

Innovation through Investigation: Creating a Cooperative Social Community

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The community of Idlewild, located in Yates Township, Michigan, possesses a significant history as the largest historic African American resort community established during the Jim Crow Era. Established in 1912, it thrived for more than fifty years but declined with the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. However, Idlewild has begun to revitalize, with new full-time residents seeking work-life balance in a rural context and, most importantly, residency in a safe community. However, Idlewild was originally designated for seasonal residents, resulting in a new set of needs for community sustainment.

A special focus on research that engages with community visioning to develop planning that realigns community, township, and county goals for Idlewild is a significant driver in this exercise. The use of community visioning will be coupled with the township master planning process with focus on sustainability; the implementation of social solidarity economics, as well as open book management, will solidify the continued success of the community in the spirit of “co-opetition”. The application of these theories and their effect on the sustainability of Idlewild will be of particular interest. In addition to the environment, sustainability will include concern for people and economy to develop a balanced community structure.

Social solidarity economic principles refer to a set of values and practices aimed at promoting economic systems that prioritize cooperation, social justice, and sustainability. It is an alternative model to the mainstream capitalist system and seeks to address the inequalities and environmental challenges created by traditional market economies. The principles of solidarity economy emphasize the well-being of individuals and communities over profit maximization. Key Principles that will be addressed in this paper are:

1. Solidarity and Cooperation
2. Social Justice and Equity
3. Democratic Governance

4. Sustainable Development

5. Localization and Autonomy

6. Diverse Economic Forms

7. Ethical Consumption

8. Education and Awareness

A critical factor in the planning process is preserving historical community values while not stifling progress that will allow for a continued longevity. Embracing the African American heritage of Idlewild makes this instance of cooperative community living a unique example, amplified by its resort identity. Extensive literature review, community engagement, and active group communication will serve as the basis for planning.

The strategic conversation of the Idlewild community members will be formulated through the lens of social solidarity economic principles and community theory, leading to documentation of solutions for the future of Idlewild. The aspiration for this process is to create a successful case study for other rural communities to begin planning and applying cooperative community modeling.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The community of Idlewild, located in Yates Township, Michigan, possesses a notable history as the largest African American resort community established during the Jim Crow Era. In 1912, the land was homesteaded by a group of four white developers and their wives, who saw potential in the recovering forest and quiet lakes. The consortium christened themselves as the Idlewild Resort Community (IRC) and began purchasing and platting properties in 1915, which they invited middle-class African Americans to buy shortly thereafter.

From its earliest days, Idlewild was recognized as something much more significant than a simple resort. During a time when African Americans were systematically pushed to the margins

of society, it served as a place where luminaries of the black community could gather and discuss issues of vital collective interest. During the 1920s and 1930s, Idlewild was a haven and known as a place for rest, relaxation, and intellectual discussion. However, the resort became much more saturated during the prosperous years after World War II.

The community thrived for more than fifty years; it was listed in the Green Book, a travel guide for African Americans, and became a stop on the so-called “Chit’lin Circuit”, a string of Midwestern bars, nightclubs, and theaters, where African American singers, dancers, and comedians could safely perform. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, Idlewild hosted some of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century, some of which include B.B. King, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Aretha Franklin. At its peak, it accommodated a multitude of tourist destinations, including hotels, motels, summer cottages, stores, restaurants, churches, a roller-skating rink, and more. Idlewild’s heyday continued into the 1960s but began to decline in 1964 after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. With the end of legalized discrimination, African Americans were able to vacation anywhere, and Idlewild found itself in direct competition with resorts nationwide. Its hospitality businesses were too slow to respond. In the 1980s and 1990s, Idlewild began to stabilize and then—slowly—grow again. In 1979, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places, which helped people come to understand the historical importance of Idlewild as a safe space for African Americans during the segregation era. Today, Idlewild is seeing a “reluctant” resurgence in its re-population due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as people are leaving more densely populated areas and moving to more rural locations.

A NEW SET OF NEEDS

Idlewild’s revival continues as citizens are taking roots, looking for work-life balance in a rural context, but most importantly, seeking residency in a safe African American community. Notably, this incoming population resides within infrastructure that was originally designed for seasonal residents, resulting in a new set of needs for community sustainment.

The community’s new needs are twofold: first, significant changes to the system that support full-time residents and second, progress that will respect and revive the historical origins of Idlewild. As an African American community, discriminatory infrastructure impedes the ability of the community to thrive, and prevents the support required for a robust quality of life. Local systemic change is required, beginning primarily at the township level. Significant concerns include rural tourism, worker retention, cooperative economics, and local living, among other considerations.

The community of Yates Township, in which Idlewild resides, has already begun to explore ideas that embrace the town’s history of inclusion and preservation; most recently, community members have initiated new approaches to master planning pro-

cesses that experiment with ideas of open-book management and the social solidarity economy.

OPEN-BOOK MANAGEMENT

The idea of open-book management is applicable to Yates on a number of scales, and members of the community have already recognized ways to adopt it. Traditionally used as a business model, open-book management (OBM), as defined by Aggarwal and Simkins, “is a way of managing a company demonstrably, without concealment, that motivates all employees to focus on helping the business grow profitably and increasing the return on its human capital.” More literally, it refers to complete transparency with employees about a company’s financial statements, and the education for employees to understand how the company makes money and how their actions affect its success.¹ One key aspect of OBM is that employees must have a direct stake in the company’s success; this will grant them perspective from a business owner’s standpoint, and often results in employee actions that align more closely with the company’s goals and values.⁵

A precedent for this style of management is Zingerman’s Delicatessen, formed by business partners Paul Saginaw and Ari Weinzwieg in Ann Arbor, MI, in 1982. The company fully embraces this style of management and has found it not only great for business, but also effectively boosting employee retention, which is an enduring struggle for the restaurant industry. The deli, however, is just one facet of Zingerman’s collection of ten businesses — all of which support the OBM philosophy.

According to Saginaw, workers are brought together each week for “huddles”, in which they all are faced with a white board of profit-and-loss statements. Each line item, from food costs to inventory, has an “owner”. “It’s not the accountant coming up and giving a historical presentation about what happened last week,” he says, “it could be a dishwasher talking about what goals were met, and, if not, what we should do to hit plan. It’s action oriented.” In addition to financial transparency, employees are given the opportunity to buy shares in the business. Workers within each division who have been a part of the Zingerman community for a minimum of two years may buy into the holding company for \$1000 per share, which they are allowed to pay for with a payroll deduction over the course of two years. Then, should they decide to leave the company, they receive their initial \$1000 back, in addition to any distributions that have resulted. The business has seen huge success as a result of this, with a notable drop in employee turnover and labor costs. Employee attitude and productivity has also increased considerably.⁸

Members of the Yates community have identified this model’s relevance to the township’s models of ethics and have started to employ open-book ideals. Open-book management can be used as a model for the businesses of Idlewild, encouraging a more employee-empowering approach to management. However, Yates township has taken this framework as inspiration for a new

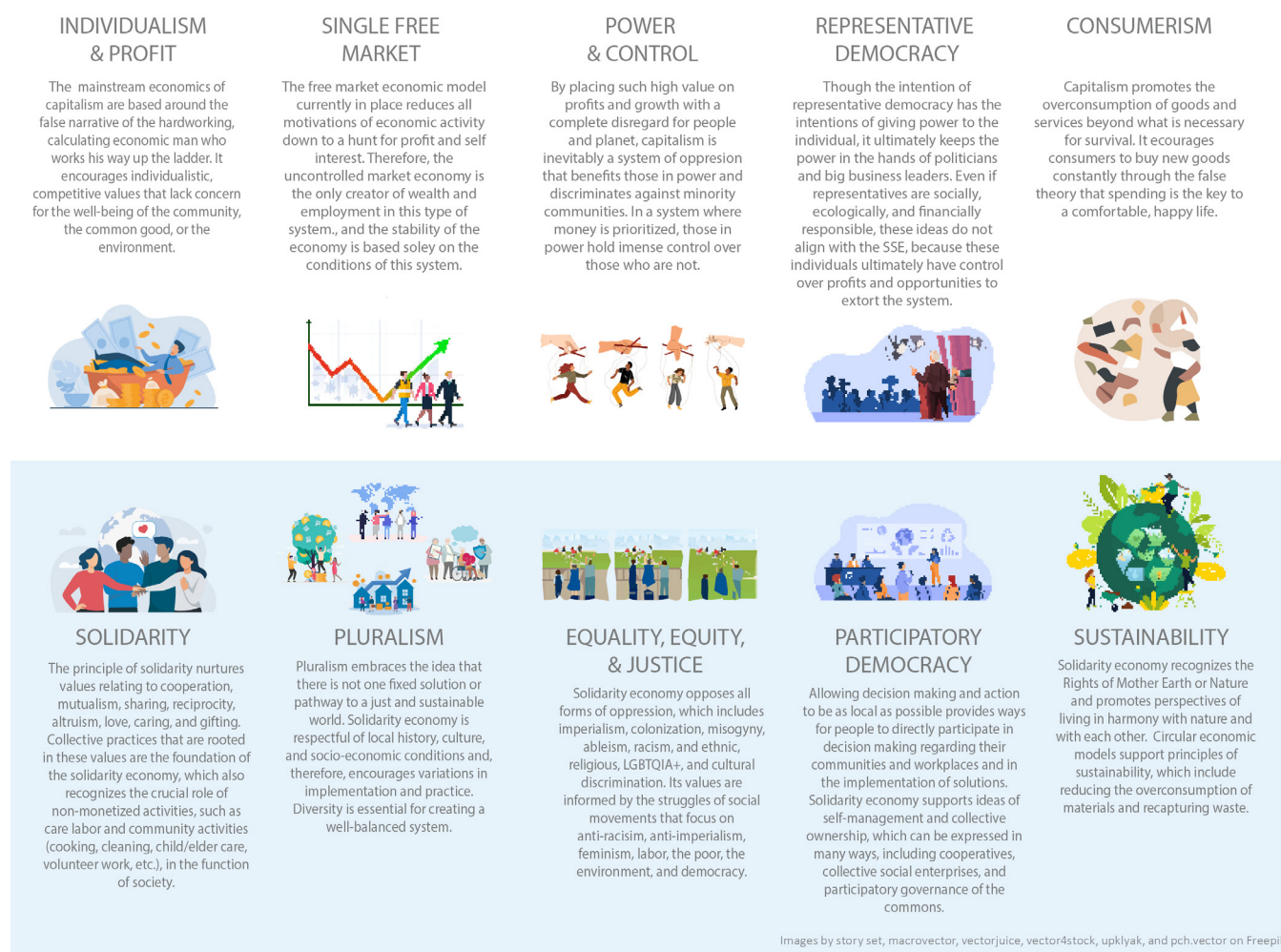


Figure 1. Comparison between Authoritarian and State Dominated Economy (top) and the Circular and Solidarity Economy (bottom).

style of governance, one which brings power from the highest level down to the individual. This is echoed in its current macro planning processes, which have explored ways of bringing that planning power to the individual citizens of Yates. Likewise, the township has begun to realize the relevancy of other parallel models, such as the social solidarity economy.

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

Specific definitions of the social solidarity economy (SSE) vary across place, time, and politics, yet a broad common understanding of these principles is growing. The definitions produced in this paper are predominantly informed by the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network (SEN) and the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS).

The SSE seeks to answer the following question: what actions are necessary in order to fight the current injustices and ecological terror that infects our current economic systems?

It will undoubtedly take a foundational transformation of our system to draw us back from brink of chaos we are currently

reaching, with inequality in wealth and income at historic highs and continuously alarming rates of pollution created by our profit driven economy. The social solidarity economy offers several different pathways towards a transformation of our economy into one that serves people and the planet, not blind growth and private profits. More clearly defined, the social solidarity economy is a global movement that aims to build a just economy through the promotion of values and practices that align with systems characterized by ideas of cooperation, social justice, and sustainability.

"It is not a blueprint theorized by academics, but rather, an ecosystem of practices that are aligned with the values of the solidarity economy."

-Kawano

There is already a huge foundation of emerging and existing practices upon which to build; however, the SSE and its elements remain, for the most part, invisible in our current system. This is partially due to the fact that the various SSE practices — worker

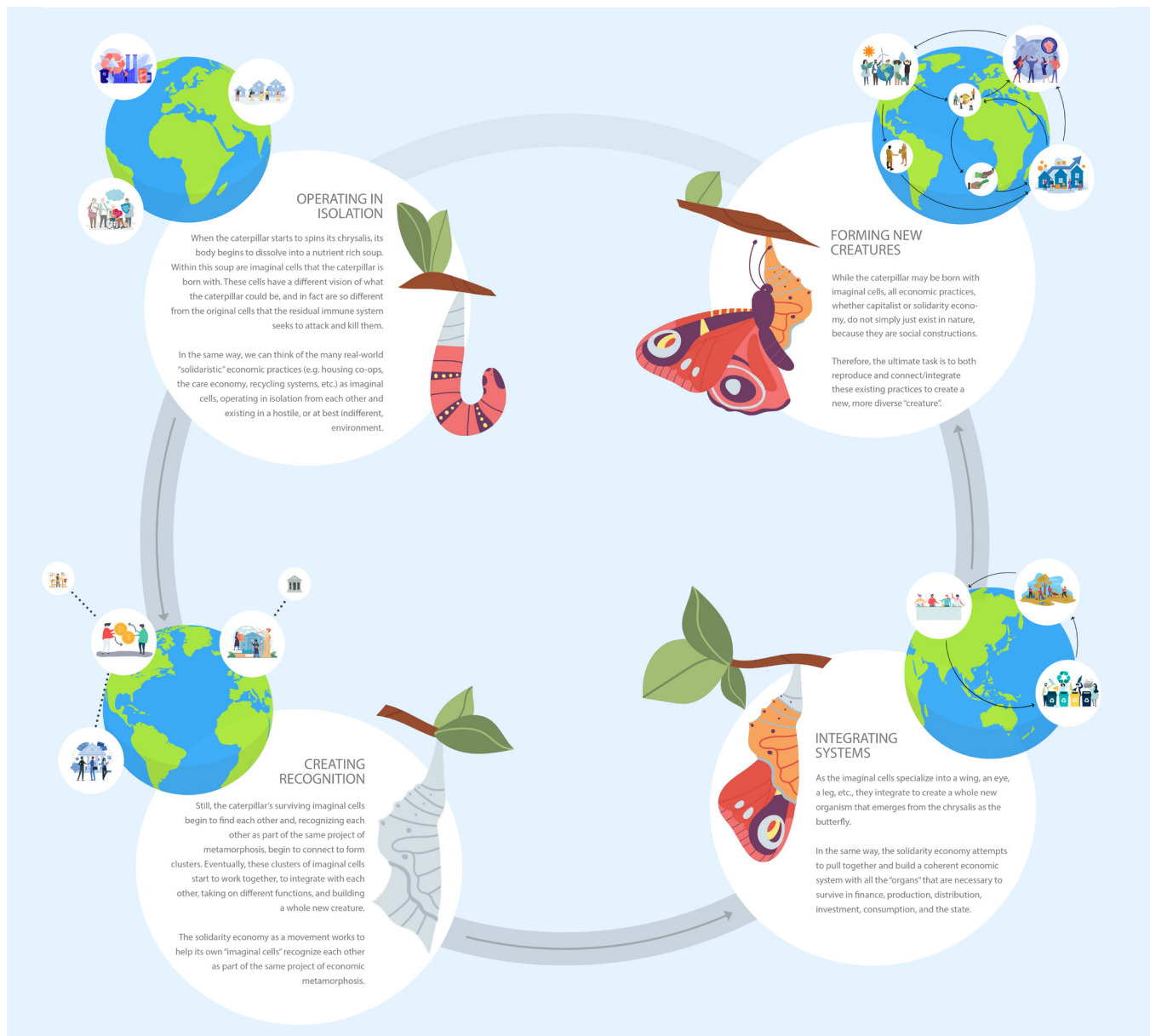


Figure 2. A Metaphor for Change

cooperatives, credit unions, social currencies, community land trusts, etc — operate in their own individual silos. They are seen and tend to develop as small, distinct units rather than complementary pieces of a whole system. The solidarity economy seeks to recognize and connect siloed practices such as these in order to build an alternative economic system, broadly defined, for people and the planet.

Emily Kwano, coordinator of the U.S. Solidarity Network, shares an interesting metaphor for thinking about the transformation—that the solidarity economy is seeking; she explains that we can think of this as the metamorphosis of a butterfly.

“When the caterpillar spins its chrysalis, its body begins to dissolve into a nutrient rich soup. Within this soup are imaginal cells that the caterpillar is born with. These cells have a different vision of what the caterpillar could be, and in fact are so different from the original cells that the residual immune system seeks to attack and kill them. Still, the surviving imaginal cells begin to find each other and, recognizing each other as part of the same project of metamorphosis, begin to connect to form clusters. Eventually these clusters of imaginal cells start to work together, to integrate with each other, taking on different functions, and building a whole new creature. As the imaginal cells specialize into a wing, an eye, a leg, they integrate to create

a whole new organism that emerges from the chrysalis as the butterfly.”

In the same way, the solidarity economy seeks to help its “cells” work together and build a coherent economic system with all the “organs” that are necessary to survive in regards to finance, production, distribution, investment, consumption, and the state.¹⁰

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

The solidarity economy is grounded in principles that share a common ethos of prioritizing the welfare of people and planet, as opposed to our current capitalistic economy, which places all value on profits and blind growth. The breakdown of these principles varies among interpretations, but they are unified in their underlying ethics. We’ve identified a common organization of these principles.

Solidarity and Cooperation

Solidarity can be used as a shorthand term for a range of social interactions, some of which include cooperation, mutualism, sharing, reciprocity, and altruism. These values conflict directly with the individualistic and competitive ideals of capitalism, which is characterized by racism, sexism, and classism. Solidarity economy supports collective practices that are motivated by solidarity and notably recognizes non-monetized activities that are motivated by solidarity, including care labor and community nurturing (cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, eldercare, community and volunteer work, etc). The SSE recognizes the crucial role of these non-monetized activities in the functionality of society and seeks to support them through policy and institutions.

Social Justice

Social justice is naturally embedded in the solidarity economy through both its historical development and deliberate commitment. SSE opposes all forms of oppression, including imperialism, colonization, patriarchy, ableism, racism, and ethnic, religious, LGBTQIA+, and cultural discrimination. As a movement, it is intertwined with other social movements focused on anti-racism, feminism, anti-imperialism, labor, climate change, and democracy. The solidarity economy tends to prioritize building, whereas these other social movements typically focus on resisting; both are undoubtedly necessary for social change.

Democratic Governance

The solidarity economy recognizes truly democratic governance as an important player in its success. Participatory democracy is a term used to describe a style of democracy that intends to make decision-making and action as local as possible (similar to the objective of open-book management); it allows for citizens to be directly involved with these decisions being made and make them aware of the implications of these decisions. Concepts such as participatory budgeting, restorative justice,

and regulation are aligned with the SSE perspective of democratic governance.

Sustainable Development

Solidarity economy recognizes the Rights of Mother Earth or Nature and promotes perspectives of living in harmony with nature and with each other. Sustainable development, in this case, refers to the evolution of the built environment into one that is equitable, lasting, and compatible with people and nature. The SSE recognizes development practices that support people and the planet — for instance, community land trusts and housing cooperatives — and hopes to popularize these kinds of practices.

Location and Autonomy

The social solidarity economy recognizes the diversity in history, culture, and socio-economic conditions in our world and therefore respects the variation in its interpretation and practice. The concept of pluralism is often highlighted in conversations about SSE, because it shows that the solidarity economy is not a “fixed blueprint”, but rather an acknowledgement that there are many roads to equity and sustainability. There may be national and local variations in the definition of SSE and which practices are most appropriate, but they all share the same common foundation.

Diverse Economic Forums

The importance of diversity in any conversation could not be more valuable to a sincerely equitable exchange. Creating diversity in economic forums helps amplify the voices of traditionally marginalized groups, therefore implying more equitable results. The lack of diversity seen throughout history has proven that without lifting up the voices of these individuals, individuals with the most social and economic power will exclude the opinions and fair treatment of those at the bottom.

Ethical Consumption

Again, the solidarity economy supports efforts towards living in harmony with nature and with each other. Practices that align with sustainable and ethical consumption morales are supported by the SSE, such as collective kitchens or waste management systems. Circular economic models, which include reducing the overconsumption of materials and recapturing waste, align with the values of sustainability, with each model having their own approach to ethical consumption practices.

Education and Awareness

Lastly, it is crucial that the ideals and practices supported by the SSE are understood by all individuals, so the entire community can work in solidarity towards their goals. Some people might be knowledgeable about many of these practices and simply



Figure 3. Social Solidarity Economy: Existing Movements

need a sense of their relationships to one another; others might only be aware of traditional systems like capitalism. By having an understanding of the parallel nature of the SSE to our current system, individuals can better grasp the reality and applicability of its ideas. It is important to take all of these principles together, as they are individually insufficient to support a truly just and sustainable system. Yates Township reflects the same value for these principles in its history, which makes the Idlewild/Yates community a fitting place to begin exploring many of these social

solidarity ideas. As the township continues its pursuit in the development of new macro planning processes (e.g. amending the Yates Township Master Plan), residents and visitors can begin to recognize and synthesize systems that are already present within the community, as well as identify new components that the community believes will align with both the historical and contemporary traditions of Yates and Idlewild.

APPLICATION TO IDLEWILD/YATES TOWNSHIP

The implementation of these theoretical frameworks to both Idlewild and Yates as a whole has already been initiated by active members of the community. As the township has undertaken new macro planning processes, community members have taken advantage of the opportunity to explore principles of open-book management and the social solidarity economy.

2022 Yates Township Strategic Plan

In the beginning of summer 2022, the pursuit of development of a new Strategic Plan for Yates Township was approved by the Yates Township Board. The community used this as an opportunity to introduce OBM and SSE principles to their planning processes; in the traditional open-book management style of creating individual power, Yates has made a specific effort to ensure all community members had a voice in the development of the new plan.

The process for gathering community input contained three parts:

1. A pre-planning survey conducted by a facilitator chosen by community leaders.
2. An initial half-day session meant to explore the emerging trends that would impact the township in the future, plus consideration of a preferred future statement.
3. A full day session which broke down a preferred future and identified key strategies and goals to achieve that preferred future.

This process resulted in a strategic plan that thoroughly addressed joint goals of the community and solidified a preferred pathway for the future of the community.

The Strategic Plan itself was a mirror of the township's attempts at applying the SSE to Yates. The township planned to use "effective governance" as a strategy for achieving the newly desired outcomes of the plan, citing specific goals shaped by principles of democratic governance and solidarity (e.g. "All local government components are functional, establishing trust, professionalism and consistency in public service work"). The community defined a range of short and long term outcomes that demonstrated a dedication to sustainability and ethical consumption, citing goals that ranged from directly preserving the lakes and forest to establishing watershed management authority. Localization and autonomy were addressed in the plan's goals to establish a historical commission for the preservation of Idlewild and reliable internet resources across the entire township. In short, there was an undeniable trace of the solidarity economy in the final Strategic Plan adopted by the township.¹⁴

2023 Master Planning Process

As an extension of the strategic planning process, the township decided to update zoning and initiate a master planning process that aligned with the newly established Strategic Plan. In the same manner as the Strategic Plan, the process for master planning sought to include all members of the Yates community

throughout its entirety. The Yates Township Planning Commission held a number of meetings, offered both in person and virtually through multiple formats, as a tool for gathering the ideas and opinions of the community. All members of the community were welcomed, including year-round and seasonal residents, reflective of the open-book management style. Outside conversation facilitators were invited in order to allow the members of the planning commission to equally participate in the conversation. In addition to this, a survey was commissioned to gather input from individuals that may not have attended the various meetings. Equity and diverse forums were clear values of this process, once again revealing the relevancy of the solidarity economy.

SOLUTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF IDLEWILD

The results of these planning processes are still being explored, but the ambitions of the Idlewild and Yates community continue to grow. Community leaders have reached out to local university students and explored a wide range of architectural solutions to the continuing revitalization of Idlewild. Ideas of fabrication laboratories and maker spaces were investigated to support the "do-it-yourself" approaches to sustainable development, while community gardens were discussed in support of community supported agriculture. An interest in community/collective kitchens was expressed by community leaders, as well as camps and other educational spaces that advise community members on topics of sustainability.

Most recently, community leaders have been making an attempt to educate the community on the social solidarity ideals, so they may fully understand the goals of Yates. Infographics which explain the social solidarity economy were created by one of the university students with the intention of breaking down its seemingly complicated ideas into easily digestible graphics; the outcome of these infographics has yet to be examined. Through the analysis of the results of these planning efforts, a better understanding of the social solidarity economy and other parallel systems can be established. As the Idlewild/Yates community continues to explore the application of these principles, other rural communities can observe elements that may work with their own ideas.

LESSONS FOR OTHER RURAL COMMUNITIES

The recent planning efforts of Idlewild serve as a practical study for other rural communities seeking to explore SSE ideas. The process for Idlewild has included a number of successes that could prove to be useful suggestions for others.



Figure 4. Additional resources provided to educate members of the Idlewild community.

One of the most crucial goals of Idlewild's planning process was to ensure the inclusivity of all voices in the community. One way this was executed was through the Planning Commission's use of multiple formats to gather suggestions and feedback. Meetings were advertised both electronically and digitally; they were held in person with multiple online participation options for those who could not be in there physically. In addition to this, there were surveys made public to anyone unable to attend these meetings. The Planning Commission also decided it was necessary that a third party facilitator help move the conversation along during these meetings, so they too were able to participate as equal members of the community. This was most successful when tensions rose during meetings and facilitators were able to redirect the conversation back to the topic on hand. By intentionally providing a plurality of input-gathering methods, all members of the community had a space to voice their opinions.

One negative aspect of this process was that input received in person seemed more thorough than that which was gathered from the survey and various online comments that limited how much an individual could explain or expand on their ideas. The meetings also repetitively ran longer than intended due to the extensive effort to hear out all opinions, so making time for additional meetings became a bit of a struggle.

A suggestion for other rural communities seeking to follow in the footsteps of Idlewild would be to begin executing the following actions:

- Identify the SSE practices that are already present within the community by examining the applicability of these principles to existing local practices

- Identify what the community's unique needs are in order to start connecting these existing practices and forming new ones that align with SSE values

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- Create as many opportunities for community input that will reach the most diverse and complete group of community members

The objective is to break the threshold between theory and practice in preparation for the future of rural communities. It is the hope that Idlewild will serve as an inspiration for those who share the same values of solidarity, sustainability, and social equity.