

# Southwestern Michigan Commission

The Regional Planning Agency for Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties

April-June 2005

## SWMC Volunteer Day

*The SWMC had the honor* of participating in the 2005 Jimmy Carter Work Project in Benton Harbor this spring. The JCWP is an enormous undertaking that required the mobilization of a massive volunteer corps. During a single week, twenty-nine homes were built in



*Chairman Jim Sayer, John Egelhaaf, Larry Koepfle, and Jerry Chase shoveling one of many loads of mulch.*

Benton Harbor in association with Habitat for Humanity. The SWMC contributed to the effort by working on the “pre-build” in April.

Several homes were constructed and landscaped prior to the primary “Build” week in June as a way of insuring that the construction process was satisfactory. The SWMC landscaped two of the three homes involved in the pre-build.



*SWMC staff with volunteers from MSUE and area garden clubs in front of a Habit for Humanity home.*

Thank you to all the SWMC staff and Chairman Sayer for their hard work on this rewarding project.

## Current Projects at the Commission

**Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)** As the regional Economic Development District, the SWMC requests each municipality to provide information regarding their economic development projects so that they may be included in the annual report to the Economic Development Administration. Projects that may meet the requirements for EDA funding must also be included in an approved CEDS report. Inclusion in this report does not guarantee EDA funding but is a step towards it. Details of this process have been sent to every municipality in the region and the report will be ready for approval by October 1, 2005.

**Community Master Plans** SWMC staff are currently in the process of conducting steering committee

meetings, public visioning sessions, and community surveys as part of the research needed to prepare master plans and transit studies in the southwest Michigan region.

**Annual Highway Performance Monitoring System (HPMS) Surveys** The HPMS is a national level highway information system that includes data on the extent, condition, performance, use, and operating characteristics of the Nation's highways. The major purpose of the HPMS is to support a data driven decision process within the Federal Highway Administration, the Department of Transportation, and the Congress. Each year the SWMC cooperates with this process by conducting road surveys in our region and submitting the data to the state.

*“If at first an idea is not absurd, there is no hope for it” ~Albert Einstein*

## Regional Spotlight - Agriculture in Southwest Michigan

*Michigan enjoys the second* most diverse agricultural production in the United States. As the asparagus season ends, the strawberries, blueberries, peaches, and cherries ripen providing even more opportunity to enjoy the benefits of this unique agricultural area.

Take a bite of any farm-fresh fruit or vegetable in Southwestern Michigan and you'll never be satisfied with anything less! Over 60 roadside markets and



pick-your-own farms offer you sun-ripened and rain-sweetened goodness in a wide variety of produce.

Our temperate climate has helped Michigan to lead the nation in growing tart cherries and blueberries and we're in the top ten states for apples, plums, sweet cherries, asparagus, grapes, snap green beans, pears, strawberries, sweet corn, cauliflower, peaches, cucumbers and wine.

In 2004, Michigan ranked third nationally in value of wholesale sales of floriculture products and ranked number one in the nation for sales of potted Easter lilies, geraniums (potted and hanging

baskets), and New Guinea impatiens (potted and hanging baskets).

Statewide, Van Buren County is first in blueberries and processing cucumbers (2003 statistics). Berrien County leads the State in grapes, with Van Buren and Cass County ranking second and third (based on acreage). Cass County also has the second highest number of hogs and pigs in the State (based on number of head).

We're proud of the agricultural environment and successes of the growers and producers in our area. They are a big part of what makes living in southwest Michigan so very rich and rewarding!

## Tree City USA Program

*Every community*, regardless of size, benefits in different ways from being a Tree City USA. Reports of these benefits have reached The National Arbor Day Foundation through the years and are summarized in six categories as follows:

- 1) Meeting the four standards for becoming a Tree City USA provides initial direction for a community forestry program and helps a community get started toward annual, systematic management of its tree resources.
- 2) Education begins with discussion of the standards and getting organized to apply for Tree City USA status and continues by leading to contacts with the state forester's staff.
- 3) A community's public image is a very real phenomenon and important in many ways. Being a Tree City USA helps present the

kind of image that most citizens want to have for the place they live or conduct business. The Tree City USA signs at community entrances tell visitors that here is a community that cares about its environment and is an indication to prospective businesses that the quality of life may be better here.

- 4) Gaining and retaining Tree City USA recognition is an award to the tree workers, managers, volunteers, tree board members and others who work on behalf of better care of a community's trees.
- 5) Preference is sometimes given to Tree City USA communities over other communities when allocations of grant money are made for trees or forestry programs.
- 6) Presentation of the Tree City USA award and the celebration of Arbor Day offer excellent publicity opportunities. This

results not only in satisfaction for the individuals involved and their families, but also

provides one more way to reach large numbers of people with information about tree care. As one forester put it, "This is advertising that money can't buy -- and it is free!" (<http://www.arborday.org/programs/TreeCityBenefits.cfm>)



**Congratulations to the City of Buchanan and the City of South Haven for their continued participation in this program!**

To receive a free Tree City USA booklet, call (402) 474-5655 Monday-Friday 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. CST or email your request to [treecity@arborday.org](mailto:treecity@arborday.org)

## Asset Management Cooperative Effort

*In mid-July* the SWMC will begin its third year as a partner in the State of Michigan's Asset Management program.

The Asset Management effort attempts to uniformly measure the condition of all of the State's roads that are eligible for federal aid. The road data for Asset Management will become a tool to determine precisely how various road surface types (asphalt, concrete, gravel, seal

coat) degrade differently in each region of the State. With this information, the funds dedicated to road maintenance can be more accurately planned.

The program has brought the county road commissions and the SWMC closer together by sharing staff for a common goal. It has also produced valuable data for the State to ultimately help direct ever-shrinking road maintenance dollars

to roads when they need them most. This year the SWMC applied for and received a grant to expand the Asset Management program in southwest Michigan to include all local roads and streets. The expanded scope will provide more quality data to our local road commissions.

We are glad to be part of this sensible planning effort by the State of Michigan.

## Long Range Transportation Plans Approved

*At their respective June 2005* meetings, the policy committees of the Benton Harbor-St. Joseph urban area and the Niles-Buchanan-Cass urban area approved the long range transportation plans designed for their planning areas. These long range transportation plans are an essential element in determining the local priorities for receiving federal and state aid for transportation projects in urban areas and are required as part of the coordinated, cooperative, and continuing transportation planning process.

The Niles-Buchanan-Cass Area Transportation Study (NATS) Review Committee and the Twin Cities Area Transportation Study (TwinCATS) Policy Committee are the policymaking bodies for the urban areas in southwest Michigan. Through an 18-month process, each has developed the adopted long range transportation plan as the overall guide for sustaining and improving transportation in their areas. Highlighted in each plan is the call for the completion of the US-31 connection into I-94 at Benton Harbor. This event will have a significant impact on all of our communities. Benton Harbor-St. Joseph will be a point of convergence for traffic heading toward Indianapolis, Memphis, Birmingham, Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City. Niles-Buchanan-Cass will serve as the gateway to and from the Indianapolis, Memphis, and Birmingham connector.

Each urban area is allocated a limited amount of federal funding based on a formula determined by the State of Michigan. This money comes primarily from the Highway Trust Fund, which derives its monies

from the federal gas taxes and tariffs established by Congress.

Only roads that have been designated as "federal aid eligible" qualify for federal funding. Communities benefit by supplying one dollar of local funding for every four dollars of federal funding. The premise is that communities and transportation agencies must work together to determine the best priorities for spending to resolve local transportation issues.

While road repair is the most obvious use of the money, there are other potential projects that are also eligible for federal funding such as non-motorized facilities, public transit, and even airport and harbor operations.

Adding to the complexity of the planning process is the recent USEPA designation of Berrien County as an "Air Quality Non-attainment Area". This status meant additional considerations had to be weighed in determining transportation priorities.

The NATS and TwinCATS Long Range Transportation Plans have been submitted to the State and the Federal Highway Administration for review and approval. We anticipate late summer or early fall approvals.

***Our interstate system was originally conceived and funded as a national defense project in the 1950s under President Eisenhower. The original bridge clearances were designed for the movement of the ICBM "Minuteman" missiles.***

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## *Staying Ahead of the Curve*

*Michigan Graduated License Law, Driver Behavior, Crash Data, and Safety Enhancements to Low Volume Rural Roads* - these are a sample of the presentations scheduled for the 2005 Rural Transportation Safety Forum. Continuous improvement in road, driver, and pedestrian safety is an important challenge for communities in southwest Michigan. These improvements require cooperative effort from private citizen groups and every level of government, education, and business.

Every municipality, school district, county road commission, and county health department in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties has received an invitation to participate. Interested members of the general public are also welcome and encouraged to attend this important forum for a discussion of innovative concepts regarding rural community transportation safety issues in southwest Michigan.

Tuesday, August 9, 2005  
9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.  
(Registration is at 8:30 a.m.)  
Priscilla U. Byrns Heritage Center  
708 Market Street  
St. Joseph, Michigan

Lunch will be served - your RSVP is requested by August 1, 2005.

Call Shelley Klug at 269-925-1137 extension 13, or see registration form at [www.swmicomm.org](http://www.swmicomm.org)

## **212 Miles of Antiques, Collectibles, & Treasures!**

*Drive US-12 across southern Michigan* for the state's longest garage sale! Scheduled for the second weekend in August, (Friday-Saturday-Sunday August 12-14, 2005) this event is being sponsored by communities along the US-12 Heritage Trail. Check out this website to plan your drive and to have fun shopping, eating, and hunting for treasures! [www.us12heritagetrail.org](http://www.us12heritagetrail.org)

*Did you know Michigan ranks 10th in the country for number of arts-related businesses, institutions, and organizations?*