

Planning for the warmth

By **RALPH HEIBUTZKI - HP Correspondent** | **Posted: Monday, August 26, 2013 6:00 am**

BENTON HARBOR - Local road planners and politicians need to start working out strategies now for dealing with the potentially destructive effects of climate change.

That's the essence of a report presented to the Twin Cities Area Transportation Study (TwinCATS), an agency of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

How local governments respond to climate-related problems - such as floods or wildfires - depends on getting a consensus that's proven elusive, at the best of times, said Wayne R. Beyea, an instructor from Michigan State University's School of Planning, Design and Construction.

"This is sometimes a heated topic, a controversial topic," Beyea said. "It gets a lot of attention in the media, which often makes this a difficult topic to talk about at the local level."

Beyea presented the report Monday with Claire N. Layman, a public education policy specialist for MSU's Cooperative Extension Service.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission received a \$50,000 grant to complete the report, with help from their Cooperative Extension Service counterparts.

Beyea and Layman asked TwinCATS members to submit their final comments by Saturday to ensure the final report's completion by next month.

The funding came from the Great Lakes Integrated Science Assessment (GLISA), which is a partnership of MSU and the University of Michigan, Beyea said.

"The staff involvement in this was really integral, with our partner, from the get-go," he said.

The grant funded a similar effort in Marquette, which coincides with the revision of its master plan, Beyea said.

Planning Commission and Cooperative Extension staff spent six months working on the report, which aimed at measure local attitudes about climate change, Beyea and Layman said.

Those efforts included public sessions Feb. 27 and May 8 at the Michigan Works Building in Benton Harbor and interviews with those most immediately affected, Beyea said.

The public sessions were designed to measure local attitudes toward climate change, Layman said.

Participants were asked to identify what they saw as the biggest local challenges. The report's compilers then worked to develop best practices to deal with each concern.

Debating the causes of climate change wasn't on the table, but it came up anyhow at the February and May meetings, Layman said.

"There was some pushback from people who really did want to talk about the whole premise of the climate changing. What they wanted to talk about pertained much more to the scientific consensus," she said.

Putting those issues aside, the report contains plenty of data - including 16 maps and 35 proposed strategies - to guide local governments' policy-making, Beyea and Layman said.

For example, protecting the diversity of crops and trees emerged as the top best practice at the February and May meetings, Beyea said.

"Having a variety of species is going to be helpful, so we don't get a single catastrophic event that can wipe out all the trees," Beyea said. "That's been a big issue, as you know, with the emerald ash borer (infestation issue) and others."

Similarly, the report shows above-average increases in precipitation and temperature levels across the Great Lakes region, while overall ice coverage has declined by about 71 percent between 1973 and 2010.

Communities benefit from knowing this type of information, even if they don't agree on how a particular trend came about, Beyea said.

"Water levels in the Great Lakes are near and dear to us, as we see some extreme events, whether it's floods, droughts or winter weather," Beyea said. "The issues that affect our transportation infrastructure are some of the issues that we want to address, at this point."

The final report can be viewed at www.swmpc.org/climatechange.asp.

Monday's presentation did nothing to sway Hagar Township resident Adolf Pelzer, who also attended the February and May sessions - and still counts himself among the doubters, he said.

"I'm a real skeptic. That's why I attended all their meetings. We don't need to do anything (about climate change) now. It's (manure) as far as I'm concerned," he said.

Pelzer had no problems with the process or how the meetings were run, but questioned the real purpose.

"They're (SWMPC) getting funds, right? That's why they're pushing this. They have to justify spending the money, so they have to come up with stuff like this," he said.

As far as the climate change debate goes, what happens to the report is up to local communities to decide after they receive it, said Gautam Mani, an associate planner from the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, who worked on the document.

"Our hope is that the community members will decide to incorporate certain suggestions from the report in their long-range plan. They'll have to read it first and decide what's best for their constituents, how to incorporate the recommendations," he said.