

ACTION TIME

PROUDLY SERVING BERRIEN, CASS, AND VAN BUREN COUNTIES

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 4—JANUARY 2026



ELEVATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF ENTREPRENEURS

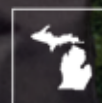
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Dear Members,

At the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber, we believe progress is driven by people, strengthened through partnership, and sustained by purposeful action. When these forces align, meaningful progress follows.

This quarter, that alignment was on full display. And the progress is proof of what is possible when a region commits to the long-term work that drives lasting change.

- **HYPE Pitch Competition:** With support from generous sponsors, more than \$65,000 was awarded at our second annual pitch competition—not simply as prizes, but as strategic investments in the talent and innovation shaping our region's future. (pg. 6)
- **Management Accelerator:** In partnership with Lake Michigan College, we completed our inaugural leadership program that equipped 17 emerging leaders with practical tools to build stronger teams and more effective organizations. (pg. 14)
- **State of the Economy Breakfast:** More than 100 leaders joined the Greater Niles Chamber to assess economic conditions, confront uncertainty, and reinforce the importance of regional alignment in navigating what lies ahead. (pg. 16)
- **Greater Bridgman Chamber & Growth Alliance:** The Bridgman CGA continues to demonstrate measurable impact, transforming a long-vacant property into a valuable community asset with the addition of Ace Hardware in Greater Bridgman. (pg. 18)

We look forward to spotlighting these accomplishments and more at our upcoming Business Recognition Breakfast on February 20. We hope you'll join us as we celebrate progress, ignite momentum, and commit to the work that will shape Southwest Michigan's future.

Thank you for your continued confidence, commitment, and investment in this work.

You make it happen,



Arthur A. Havlicek

Arthur A. Havlicek
President & CEO



WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

We are thrilled to welcome our new members to the largest and most influential network of businesses and professionals in Southwest Michigan. We look forward to supporting their needs, amplifying their voices, and working on their behalf to drive economic growth throughout the region.



BECOME A MEMBER TODAY!

Our Chamber is proud to offer its members an unmatched return on investment. Scan the QR code to explore our tiers and benefits and choose the level that's right for you.

WHO WE ARE

The Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber of Commerce is a 501c(6) non-profit organization and the largest chamber in Southwest Michigan. We are focused on growing existing industry and creating an economic ecosystem that prepares our region for future opportunities.

WHERE WE SERVE:

We proudly serve **Berrien, Cass, & Van Buren Counties.**

WHAT WE DO:

Policy Development, Leadership Development, Business Development, Community Development, and Economic Development.

OUR MISSION:

To leverage every available resource within our network for the advancement of our members and the betterment of all who live and work in our community.

OUR VISION:

To propel Southwest Michigan to national prominence as a vibrant, regional destination where business thrives, talent resides, and quality of life is second to none.

OUR STAFF:

Arthur Havlicek
President & CEO

Sarah Spoonholtz
Membership Director

Jasmine Hansen
Events Director

Cassandra Adams
Finance & Administration Manager

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AFFILIATE ORGANIZATIONS:

Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber Foundation
Discover Southwest Michigan
Greater Bridgman CGA
Greater Niles Chamber

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CELEBRATORY EVENTS

Our Chamber is proud to offer members a complimentary, turn-key service for ribbon cutting events, grand openings, and ground breaking ceremonies throughout Southwest Michigan. Whether it's a new business opening, an anniversary, or a significant achievement, our team stands ready to help celebrate your accomplishment.



Niles Charter Township Hall



EDIT Studio



Greater Niles Area Chamber Press Conference



Glassman Park Disc Golf Course




Downtown Buchanan Reopening



Michigan Gateway Community Foundation



Drive & Shine



WE WANT TO CELEBRATE YOU!
Scan the QR code to join the Chamber and schedule an event to celebrate your success today.

Member Spotlight



THE BATALIS AGENCY

New Business Brings Energy & Experience

Courtesy of the Batalis Agency

Since launching The Batalis Agency in early March 2025, Austin Batalis has become one of Southwest Michigan's most active new business owners. Through hard work and community involvement, Austin has built strong momentum for his Farm Bureau Insurance agency in less than a year.

Austin brings five years of insurance experience to his own agency, but he knows that experience isn't just about time; it's about what you learn along the way. That's why Farm Bureau's "Experience Matters" campaign resonates so strongly with him. "Before Farm Bureau, I learned how to do this job the wrong way," Austin explains. "It never sat well with me, and that pushed me to start my own agency and drives me to serve my community the right way."

That commitment shows in how Austin works with clients. "I protect people's assets and income with the correct

insurance products," he says, "and correct products aren't necessarily more expensive." As a multi-line insurance agent, Austin offers auto, home, life, and business insurance so his clients can make one call for all of their needs.

Austin's dedication to community involvement really sets him apart. He's a regular at Chamber ribbon cuttings and networking events, and he is involved with several other business organizations throughout the area. He asked to become a Chamber Ambassador to get even more involved, and the Chamber was happy to welcome him. Austin is also sponsoring our biggest event of the year, the Chamber's Business Recognition Breakfast & Annual Meeting.

"The support I have gained from the business community in my first year has been an incredible launchpad for my agency that will allow me to

continue providing quality service for years to come," Austin says.

For Austin Batalis and The Batalis Agency, Farm Bureau's "Experience Matters" philosophy is more than just a slogan. It's how he does business every day. By learning from the past and actively engaging with the Southwest Michigan business community, Austin is building an agency that serves its neighbors the right way. ■

Scan To learn more about the Batalis Agency and how they can cover you.





ELEVATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF ENTREPRENEURS

Young Professionals Take Center Stage at the Second Annual HYPE Pitch Competition

Written by: Jasmine Hansen | Pictured: Alexandra Ranft, Bare Naked Salts & Soaps

In Partnership With



On November 20th, the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber hosted the second annual HYPE (Highlighting Young Professional Excellence) Pitch Competition, gathering young innovators, community leaders, and business champions at the Solarium by Watermark. The venue's blend of character and modern design set the stage for an evening focused on bold ideas and the entrepreneurs driving them forward.

The evening began with a panel of four entrepreneurs who have each built their businesses from the ground up: Danielle Grandholm of Rising Kites Coffee, Michael Rowland of Rowland Properties, Dustin Jankoviak of 2nd & Main, and Vanessa Frias of Willowbrook Farms. After the panel, they became judges for the pitch competition.

Meanwhile, seven contestants prepared backstage, each focused

on the opportunity ahead. With cash prizes, in-kind support, and exposure to the region's business community, the competition offered a real chance to advance their entrepreneurial goals. Each contestant stepped onto the stage, sharing stories of purpose, community impact, and bold innovation. By the time the winners were announced, the energy in the room was electric.



Pictured: Kenyona Speight, Alexandra Ranft, Jasmine Hansen, Emily Onken, & Stephanie Ott-Williams

First Place: Bare Naked Salts & Soaps

Bare Naked Salts & Soaps, founded by Alexandra Ranft of Niles, earned first place and the \$15,000 grand prize. Alex's business began in 2022 when her son's severe dermatitis led her to create natural, gentle alternatives to commercial products. That determination grew into Bare Naked, a line of mineral-based, all-natural skincare essentials. Her pitch, grounded in personal experience, earned the judges' top honor.

Second Place: Hello Beautiful Boutique

Hello Beautiful Boutique, represented by co-owner Kenyona Speight of Benton Harbor, took second place and a \$10,000 prize. Starting in 2020 as a home-based jewelry business, Hello Beautiful has grown into a downtown storefront offering clothing, accessories, and a sense of community. Kenyona credited her mother's experience in fashion and her own drive for shaping a business where style and confidence meet.

Third Place: Bake Effect

Bake Effect, founded by Emily Onken of St. Joseph, earned third place and a \$5,000 award. After discovering a contact allergy to wheat flour, Emily chose to rebuild her craft, creating gourmet treats made without wheat. Her resilience and commitment to sharing joy through food made her story stand out.

Crowd Favorite: Base Bowls & Company

The Crowd Favorite Award, selected by live audience vote, went to Base Bowls & Company of St. Joseph. Owner Stephanie Ott-Williams has built a loyal following with a fresh, nourishing menu. Her commitment to hospitality and community service, including providing thousands of meals to the St. Joseph Senior Center, earned strong support and the \$2,500 prize.

Other contestants included Final Brush of Buchanan, OH Art of Benton Harbor, and Rite Innovations of Benton Harbor. Each brought creativity, vision, and a commitment to bold ideas.

Investing in the Region's Future

More than \$65,000 in cash prizes and in-kind support were awarded, made possible by the **Frederick S. Upton Foundation, Whirlpool Foundation,** and other sponsors, partners, and contributors. Their belief in local talent continues to strengthen Southwest Michigan's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

As we celebrate these young entrepreneurs, it's clear that HYPE is more than a competition; it's an investment in the visionaries shaping the future of Southwest Michigan. Every entrepreneur in our region deserves recognition for the important work they do to drive innovation and strengthen our economy. Their creativity, passion, and dedication truly embody the spirit of this event, sparking inspiration that will continue to energize our business community. Join us next year for another night of celebrating the ideas and businesses of rising young entrepreneurs. ■



A RECIPE FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS.

From serving her country to serving her community, veteran Aiye Akhigbe embodies Michigan's spirit of progress. Partnering with MEDC, businesses like hers are helping Michigan grow. In one year alone, our collaborations statewide delivered nearly 18,000 job commitments and \$2 billion in revenue.

Find out how our impacts add up at [MICHIGANBUSINESS.ORG](https://www.michiganbusiness.org)



**MICHIGAN ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

STICKY SPOONS JAMS - BERRIEN COUNTY, MI

FROM GRANTS TO GROWTH

Small Business Support Programs Making Waves in Southwest Michigan

Courtesy of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation



All across Michigan, small businesses serve as the foundation of our communities. Case in point: in 2024, 96.2% of private businesses in Michigan were considered small businesses. To ensure the vitality of these integral drivers of our local economies, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) has made a concerted effort to develop tools and programs that support small businesses.

One of those initiatives is Match on Main, an MEDC-funded reimbursement grant program that supports new or expanding place-based businesses with up to \$25,000. Since its inception in 2019, the program has delivered tremendous impact, contributing \$4.5 million in funding, with 91% of awarded small businesses still operating today, 13% higher than the state average.

For Southwest Michigan, where idyllic downtowns are plentiful, Match on Main helps create additional

momentum for the region as a great place to live and work. But the program doesn't just support what you may think of as traditional small businesses. Impactful community organizations like The Children's Museum of Branch County are beneficiaries, too.

The Children's Museum offers events, classes, and interactive exhibits from theater to science, and originally opened in downtown Coldwater in 2014. After losing its lease and failing to find space downtown, the museum relocated to a strip mall north of downtown in 2017. At the beginning of 2020, the Children's Museum team, led by executive director Shana Grife, began searching for ways to move back downtown.

"Always wanting to move back downtown," said Grife, "we looked at a building that had been donated to the City of Coldwater. The Downtown Development Authority (DDA) was hoping someone would be interested in renovating the three-floor building."

In 2022, through the MEDC's Public Spaces Community Places crowdfunding program, the Children's Museum was able to raise over \$150,000 toward the new building, showing the community's overwhelming support for the museum's return to downtown Coldwater. The MEDC contributed \$50,000 in matching funds to support the revitalization of the historic building, providing the museum with more space for programming and exhibits.

The Children's Museum reopened in downtown Coldwater in April 2023, this time in a renovated and historic building. As the museum gained momentum in the community, the MEDC awarded a \$25,000 Match on Main grant to the City of Coldwater DDA on the museum's behalf. The museum used the grant to fund a vertical climbing wall exhibit and a two-story mural on the side of the once-vacant building, the largest mural in Coldwater.

For Grife, who moved to Coldwater to raise a family, the museum makes the town a better place to do just that.

"We love being in Downtown Coldwater! We have a sense of community that we did not have at our former location. We more than doubled our visitors from 2022 to 2023 and brought families downtown that would not have been there if the museum weren't. We know there are so many benefits for children being exposed to new environments, new people, new experiences. Quite simply, the Children's Museum of Branch County makes Coldwater a better community to live in and raise a family."

Match on Main supports a variety of businesses that make our downtowns more attractive places to work and live, from museums to cafes. This past July, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer announced Michigan Strategic Fund (MSF) support for 63 small businesses through Match on Main, awarding \$1.49 million in grants. Region 8, which represents Southwest Michigan, had 10 businesses – including the Children's Museum – receive a combined \$227,689:

- **Economy Garage, LLC** (City of Bronson)
- **Children's Museum of Branch County, Inc.** (City of Coldwater DDA)
- **Matchacita LLC** (City of Kalamazoo)
- **Locri, LLC - Front Street Pizza Pub** (City of Niles DDA)
- **Jerome Hardin - Rooney's Soul Food Wagon** (Comstock Center DDA)
- **Nature's County Cupboard** (DDA of the City of South Haven)
- **Bogar Theatre LLC** (Marshall Area Economic Development Alliance)
- **Layered Clothing, LLC** (Sturgis DDA)
- **Flyover Art** (Village of Marcellus DDA)
- **Applied Arts, LLC** (Village of Stevensville)

For Matchacita, a cafe in downtown Kalamazoo, Match on Main will help support new equipment and outdoor seating, bringing even more vibrancy to the downtown. "We want our neighbors to be able to grow as business owners," Matchacita owner Vargas Root told WMUK.

"And so, this kind of gives that step up, and it gives a little bit of incentive to be a really good part of the community."

Another program helping small business owners succeed and enriching our communities is the MEDC's Small Business Support Hubs. After receiving approval from the MSF in June 2023, 27 economic development organizations were selected to receive funding from a one-time appropriation using the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The program is anticipated to support 20,000 Michigan businesses over three years.

Each Small Business Support Hub provides a central source for entrepreneurs to discover local, state, and federal resources. They each disseminate support in a variety of ways, from one-on-one coaching sessions to mentor matching to pitch competitions.

Can-Do Kalamazoo is one of Southwest Michigan's Small Business Support Hubs. Since 2007, it's been helping Kalamazoo-area entrepreneurs, first focused on small food-industry businesses, then expanding to support all entrepreneurs at every stage.

The hub stays true to its roots with a kitchen incubator, a three-year program for developing food businesses, and ServSafe classes that can lead to the certification required to operate in licensed kitchens. Can-Do also offers 90-day camps to launch almost any type of business and workshops to help entrepreneurs take actionable next steps.

Battle Creek Food Reimagined (BCFR) is another Small Business Support Hub in Southwest Michigan. True to its Cereal City location, BCFR serves food entrepreneurs, providing access to a high-caliber network of food consultants, research and development, and entrepreneurship support programs.

With support from Small Business Support Hubs funding, SmartZone participation, and direct funding, BCFR has planned programming in collaboration with its partners to offer a startup incubator, a cohort-based accelerator for early and growth-stage, a food finance accelerator, an investor's network, networking events, and a centralized accelerator kitchen, demo kitchen, and food manufacturing space. Its capabilities and location made it an attractive choice for a Small Business Support Hub, providing a legacy food industry ecosystem right outside its doors.

Chasing a dream and starting a small business or growing a community organization is no small task. But with resources like Match on Main, Small Business Support Hubs, and backing from our wonderful communities across Michigan, success may be closer than you imagine. ■

Scan for more information on how the MEDC can support your small business or entrepreneurial endeavor





BUSINESS RECOGNITION BREAKFAST TICKETS ON SALE

Join as we Celebrate Collaboration, Growth, and Business Excellence Across Southwest Michigan

Written by: Arthur Havlicek

The Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber's Annual Meeting and Business Recognition Breakfast returns on Friday, February 20, at Grand Upton Hall in the Mendel Center at Lake Michigan College.

Presented by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, Honor Credit Union, and The Batalis Agency-Farm Bureau Insurance, this year's event highlights the collaboration reshaping Southwest Michigan's business and economic landscape. More than 600 business leaders have attended in each of the past two years and attendance continues to grow, making this one of the region's most anticipated business gatherings.

Stronger Together

Chamber President and CEO Arthur Havlicek will deliver a keynote address focused on how Southwest Michigan is aligning in new and meaningful ways to strengthen our regional business ecosystem.

Central to his remarks will be the historic partnership between the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber and the Greater Niles Area Chamber. In 2025, the Greater Niles Area Chamber entered into a Management Agreement with the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber, formally uniting north and south Berrien County for the first time in history.

This milestone reflects more than organizational efficiency, it signals a shared commitment to collaboration across communities in service of a stronger regional economy.

That same spirit of collaboration is driving the expansion of Chamber Growth Alliances (CGAs). CGAs bring municipalities together under the regional chamber framework to advance coordinated economic development. Rather than competing for limited opportunities, communities are choosing to work collectively to attract investment, support business growth, and create jobs that benefit the entire region. What began with the Bridgman CGA has continued to scale,



with the launch of the Central Berrien CGA in 2025 and the Southwest Berrien CGA in 2026.

These efforts represent a meaningful shift in how Southwest Michigan approaches economic development. By working together across municipal and organizational lines, the region is building a more resilient, competitive, and connected economy that prioritizes shared success over individual achievement.

In addition to the keynote, the Annual Meeting will include a recap of the Chamber's 2025 accomplishments, a preview of priorities and initiatives for 2026, and the formal election of new members to the Chamber's Board of Directors.

What to Expect on February 20th

The morning kicks off with doors opening at 7:00 am at Grand Upton Hall in the Mendel Center at Lake Michigan College. The program

begins at 7:30 am with breakfast and networking, giving attendees the chance to connect with hundreds of fellow business leaders.

Following the keynote address, the program transitions into the Business Recognition Awards ceremony. For the past several years, the Chamber has incorporated live audience voting, allowing attendees to participate directly in selecting award recipients—creating an interactive and engaging celebration of excellence.

This year, the chamber will recognize outstanding businesses, organizations, and individuals across six award categories.

- **The Best New Business Award:** Honors a standout company that's between six months and two years old.
- **The Small Business of the Year Award:** Celebrates a local business with fewer than 50 employees that has demonstrated resilience, growth, and community commitment.

- **The Non-Profit of the Year Award:** Recognizes a 501(c)(3) organization making a significant impact in our community.
- **The Community Placemaking Award:** Honors a community that has transformed itself through innovative projects that bring people together and enhance quality of life.
- **The Rising Star Award:** Recognizes a professional between 21 and 40 years old who serves as a role model in their field and gives back to the community.
- **The Pat Moody Award:** Honors an individual or business with 10 or more years of established presence in Southwest Michigan who has demonstrated exceptional leadership and community service.

These awards showcase the collective strength of our business community and the impact we make when we commit to excellence and service.

Join Us

Tickets and sponsorship opportunities are now available. Whether you are celebrating colleagues, building new connections, or drawing inspiration from regional success stories, this is an event you will not want to miss. Join us as we continue building a stronger, more connected regional business community. ■

Scan to visit our website and get your tickets today.





MANAGEMENT ACCELERATOR COMPLETES FIRST COHORT

Chamber's Newest Leadership Program Earns Top Marks

Written by: Sarah Spoonholtz | Pictured: 2025 Management Accelerator Cohort

The Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber's inaugural Management Accelerator program wrapped up this fall with outstanding results, earning an exceptional Net Promoter Score of 93 from participants who completed the three-session leadership development experience.

Delivered in partnership with Lake Michigan College and facilitated by Kim Kavala of Legata Leadership Solutions, the program brought together 17 managers, supervisors, and business owners for intensive full-day sessions focused on one critical goal: strengthening their ability to lead people effectively.

Real Skills, Real Results

The results speak for themselves. Participants reported meaningful improvement across every area surveyed, with the most significant gains showing up in goal-setting, feedback delivery, conflict management, and decision-making.

"The Management Accelerator program equipped me with essential and practical skills to manage a team effectively," said graduate Luke Jeffries. "Core responsibilities like interviewing, giving feedback, conducting performance reviews, and navigating conflict are often expected of managers but rarely taught well. This program filled that gap."

The curriculum covered everything from understanding personality assessments and building trust to mastering difficult conversations and juggling competing priorities. Each participant completed a Hogan Insights assessment and received one-on-one coaching to help translate those insights into real-world action.

Practical Application Makes A Difference

What made the program particularly valuable was its focus on practical application. Graduates consistently praised the interactive format and relevant content that reflected actual workplace challenges they face daily.

"Exceptional, tangible information and scenarios that you can apply today," said graduate Martha McGowan. Another participant noted, "10 out of 10 for the Management Accelerator. As a manager, all of the discussions helped me gain more insight into being better and continuing to develop my skills."

Perhaps most telling, when asked what they're doing differently as a result of the program, graduates overwhelmingly cited delegating more effectively, providing regular feedback, and explaining the "why" behind decisions to their teams.

What's Next

With such strong results from the first cohort, the Chamber plans to offer Management Accelerator again in 2026. Business owners and managers interested in developing their leadership capabilities can visit smrchamber.com/management-accelerator for information on upcoming sessions. ■

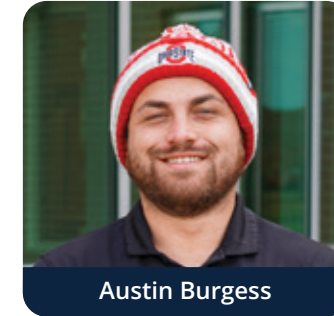
2025 Management Accelerator Cohort



Reeanne Beck



Carrie Beukelman



Austin Burgess



Gary Depa



Miranda Dopp



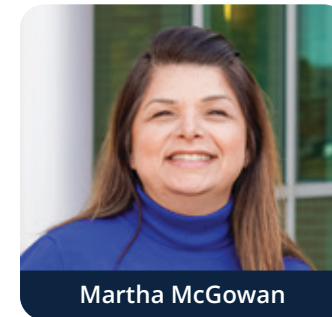
Luke Jeffries



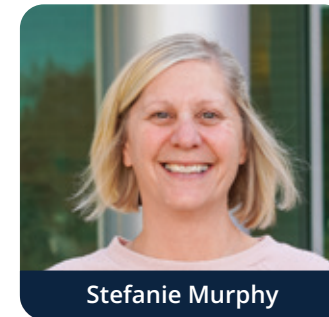
Arthur Havlicek



Laura McCoy



Martha McGowan



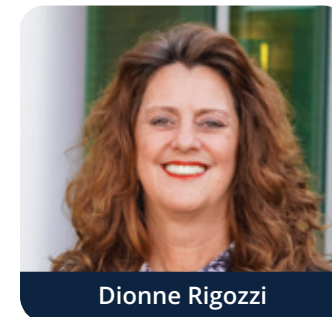
Stefanie Murphy



Greta Pearson-Barrons



Shaun Pressley



Dionne Rigozzi



Chad Simcox



Sarah Spoonholtz



Catherine Waggoner



Darwin Watson

Management Accelerator is delivered in partnership with:



NILES STATE OF THE ECONOMY

Breakfast Highlights Progress Amid Uncertainty

Written by: AnnaKate Dwyer | Pictured: Bryan Van Itallie, GNC Board Chair

Business and community leaders from across the region gathered on Wednesday, December 3rd, at The Grand LV in Niles for the Greater Niles Chamber's 2025 State of the Economy Breakfast.

Presented by Sturgis Bank and Trust, this event is an annual forum for leaders from state, regional, and local organizations to offer insight into how policy decisions, economic conditions, and collaboration will influence growth in the year ahead.

With more than 100 attendees in the room, the event served as both a reflection on a year marked by uncertainty and a forward-looking discussion on competitiveness, workforce priorities, and development opportunities across Southwest Michigan.

Local journalist and broadcaster Allison Hayes moderated the conversation, keeping the discussion grounded in the practical realities facing business communities. Her

approach emphasized translating complex policy and economic developments into real-world considerations for employers, developers, and residents.

State and Regional Economic Outlook

The first panel addressed Michigan's political and fiscal climate, beginning with a broad look at a year that included a delayed state budget, significant policy debate, and heightened

uncertainty for employers. Panelists discussed how these challenges affected planning, investment decisions, and overall confidence within the business community.

Wendy Block, Senior Vice President of Business Advocacy for the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, provided perspective on the complexity of recent legislative issues, including debates surrounding minimum wage, paid sick leave, and the state budget process. Her remarks highlighted how policy uncertainty can ripple through the economy, creating hurdles for small and mid-sized businesses navigating compliance, labor costs, and strategic planning.

Jonas Peterson, Chief Executive Officer at Southwest Michigan First, shared how regional economic strategies are being shaped by both statewide conditions and global market forces. Drawing on experience from larger metropolitan areas, Peterson emphasized the importance of positioning Southwest Michigan as a competitive, business-ready region across the seven counties served by Michigan's Region 8.

Arthur Havlicek, President and CEO of the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber, rounded out the panel with insight into the concerns most frequently raised by local employers - namely workforce availability, business attraction, and the conditions needed to support population growth. Together, the panel painted a clear picture of the policy and economic dynamic influencing business growth throughout the state and region.

Local Development and Community Growth

The second panel shifted the focus closer to home, examining development efforts and priorities



Pictured: Allison Hayes, Wendy Block, Jonas Peterson, Arthur Havlicek



Pictured: Allison Hayes, Jim Ringler, Ann Young, Dan Fette

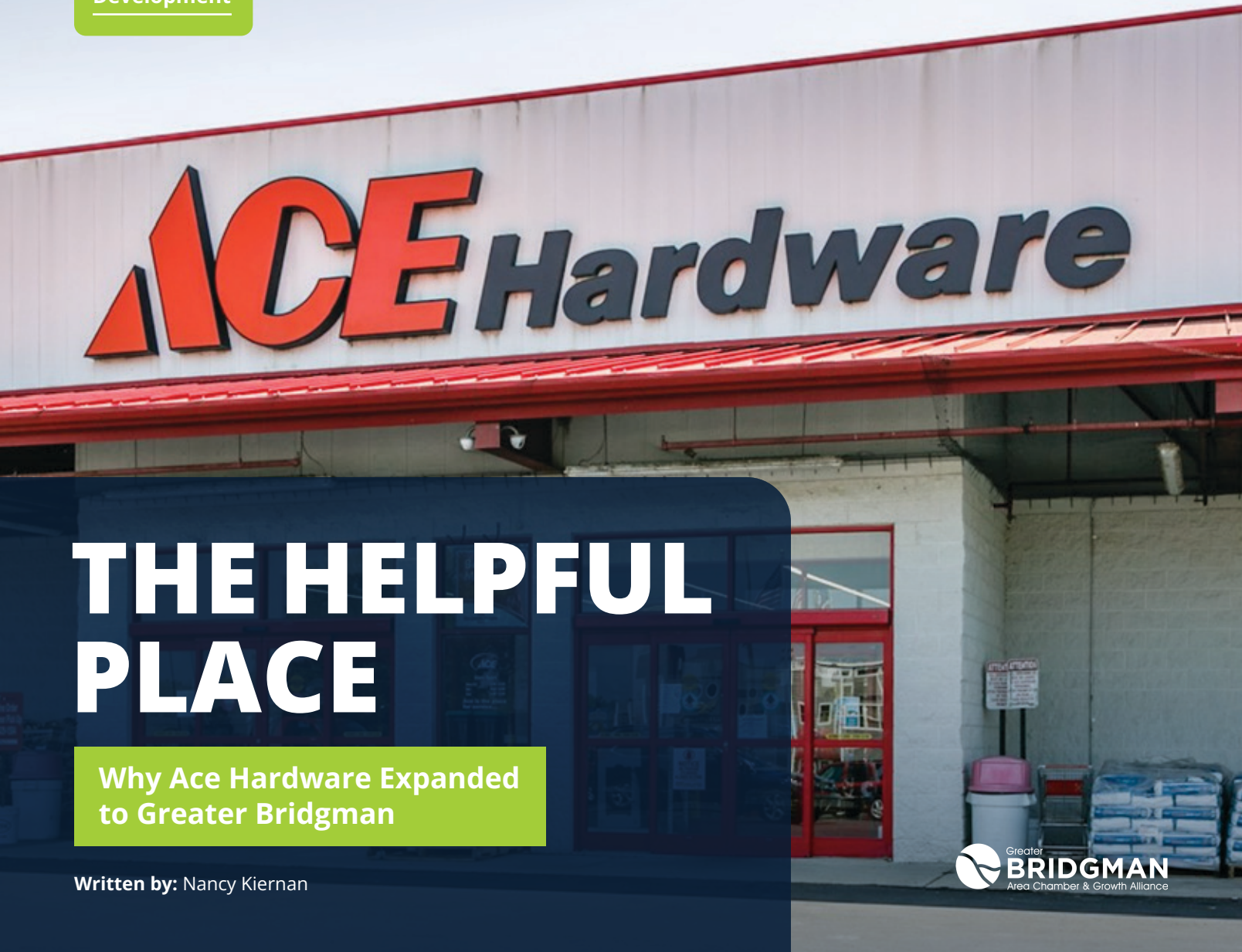
within Niles, Niles Charter Township, and Berrien County. Ann Young, Community Development Director for the City of Niles, discussed the city's recent Michigan Economic Development Corporation Redevelopment Ready Community certification and its significance in creating a more efficient, predictable environment for development and reinvestment.

Niles Charter Township Treasurer Jim Ringler provided an overview of local commercial inventory and development opportunities, including the potential for revitalization along the South 11th Street corridor. His remarks highlighted both the challenges and possibilities associated with existing infrastructure and available properties.

Dan Fette, Director of Community Development for Berrien County, addressed the importance of collaboration among municipalities, county partners, and regional organizations. He underscored housing as a pressing need across the county, noting its direct connection to workforce attraction, economic mobility, and long-term stability.

Looking Ahead

By the end of the morning, attendees left with a clearer understanding of the economic forces shaping the region and the strategic efforts underway to address them. The State of the Economy Breakfast reinforced the value of informed dialogue, regional cooperation, and proactive planning as Southwest Michigan works to remain competitive and resilient in the year ahead. ■



THE HELPFUL PLACE

Why Ace Hardware Expanded to Greater Bridgman

Written by: Nancy Kiernan

The Greater Bridgman area is poised to welcome a major new retail asset as Ace Hardware prepares to open a location in Lake Charter Township. The store will occupy the former Rite Aid building at the corner of Shawnee and Gast Roads, within the same shopping center as Harding's Family Friendly Market.

Announced by the Greater Bridgman Chamber & Growth Alliance (BCGA) on December 4, the project will bring a long-requested retail option to area residents while activating a prominent vacant property along a key commercial corridor.

Finding the Right Fit

Following the closure of the Rite Aid, the BCGA engaged early with the property owner to identify a tenant that would both meet community needs and strengthen the local economy. Rather than waiting for a passive market solution, the organization took a deliberate, hands-on approach—seeking an operator with a proven track record, regional roots, and long-term commitment.

That effort led to a connection with longtime Ace Hardware owner

Matthew "Chip" Borre, who operated stores in St. Joseph, Stevensville, and Watervliet for more than 40 years. The BCGA, played a central role in facilitating discussions and aligning interests between the property owner and the Borre family.

We are excited to welcome Ace Hardware to the Greater Bridgman area. This project fills an important commercial space and brings a trusted, community-focused retailer to our region. It's exactly the kind of outcome the CGA model is designed to deliver.

A Legacy of Entrepreneurship

Tragically, Chip Borre passed away shortly after the new Bridgman location was announced. For decades, he was a respected business leader whose stores were known for their service, reliability, and commitment to the communities they served. His entrepreneurial legacy is evident not only in the success of his businesses, but in the relationships he built across Southwest Michigan.

The Bridgman Ace Hardware will move forward in his honor, with his son, Mat Borre, continuing the family business and serving as General Manager across all four Ace Hardware locations. This continuity ensures that Chip Borre's values—local ownership, customer service, and community investment—remain central to the operation.

Responding to Market Demand

For the Borre family, the Bridgman location reflects both a strategic expansion and a direct response to customer demand. For years, area residents and contractors have expressed interest in having a local hardware option closer to home.

"The Bridgman community has long been on our radar," Borre previously shared. "We've heard from many customers who wanted the convenience of a local Ace in this area, and when this location became available, it felt like the perfect opportunity. We are thrilled to bring our friendly service and helpful expertise to Bridgman and look forward to serving our new neighbors."

With decades of regional operating experience, the new store is positioned to open with strong operational knowledge, established supplier relationships, and a clear understanding of local market needs.



Proactive Economic Development

This project underscores the value of the CGA model and proactive economic development. By actively managing relationships, maintaining an inventory of available properties, and recruiting the right businesses, the BCGA helps cultivate thoughtful growth in the communities it serves.

In this case, the approach transformed a vacant pharmacy into a high-demand retail anchor with strong brand recognition and long-term stability. It is a clear example of how local leadership, coordination, and strategy can deliver tangible results.

Economic and Community Impact

As a nationally recognized corporation with a nearly century-long history, Ace Hardware brings a proven business model that will generate multiple benefits for the Greater Bridgman area.

For Lake Charter Township, the reuse of the former Rite Aid building returns a vacant property to productive use, reinforcing the shopping center and strengthening the local tax base.

The project will create jobs during renovation and will provide skilled retail positions that require product knowledge and customer service expertise. For residents, the store offers convenience and keeps retail spending local. For contractors and tradespeople, it provides a nearby resource that improves efficiency and reduces travel time.

The Borre family has also expressed their commitment to contributing to economic growth in Bridgman and the surrounding area, suggesting potential for community involvement and local partnerships beyond simply operating a retail store.

Looking Ahead

As Greater Bridgman welcomes this new business, it does so while honoring the legacy of Chip Borre and the continued leadership of his family. Renovation and preparation work is expected to begin in the coming months, with doors opening by late April 2026. The transformation will serve as a visible sign of momentum and of what is possible when communities take a proactive approach to growth. ■

Upcoming Chamber Events

- Jan 8 ● **Business After Hours**
Berrien RESA
- Jan 26 ● **Ribbon Cutting**
Visit Southwest Michigan & Mid-West Family Marketing & Media
- Feb 3 ● **Ribbon Cutting**
Gym Rat Physical Therapy Performance and Wellness
- Feb 12 ● **Business After Hours**
Health Elevated
- Feb 20 ● **Business Recognition Breakfast and Annual Awards Ceremony**
LMC Mendel Center
- Mar 12 ● **Business After Hours**
United Federal Credit Union
- Mar 18 ● **NextGen Networking**
Personal & Professional Development
- Apr 9 ● **Business After Hours**
Lazer Graphics
- Apr 24 ● **Ribbon Cutting**
Epoxy Plus Flooring Solutions
- May 14 ● **Business After Hours**
Krasl Art Center
- May 29 ● **4th Annual Wine & Nine Golf Outing**
Pipestone Creek
- Jun 11 ● **Business After Hours**
New Heights CCDA
- Jul 9 ● **Business After Hours**
Four Winds Casino-Pool Area, New Buffalo
- Jul 13 ● **66th Annual SMRC Golf Outing**
Lake Michigan Hills
- Aug 13 ● **Business After Hours**
Meridian Title Company

Check Out All of Our Events

Our Chamber hosts multiple events and networking opportunities each month to keep our members informed, engaged, and in front of the community. Check out what is next on the agenda.



SCAN TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR EVENTS

Check Out Our Member Events

Our Members enjoy the benefit of posting their events on our site for our community to see.



SCAN TO SEE OUR MEMBER EVENTS

Check Out All Niles Chamber Events

The Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce hosts a variety of Chamber events designed to support local business growth and community collaboration. Check out what is next in Niles.



SCAN TO LEARN MORE ABOUT GREATER NILES CHAMBER EVENTS

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 **Grand Upton Hall**