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## Southwest Planning Commission wants to cut board members

By John Matuszak HP Staff Writer Aug 21, 2017 Updated 22 hrs ago



Pictured is the Berrien County Administration Center

Don Campbell / HP staff

ST. JOSEPH — How many planning commissioners does it take to change a region?

Apparently, not 41, the number of board members now with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

In fact, they think they can get by with 25, SWMPC Executive Director John Egelhaaf told the Berrien County Board of Commissioners on Thursday.

That's the draft proposal on the table for the planning commission that serves Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties and provides guidance in areas of transportation, economic development, environmental issues, digital mapping and master and recreational planning. The commission gets most of its funding from federal and state sources, with the remainder coming from county and local governments.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission area is among the smallest geographically in the state, Egelhaaf said, but has one of the largest boards.

The board of the planning commission, formed in 1973, was originally made up of mayors and county commissioners, but membership was later expanded to include townships and the public to address special interests and ethnic diversity, according to the organization's website.

Berrien County has 20 board representatives, including four county commissioners and seven citizen representatives. Cass County has nine members, with two county commissioners and four citizens. Van Buren has 11 members, with three county commissioners and three citizens.

Ten members are automatically appointed to the board from cities or townships with more than 9,000 residents. These include the mayors of Benton Harbor and Niles, the St. Joseph city manager, and representatives from Benton, Lincoln, St. Joseph, Oronoko and Niles townships in Berrien; the mayor of Dowagiac in Cass; and the mayor of South Haven and the supervisor of Antwerp Township in Van Buren.

There is also one appointed at-large member from the Pokagon Band, and representatives from the Michigan Township Association.

The proposed changes would eliminate the automatic appointments, Egelhaaf said, and the number of members would be in proportion to a county's population. Under this formula, Berrien would have 12 representatives, Van Buren would have seven and Cass would have five. Appointments would be made by county boards, with recommendations for township members coming from their respective supervisors. Each county would be required to appoint a minimum of one county commissioner.

Members from the Michigan Township Association could be nominated by county boards, and recommendations for appointments for city members could come from county chapters of the Michigan Municipal League.

By reducing the number of board members, Egelhaaf said he hopes to open up more opportunities for debate among the remaining members. The full board meets four times a year, and with fewer people it could meet six times, he said.

Having a board reduced by 40 percent would also cut back on the per diem payments paid per meeting to board members, along with mileage, saving money that could go into planning projects, Egelhaaf said. The average annual cost per member is \$146, and three-quarters of board members accept mileage and per diem payments.

Egelhaaf said he had spoken with Van Buren County's administrator, whom he said had no reservations about the proposal, but he had not yet talked with Cass officials.

Lincoln Township officials were a little leery about the recommendations, but agreed that the board is too big.

Egelhaaf said he didn't think formal approval was required by county officials, though Berrien commissioners said they might want to draft at least a resolution of support.

Once they are assured that this is the way to go, the next step will be to amend the bylaws to make the changes happen, Egelhaaf said.

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