

Preparing for a rainy day

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, August 2, 2014 6:00 am

ST. JOSEPH - Forecasting the weather or the economy long-term can be tricky, and the only predictable thing is the unexpected.

St. Joseph city planners are looking to buffer the community against these extreme events, from climate change to economic slumps, through Resilient Michigan, which held its public kick-off Thursday at St. Joseph High School's student center.

Some 50-60 people were in the audience.

The eight-month process will update the city's master land use plan, said Claire Karner, community planner with the Land Information Access Association, which is helping to coordinate the Resilient Michigan efforts.

Several experts offered perspectives on factors that could affect the area, and what St. Joseph can do to protect itself.

Jeff Andresen, state climatologist at Michigan State University, said trends show higher temperatures and more precipitation for Michigan.

"Overall, we're looking at a warmer, wetter climate with more extreme events," such as heat waves, severe storms and flooding, Andresen said.

The Upper Midwest could see an increase in average temperatures of 2 to 3 degrees in the short term, and as much as 10 degrees by the end of the century, some models suggest, Andresen said.

The Great Lakes region could see 10 percent more precipitation, he said.

The impact could include an increased intensity and frequency of heat waves, and a reduction in air and water quality, he said.

Loraine Cameron, with the Michigan Department of Public Health, outlined why "Climate change is bad for people."



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Mark Moreno, center, a professor of architecture and urban design at Andrews University, chairs one of six Community Action Teams that are part of Resilient St. Joseph, the city's update of its master land use plan which held its kick-off meeting Thursday. Organizers are seeking community participation in the effort to prepare the area for changes in everything from climate to the economy.

Extreme weather conditions have a greater impact on children, the elderly, the handicapped and low-income residents, Cameron said.

Extreme heat means more illnesses. Last year, 200 people in Michigan were hospitalized for heat-related illnesses, and almost half of them were age 65 or older, Cameron said.

In Berrien County, from 2000 to 2010, there were 26 severe storms, those resulting in death or injury or causing more than \$50,000 in damage, Cameron said. In that time there were 21 thunderstorms that resulted in eight injuries and one death.

Changes in climate are creating an upsurge in ticks and an increase in Lyme disease in Berrien County, Cameron said.

Humans can counter climate change by reducing their driving by using bicycles and public transportation, she said, as well as more efficient energy consumption.

Better use of water resources is everybody's business, said Marcy Colclough, with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

"We all live downstream," Colclough said.

The St. Joseph River watershed has lost about half of its wetlands, areas that reduce flooding and filter water sources, she said.

Low-impact development, in contrast to conventional development, preserves open spaces and protects wetlands, which means cleaner water and less flooding.

The mantra is "Slow it down, spread it out, soak it in," Colclough said.

Developers can reduce run-off, carrying pollutants to rivers and streams, by incorporating green parking lots and roofs and using porous surfaces. Residents can help by building rain gardens.

The Pokagon residential development in Dowagiac is using these low-impact techniques, Colclough said.

Low-impact development not only leads to "prettier, cleaner, and greener" communities, it also saves money, she said.

Residents also can have a positive impact on their own economic environment, said Michele Lonergan, with Local First, a Grand Rapids-based organization that promotes local spending.

One study showed that \$68 of every \$100 spent at locally owned businesses stays in the community, Lonergan said. In contrast, only \$43 of \$100 spent at non-local businesses stays local.

A study in Kent County found that just a 10 percent shift in spending toward local businesses generated \$140 million in new economic activity and created more than 1,600 jobs.

Local First encourages this type of spending through its Eat Local initiative and its "Guide to Local Living."

Lonergan said that 78 percent of businesses participating in Local First saw an increase in their annual sales. A survey by Grand Valley State University found that 68 percent of customers prefer to shop locally, and 80 percent believe that local businesses make their community a unique place to live.

Getting involved

Residents have several opportunities to contribute to the Resilient St. Joseph effort, Karner said.

Community Action Teams are being formed in six key areas: community access and transportation; economics and energy; buildings and neighborhoods; agriculture and food; human and social systems; and parks and natural resources.

Community Action Team meetings will be held at St. Joseph High School Aug. 13, from 6:30-8 p.m.; Sept. 24, from 6-7:30 p.m.; and Oct. 22, 6-7:30 p.m.

Community meetings will be held dealing specifically with marina and harbor development, and on the Lions Park Drive neighborhood, as well as shoreland analysis and a discussion on vulnerable populations.

The Resilient St. Joseph website has a page to gather public opinion about the master plan, under the "Get Involved" section. Residents also can sign up for an e-newsletter.

The website address is www.resilientmichigan.org/stjoe.

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