

Living large in SW Michigan

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, October 30, 2016 6:00 am

How livable is your community?

Does it have affordable housing, grocery stores that sell fresh food, places to enjoy exercise and cultural activities? What is the quality and accessibility of health care? Does the community accommodate all age groups?

These are some of the questions Michigan's Great Southwest Strategic Leadership Council is encouraging leaders and residents to ask as they plan for their futures.

"We're promoting the Three As – awareness, appetite for change and action – big or little," said Lynn Kellogg, part of the Strategic Leadership Council's Livable Communities committee, which is launching a public awareness campaign with presentations to elected officials and other movers and shakers.

Kellogg, CEO of the Area Agency on Aging Region IV, has been speaking to numerous groups, including the St. Joseph City Commission last week, about how to make communities more livable.

"Berrien County has a lot of good, raw materials to build on," Kellogg said in a separate interview. "They're just not really connected yet."

Pluses include having 70 percent of Southwest Michigan homes within 1 mile of a major waterway. The region has 80 percent more arts, cultural and entertainment venues than the national average, and is the second most diverse fruit and vegetable belt in the country, Kellogg said.

It's important that residents of all ages have easy access to all of these things, Kellogg said. She said Berrien County is "older" than the rest of the state, with 23 percent of its residents 60 and older, and 40 percent of households have a resident who is 60 or above.

Those older residents are a benefit to the community. One study showed that a retired couple generates the same economic benefits as 3.7 manufacturing jobs.

The things that assist older residents, from public transportation to walkable sidewalks, help younger residents who might not have a car or are pushing a baby stroller, Kellogg said.

Her committee lists several factors that contribute to livable communities: community engagement and volunteer opportunities; culture and lifelong learning; health and supportive services; affordable and diverse



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Downtown Benton Harbor is pictured Sept. 1. The Southwest Michigan Strategic Leadership Council's Livable Communities committee is looking to make neighborhoods more pedestrian-friendly and walkable for residents.

housing options; public safety and security; planning and zoning that encourages mixed use and pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods; and transportation and mobility for everything from cyclists to walkers.

Sometimes it's the little things that count.

Safety and security can be enhanced with lighting and by providing places where residents can meet together, Kellogg said. "It's people seeing people."

Living it up

One tool available for gauging communities is the AARP Livability Index.

The website charts every community in the country in the areas of housing, neighborhoods, transportation, environment, health, civic engagement and opportunity, and rates these areas on a scale of 0 to 100.

Most communities rate in the middle, as different factors affect each other, the website explains.

Berrien County is no exception, earning a rating of 49 for overall livability. Most communities in the county rate right around that range, as well.

The website allows users to dig deeper into what is going on right in their communities, and what can be improved.

Berrien County earns a 60 in the category of housing, which includes whether dwellings are handicapped-accessible and the availability of multi-family housing, as well as cost, affordability and the availability of subsidized housing.

The county fares less well in the areas of neighborhoods and access to such things as grocery stores and farmers markets, parks and libraries and jobs; and in transportation, including public transit.

The index notes that there are no jobs within a 45-minute commute that can be reached by public transportation, and about 18,000 jobs that can be reached in that radius by car. There are 1,761 jobs and people per square mile in Berrien County, compared to the national average of 3,567. The county has a housing vacancy rate of 15.7 percent, above the national median of 8.8 percent.

Berrien households make fewer walking trips than the national average. The good news is Berrien residents spend less time stuck in traffic, at 6.5 hours per person per year, compared to 17.4 hours nationally.

Under environment, the county gets good marks for water and air quality, though a high number of its residents are exposed to roadway pollution, including vehicle exhaust and noise.

In the health category, a high percentage of Berrien residents smoke and are obese, and the region suffers from a shortage of health care professionals, though 71 percent of residents are satisfied with the quality of care provided.

As for community engagement, residents have many civic, religious, political and business organizations they can join, and numerous people are taking advantage of those opportunities. Sixty-one percent of residents vote, according to the index.

Income inequality in Berrien is rated at 0.46 on a scale of 0 to 1, and the number of jobs per person is below the national median. Age diversity is 0.85 on a scale of 0 to 1, with 1 being the best.

Elsewhere in Southwest Michigan, Van Buren County had an overall livability rating of 43, with high marks in housing and social opportunities, and lesser ratings in transportation and quality of neighborhoods. Cass County had an overall rating of 44.

Kellogg said that the AARP Livability Index is one tool for community members to be informed about where they reside.

“It tells you the gaps,” Kellogg said.

Another tool is the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging’s “Communities for a Lifetime” Aging-Friendly Community Assessment, which asks a series of questions that allows leaders to determine if their communities accommodate all age groups.

Moving ahead

The Strategic Leadership Council was formed after Loren Hamel, president and CEO of Lakeland Health, and Jeff Fettig, president of Whirlpool Corp., called together a meeting of business, government, education and nonprofit leaders in 2013 to discuss the region’s future. The 90 members kicked off their action plans in January 2015.

Kellogg and her Livable Communities group see positive changes being made in the Twin Cities, with such amenities as lights, benches and sidewalks being added in St. Joseph and Benton Harbor that give people a place to relax or hang out with friends. And the more people that are out, the safer everyone feels, she added.

Sawyer and Stevensville have capitalized on the success of a handful of businesses to build up their own livability, and Bridgman is promoting its “Lake 2 Grapes” theme and assets such as its beaches and wineries.

Lake Bluff Park in St. Joseph is “pretty phenomenal,” Kellogg said. “If you see people out on the street, walking around, looking in store windows, sitting on a bench reading a book, that’s an indication that it’s a healthy place.”

The downside to downtown St. Joseph and Benton Harbor is that they are “food deserts,” with no grocery stores nearby, Kellogg pointed out.

The Twin Cities Harbor Study, which envisions possible development along the waterfront, is a good example of a document “that gets the juices rolling about what could happen,” Kellogg said.

The ultimate goal of the Strategic Leadership Council is to make community leaders aware that the decisions they make – large and small – have an impact on the quality of life in their communities, Kellogg said. “We would like to see livability become more prominent in people’s minds.”

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More online

Information on the Great Southwest Michigan Strategic Leadership Council and Livable Communities is at:

Strategic Leadership Council: www.drivegreatness.com

AARP Livability Index: <https://livabilityindex.aarp.org>

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging: <http://www.n4a.org/livable>

Twin Cities Harbor – A Study of Potential in Benton Harbor & St. Joseph, Mich:
<http://www.swmpc.org/bhsjharbor.asp>