

Commission developing strategy for economic development

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BENTON HARBOR — In spite of the many differences between residents of Cass, Berrien and Van Buren counties, a strong, resilient economy that helps draw and retain talented professionals is a rising tide that lifts all boats in southwest Michigan.

To that end, governmental and business leaders across the three counties spent the better part of 2017 working with members of Southwest Michigan Planning Commission to develop a strategy on how to achieve that goal. Now, local residents will have a chance to share their thoughts and opinions on how to improve the region's economic fortunes as well.

The SWMPC is seeking public comment on its recently completed Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy report, a document that details a shared economic vision and plan for the tri-county region. From now through Dec. 1, people may submit feedback on the plan, by emailing SWMPC Associate Planner Ryan Fellows at fellowsr@swmpc.org or by mailing the SWMPC office 376 W. Main St., Suite 130, Benton Harbor, MI 49022-3651.

A copy of the CEDS report can be found online at swmpc.org/ceds.asp.

Fellows and others with the SWMPC — a regional planning and development organization that serves Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties — have spent more than a year developing the CEDS plan. The study was funded by a grant U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration, which funds area regional planning agencies to complete economic development strategies around every five years, Fellows said.

The plan outlines a common economic mission between the three counties; describes the current demographic and economic trends in the region; analyzes the area's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; and creates goals for leaders to reach to promote further economic prosperity in the area.

"We want to build on our successes, and identify areas that still need attention and put resources into them," Fellows said about the plan.

To create the plan, the planning commission created a 20-person CEDS Strategy Committee, which was comprised of stakeholders from through the tri-county region, including Cass County Administrator Karen Folks, Berrien County Administrator Bill Wolf, Pokagon Township Supervisor Linda Preston, Mno-Bmadsen CEO Troy Clay and Southwestern Michigan Economic Growth Alliance Executive Director Barkley Garrett. The group met several times between May and August to iron out the plan, Fellows said.

"We had a lot of great help from a lot of different people," he said.

At the end of the sessions, the committee settled on the following goals:

- Livability for talent attraction — promote a diverse environment that creates an excellent quality of life for talent
- Education and Training — attract, retain, and develop a high-quality workforce
- Infrastructure — create, improve, and maintain services and infrastructure

- Support Business — support and meet the needs of current, new, and emerging businesses
- Coordination — promote better coordination among different economic development groups

Besides encouraging cooperation between area economic developers and providing leaders with a strategy for business growth, the CEDS will also help municipalities in the tri-county area possibly capture grant dollars through the Michigan Economic Development Corporation's Redevelopment Ready Communities program, Fellows said.

While the 20-person committee was comprised of people from a diverse number of backgrounds and locations, Fellows said the month-long public comment period will give populations who may have been overlooked a chance to weigh in before the plan becomes ratified.

"As much as we know, we don't know everything," he said. "There is the possibility of a perspective that we may have missed."

Following the end of public comments Dec. 1, the CEDS will make any needed revisions and present the final version before the SWMPC Executive Committee during its meeting at 9 a.m. Tuesday, Dec. 19, at the SWMPC office in Benton Harbor. The board will then vote on whether or not to approve the document.