

Community leaders push for better public transportation

By LOUISE WREGE - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, February 14, 2017 6:00 am

BENTON HARBOR — Improving the education and health of people in Berrien County will only happen if residents have reliable transportation so they can get to the services they need.

That was a recurring theme as 13 community leaders talked Monday about work being done by Michigan's Great Southwest Strategic Leadership Council (MGSSLC).

"Mobility is one of the key enablers to the American dream," said Pat Brandstatter, a member of the Quality of Life Group and president of Kruger Plastic Products in Bridgman.

He said an improved countywide transit system is critical to make the county a better place to live and work in.

"Unfortunately, there are way too many low income people in Berrien County who don't have reliable cars or available transportation," he said. "Many times, well paying jobs are located far away from their neighborhoods and homes. Without a means to access that reliable transportation, they're having a very difficult time escaping the circumstances that they have."

He said a study done in 2014 recommended that the county's four transportation providers join to create one countywide system. But, he said people were unsure what that would look like.

He said with the help of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, the group received a \$200,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Transportation to put together the Berrien Countywide Transit Service Integration Plan. That includes \$40,000 in matching funds.

Brandstatter said a steering committee will meet for the first time next week with a consultant who will start putting together the plan. He said the plan will take nine to 12 months to complete.

"We've got a lot of key players from key areas across the county getting together in the same room talking about how we're going to make this thing work," he said. "And our hope is when we're done with the transportation study, that we'll actually have a document and will have some consensus built throughout the county that will be actionable – that we can actually move on rather than just have a study."

Dr. Loren Hamel, president and CEO of Lakeland Health in St. Joseph, said transportation is critical not only to get people healthier, but so people can get to their jobs.

"We employ a lot of close to entry-level jobs, lower wage jobs, and if there's anything that gets in the way of health, if there's anything that gets in the way of jobs, it's transportation," he said. "Those are problems you just can't solve unless you address the transportation issue. ... The number one reason someone entering the workforce for the first time can't keep their job is getting there reliably."

Hamel cofounded MGSSLC in 2013 with Jeff Fettig, chairman and CEO of Whirlpool Corp., to bring people together to help Southwest Michigan grow and to reverse some troubling trends. Fettig said that

between 2002 and 2015, Berrien County's population fell 3.7 percent and the number of jobs in the county fell 4.6 percent.

"Everyone would agree that a shrinking population and declining number of jobs is not a good formula for future success," he said.

He said MGSSLC has more than 115 volunteers from more than 100 organizations that are working to make Southwest Michigan a great place to live, work and play in.

In addition to the Quality of Life Group, there are volunteers working on Best Practice Governance, Business and Job Growth, and World Class Education and Talent Development.

"We truly believe that Berrien County is at an inflection point," Hamel said. "We think history is changing. And we think a future is emerging that will benefit us and will benefit our children."

He said that's because transformational things are happening.

"People are talking together who used to not talk together," he said. "People are listening to people they didn't used to listen to. Folks are meeting on a regular basis across communities, across cultures, across organizations – things that just haven't occurred the same way in times past."

Contact: lwrege@TheHP.com, 932-0361, Twitter: @HPWrege