

# Tourism Development Strategy for Idlewild, Michigan

Presented by Nathalie Winans

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**Nathalie Winans:** My name is Nathalie Winans and I'm standing in for my practicum team at Michigan State University, Spring 2013.

We developed a tourism development strategy for Idlewild, Michigan. The goal of the project was to help the community of Idlewild, Michigan achieve community and economic prosperity by researching and creating a tourism development strategy that leveraged Idlewild's cultural and natural assets to attract year-round visitors. Our lead client was the Idlewild Community Development Corporation. We had support from the Idlewild African American Chamber of Commerce, Yates Township, Lake County, the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, local business owners in Idlewild, and several others.

Now, the scope of the project included an overview of Idlewild, a socioeconomic profile, a tourism asset study and market study, an overview of planning documents completed since 2006, a series of case studies, and finally the tourism strategy itself.

This is a look at the target area of our strategy. Idlewild is located in north, northwest Yates Township, in southern Lake County, which in turn is located in the northwestern Lower Peninsula. Here is a closer look at the target area in the context of the community of Idlewild itself. The black line is the boundary of the complete Idlewild community, and the red line is the focus area of the Idlewild tourism strategy which encompasses the historical center of Idlewild. Here is a closer look at the target area. There are three lakes inside the target area of Idlewild The largest is Idlewild Lake, then Paradise Lake, and Tank Lake. And the historical center, as you see a concentration of red spots, these are historic sites here, and this is Williams Island and this is the downtown area.

Now I'm going to give an overview of some specific characteristics of Idlewild. First, a brief history. Idlewild was founded specifically as an African American resort community in 1912. This was at a time when segregation was the norm nationwide and there were few places African Americans could go on vacation. So Idlewild was considered a really important place. Not just for entertainment, and in fact, Idlewild hosted a "Who's Who" of mid-twentieth century African American entertainers, but it was also considered a valuable gathering place for discussing issues of vital interest for the civil rights movement. Idlewild's period of popularity lasted from 1920 until roughly 1965, and then in 1964 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, Idlewild fell into decline because overnight Idlewild was in direct competition with resort communities nationwide. Now in recent years, Idlewild has seen somewhat of a resurgence. It was designated a federal enterprise community in the 1990's, which made it eligible for federal funding. In 2006 it entered a partnership with the State of Michigan that resulted in several planning activities as well as important state funding.

This is a map of the zoning in the Idlewild target area. Fairly simple map, the only commercially zoned area is this part in brown, the rest of this area is residential areas, there are some parts in yellow outside the tourism strategy area that are agricultural.

This is a land ownership map of Idlewild. 72% of the Idlewild acreage is privately owned and collectively, land banks are the third largest property owner in Idlewild. Land banks are county organizations that take foreclosed properties and either auction them off or strategically reuse them. A note about the lot size in Idlewild: it's very small, 0.34 acres. This could present some challenges to development. The national average lot size for new development is almost twice the average lot size in Idlewild.

I'm going to take you through some key sites in the target area. The first is Williams Island. It was first settled in 1912 and it is the historical center of Idlewild's commerce and social life. There used to be lots of structures on Williams Island. Today there is only one, which is the vacant Flamingo Club, marked in the red square.

These are some historical and new pictures of the Flamingo Club.

Moving over to the downtown area, this again, is Idlewild's only neighborhood commercial district. The major historic sites are concentrated in the eastern side of the commercial district. You can see a lot of trees here, much of this district is vacant. There are a few houses there but very few.

And here are some key historic sites in the downtown area. Like most of the buildings in Idlewild, these are of simple construction. Their historical significance lies less in their architectural merits and more in the stories they tell about Idlewild's history.

Moving on to the Broadway and US 10 entrance. And this is the way that most people take to actually get to Idlewild. US10 is the border of the tourism strategy area and then Broadway is the slightly larger north/ south corridor that's inside the tourism strategy area. This area is currently zoned residential, but it's recommended for development as a commercial corridor in the Yates Township Comprehensive Plan.

And here are a few key sites at the Broadway and US10 Entrance. The historic sites in this area include both houses and commercial buildings; an example is the vacant Casa Blanca hotel at the upper left. And just a summary of the overview of Idlewild, some key takeaways, Idlewild has a rich history and a large number of important historic properties. It also has a large number of vacant properties that present opportunities for development but the smaller parcel size could present some development challenges.

Now I'm going to talk about the socioeconomic condition of Idlewild. Just some notes on the socioeconomic profile (SEP): we compared Yates Township, Lake County, and the State of Michigan from the period of 1990-2010. Now the Yates Township data presented some complications because the Yates Township census tract changed significantly from 1990 to 2000 and again from 2000 to 2010. For this reason we feel that the Lake County data provided a good frame of reference for understanding the changes in Yates Township, because Lake County is a rural low-density area like Yates Township and its boundaries didn't change during the study period.

This is a map of the changes in Yates Township from 1990-2010. The tract in 1990 was very small encompassing Yates Township and parts of Chase Township. It more than doubled in size in 2000 encompassing the county seat of Baldwin as well as Pleasant Plains and Lake Townships and parts of Sweetwater and Webber Townships. In 2010 it shrank a little bit, encompassing parts of Yates, Chase, Pleasant Plains, and Webber Townships.

Here is a population trends in the Yates Tract and Lake County. The Yates Tract population appeared to increase dramatically from 1990-2000 and then showed a big decline in 2000-2010. And again, this probably is a function of the change in census tract size, not an actual population trend. Lake County shows a trend of relatively fast growth from 1990-2000 and then levels off from 2000-2010. And the actual population of the Yates Tract probably showed a similar trajectory.

This shows the age in Lake County. Residents aged 45 and older showed the fastest growth. The number of residents aged 44 or under was either flat or in decline, indicating an aging population in this area.

This chart shows average household income in the Yates Tract, Lake County, and the State of Michigan. Income increased across all three study areas, but income in the Yates Tract and Lake County were well below that of the State of Michigan as a whole.

This chart shows employment status in 2010. Again, the percentage of Yates Tract and Lake county residents who were in the labor force or employed was much lower than that of the State of Michigan.

This chart shows educational attainment in 2010. The Yates tract and Lake County had a much higher proportion of high school graduates but a much smaller proportion of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher. So the educational attainment is much lower than the State of Michigan.

This chart shows the vacant units in the Yates tract, Lake County, and Michigan from 1990-2010. I chose a very dramatic difference in the number of vacant units between the Yates tract and Lake County and the State of Michigan; however a study by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation on the uses of housing in Lake County showed that 61% of housing is seasonally owned. So most of the vacant housing you see here is probably seasonal housing. Now the takeaways from this socioeconomic profile, again, this is just a snapshot – the whole data from the SUPR is available in our full report. But we're seeing slow but steady population growth, an aging population, overall low household income, a small labor force, low educational attainment vis a vis the state of Michigan, and a very high proportion of seasonal housing.

Now, moving on to the tourism asset study. These tables show the number of attractions and amenities in Lake County from 2000-2010 and these tables show that the number of both attractions and amenities showed relatively little change during this period.

This map compares the number of tourist attractions in Lake County versus the surrounding counties. And it shows that Lake County has very few tourist attractions compared to other counties in the region.

This map shows tourism amenities like restaurants and accommodations. It shows that the amenities are very well distributed throughout the region including Lake County, however, there are far fewer of them in Lake County than in the surrounding region.

Here I'd like to just briefly discuss some tourism highlights in the regions surrounding Idlewild. Traverse City is one of the area's largest cities and also a major tourism hub. Ludington is about an hour away from Idlewild, in Mason County. It is also close to the Huron-Manistee national forest which encompasses Idlewild. Manistee is also close to Idlewild, and these are just a few of the communities that make up the ecosystem that is the northwest Michigan tourism economy. Lake County is close to all of these and really it's centrally located within them; however, its tourism assets and amenities are minimal by comparison. And you could really say that Lake County is sort of like a hole in the donut of northwest Michigan tourism.

And moving on to the tourism market study.

This chart compares Leisure spending and business spending in Michigan from 2001-2009. It shows that leisure spending has been consistently much greater than business spending. Both forms of spending grew to a peak in 2006 and then declined into 2009.

Now I'm going to talk about the basic demographics of Michigan leisure travelers compared with the county as a whole. Michigan saw a higher percentage of travelers aged 18-34 compared with the United States which had a higher percentage of travelers aged 35-54. And the main reasons for leisure trips to Michigan are to visit friends and relatives, get away for the weekend, or take a vacation.

Now the most popular activities for northwest Michigan leisure travelers are things like dining, shopping, entertainment, and beach or other waterfront activities, as well as festivals and fairs, and nature tourism activities. 61% of Michigan visitors originate inside Michigan. The next largest group, 6%, comes from Illinois. Illinois was the historical base for much of Idlewild's early tourism coming out of Chicago. And most of the current leisure visitors to Michigan, so they come from Michigan and the states closest to it: Illinois, Indiana, Ohio. So this is something to consider when Idlewild develops a marketing strategy.

This map shows the average length of time that visitors stay in Michigan counties. In Lake County they stay an average of 1-2 days, whereas in Mason County, which is immediately to the west of Lake County, they stay 3-4 days. Also, another observation about this map is that many of the counties where visitors stayed 2 days or more are counties that border the Great Lakes. And Idlewild is in a landlocked county so this could pose a disadvantage.

This chart talks about the reasons to visit the Manistee National Forest which encompasses Idlewild and Yates Township. About two-thirds of visitors are there for recreation so this is a body of visitors that could represent another potential market for tourism to Idlewild.

Now finally for the marketplace study, I'm going to talk about the retail marketplace profile that the practicum team created. This provides a rough indication of Idlewild's potential for attracting retailers

that could compliment a tourism economy based on its population density. We developed profiles for a 1 mile, 10 mile, and 20 mile radius surrounding Idlewild. Now the way to understand a retail marketplace profile is to look at retail surplus, which is represented by positive numbers, and leakage, which is represented by negative numbers. A retail leakage for a particular type of retail indicates that people inside the study area, that 10 mile, 20 mile, or 1 mile area radius, are traveling outside the study area to purchase that type of retail product or service. In a retail surplus for a particular type of retail indicates that there is an excess of that retail type in the community.

So this chart shows the retail leakage, which again is positive numbers, and the surplus, which is negative numbers, in the 20 mile radius surrounding Idlewild. It indicates several retail types that people have travel outside the 20 mile radius in order to obtain. And these include things like full service restaurants, book, periodicals and music stores, shoe and clothing stores, and specialty food stores. So it indicates that if these types of retailers were to open in Idlewild and if they had unique offerings that didn't exist outside the 20 mile radius, they might find success in Idlewild. Now, conversely, it also shows retail surplus, which again is negative numbers, and these are things that already probably have enough of in the areas surrounding Idlewild and these include things like general merchandise stores and grocery stores. So a few main takeaways from the retail market study, tourism is an important industry for Michigan in general and for northwest Michigan in particular. Michigan's most important tourism visitor markets are inside Michigan and in Illinois, Ohio, and Indiana. Some of the most popular tourism activities are dining, shopping, entertainment, waterfront activities, festivals and fairs, and nature tourism. And there are several apparent retail opportunities within Idlewild based on the retail marketplace profile.

Now I'm going to go through some recent Planning Activities that were developed for Idlewild. The client asked for us to do a summary of these planning activities that were completed because they provide a great array of resources that can be a little overwhelming because there is such a volume of documentation. And we also incorporated several of these earlier recommendations into our recommendations because our research indicated that they were especially important for tourism development. And all of the earlier recommendations are also very important and very relevant because of how recently they were developed. All of the plans were done since 2006. So we created a matrix to help the client navigate and use them.

And here is a sample of that matrix that we developed. Again, it's just a small sample of the matrix of planning documents that shows the date, title, authors, recommendations, and the tentative status as of 2013. So I want to emphasize that the status in 2013 is tentative based on our consultation with the client and our review of background documentation. Because of the time limitations of this project and the large volume of recommendations, the current status of all recommendations may not be accurately represented. But just as an example of one recommendation, in 2008, the Idlewild Economic Development Action Strategy recommended updating the Yates Township master plan and zoning ordinance. And the status of that recommendation in 2013 is that the master plan was completed in 2010 and the zoning ordinance update is currently in progress.

Now I'm also going to talk briefly about some case studies that the practicum team developed. These were case studies that appeared to show examples for Id based on the needs identified in the research. And these were in three categories: Special Events, Historic Preservation, and Mixed Use Development. I'm not going to go into the case studies today because of time constraints for the presentation, but the full details are available in our report.

And finally, our recommendations. We created a wide array of recommendations that were indicated based on the research findings. These include short term/ low cost strategies for the next three years, medium term/ medium cost for 2016-2019, and long term/ high cost strategies for 2020-2023. And there are six categories; capacity building, physical development, marketing, beautification, special events, and preservation and stewardship. And there isn't time today to talk through all of our recommendations, but I'm going to give you an overview of the categories and show you part of the matrix and walk you through the recommendations for one of the six categories.

So here is a sample of our matrix of tourism development recommendations. Each row is one of the six categories that we provided and each column is the time period from short term/low cost to long term/high cost over the next 10 years.

And finally, here is a sample of the recommendations for one of the six categories: Special Events. So the rationale for this section of recommendations is that the research suggests a need for small scale, community driven, grassroots strategies that don't require a large up-front investment. Special events in particular can start small and they can grow over time without major investments in buildings or infrastructure, bricks-and-mortar investments. So for short-term/low cost recommendations, we recommended forming a volunteer special events subcommittee for organizing events. This is the first step in getting everything started- this is the group that coordinates all the activities. Another short term strategy we recommend is to start a Father's Day BBQ festival or some other food festival. Given that Idlewild has an aging population, a Father's Day event could span generations of people both young and old. For example, members of the Idlewilders Club, which is a group of Idlewilders who enjoyed Idlewild back when it was really popular and they still operate in several parts of the country, so this would be a way to engage the Idlewilders Clubs and as well as other residents of Idlewild together with the younger generations to develop an interest in Idlewild. And then finally, as far as short-term/low cost strategies, we recommend seeking additional sponsors for the Idlewild Music Festival. This is an existing festival in Idlewild that's been going on for several years and presents an opportunity for growth. The special events subcommittee could help generate additional sponsorships to increase the resources available to the festival. For medium-term/ medium cost recommendations, if the initial organizing capacity-building work is completed, it should be possible to hire a part-time special events coordinator. This position would add staff support to the special events subcommittee and increase its productivity. Also, by this time, the increasing popularity of the Father's Day BBQ or other food festival should make it possible to grow the festival through additional sponsorships both from Idlewild businesses as well as other businesses throughout the region. And then third, in the medium term, we recommended seeking major acts for the Idlewild Music Festival. This would be the time to aim for bringing national acts to the Idlewild Music Festival to make it more attractive to a statewide or national audience. The additional sponsorships started in the short term should make this possible. And then

finally, for long-term/ high cost recommendations, with capacity building, with business growth, with the increased scale and scope of the special events from the previous tasks, it should be possible in the long-term to hire a full time special events staff to coordinate events. This level of staff support would allow Idlewild to really take special events to the next level, to organize them more formally and on a much larger scale.

Just to close, this report provides data, maps, resources, contacts, and recommendations for initiating and sustaining a community driven, tourism development strategy in Idlewild. It's designed as a point of departure for a tourism initiative defined and driven by local residents and organizations from Idlewild with support from external partners. And as time passes, the recommendations in the report should be updated to suit changing needs of the community. Our full report can be downloaded at the link shown on this last slide: [ced.msu.edu/publications/reports/planning](http://ced.msu.edu/publications/reports/planning). And finally, the practicum team is grateful for the opportunity to learn about this beautiful community and make this small contribution to its revitalization. And we're going to move over to Hubert for some final comments.

**Hubert Brandon:** First of all, we're really grateful for the opportunity to partner with Michigan State and the practicum team. What you've developed for us is a great plan because it synthesizes and distills the acts of course that you mentioned in your report, your data and original thoughts and ideas something something as opposed to just taking those documents and kind of re-hashing them. You were able to come up with new ideas and new projects if we actually work on them. We feel, as an organization, that this was a completely professional plan that exceeded our expectations and they're being well-received by the community. Case in point, as of this morning, a front-page, full-page newspaper article appeared in the Lake County Star Newspaper detailing this project and comments from our board, and we're sure we're going to be receiving a lot of positive feedback.

**Jennifer Bruen (REI):** That's great. I have a question, actually, for Nathalie. I can see why your group went towards the special events as the first step, because Idlewild is very beautiful and it seems its always been a destination spot. And I know that some of these other music festivals or food fests or whatever that are taking place in northern Michigan have become very popular as a destination. People schedule them a year in advance on their calendars and they begin to plan work off for a week. I do have one question though: once these people get up there, is there a place for that low-cost vacationer to camp? I mean, I know its national forests, but is there camping available that's close enough to where they can come and watch a music performance or participate in a craft, watch a craft show or whatever.

**Nathalie Winans:** There are camping and hotel and motel opportunities; there are not a whole lot of them inside of Idlewild itself. And that was one thing that we found in the tourism asset study. Not a whole lot of opportunities inside Idlewild. However, there are lots and lots of opportunities in the areas surrounding Idlewild. And, what we found in one of our case studies, of the Eatonville community in Florida, is that you don't necessarily have to have those accommodations in order to attract people to festivals, because they have a nationally renowned festival called the Zora! Festival which people attend from all across the county and Eatonville, Florida has, I think, one motel. So people stay at accommodations elsewhere. So that was one reason why we thought it would be a great idea to start

with special events as one part of our strategy, one component. And there are five others - everything from physical development to historic preservation, all sorts of things. But for special events, you don't need to have hotels and motels already developed in your community in order to get people to come. I mean, even if you have a really well established, nationwide festival, even then you wouldn't necessarily have to have motels and hotels. We're hoping, and we believe, that if the strategy were implemented as we say, that they could develop those accommodations over time, but we don't need them first.

**Hubert Brandon:** And going along with what Nathalie just said, she is absolutely right. We are currently having discussions about focusing low-cost/ high-visibility events such as music festivals, art and cultural festivals. Keep in mind that during the 1920's, 30's, and 40's, Idlewild was able to accommodate, on a daily basis, nearly 25,000 people. And most of those were for days. And if you take a scale around the area, there are accommodations both here and Lake County, going over to Big Rapids so we wouldn't have a problem accommodating large numbers of people. However, here's the rub, it does our economy little good if we're not able to capture those dollars, so the eventual plan is to be able to get people in, they would invest their dollars, we're able to build our infrastructure in terms of hotels, restaurants, motels, that's what the goal will be in Idlewild.

**Jennifer Bruen:** Now, Hubert, do you already have a special events committee or do you have the volunteers that you could form one with?

**Hubert Brandon:** We had this discussion within the past five days. Those are the things that we were discussing in the newspaper article. That was one of the things that my board president specifically mentioned that we are reaching volunteers for various committees. Another great thing that happened as a result of this actual document, we have probably close to a dozen applications in process, 2 funders including the Mott Foundation, The Magic Johnson Foundation, the Night Foundation, Bank of America, Great Lakes Engery, Chrysler, Consumers Energy and others. How does this work if we don't have the ability to first of all, build capacity for our organization itself but also build the capacity of other organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit organizations, in this region to be able to deliver programs and services.

**Jennifer Bruen:** Right, right. You have to be able to administer whatever the program will be and maybe vocally you're going to get some funding and you'll be able to do that. And I'm also wondering about these volunteers, do they need to be living in the community or can you get outsiders to volunteer if they're interested in using their arts or you know, you're not restricting to Idlewild only, are you?

**Hubert Brandon:** Idlewild is a world community. Even in terms of last year when .. What we're getting is people calling in, like emailing from Japan, Yugoslavia, from Russia – people all over the world call Idlewild. We plan to reach out much further than this cluster community looking for assistants, looking for partners, looking for investors to come in, not just for dollars but for their time, their talent. The last thing I want to say is that the document itself is so user friendly. We are able to go into the document, to pull out text, to be able to pull out data, pull out graphs, it's so integral to us to being able to move forward as an organization and as a community. We thank you for listening to us because as we begin negotiations in terms of scope of work, the Practicum Team did not just take this and go out into the



woods and didn't come back with a finished product. They contacted us when they had questions, we were able to provide feedback. So this was a great collaboration between Michigan State Student Practicum and the community of Idlewild. We just want to thank you on behalf of this entire community.

**Jennifer Bruen:** Fantastic! We're so glad to hear that you're pleased with the team and their work. That's really great, and it was a good partnership. We will definitely stay in contact and if there's any way we can help in the future please let us know!