,000 Brats served at the Beer & Brat Street Festival



KEEPING THINGS VIBRANT

Unique Sip & Shop themes brought visitors from afar: Barbie night and Taylor Swift themes!

A new Expo style night on Thursday kicking off Town & Country Days in mid May brought 16 local businesses to set up booths with interactive games / fun for the hundreds of visitors who attended.



SPARTA BUCKS



22

Local businesses accepting Sparta Bucks

\$18,190

Sparta Bucks spent in Sparta small businesses in 2024

\$6,020

Amount of Sparta Bucks purchased by community to circulate back into local economy

\$3,000

Shop Local Campaign "prizes" of Sparta Bucks awarded through Shop Local promotions!



ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2024

Recognized by the Michigan Downtown Association as an "On the Rise Organization" for the momentum of our efforts! Each year during its Annual Award Ceremony, the MDA recognizes communities across the state for outstanding marketing and promotional strategies, economic development projects, and placemaking initiatives. The MDA is committed to drawing attention to the work downtown organizations and downtown directors do every day to increase property values, promote community, and encourage small business growth.

This is a major kudos to the efforts of our boards, volunteers, staff, and businesses!



A group of local leaders rebuilt a retired service organization into Sparta Community Works, which has provided over \$4,500 worth of grants to local organizations such as West Michigan Arts Council, Hometown Helping Hands, Sue Blackall's Projects, Military Hygiene Box of Grace, Sparta Events, Sparta Appleview Elementary, Daddy Daughter Time, Sparta Middle School Fishing Club, and Sparta Ridgeview Elementary!

Exciting things to note!

3 businesses who celebrated ribbon cuttings: Hotspot, Kindred Karma, & Bayes Water Treatment

150+ People who found penguins hidden throughout Sparta businesses during the Penguin Pursuit, a Shop Local initiative hosted by Sparta TODAY



BOARD OF DIRECTORS & STAFF

As of December 1, 2024

DDA Board

Tom Cheslek, President North Ridge Funeral Home | **Kelly Potes**, Vice President ChoiceOne Bank | **Mike Lamb** Coldwell Banker | **Robert Whalen** Sparta Village President | **Rex Baker** Baker Investments LLC | **Robert Shangle** LiveStatue | **Doc George Freeland** Freeland Chiropractic | **Janet Knauf** 201 Marketplace | **Tim Driscoll** Driscoll | **Nate Benham** Sparta Tire | **Joel Stoner** Sparta Area Schools | **Dan Scarffe** Scarffe Chiropractic

Mission (approved 2009): Create a downtown that still has a small town feel and offers a bit of yester-year and yet is on the cutting edge with up-to-date shops and business practices. A safe, secure, friendly downtown where every member of the family can find fun things to do. A beautiful, busy, and thriving downtown that has things you can't find elsewhere. The heart of a real town that is a great place to raise a family. Once you come to downtown Sparta, you won't want to leave!

Chamber Board

Amber Marks Dance with Me | **Konrad Raclawski** ChoiceOne Bank | **Maryanne Wright** Wrightway Appraisal | **Tom Cheslek** North Ridge Funeral Home | **Tom Penland** Tom's Hometown Bakery | **Lynn Driscoll** Sundaes at the Park | **Michelle Cooper** Servpro | **Karin Kay** Sable Homes | **Sarah Acker** Compass Credit Union | **Alysia Gill** Auto Care Excellence

Mission: Promote local business development through community interaction.

Sparta Events Board

Maryanne Wright Wrightway Appraisal | **Rex Baker** Baker Investments LLC | **Brenda Braybrook** McDonald's | **Tom Cheslek** North Ridge Funeral Home

Mission: Promote economic development and community pride by creating great events for people near and far to come together and enjoy!

STAFF



Elizabeth Morse DDA/Chamber Director

Beth Baltruczak Events Coordinator

Amy Falk Chamber Administrator

Heather Hockey Hospitality Coordinator

Ethan Metzgar Downtown Attendant

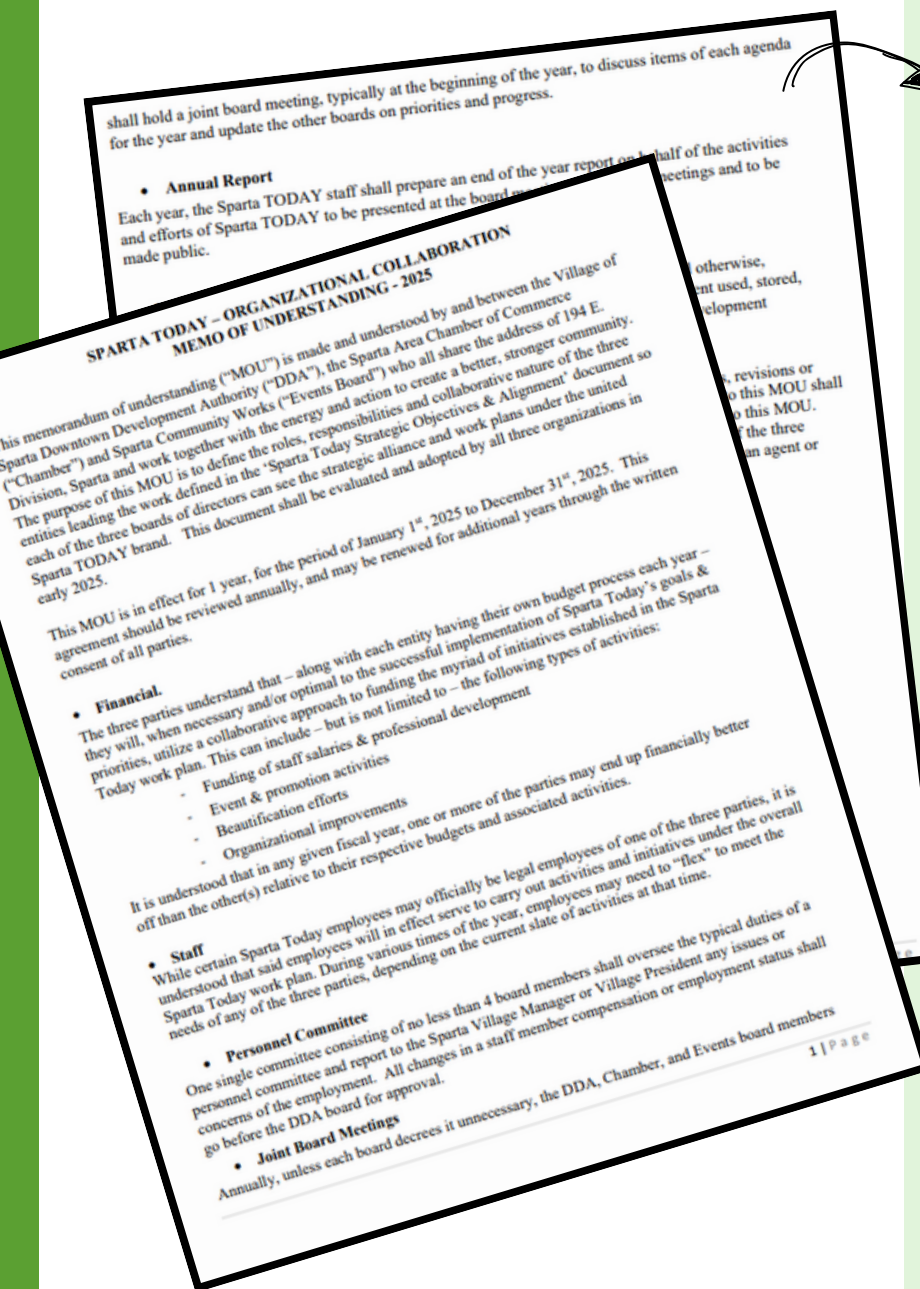
Michelle Baltruczak Social Media Coordinator

SPARTA TODAY MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT

SPARTA TODAY (DDA, CHAMBER & EVENTS)

NEW ORGANIZATIONAL DOCUMENTS

Sparta TODAY organizations DDA, Chamber, and Event boards of directors undertook strategic planning sessions with the help of Travis Alden, Senior Director of Community Development at The Right Place. One major initiative was to solidify the relationship between the 3 organizations in a formal Memorandum of Understanding that would be formally adopted by each organization. This would be an annual adoption to keep new board members up to date on the agreement between the organizations and operations. Additionally, after joint board meetings and separate board meetings, the input and feedback from the board members were condensed into a new joint working document titled "Strategic Objectives & Alignment" which was created to maximize the positive impact that Sparta TODAY will have on the future prosperity of the downtown district, the overall business community, and Sparta as a whole. The strategic objectives were established to focus and guide the group's initiatives and optimize collaboration.



SPARTA TODAY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES 2024

SPARTA TODAY (DDA, CHAMBER & EVENTS)

Sparta Today's Primary **Opportunities**:

- Focus on catalytic capital improvement projects (with potential partnerships).
- Events have become our calling card – lean into that and plan for/target growth.
- Improved communications & relationships with local businesses.
- Exploring ways to capitalize on additional revenue generation from events.
- Diversify revenue streams.
- Cultivating an authentic community identity for inward and outward branding & marketing efforts.
- Spearhead growth initiatives (business, housing, etc) in ways that are sensitive to the character of the Sparta community.
- Take on a key leadership role in the future vision of the Sparta community (including the Township).
- Revitalization of the Operahouse property.
- Continuing to build strong relationships with the Village of Sparta and Sparta Township.

Notes

Notes

Threats To Sparta Today's Future Success:

- Losing key leadership (staff and board) without a strong succession plan and formalized partnership model in place.
- Sprawl and big-box development could significantly hurt the local business mix.
- Chronic negativity from vocal naysayers in the community – especially on social media.
- Not engaging the broader business community.
- Insufficient funding.
- Stagnation of the community / status quo / apathy.
- Potentially fragile relationship between cornerstone community entities: Sparta Village, Sparta Township, School District.
- Complacency with how things are going and not pushing for better, more significant impact and results from our work.

SPARTA TODAY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES 2024

SPARTA TODAY (DDA, CHAMBER & EVENTS)

Sparta Today's Primary Weaknesses:

- A lack of awareness of what the organization does, by some in the community,
- Less than adequate funding to have an even larger positive impact.
- Funding: -Staff funding hinges almost solely on DDA revenue.
- Fundraising & sponsorships makes up the bulk of the rest of the organization's revenue – these by nature can be volatile.
- Difficult to maintain positive relationships with every single business / property owner due to sometimes priorities not aligning, differing perspectives, etc. (e.g. closing a street for an event is good for the whole, but could mean less sales for a business on that particular event day)
- Building the volunteer base / soliciting community involvement.
- Perception that decisions are made by a small few.
- Engagement with the local business community outside the downtown district.
- A formalized connection between the Chamber, DDA and Events “arms” of the organization. It works, but only because of the leadership currently in place.
- Lack of capacity – trying to be all things to all people.
- Inexperienced board members / loss of institutional knowledge from departing board members.
- Staff roles & responsibilities could be better defined.
- Need to tell the organization's story more effectively.
- Succession plan for key staff members/board members.
- Communication encompassing the whole community and not just the core Main Street area.

Sparta Today's Primary Strengths:

- Keeping the community informed of happenings in the area, particularly downtown.
- Our people: experienced & skilled staff; dedicated volunteers.
- Putting on high-quality, impactful events ranging from community festivals to shopping-focused events that help promote local businesses.
- Positive momentum, which is a result of years of effective work to get us to this point.
- We've created raving fans of our community, both residents and visitors.
- A willingness to try new things and not get stuck in the status quo.
- We're a trusted resource in the community – people turn to Sparta Today for info and to get things done.
- Tangible progress in creating a positive “vibe” in the community
- Filling the ‘gaps’ that arise in the community (when possible) such as fundraising for important projects.
- Collaboration: pulling together groups & people to work together, including the Village, School District, etc.
- Strong, positive customer service.
- Recognizing local partners and supporters – a rising tide lifts all boats!

SPARTA TODAY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES 2024

SPARTA TODAY (DDA, CHAMBER & EVENTS)

Utilizing a combination of electronic surveying (anonymous responses), research and thorough group discussion, the DDA, Chamber and Events Boards have established a list of key objectives to pursue. These are categorized into five thematic “buckets” of work:

D = DDA | C = CHAMBER | E = EVENTS

Communication & Relationships:
how people see, hear & interact with us

Delivering a Great Experience
create raving fans of Sparta

Economic Vitality
Manifesting positive things in the community

Built Environment
Sparta's vibe - how it looks & feels

Foundational – organizational stability & sustainability, allowing the above to happen

EXISTING INITIATIVES TO CONTINUE

Communication & Relationships

- Represent Sparta Today and/or the Sparta community at local, regional, state-wide networking/organizational events - D
- Downtown district management & problem-solving facilitation: parking concerns, snow plowing concerns, litter clean up, mowing if needed etc. - D
- Annual Meeting Celebration - C
- Integrity office supplies benefit to Chamber members - C
- Monthly Coffee Networking Meetings / opportunities for businesses members to connect - C
- Sparta Today publication (currently a net \$6-\$7k annual loss leader) - C

Delivering a Great Experience

- Town & Country Days & carnival at the new 2024 time of year - E
- Beer & Brats Street Festival - E
- Concerts in the park – June through August - E
- Apple Festival (formerly known Harvest on the Ridge) in September - E
- “Thursdays” – smaller-scale community activities every Thursday, June through October - E
- Reindeer Night - E
- Ribbon Cuttings for business anniversaries/grand openings - C
- Boo Bags - C

Economic Vitality

- Property (re)development facilitation, especially with Village-implemented Commercial Rehab District as new resource- D
- Capitalize on larger (state) opportunities & resources such as social district, redevelopment liquor licenses, MEDC incentive programs, etc. - D

Built Environment

- Downtown décor: Seasonal, district banners, planting bulbs, snowmen/penguins/gnomes/etc. - D
- Beautification management: fund & coordinate flowers /irrigation /fertilization - D
- Haybale decorating Fall- E

Foundational

- Organizational management: board meetings, agendas, minutes, yearly reporting, etc. - D
- Grant funding pursuit for strategic projects - D
- Facilities / physical maintenance for the office - D
- Administration / Office Management (all accounts payable/billable/ office management items) - C
- Volunteer cultivation & management - E

SPARTA TODAY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES 2024

SPARTA TODAY (DDA, CHAMBER & EVENTS)

EXISTING INITIATIVES TO EXAMINE & EVALUATE BEFORE CONTINUING

Communication & Relationships

- Communicating opportunities to members vs dda district parcels vs businesses vs property owners

Delivering a Great Experience

1) 'Shop Sparta' holiday kick-off event - Friday before Thanksgiving – E

- This is a big sales day for businesses. A money-loser for the organization but that's ok in this instance.
- A true "Hallmark moment" kind of event. Huge, "almost unmanageable" growth of this event.
- Challenges to address:
 - Public Safety
 - Reverse parade, growth vs. maintenance

2) Winterfest February – needs examined - E

- Group is still figuring out what this event is at its core
- Needed to fill the gap in the winter months
- Ice skating experiment was expensive
- Consider the goal: to fill calendar void? to give "warm & fuzzies"? Ring registers?

3) Scare on the Square in October - E

- Low barrier to entry: costumes, trunk or treat, kids activities
- Lots of ways for businesses to engage

Economic Vitality

1) Examine the DDA's façade grant program – D

- Currently is not funded consistently yearly
- Determine whether the need and return on investment would be there to invest more in the program or whether to eliminate the program. Shouldn't stay status quo.

2) Business retention & recruitment – D, C

- Has been done informally in the past, is now the time to explore a formal business retention & recruitment plan/strategy?
- Lean on regional partners such as The Right Place to lead on larger business opportunities, Focus on small business, entrepreneurship, filling vacant storefronts.
- Fully consider the organizational capacity to take this on.

3) Sparta Bucks program – examine & potentially revamp aspects of the program - C

- Promote "live list" of accepting businesses on website, link/qr code printed on bucks
- New "we accept Sparta Bucks" stickers on storefront window/doors
- Full list updated regularly in office window
- BOGO promos have been successful – maintain this as possible
- Explore going away from paper certificates

4) Shop Local Campaigns – (Penguin Pursuit, Love to be Local, etc.) - C

- Continuously improve promotions, communications, programming
- Has largely been one-off promotions, but have annual ones: deer widow, galentines,
- Challenging dynamic with Chamber / Non-Chamber member participating. Address this?

Built Environment

1) Consider geographic expansion for investment in downtown capital items, e.g. flowers, pots, benches, wayfinding signage - D

- Not replicating everything thru district
- Perhaps focus on strategic gateway improvements - "you have arrived" treatment to corridors outside downtown
- Explore mapping priority locations identified on a map of district – where certain investments should go, what those would entail, and a tiered priorities list

2) Geographic décor & lights expansion – D

- Explore mapping priority locations identified on a map of the district - where certain investments should go, what those would entail, and a tiered priorities list.
- This is dependent on power infrastructure, will require investment if the site(s) are high enough priority.

3) Town Square Phase 2 management - D

- Programming of the public space
- Addition of historic depot will shift volunteer needs and opportunities

Foundational

1) Personnel structure – D, C, E

- Flesh out & memorialize the staff funding structure between organizations
- Prioritize professional development & staff retention

SPARTA TODAY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES 2024

SPARTA TODAY (DDA, CHAMBER & EVENTS)

NEW INITIATIVES TO CONSIDER

Communication & Relationships

- 1) Intentionally examine and implement ways to enhance cross-communication between the three Sparta Today organizations – D, C, E
- 2) Intentionally examine and implement ways to enhance stakeholder communication, specifically with downtown businesses, Chamber members, local governments and the school district. – D, C, E
- 3) Explore additional, tangible Chamber member benefits - C
 - Examples: member-to-member benefits; member amplification on Chamber social media channels, etc.
- 4) Re-evaluate the Chamber membership structure as a whole - C
 - Pros vs cons – is the small amount of membership revenue worth the member/ nonmember “wedge” that sometimes exists? Is doing away w/ memberships an opportunity to bring more involvement (& investment) from a larger group?

Delivering a Great Experience

- 1) Evaluate the scope of Sparta Today’s events & activities calendar – C, E
 - Assess the purpose of each event/activity (some events can be more than 1 of these)
- a. Image events: purpose is to convey a positive image about the community, give people who attend that “warm & fuzzy” feeling about the community.
- b. Vitality events: intended to boost local businesses specifically – shopping-focused events or with a strong retail component.
- c. Attraction events: Typically larger events intended to bring in visitors to the community.
- d. Fundraising events: a primary objective is to raise funds for the hosting organization.
- 2) Keep organizational capacity in mind. More isn’t always better; sometimes doing fewer things better makes more of a positive impact.

Economic Vitality

- 1) Consider whether Sparta Today could or should spearhead a community-wide ‘Visioning’ effort for the Greater Sparta area, inclusive of the Village and Township – D, C, E
 - ‘Blueprint’ example exists from back in 2008 – should be a more holistic approach
 - Perhaps a big-picture “Sparta 2050” – type visioning, including things like housing growth goals (or limits), public space amenities, future economic mix, etc.
 - Actively incorporate & invite Sparta Township to the table

Built Environment

- 1) Work to develop a built environment maintenance plan, including a regular cadence for certain maintenance items, estimated budgets, who is responsible for what, etc.

Foundational

- 1) Develop and implement a memo of understanding (MOU) between the three organizations to formalize the critical, collaborative relationship between the entities. – D, C, E
 - Throughout this process it was reinforced how the success of Sparta Today hinges on this positive working relationship, which is anchored by staff with a solid history with the organizations and significant clout across the boards and community.
 - Putting a MOU in place to outline these relationships – including the dynamic with the Village – would be important to sustain this success in the future, regardless of the staff or leadership in place.
- 2) Examine and evaluate the current ‘elective’ revenue generation model: sponsors, etc. – C, E
 - Is this welcoming or exclusive?
 - Business directory obsolescence as an example