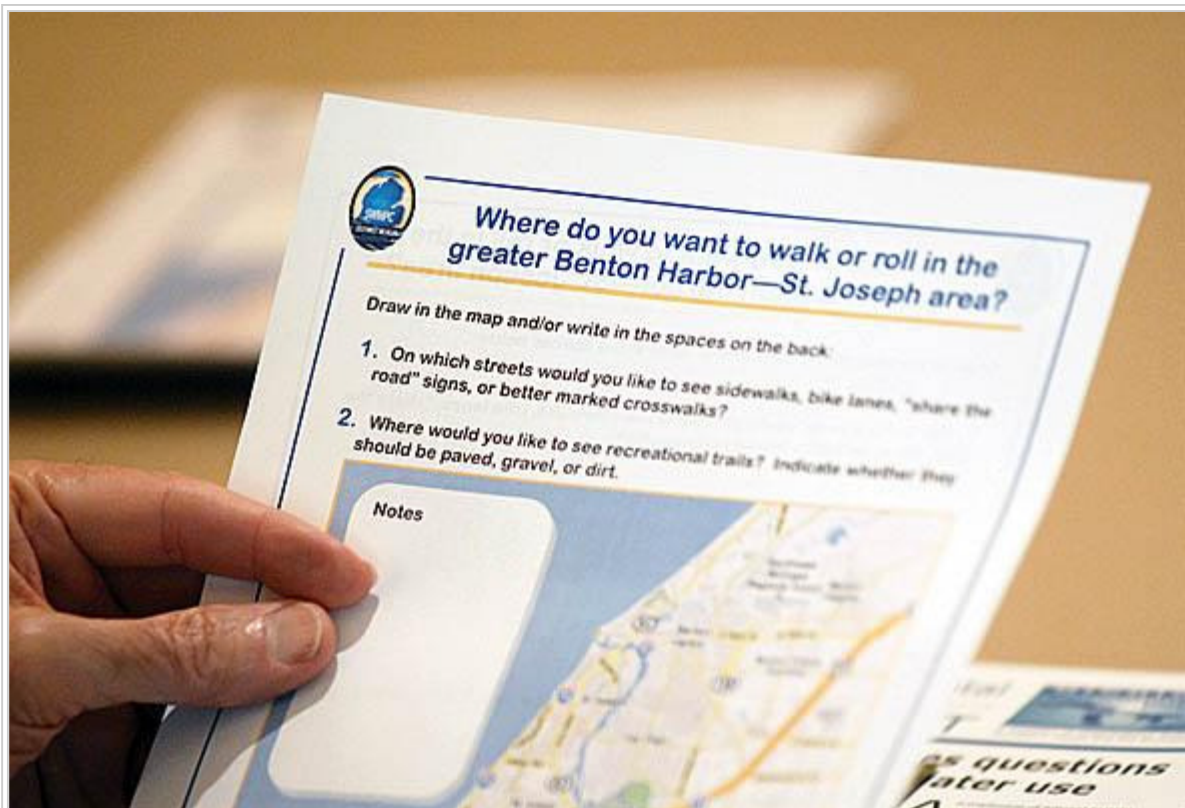




## Local News

## Draw your own rail line routes rolled out

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Don Campbell / H-P staff Dozens of people attend a public forum on the future of Michigan's rail system Wednesday, September 8, 2010, at the Silver Beach Center in St. Joseph.

By **RALPH HEIBUTZKI - H-P Correspondent**

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ST. JOSEPH - Would passengers be more likely to ride a train along Michigan's west coast to the Upper Peninsula? How about a line linking the state's universities?

Those possible routes were shuttled around at Wednesday's Michigan by Rail forum at the Shadowland Ballroom, a joint effort of the Michigan Environmental Council and the Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers.

In the end, new passenger rail routes in Michigan may come down to who draws the maps and who most effectively lets elected officials know their desires.

"The important thing to remember is the squeaky registered voter gets the grease," MARP Chairman John DeLora told the group.

"I've been a supporter of Amtrak from the get-go, and I understand the importance of what mass transit means - which is really multiple sources," U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, said. "Rail needs to be part of that."

That lesson became clear to Upton about 30 years ago while visiting a military base in the United Kingdom.

"High-speed rail was there - there's no reason why we shouldn't have it here," Upton said. "It is a partnership. The states are engaged and involved and need to continue to be so."

Equipped with colored dot stickers, markers and oversized maps of Michigan, local governmental officials, planners and residents were asked to draw their preferred routes without worrying about finances or logistics.

"We left that intentionally vague," MEC Deputy Policy Director Tim Fischer told the group. "The idea was not to connect the dots, but think where you wanted to go - to get you thinking about places and destinations."

Participants broke up into seven smaller groups. Most of their maps focused on connecting points in West and Southwest Michigan, with some notable variations.

The map devised by St. Joseph Charter Township Manager Tim Fenderbosch's group showed a line running prominently up West Michigan's coastline from St. Joseph to the Upper Peninsula.

That's how group members felt the state should position itself in the competition for tourism dollars, Fenderbosch said.

"I think they need to maintain the routes that go along the beautiful shoreline and make people want to come to Michigan," he said.

Shadowland building director Phil Knuth's group also developed a map with a marked Upper Peninsula flavor.

"If you could extend (rail routes) to the Keweenaw Peninsula, or just get up the U.P. and across, that could be a big attraction," Knuth said.

Benton Harbor Planning Commission Secretary Rich Hensel's group developed a map that links college and university areas.

"Their populations of students and communities might actually provide more traffic for trains," Hensel said.

"We've heard that before, (at previous forums) in East Lansing and, to some degree, in Royal Oak," MEC's Tim Fischer said. "I think we heard it in Jackson as well, from parents, about getting their kids back home to visit them."

People are starting to appreciate what enhanced mass transit can do for them, particularly in light of America's chilly economic climate, Upton said afterward.

"Part of it is we're seeing ridership increase," Upton said. "And if we could see the frequency of trains increase, we could have a double train, or a morning train, into Chicago."

Sixteen forums are planned statewide. Then the association and the council will submit whatever information they collect to Michigan's next governor, Fischer said. Wednesday's event was the seventh.

The data should also help the Michigan Department of Transportation, which is taking public comment on what the state's freight and rail passenger network should look like, Fischer said.

The agency is drawing up an official railroad plan, which was required by a 2008 law to get federal funding for rail upgrades.

For more information about Michigan By Rail, visit online at [www.michiganbyrail.org](http://www.michiganbyrail.org).

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