

# Model coalition working to develop five-mile 'Loop' in West Branch

State leaders have taken note of group called GAP

By HELEN LOUNSBURY  
TIMES WRITER

WEST BRANCH – Time was when the adage "Every man for himself" was an economic fact of life for the three jurisdictions spanning the five-mile West Branch Business Loop.

But in the last two years, a trio of governments have revolutionized their self-preservation approach to a point that they're meriting state level attention as a model coalition.

"We realized we were getting nowhere, fighting over borders, each municipality with its own agenda," explained West Branch Township Supervisor Steve Steinhauser.

"Now we've moved past annexation to municipal agreements that benefit us all," Steinhauser continued. Their accords, he added, include once-taboo notions such as tax revenue sharing, he added.

The Business Loop is a five-mile horseshoe of commerce serving residents and Interstate 75 travelers from two exits. The Loop not only showcases the city of West Branch and West Branch and Ogemaw townships, it holds the communities' best potential for economic growth.

Planning, nurturing and promoting that growth as one unit, not three, started two years ago, over lunch.

The two townships' supervisors and West Branch city manager called a truce and agreed to start meeting monthly for lunch. Over sandwiches, they talked and brainstormed about their common interest – the Loop.

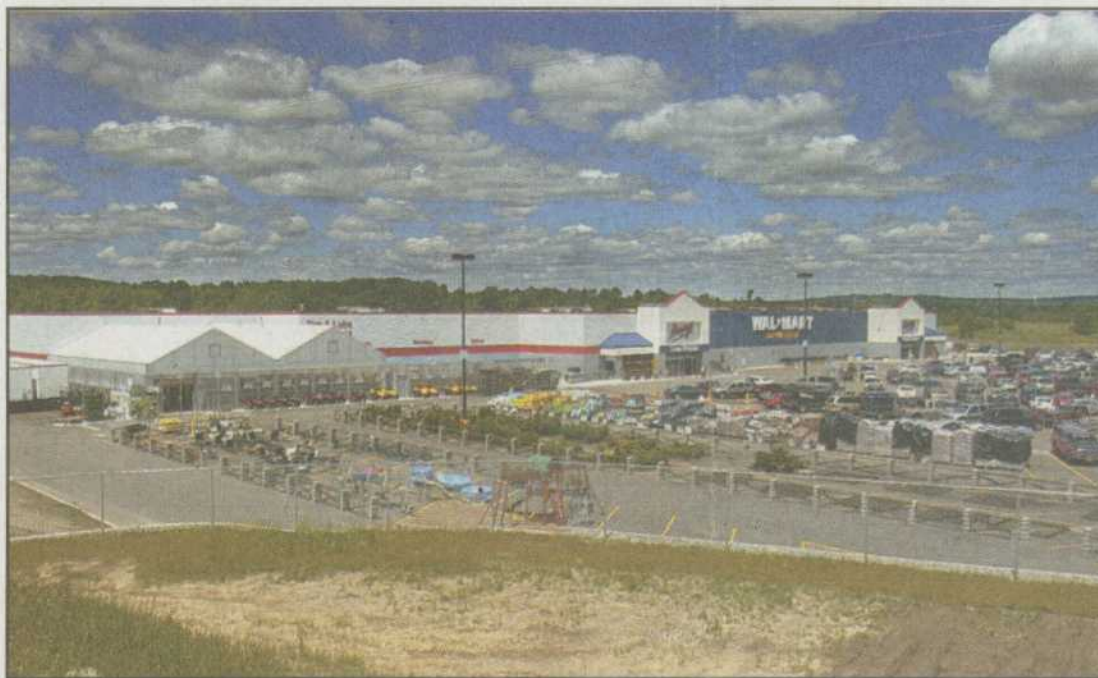
The offshoot is an organization called GAP, short for Growth Assessment Planners.

"We saw pretty quickly the whole thing was too big for us to handle on our own," said Denis Stephens, Ogemaw Township supervisor. "Partnering is going to be the key to our economic growth on the Loop."

GAP is a 12-member group of citizens, business people and elected officials from the three municipalities focused expressly on planning Loop growth. GAP meets frequently – emphasis on frequently – members say. Ogemaw County's Economic Development Corp. representatives are wrapped into the GAP mix.

"Communicating with each other regularly, I think that's the biggest thing," Stephens added about their newfound collaboration. "If you can get government leaders together, talking freely and openly, even about the hard issues, you've got the climate for cooperation. Most governments don't have the will to do that."

A strength already apparent from the union is an ability to attract grants and other funding. In its infancy last year, for example, GAP drew a \$50,000 grant to create an inter-jurisdic-



Dan Staudacher ■ Times Photo

**Part of the plan:** Stores like Wal-Mart, pictured here, and The Home Depot put roots down on the West Branch Business Loop that three Ogemaw County governmental units are working together to further develop.

"Basically, we've gone from shotgunning it to shooting with one steel bullet. It's taking us farther, faster."

– Steve Steinhauser,  
West Branch Township supervisor

tional corridor plan along the Loop.

The process wrapped up early this year after a series of public meetings to broaden the plan's collaboration among locals. Specifically, the plan addresses Loop beautification, business attraction, pollution management and resource preservation.

GAP is poised now to get a \$29,000 grant to do a Loop marketing study. The study, by an outside firm, would evaluate

what the corridor has and where experts think it should head.

The document will not only guide planners. It will serve as a tool of persuasion for business recruitment, showing prospects precisely the area's potential for supporting their industries.

GAP is pushing for an aesthetics project, too, namely a decorative walkway to span the Loop's length. The path would extend the city's Victorian-style streetscape to both townships, with benches, lighting and brick work, planners said.

"Our goal and catch-phrase is to get people to 'Do The Loop,'" Steinhauser said. "We want to encourage people to do more than get off I-75 at Exit 212 or 215. We want them to travel the Loop, exit to exit, to see what we have. An attractive theme like this Victorian walkway, done impressively, unites the

entire Loop."

The proposed project, still a few years away, would cost about \$5 million, Steinhauser said. But planners aren't daunted. Funding sources have shown Ogemaw County time and again that money is available to partnerships like GAP.

"They see more bang for their buck," Stephens said. "For every dollar they lay down,



Michele Jokinen ■ Times File Photo

**Victorian theme:** Victorian-style shops line Houghton Avenue in downtown West Branch, where planners from the city, along with those from West Branch and Ogemaw townships, are working on a plan to build a decorative walkway to span the entire West Branch Business Loop. The path would extend the Victorian-style streetscape to both townships, with benches, lighting and brick work.

they see they're satisfying three municipalities."

GAP's biggest success in its first years is to have laid the groundwork for Loop development. Fruits from its effort are yet to come, but they promise to take shape via beautification, water and sewer expansions and attracting more of the goods and services community members want, planners say.

At January meetings of the statewide Michigan Township Association and Michigan Municipal League, GAP members were asked to sit on a panel for intergovernmental coop-

eration and present GAP as a model.

The sessions drew big crowds, Ogemaw and West Branch township supervisors said.

"We were definitely something rare – leaders of something to pattern," Steinhauser said. "Basically, we've gone from shotgunning it to shooting with one steel bullet. It's taking us farther, faster."

– Helen Lounsbury covers regional news for The Times. She can be reached at 1-800-727-7661 or by e-mail at hlounsbury@bc-times.com.

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