

Cass master plan effort proves an award winner

By JANET HAYES - HP Correspondent | Posted: Friday, April 24, 2015 6:00 am

BRIDGMAN - The Cass County Michigan Master Plan Collaboration received the 2015 Graham Woodhouse Intergovernmental Effort Award from the Southwest Michigan Planning (SWMPC) Commission in a ceremony Tuesday in Bridgman.

The award recognizes outstanding cooperative efforts in problem solving by units of government.

The four-year effort in Cass County was cited for \$90,000 to \$120,000 in savings, which resulted from joint efforts of the county, four townships and two villages in writing or updating their individual master plans.

The units involved included Cass County Planning Commission, the villages of Edwardsburg and Vandalia and the townships of Pokagon, Silver Creek, Volinia and Wayne. Mark Eidelson of LANDPLAN Inc. also was recognized for his work on the project.

"It's a master example of imaginative problem solving and the value of collaboration," SWMPC Executive Director John Egelhaaf said in announcing the award.

He named Cass County Planning Commission Chairman Barbara Cook as the catalyst to the project. Cook has been on the county Planning Commission since 2001, having served as Pokagon Township supervisor from 1990 to 2000.

When contacted after the ceremony, Cook said the project was inspired by the challenge of Gov. Rick Snyder for local units of government to conserve funds.

She said she envisioned the cost savings that might result if the county, which was already planning to update its master plan, invited local municipalities to work on their plans at the same time and share the costs.

Beginning in 2010, Cook said the "long, involved process" involved many exploratory meetings until the consortium was formed. The \$25,000 projected cost of a master plan was broken down into the county paying \$18,000 and each of the municipalities \$3,000. The sizable cost of mapping needed for the plans was absorbed by the county.

The total project budget was \$38,000, a significant savings over each unit working independently.

Most of the meetings were on "neutral territory" at the County Road Commission office, and progress was slow due to the many players and layers involved at every step of the process.

Cook said the "jellyfish operation" was guided by Eidelson's professionalism and experience.

"He had the procedures and processes established. I think he drove every road in Cass County and has a fantastic memory that let him recall places as they came up during discussions," Cook said.

The completed plan, with each participating entity's separate section, is available on the county's website at casscountymi.org.

Cook said she never imagined the project would take as long as it did, "but nobody held it up deliberately. It just took that long to work through it."

SWMPC further presented Jason Auvil, former Pokagon Band representative on the SWMPC board, with the Welch Lackey Award that recognizes the spirit of public service and dedication to governmental collaboration throughout Southwest Michigan.