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TOP STORY

Connecting the dots: SJ-BH waterfront meetings continue tonight, Thursday

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer 3 hrs ago



Participants at a planning meeting for the Twin Cities Harbor Study Tuesday were asked to place dots where they'd like to see housing, commercial development and cultural and recreational improvements. Meetings continue at 6 p.m. tonight and Thu at Kinexus, 499 W. Main St., Benton Harbor.

John Matuszak / HP Staff

BENTON HARBOR — Participants in the latest public meeting on the Twin Cities Sustainable Harbor Project had an opportunity Tuesday to mark off the types of development they would like to see along the waterfront, and consider how to connect those elements.

This was the first design “charrette,” held at the Kinexus building in Benton Harbor, to gather input from residents, and will be followed by an open house at tonight and a final meeting Thursday, both at 6 p.m.

That final proposal will result from the ideas generated at the gatherings, said Don Carpenter, one of the planners organizing the project.

“It’s what we heard from you,” he said.

At last night’s event, participants affixed colored dots to maps of the harbor area representing housing, commercial development, and cultural and recreational amenities.

Housing options included single-family dwellings, entry-level residences, senior housing, apartments, town homes and condominiums.

Commercial development encompassed restaurants, retail, mixed use, grocery stores, and commercial shipping.

Cultural additions featured art and murals, a cultural center, streetscape improvements and entertainment venues. Recreation included parks and greenspace, fishing, bike sharing, marinas, transient boat slips and wildlife habitat.

After making their choices, participants then used color-coded markers to illustrate connections with walking trails, bike paths, water trails and public transportation.

Several groups focused on possible development at the current site of Dock 63, across from the Inn at Harbor Shores. Recreational and commercial options also were strung along the harbor and the St. Joseph and Paw Paw rivers.

Along with pedestrian and bike trails, water taxi routes were envisioned along the harbor and around Marina Island.

Following the Tuesday meeting, designers were to look at these ideas and come up with three alternative proposals.

Carpenter explained that at tonight’s open house, residents will view those alternatives and vote on which ones they like. The final plan will be presented to local and state leaders, who can then move it toward reality, he said.

The charettes followed a Sept. 19 meeting at which participants were asked to come up with one word that described the harbor today, and a word to describe its future.

“Potential” was the No. 1 word used to describe the harbor today, Carpenter said. “Disjointed” and “divided” were other terms offered, pointing to the need for better connections.

Residents see the future for the harbor as “prosperous” and “vibrant.”

The project stemmed from a 2015 harbor study conducted by Andrews University. Partners in the latest effort are the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Office of the Great Lakes; the Twin City Harbor Conservancy; Michigan State University Extension; and Michigan Sea Grant.

The planning area covers a half-mile radius and 728 acres, and a mile-and-a-half long waterfront, Carpenter said.

A lot of money flows into the community through that harbor. Recreational boating generates \$20 million a year, according to Carpenter, with 53 percent from equipment and service at marinas, and 22 percent from fuel sales.

There are 1,600 boat slips along the harbor, and 35 percent of them are owned by out-of-state visitors. There are only 10 transient boat slips for day trippers. And most of the slips are not within convenient walking distance to downtown St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, Carpenter said.

Commercial shipping brings in \$250 million in income annually from 5,000 jobs, mostly from construction and transportation. Ships bring in 280,000 tons of material each year in limestone, gravel, salt and other cargo. The LaFarge dock on the outer harbor sees between 20 and 30 vessels each year, and Dock 63 welcomes 10 to 20 ships.

That commercial traffic depends on dredging the harbor. Around 50,000 cubic yards of sand is dredged from the outer harbor each year, at a cost of as much as \$750,000, with the sand returned to nearby beaches.

The inner harbor is dredged every three to four years, at a cost of around \$1 million. Material from this harbor is trucked to a landfill at the Southwest Michigan Regional Airport.

If the harbor lost its commercial shipping designation, the Army Corps of Engineers would no longer maintain the channel, and the U.S. Coast Guard station would leave, Carpenter said.

Information is available at www.miseagrant.umich.edu/smallharborsustainability/communities/st-joseph-benton-harbor/.

Contact: jmatuszak@TheHP.com, 932-0360, Twitter: [@HPMatuszak](https://twitter.com/HPMatuszak)