



# Community leaders gather to share small town entrepreneurial ideas

DIANNA STAMPFLER | THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2022



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**CONNECTING  
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Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities



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Smaller communities around Michigan face unique challenges when it comes to developing ways to draw residents, businesses and travelers to town.

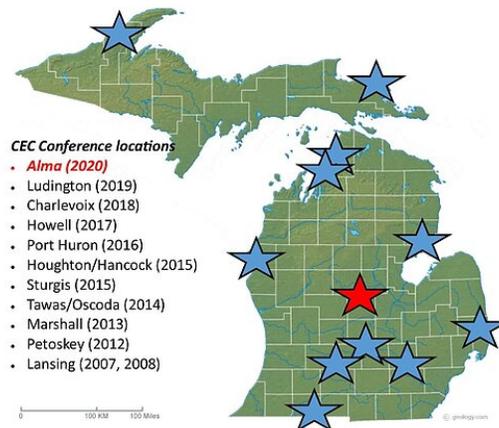
While larger urban centers may have deeper pockets, enhanced resources and the support of multiple governmental agencies, small towns often rely more on creative grassroots initiatives and idea sharing with other like-sized municipalities.

The annual Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities (CEC) Conference, September 14-15 in Alma, provides community leaders with a series of colleague-led sessions meant to spark innovation and deepen conversations.

First held in 2007 in Lansing, the CEC conference was developed by staff at Michigan State University Extension. For more than a century, MSU-E has – according to its printed mission statement – “helped grow Michigan’s economy by equipping residents with information that they need to do their jobs better, raise healthy and safe families, build their communities and empower our children to dream of a successful future” through educational programs focused on critical issues, needs and opportunities.

“CEC has garnered national attention and has been replicated in four other states,” says Mary Reilly, a MSU land use educator and conference committee marketing representative. “As of 2021, universities in three additional states are in the planning stages of delivering their first CEC.”





Over the years, Michigan towns like Petoskey, Marshall, Port Huron, Houghton/Hancock and Ludington, among others, have welcomed 100-plus individuals for 24-hours of learning and networking. Alma was the frontrunner for 2020, but the pandemic put that in-person event on hold.

“Host communities are doing innovative work to support local entrepreneurs and are well positioned to share examples that will highlight their community,” says Reilly, who is expecting up to 150 attendees this year. “Alma’s tagline is ‘In the Middle of Everything’ and their central location within Michigan is ideal for a conference location.”

This “fun and quirky” conference is worth the investment for anyone interested in how a community can encourage and support visionaries. The event tends to attract staff and members of chambers of commerce and visitor bureaus, local government officials, planning commissioners, small business owners and those vested in local and regional economic development. Both seasoned employees and those new to their roles will find topics of interest, in terms of learning and sharing.

“As I head into my first CEC conference, I am hoping to gain more insight as to how all of these small but mighty communities connect and how we can grow together,” says Kady Gehrke, marketing and outreach coordinator for the Alpena Downtown Development Authority “I have learned so much about the great impact that a downtown can make on a community in the short time that I have worked for our DDA and I am excited to see how the knowledge from my beautiful town transfers to the communities surrounding other towns.”

Things get underway at this year’s CEC with a special reception and cultural



presentation on Wednesday morning at the Saginaw Indian Tribe Reservation in Mt. Pleasant, about 20 minutes north of Alma, sponsored by the Migizi Economic Development.

Wednesday's opening Keynote Panel is titled "Alma Aspires" based on a strategic community development plan with local institutions leading the way to engage community members in growing an even stronger city. Panelists include Aeric Ripley, Alma city manager; Jeff Abernathy, president of Alma College; Marita Hattem-Schiffman, Central Region President of MyMichigan Health; Bob Conley, Systems CEO, Michigan Masonic Family of Corporations; Stacey Criner, superintendent of Alma Public Schools; and Jim Wheeler II, president of Greater Gratiot Development Inc.



**Jim Holton**

Local restaurateur Jim Holton, who owns more than a dozen businesses including Alma Brewing Company, will be the Thursday closing Keynote speaker. Over the past 25-plus years, Holton has built up an impressive portfolio of restaurants, breweries and catering operations while also serving in local government (both as a city Commissioner and mayor of Mount Pleasant) and dedicating time to organizations such as the Mt. Pleasant Area Chamber of



Commerce, Michigan Restaurant Association and Mt. Pleasant Convention & Visitors Bureau.

He'll share his personal story of entrepreneurship and advise how others can work with their local government agencies to grow their own businesses.

Holton's first restaurant was Mountain Town Station in Mt. Pleasant (Isabella County), which opened in 1996 as one of the early brewpubs in the state. With Alma being just 20 minutes down the road, it seemed a natural progression for his growing portfolio.

"While I was walking around town, I realized that downtown Alma could use a small brewery and that there was room for another restaurant in the dining mix," he says finding a location at 208 E. Superior St., where he opened Alma Brewing Company in 2014. "The City of Alma, Alma College and the residents of town were so accommodating and helpful for us to get this project started and have been great customers ever since."

CEC Breakout Sessions are categorized into 10 areas: including arts, culture and food; development strategies; housing; drawing tourism and shoppers; workforce development; and institutions as community partners. Among the specific sessions are "Renewable Energy & Small Business," "Designing and Planning for Crime Prevention in Our Communities," "The Power of Public Art" and "Using Geofencing and Mobile Data for Development, Planning and Engagement" among others. There is even a session for those looking to host this conference in the future. In all, nearly 30 distinct topics will be offered during this intensive event.

"I am most interested in the 'The Power of Public Art' session because we have an amazing program called the Fresh Waves Project in Alpena where artists are able to apply to paint a mural in our downtown district and I have been able to see a bit first-hand how wonderful public art is for a community," says Gehrke. "I am also interested in 'Downtown Development and Investment Strategies' because I would love to learn even more about the best ways to invest and grow in our downtown area. We have a thriving downtown and I am excited to learn about more ways that I can help be a part of this amazing process of growth."





**Aerial views of downtown Alma.**

Unlike other conferences held within one key building, CEC centralizes its activities in the downtown area with small group sessions (eight to 15 people) held at a variety of business settings this year, including Alma Community Art Center, Gratiot County Players Strand Theatre, Block House, Wright Leppien Opera House, ZENlightenment Wellness Center and Alma Brewing.

“The setting is great – we meet in small groups, in business spaces, so we can see how people re-made the space that they have, hear how they incorporate best practices into their business plan, or sometimes just meet in these terrific spaces and talk about other subjects of interest to those who want to rejuvenate their own villages and cities,” says Betsy Dayrell-Hart, chair of the St. Ignace Planning Commission, who has attended two previous CEC events in Charlevoix and Ludington.

No two CEC conferences are the same, because each draws inspiration from host city along with the individuals in attendance. And while the event is more relaxed and low-key, it delivers big in terms of idea generation. In addition to the



various breakout sessions and social activities, the CEC conference is also strong on networking opportunities.

“I met people who had innovative ideas about improvements to small cities – placemaking, flexible use of vacant properties, grant and loan opportunities for cities and individual business owners, zoning changes that make a big impact and lots more,” says Dayrell-Hart. “We make connections with people who are willing and able to share what they know, in a face-to-face setting. I came away from the conferences with ideas and enthusiasm – the ‘look what you can do if you work toward a common goal’ atmosphere is great.”

At-the-door registration for the CEC Conference is available for \$125.

*Dianna Stampfler has been writing professionally since high school. She is the president of Promote Michigan and the author of Michigan’s Haunted Lighthouses and Death & Lighthouses on the Great Lakes, both from the History Press.*

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