



Northern Lakes
ECONOMIC ALLIANCE

STRATEGIC PLAN

2025-2027





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The development of this strategic plan would not have been possible without the many stakeholders who helped shape its content and provide financial support. The NLEA Board of Directors and staff would like to thank the many community and business leaders, residents, and partner organizations across our service region who engaged in the process to shape our strategic focus in the years ahead and to our annual investors who continue to make our work possible everyday.

We would also like to extend a very special thank you to the Cheboygan County Community Foundation and the Fund for the Community of the Petoskey-Harbor Springs Area Community Foundation whose generous support ensured a successful and comprehensive community engagement process and final strategic plan.



Petoskey-Harbor Springs Area
community foundation





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Informed by more than 250 local community and business leaders, the following pages detail the Northern Lakes Economic Alliance's (NLEA) three-year strategic plan that builds toward a long-term vision for the NLEA region.

MISSION

NLEA is the lead economic development organization for the region of Antrim, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, and Emmet counties.

Our mission is to drive economic resiliency in the NLEA region by ensuring the resources, infrastructure, and policies exist to fuel business growth and community prosperity.

VISION

The NLEA region will be a thriving and resilient economy with a robust business environment that provides a diversity of family-sustaining career opportunities; an abundance of natural beauty; and an exceptional quality of life that allows all residents and future generations to prosper.

STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

1. Lead a comprehensive economic development strategy that builds greater economic resiliency for the region.
2. Grow diverse and year-round economic opportunity through targeted business retention, growth, and attraction efforts.
3. Advance infrastructure and development efforts that support the current and future diverse needs of our region's workforce and employers.
4. Elevate regional opportunities and implement new initiatives to attract and retain talent.

MEASURING IMPACT

Progress toward achieving this vision will be measured by gains in:

- Current and future working age population
- Median earnings
- GDP per employee
- Economic diversification
- Capital investment
- Shared prosperity

An aerial photograph of a coastal town, likely NLEA, featuring a river flowing through a sandy area in the foreground, a dense forest, and a town with various buildings in the middle ground. A large body of water is visible in the background under a cloudy sky. The entire image is overlaid with a blue tint.

***Our mission is to drive economic resiliency in the NLEA region
by ensuring the resources, infrastructure, and policies exist to
fuel business growth and community prosperity.***

INTRODUCTION

The Northern Lakes Economic Alliance (NLEA) is a 501(c)(3) regional economic development organization serving Antrim, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, and Emmet counties.

ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

The organization initially formed in 1984 when a group of community leaders in Charlevoix County founded the Charlevoix County Business & Industry Task Force. The group focused on supporting the growth of local manufacturers to increase long-term economic vitality and to create year-round jobs for residents. Both public and private sector entities joined together to support the new economic development resource. Recognizing the value of pooling limited funds, this public-private partnership expanded to include Antrim County in 1985, creating the Antrim-Charlevoix Growth Alliance. In 1988, the organization rebranded to the Northern Lakes Economic Alliance and expanded support to businesses and communities across Emmet County and then Cheboygan County in 2007.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

2024 marked NLEA's 40th year as an economic development organization. The NLEA hired its fifth President in early 2024 and began a strategic planning process to guide the organization's structure, services, and development over the next three years. NLEA brought on Lake Superior Community Partnership (LSCP) to facilitate public engagement, ensuring the strategic plan was informed by NLEA's partners and the region's varied communities.

LSCP led a five-month engagement process that included an initial impressions survey conducted at NLEA's annual Economic Symposium, NLEA staff planning sessions, four community workshops, two business roundtables, a Chamber of Commerce Directors roundtable, NLEA Board of Directors surveys and workshops, individual stakeholder interviews, and a comprehensive public survey with specific sections for residents/employees, businesses, local officials, and developers. More than 250 community leaders, business leaders, and residents engaged in the process. Across the stakeholder groups and sessions, participants provided input in the following general areas:

- Top challenges and opportunities for economic development in the region.
- Experience with NLEA programs and services, including the familiarity with, use of, and perceived value of such programs.
- Feedback on new programs and services NLEA could provide.



In addition to the LSCP-led engagement, NLEA's ongoing interactions with business and community leaders through direct business outreach and community meetings; the organization's experience advancing economic development projects across the region; and ongoing data analysis of economic trends also helped to inform the strategic plan.

A final three-year strategic plan was adopted by the NLEA Board of Directors in late November 2024. Implementation of the plan commenced in January 2025 and will conclude in December 2027.



NLEA hosted strategic planning sessions with community and business leaders across Antrim, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, and Emmet counties.

OBSTACLES

As part of our strategic planning process, we asked stakeholders to identify what key challenges they see impeding greater economic vitality in the region. We combined this feedback with economic trend data and direct staff experience to highlight the most prominent issues. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering sustainable economic growth and improving the overall quality of life in our region. An extended discussion of these obstacles can be found in Appendix A.



A population imbalance that threatens our region's current and future economy and quality of life.



Workforce shortages that challenge employers, strain services, and prevent business growth.



Housing shortages that prevent the growth of our workforce and younger population.



Lack of affordable childcare keeping many out of the workforce.



Lack of economic diversification making our region's economy more vulnerable to economic shifts.



Regulatory hurdles that prevent businesses from growing in the region and developers from adding much-needed housing.



Lack of infrastructure and development-ready sites to support strategic business growth and much-needed housing.



Some communities are prospering far more than others across the region.

OPPORTUNITIES

As part of our strategic planning process, we asked stakeholders to identify what key opportunities they see for advancing economic vitality across our four counties. We combined this feedback with economic trend data to highlight the most prominent assets. Leveraging these opportunities will be crucial for fostering sustainable economic growth and improving the overall quality of life in our region. An extended discussion of these opportunities can be found in Appendix A.



Robust tourism industry that supports local businesses, while introducing new talent and entrepreneurs to our region.



Unique, regional natural assets fuel the Outdoor Recreation, Agriculture-, Forestry-, and Marine-Related Industries.



A strong quality of life with low crime and access to healthcare makes us an attractive place to live.



Unique, regional natural assets that provide year-round outdoor recreational opportunities that make us an attractive destination for talent.



A base of manufacturers that fuel innovation globally and grow our economy locally.



Community-minded businesses committed to solving local challenges and building prosperity.

The background of the image is a blue-tinted photograph of a waterfront scene. In the foreground, there is a concrete walkway with a metal railing overlooking a body of water. In the middle ground, a row of houses with gabled roofs is visible, some with porches. Trees are in the background behind the houses. The sky is a deep blue with some light clouds.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK BUILDING ECONOMIC RESILIENCY



MISSION, VISION, VALUES

MISSION

NLEA is the lead economic development organization for the region of Antrim, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, and Emmet counties.

Our mission is to drive economic resiliency in the NLEA region by ensuring the resources, infrastructure, and policies exist to fuel business growth and community prosperity.

VISION

The NLEA region will have a thriving and resilient economy with a robust business environment that provides a diversity of family-sustaining career opportunities; an abundance of natural beauty; and an exceptional quality of life that allows all residents and future generations to prosper.

PARTNERS

We are powered from the ground up by local and regional public, private, and individual financial supporters who are committed to advancing economic prosperity for the region. We further amplify our impact through strong state, federal, philanthropic, and organizational partnerships.

VALUES

MISSION-DRIVEN

We are on a mission to best serve our communities, businesses, and fellow residents in this region. We tenaciously strive to achieve our mission with maximum results.

FORWARD-THINKING AND ACTING

We are not just working to solve today's challenges or seize today's opportunities. We must anticipate and prepare for future needs and act with the intention of serving future generations.

VISIBLE

We are present and proactively engage our business, community, and organizational partners so they always know we are here as a resource.

GOOD PARTNER

We listen and serve as an honest and trusted partner to communities, businesses, and organizations.

ACCOUNTABLE

We fulfill the commitments we make to each other and the communities and businesses we serve.

RESOURCEFUL

If we do not immediately know the answer to a question, we find it. If we do not immediately have a solution, we work to create multiple possible solutions.

TEAM-ORIENTED

We work collaboratively and respectfully and support the common good of the organization, not our own self interests. The organization invests in and demonstrates care for its staff.

PROFESSIONAL

We always maintain professionalism in our work and interactions with each other and in the community.

EXPERT

Others look to us for knowledge and expertise. To continuously meet this expectation, we commit to continued learning, professional growth, and honing of our crafts.



MEASURING LONG-TERM IMPACT

No single data point serves as a clear indicator of impact, and all data are imperfect. By using a combination of data points though, we can assess whether our region is moving in a positive direction toward our vision. While NLEA is focused on driving our mission and vision, we also understand that moving the needle involves the work of many public and private actors, and we recognize their tremendous contributions to achieving these impacts. **Building economic resiliency requires:**



A growing current and future working age population.



An increase in regional median wage.



An increase in regional GDP per employee.



Greater economic diversification: growth in smaller share industries offering stronger wages.



A shrinking prosperity gap across communities.



The background image is a photograph of a waterfront town, possibly in New England, with a blue color overlay. It shows a river or harbor in the foreground, a stone pier or breakwater in the middle ground, and several buildings along the shore. A hill with trees is in the background. The text 'THREE-YEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES' is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font.

THREE-YEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES

THREE-YEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES

Transformational change and sustained impact do not happen overnight. They require clear, deliberate planning, execution, evaluation of progress, and necessary adaptation. The following pages outline goals, strategies, and metrics that all intentionally connect and reinforce the others. While these goals and strategies do not directly address every challenge and opportunity raised by stakeholders in the strategic planning process, they all aim to significantly move the needle by building and leading a more cohesive economic development strategy for the region. Other partner organizations across the region - like our twelve chambers of commerce, two regional planning agencies, two workforce development organizations, and others - are also critical actors in cultivating a strong economy. By advancing NLEA's goals and strategies in partnership with others, we will more successfully drive economic resiliency.

The goals and strategies in this plan outline a strategic focus for the organization's work in the years ahead while leaving room for necessary adaptation and refinement with the support of our private and public sector partners. Using this framework and continuing to work closely with our partners, NLEA staff will have accompanying one-year workplans and quarterly targets that advance these three-year goals and strategies.

Every few years we will update our strategic plan to ensure continued progress toward our vision of a resilient regional economy.

STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

1. **LEADERSHIP:** Lead a comprehensive economic development strategy that builds greater economic resiliency for the region.
2. **OPPORTUNITY:** Grow diverse and year-round economic opportunity through targeted business retention, growth, and attraction efforts.
3. **PLACE:** Advance infrastructure and development efforts that support the current and future diverse needs of our region's workforce and employers.
4. **PEOPLE:** Elevate regional opportunities and implement new initiatives to attract and retain talent.

GOAL ONE LEADERSHIP

Lead a comprehensive economic development strategy that builds greater economic resiliency for the region.

To foster a strong and resilient regional economy, there must be an entity to champion an intentional and sustained effort. Stakeholder feedback described NLEA as uniquely situated to inform and elevate regional economic development conversations and priorities, given the organization's technical expertise, focus on data, and region-wide public and private partnerships. This goal calls on the NLEA to widely communicate its role and build on existing momentum from successful programming like data analysis, education, and our premier regional event, the annual Economic Symposium.

Through this work, NLEA will serve as a leading voice and actor in fostering greater economic diversification, increased year-round and family-sustaining jobs, modern infrastructure, and intentional development to support the changing needs of businesses and communities.

STRATEGIES

LEAD: Proactively monitor economic trends and educate business and community leaders through events, direct outreach, and publications.

1. Develop an 'economic resiliency report' to communicate the need for industry diversification and articulate a path toward continued economic diversification that includes more year-round, family-sustaining jobs.
2. Issue a regular 'pulse on the regional economy' survey to gather timely data from business leaders on key issues and trends.
3. Issue regular 'pulse on the regional economy' reports featuring relevant economic trend data, survey results, and major development or business expansion projects.
4. Host regular educational panels in locations across the region that feature topics and key issues relevant to building a more resilient economy.
5. Continue hosting the annual Economic Symposium as the central region-wide convening of business and community leaders, highlighting key challenges and opportunities for advancing economic resiliency in our region.

LEAD: Advance economic development policy and funding priorities for the region.

1. Proactively meet with and convene small group discussions with elected and appointed local, state, and federal leaders to increase awareness of the region's economic development needs.
2. Engage in statewide and regional policy groups like the Northern Michigan Chamber Alliance to advance policy solutions that meet the region's economic development needs.
3. Engage in broader regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies planning with regional planning organizations and neighboring regional partners to help influence economic development investment priorities by state and federal agencies.



MEASURES OF SHORT- AND MID-TERM PROGRESS

- Event attendance and feedback
- Multi-media engagement
- Local, state, and/or federal policy change

GOAL TWO OPPORTUNITY

Grow diverse and year-round economic opportunity through targeted business retention, growth, and attraction efforts.

The businesses in our region produce tremendous opportunity. They create jobs, invest in our communities to support a strong quality of life, and innovate locally and globally. While other regional and statewide organizations provide a variety of direct business services for start-ups and businesses looking to improve their operations, NLEA is focused on cultivating the physical, policy, and investment environment for businesses to succeed in our region. By creating an environment where our businesses can succeed and grow, we are creating an environment where opportunity can flourish, and our residents and communities can thrive.

Our region boasts a robust tourism and hospitality industry, as well as a strong foundation of traded industries¹, particularly in manufacturing. The NLEA will continue to support all business types including the significant tourism and hospitality sectors by responding to requests for support. To ensure long-term economic resiliency, we will proactively and strategically enhance our efforts to strengthen, grow, and attract more diverse, quality, year-round job opportunities in strategic and traded industries.

Proactively growing our businesses in strategic and traded industries including advanced manufacturing, value-added agriculture, construction, and other areas will increase year-round employment with family-sustaining wages and investment in our region. This in turn further supports the strength of other sectors. Many companies located here have a national and global reach, which brings new capital to our local and regional economies. A strategic and proactive effort to support and grow these business types will foster greater economic diversity, reducing overreliance on only one or two sectors and strengthen our year-round economy to avoid large seasonal spikes in unemployment, increase access to insurance and benefits, and better weather future economic downturns.

STRATEGIES

LEAD: Proactively monitor economic trends and educate business and community leaders through events, direct outreach, and publications.

1. Increase direct and targeted business outreach (retention visits) to share resources and assess challenges and opportunities for business growth.
2. Using research, data analysis, and direct outreach with the business community, identify priority business types and transformative projects to drive strategic growth.
3. Convene regular business leader roundtables around key issues and industry areas.

LEAD: Strengthen and better communicate the organization's role serving as a bridge between the public and private sector.

1. Strengthen site selection and development process navigation services for businesses looking to locate and expand.
2. Develop and implement programming that intentionally introduces local elected leaders to their communities' businesses, business needs, and steps local leaders can take to foster an environment that supports existing and attracts new business investment.

LEAD: Strengthen grant writing and packaging services for businesses to secure additional resources for business development and growth in our region.

1. Proactively connect businesses with funding opportunities based on information gathered through retention visits and surveys.
2. Maintain regular communication with state and federal partners about existing and upcoming grant opportunities.
3. Better communicate NLEA's grant writing and packaging services to raise business awareness of this as a resource.

LEAD: Continue serving as a go-to resource for businesses while developing more strategic partnerships with other organizations that provide direct business services within our region to streamline and strengthen overall support to all business types.

1. Convene other organizations that are providing direct business support services in our region to achieve greater coordination and collaboration, making services overall more accessible to businesses.
2. Identify and implement joint programming opportunities with key business services organizations to help fill service and education gaps for businesses.
3. Seek out strategic partnership opportunities with businesses and other direct business service organizations to advance this goal and associated strategies.
4. Continue referring businesses seeking business planning, operational consulting services, workforce training, and financing to our partner organizations who already provide these services across the region.

MEASURES OF SHORT- AND MID-TERM PROGRESS

- **Direct and indirect investment cultivated**
- **Jobs created and retained**
- **Cost savings to businesses**
- **Volume of business projects and assists**
- **Volume and frequency of retention visits**

GOAL THREE PLACE

Advance infrastructure and development efforts that support the current and future diverse needs of our region's workforce and employers.

To support a strong and resilient economy, we must ensure our region's communities have the resources, policies, and physical assets to meet current and future needs of employers and the workforce. This includes infrastructure, housing, and targeted development to support continued business growth in key sectors. Our region's ability to support the current and future needs of residents and businesses is restricted by the lack of workforce housing to retain and attract talent, limited infrastructure to support housing and future development, and a shortage of large and prepared sites for industrial use.

While the desire for expanded and improved infrastructure, more housing, and development ready sites for business expansion was expressed across all four counties through community engagement, we understand the scale, type, location, and approach to development can vary across communities. Supporting the unique characteristics of our communities is important to current residents but is also what makes our region attractive to new residents. NLEA will work with our public and private sector partners to address the overarching challenges of infrastructure and development and drive transformative projects across the region. Our work will thoughtfully balance infrastructure and development with the region's cherished natural assets and outdoor recreational opportunities, both of which are integral to the prosperity of future generations.

STRATEGIES

LEAD: Conduct direct and regular outreach to communities, businesses, and utilities to comprehensively identify priority water, sewer, and utility infrastructure expansion opportunities and steps needed to further these opportunities across the region.

1. Work with regional planning organizations, local units of government, and utility companies to identify water, sewer, and gas infrastructure gaps.
2. Proactively collaborate with business and local government leaders to identify priority infrastructure opportunities.
3. Identify needed steps, estimate cost, and coordinate stakeholders to advance priority infrastructure projects.

LEAD: Increase the availability of development-ready industrial sites and strategic commercial sites for continued business growth in key sectors.

1. Maintain an inventory of current and future strategic sites region-wide.
2. Strengthen site selection tools and supports.
3. Secure pre-development and development funding to advance site-readiness efforts.
4. Support the implementation of development districts and incentives for strategic industrial and commercial sites.

LEAD: Secure funding to advance transformative infrastructure and development projects that serve community goals.

1. Proactively collaborate with community leaders, elected leaders, state agencies, and federal agencies to pursue state and federal grants and other funding opportunities.
2. Focus on funding in priority areas including water and sewer infrastructure, port infrastructure, airport improvements, housing, and targeted industrial development that help further other strategic plan goals.
3. Intentionally identify and advance projects that will increase economic opportunity in our most economically disadvantaged communities across the region.

LEAD: Strengthen and better communicate the organization's role serving as a bridge between the public and private sector, helping businesses and developers successfully navigate the development process across different communities in the region.

1. Continue to directly support communities, businesses, and developers in navigating economic development incentive options, processes, and requirements.
2. Apply take-aways from NLEA's business outreach programming to inform supports to communities in reducing process and policy barriers to business success and growth.

LEAD: Inform the discussion of and support the implementation of economic development strategies and tools at a governmental level.

1. Educate local and state leaders on policies, incentives, and strategies to encourage desired commercial and industrial development through regular trainings and other programming.
2. Help local and state leaders implement policies, incentives, and strategies through direct technical assistance and policy development.
3. Advise on community economic development strategy and help inform community master planning efforts to support land use planning that balances community and business needs with preservation of natural assets.

LEAD: Seek out strategic partnership opportunities with the private sector and other organizations working in the community development space to advance this goal and associated strategies.

1. Partner with existing housing advocacy organizations, developers, and state partners to secure additional resources for the development of workforce housing.
2. Engage in Regional Housing Partnerships to uplift employer housing needs and further strategies that lead to increased workforce housing production.
3. Provide professional expertise, data analysis, letters of support, and other assistance to partners pursuing additional funding.



MEASURES OF SHORT- AND MID-TERM PROGRESS

- Direct and indirect investment cultivated
- New construction and redevelopment
- Prepared sites for industrial use
- Expanded and improved infrastructure
- Community projects and assists



GOAL FOUR PEOPLE

Elevate regional opportunities and implement new initiatives to attract and retain talent.

A population balanced by age and diverse skillsets is essential for a strong and resilient economy. Our region currently lacks this population makeup and stakeholders across our region have communicated the desire for NLEA to lead efforts that will help attract and retain younger talent. MichiganWorks! organizations in northern lower Michigan lead workforce development through training and apprenticeships, helping increase labor force participation. North Central Michigan College (NCMC) being the only post-secondary institution in our region also plays a vital role in retaining talent and increasing labor force participation, particularly through programming like Fast Track Career Programs which have been seeing rapid growth. To build on and complement this work, NLEA will focus on retaining and attracting talent to live in the region.

Our region is well-known for its natural beauty, outdoor recreational opportunities, and tourism industry. It makes us a prominent destination for seasonal visitors and retirees. We are less known, however, for our career opportunities, and our successful businesses in manufacturing, marine construction, value-added agriculture, and other areas that drive innovation both locally and globally. While the efforts reflected in Goal 2 to diversify economic opportunity through strategic business growth are vital, these efforts will fall short if we do not also actively elevate the existing and growing opportunities in our region. Without a change, young residents will continue to move away, and families and young talent elsewhere will overlook our region as a place to call home. We must actively communicate and connect talent to the rewarding career opportunities in our region.

STRATEGIES

LEAD: Expand Choose the North from just a marketing campaign to a comprehensive talent retention and attraction initiative aimed at growing our working age talent.

1. Uplift diverse family-sustaining job opportunities in the region through new programming.
2. Explore strategies to tap into new or expanded talent pools with companies across the region.
3. Engage young people currently living in and originally from the region in program development.

LEAD: Expand NLEA's existing Choose the North talent attraction marketing campaign to focus attention on diverse family-sustaining career and investment opportunities.

1. Elevate the stories of diverse family-sustaining career and investment opportunities.
2. Focus marketing and storytelling on strategic sectors identified in our business retention and growth strategy.

SUPPORT: Continue supporting efforts with our educational and workforce development partners, as well as businesses across the region to retain talent and increase labor force participation through reskilling.

1. Continue assisting efforts to retain regional talent and increase regional labor force participation.
2. Collaborate with our educational and workforce development partners like NCMC and MichiganWorks!, as well as businesses across the region.
3. Partner with educational institutions to continue building and marketing programming that meets employers current and future needs.



MEASURES OF SHORT- AND MID-TERM PROGRESS

- Program participant attendance and feedback
- Increased talent pool connections for employers
- Increased multi-media engagement with Choose the North campaign



APPENDIX A: CONTINUED DISCUSSION OF OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

OBSTACLES

As part of our strategic planning process, we asked stakeholders to identify what key challenges they see impeding greater economic vitality for the region. We combined this feedback with economic trend data and our direct experience to highlight some of the most prominent issues. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering sustainable economic growth and improving the overall quality of life in our region:

POPULATION IMBALANCE

While the state overall has experienced a stagnant population, our region has seen growth. The regional population declined between 2010 and 2017 but rebounded 109,617 in 2022 which is on par with 2010 levels..ⁱⁱ This growth however presents an unsustainable future for our region. Despite population growth in recent years, we are an aging and disproportionately older population. Between 2010 and 2022, the share of the regional population over the age of 60 grew 9.9% to represent a 35.2% share of the overall population, substantially higher than the state's share at 24.8%.ⁱⁱⁱ This means a smaller workforce while also placing increased demands on sectors like health care. The share of the regional population under 18 simultaneously decreased by 4.8% between 2010 and 2022 to represent a share of 17.5%.^{iv} This results in lower school enrollments, fewer youth to fill seasonal jobs, and without change, an increasingly smaller future workforce.

An aging population also has critical implications for the future of our business landscape. Approximately 53.3% of local businesses in our region are owned by individuals 55 and older, suggesting a large wave of owner retirements in the years ahead.^v This percentage accounts for approximately 1,433 total businesses and more than 10,890 employees, \$388 million in payroll, and \$1.826 billion in revenue for the four-county region. Antrim and Charlevoix have the greatest share of businesses owned by the 55 and older demographic, with 53% and 64% respectively.

WORKFORCE SHORTAGE

Information collected from our community engagement as well as quantitative data demonstrate that one of the foremost challenges regional employers face is a constrained workforce. Between 2010 and 2023, the region's average annual labor force declined 2,630 workers.^{vi} Even with our population rebounding in more recent years, our working age population continued to shrink. Between 2010 and 2022, the region's prime working age population (25- to 54-years-old) declined by 5,811 people or 14%.^{vii} Each county lost over 1,100 people in this demographic group that is integral to current and future economic vitality. The current trajectory is not sustainable; the region must attract and retain families and working age individuals to fill vital roles in the public and private sectors.

HOUSING SHORTAGE

To solve our workforce challenges, we need housing. Finding housing that our workforce can afford emerged as the top issue across stakeholder groups and is reflected in the data. The region faces a significant deficit in available housing units. Across the region the percentage of vacant units for rent ranges from .5% to 1.4%, and those for sale range from 1.1% to 3.6%. This is significantly lower than what is considered a healthy housing market vacancy rate.^{viii} A 2023 Housing Needs Assessment by Housing North projected that Antrim, Charlevoix, and Emmet counties have an overall housing gap of 1,916 rental units and 5,583 for sale units through 2027. The study did not cover Cheboygan County. Limited housing stock is impacting every income level, from hourly workers to those with advanced degrees. This shortage limits the ability of businesses to attract and retain talent, as prospective employees struggle to find suitable housing.

LACK OF AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE

A lack of affordable childcare options poses a significant barrier for working families. It limits many from engaging or re-engaging in the workforce, further straining workforce shortages. Of the 42 census tracts in the region, 66% are classified as childcare deserts.^{ix} In both Antrim and Cheboygan counties, the share of tracts classified as deserts is over 75%.^x The data reflects the information collected in our community engagement process; business decision makers, residents, and local government officials recognized childcare as a challenge.

LACK OF ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

Economic diversification is key to a resilient economy. Overreliance on one company or one sector carries significant risk in times of economic change. Our region's two largest employment sectors are Accommodation and Food Services (19%) and Retail Trade (17%).^{xi} This reflects our strong tourism and hospitality industries. While these sectors are extremely important to our region's economy, they tend to be non-tradable^{xii} and offer lower-wage seasonal employment. Maintaining existing sector strengths but increasing year-round family-sustaining employment opportunities across diverse traded sectors will reduce the region's vulnerability to seasonal spikes in unemployment and more widespread unemployment in times of constricted consumer spending. It will also support more year-round activity for the Retail Trade and Accommodation and Food Services industries and offer more career options to keep young talent here long-term.

REGULATORY HURDLES FOR BUSINESSES AND DEVELOPMENT

Many stakeholders, especially businesses and developers who more frequently navigate land use and other regulations, raised significant concerns about local regulations and processes that complicate or prevent expansion of their business operations and needed housing development in our region. Local business leaders highlighted specific instances that prevented their companies from further investing in expansion and creating new family-sustaining jobs in the region. Yet, 81% of local public officials responding to our community survey want to attract new business to their communities. In the case of developers, regulatory hurdles caused workforce housing developments to be delayed, further increasing project costs in an already unfavorable market environment and, in some cases, prevented development entirely. Stakeholders described some very different regulatory experiences across the region; some areas were viewed as much more welcoming to businesses with greater flexibility and easier-to-navigate processes, while others were viewed as especially difficult.

The most frequent concerns were cited at the local level, but businesses also expressed concerns regarding state policy adding time and cost to their projects and operations, as well as state programs becoming less inviting. While regulations are important to the health, safety, and aesthetics of communities, finding ways to remove regulatory hurdles will be critical to cultivating a stronger business environment, meet community goals, and ensure the long-term economic vitality of the region.

LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT TO SUPPORT BUSINESS AND RESIDENT NEEDS

There is a notable lack of infrastructure and shovel-ready sites for residential and industrial development. This is one of the most frequent issues raised across stakeholders looking to expand much-needed housing opportunities. Stakeholders raised concerns about limited water and sewer infrastructure, serving as one of the most significant barriers to housing and other critical development to support business growth. The scarcity of sites zoned for industrial with infrastructure and development incentives in place also limits opportunities for local businesses in strategic industries to expand when they outgrow their current locations, hindering overall efforts to diversify the local economy and grow family-sustaining career opportunities. Having prepared sites and expanded infrastructure will create a more frictionless environment for moving desired projects forward, helping overcome many regulatory hurdles mentioned above. Businesses highlighted best practice examples like our existing industrial parks but noted availability constraints and a need for more development-ready opportunities like these around the region. Without a thoughtful, proactive effort to address infrastructure and site-readiness needs, the region will not be able to address housing and workforce shortages, and we will lose some of our growing companies.

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IN THE REGION

Economic prosperity is not evenly distributed across the region. Some counties and communities experience much higher seasonal unemployment, lower wages, smaller tax base for providing quality services, and a higher prevalence of vacant and blighted properties. For example, despite the county's having similar unemployment rates in the summer of 3-4%, Cheboygan County's unemployment rate routinely spikes to over 13% in the winter months.^{xiii} There is also disparity in earnings; in 2022 the median earnings for full-time, year-round workers were \$45,819 in Cheboygan, \$48,895 in Antrim, \$51,650 in Charlevoix, and \$51,445 in Emmet.^{xiv} All four counties are below Michigan's median of \$56,665. These differences are also experienced within counties. For example, within Antrim County the communities of Elk Rapids and Mancelona experience a significant difference, with 5.6% of residents below the poverty level in Elk Rapids, and more than 20% in Mancelona. Additionally, there is a more than ten-thousand-dollar difference in their median incomes.^{xv} Unequal prosperity indicates that targeted efforts are required but also that economic and community strategies must be tailored to a community's unique needs.



OPPORTUNITIES

As part of our strategic planning process, we asked stakeholders to identify what key opportunities they see for advancing economic vitality across our four counties. We combined this feedback with economic trend data to highlight some of the most prominent assets. Leveraging these opportunities will be crucial for fostering sustainable economic growth and improving the overall quality of life in our region:

NATURAL ASSETS AND RECREATION

Our region's natural assets were to no surprise the top strength and opportunity raised by stakeholders. Our natural assets and resources are beloved for many reasons including outdoor recreational opportunities, improving quality of life, the unique industry strengths they provide, and for attracting visitors and new talent.

One of the characteristics that makes our region stand out from other parts of the state and country is our abundance of freshwater access. The Great Lakes, the Upper and Lower Chain of Lakes, the Inland Waterway, and our many other lakes and rivers drove our economy from the start by providing important trade routes, and today make us a natural fit for growing the "blue economy" with outdoor recreation product manufacturing and testing, marine construction, and other marine-related industries.

Our topography, climate, forests, and agricultural land also make us stand out. Michigan is the second most diverse crop producer in the nation, and our region is a major driver of this and food processing. These natural assets also support our forestry industry and make us a destination for agritourism and winter sports like downhill and cross-country skiing.

Networks Northwest led an outdoor recreation industry study in partnership with economic development organizations like the NLEA. Survey responses from more than 200 regional outdoor industry businesses showed that the majority of these businesses were growing in Northwest Michigan, with 96% reporting growing or stable sales and 72% planning to add jobs in the next three years.^{xvi} Embracing these unique regional assets provides significant opportunity.

EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Our schools are a cornerstone of our community, providing a skilled workforce and fostering innovation. Community feedback frequently cited 'good schools' as a critical asset in our region. This spanned K-12, vocational training programs, and North Central Michigan College's post-secondary offerings. Continuing to support educational partnerships and programming as a method to retain and attract more families and young talent, as well as to improve pipelines to support local businesses were named as essential components to driving economic vitality.

QUALITY OF LIFE

A strong 92% of respondents to our community survey stated they are definitely or very likely to remain in the region over the next ten years. A safe environment with low crime rates and tight-knit communities were called out as significant strengths of our area. Additionally, access to two major healthcare systems ensures a high quality of life for residents.

TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY

Our region's tourism and hospitality industries have and continue to be a vital asset. In 2023, the impact of tourism is estimated to be at \$450.7 million in direct income and generated \$140.7 million in state and local taxes in Antrim, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, and Emmet Counties.^{xvii}

Beyond the financial benefit, a strong tourism and hospitality industry exposes many visiting our area to its natural beauty, recreational opportunities, and unique downtowns. These visits are often the first real exposure to our area and provide increased opportunity to attract the future workforce and entrepreneurs who want to make their vacation destination home or place of business. Many examples exist of new businesses locating to our region because of an owners existing connection as a visitor to the region. These examples range from small mainstreet businesses to larger manufacturers.

MANUFACTURING AND INNOVATION

A strong base of manufacturers is a tremendous, yet underappreciated, asset for the region. Manufacturing makes up the third largest share of private sector jobs for the region. In 2023, the manufacturing sector's 5,328 average annual jobs were most concentrated in Charlevoix County with 53.9% of the region's manufacturing jobs, followed by Emmet County with 29.6% of the region's manufacturing jobs.^{xviii} Despite varied levels of manufacturing in each county, the sector provides the largest share of family-sustaining, year-round employment. In 2023, the regional Manufacturing sector paid \$158 million more in wages than our robust Accommodation and Food Services sector, despite having 924 fewer workers. In each of our four counties, the average weekly wage in manufacturing is at least 90% higher than in Accommodation and Food Services.^{xix}

Manufacturing - from foundries to fabrication to finished goods - is also driving innovation globally across areas like infrastructure, aerospace, automotive, and more. The manufacturing industry encompasses a broad spectrum of manufacturers, but the most prominent areas for our region include fabricated metal and other products, machinery, and plastic and rubber products. There is tremendous opportunity for growth and continued innovation in manufacturing across our region.

LOCALLY OWNED AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED BUSINESSES

Our region is fortunate to have companies that demonstrate a strong commitment to the health and vitality of our communities and residents. Many businesses contribute to local community efforts and provide strong benefits for their employees, but some have also taken significant steps beyond that by building and investing in housing and supporting workforce development programs to help tackle some of the region's most pressing challenges. Our region has a strong history of family- and locally owned businesses that are deeply rooted in the community and committed to building a bright future for the region. Supporting the success of these businesses here and continuing to foster the local entrepreneurial spirit will help ensure not just a vibrant business environment but also stronger communities.

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION ASSETS

The Pellston Regional Airport was frequently cited as an important asset in the northernmost part of our region, and the proximity to the Cherry Capital Airport for the southernmost part of our region.

Other transportation access points such as our maritime ports in Cheboygan and Charlevoix were also highlighted as critical infrastructure for the movement of goods and people, access to markets, and presenting unique opportunities for marine-related industry.



CITATIONS

ⁱ A tradable industry is one that produces goods and services that can be traded across regions or internationally. Tradable sectors are important for economic vitality because they bring new money into the local economy that is recirculated through salaries, company purchasing, and business investment.

ⁱⁱ US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

ⁱⁱⁱ US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

^{iv} US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

^v According to research conducted by the Michigan Center for Employee Ownership

^{vi} Michigan's Department of Technology, Management, and Budget

^{vii} US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

^{viii} In Antrim County, only 0.5% of vacant dwellings were for rent and 1.9% were for sale. In Charlevoix County, only 1.3 % of vacant dwellings were for rent and 1.4 % were for sale. In Cheboygan County, only 1.0% of vacant dwellings were for rent and 1.1% were for sale. In Emmet County, only 1.4% of vacant dwellings were for rent and 3.6% were for sale. Generally, five to eight percent vacancy is considered average for a housing market. At this level, there are units for sale, but changeover is not dramatic, and communities are stable.

^{ix} Michigan State University's Child Care Mapping Project

^x MSU's Childcare Mapping Project defined a childcare dessert as a census tract has at least 50 children under the age of 11 and there is no provider or there is a three or more children per childcare slot in licensed facilities.

^{xi} Michigan's Department of Technology, Management, and Budget data

^{xii} Non-tradable industries produce goods and services can only be bought and consumed where they are produced, preventing them from being traded in other regions. A meal at a restaurant or a newly constructed house are examples of products that cannot be traded.

^{xiii} Michigan's Department of Technology, Management, and Budget

^{xiv} US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

^{xv} ^tUS Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

^{xvi} Networks Northwest's 2024 Outdoor Recreation Economic Impact Study for Northwest Michigan by Fourth Economy

^{xvii} Pure Michigan's 2023 Tourism Economic Impact Report - Region and County

^{xviii} Michigan's Department of Technology, Management, and Budget

^{xix} Michigan's Department of Technology, Management, and Budget



Northern Lakes

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