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## PLOTTING A BRIGHT FUTURE ON MULTIPLE FRONTS IS A BIG JOB FOR AN AWARD WINNING TEAM

By Pat Moody | Posted September 25, 2018 | 15 Under 15 (<https://www.moodyonthemarket.com/category/15-under-15/>)



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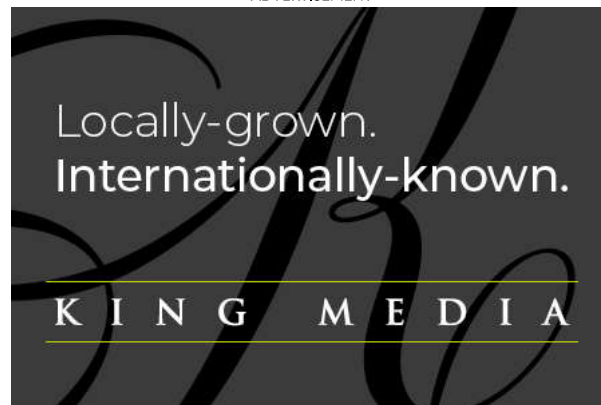
A hearty, and extremely focused and busy team comprised of a dozen professionals earned its way onto the inaugural list of the Fifteen Under 15 Best Businesses in the region by essentially "fitting the criteria perfectly." That was the opening shot over the bow by the person nominating the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission in downtown Benton Harbor.

Armed with a small team of professionals working to make a positive difference in southwest Michigan from their headquarters at 376 W. Main Street in the city, the SWMPC is focused daily on better mobility and transportation options...a cleaner environment and healthy rivers, lakes and beaches...better recreational facilities such as trails, parks and open spaces...and on bringing in federal and state resources to attract and retain employers across the region.

Under the tutelage of Executive Director John Egelhaaf and his Deputy Executive Director Marcy Hamilton, the SWMPC is a regional planning agency serving Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties. They connect people, assist communities and advance cooperative solutions to regional challenges, and, as Marcy Hamilton says, "We like to say we are planning great communities together."

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission is one of 14 Regional Planning and Development Regions created in 1968 by Governor George Romney. That step was taken in response to a growing number of federal programs ( for things like housing, water quality, economic development, and transportation) that recognized the area-wide nature of many problems.

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The organization officially began in 1973 by resolutions of the Boards of Commissioners of Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties. Something that most probably do not know is that SWMPC started a Southwestern Michigan Business Promotion Program and developed the Southwestern Michigan Tourist Council, which is now its own independent organization.

When asked about the culture of the organization, the nominator said "Words that describe SWMPC's culture include passionate, enthusiastic, inclusive, flexibility, teamwork, cutting-edge solutions, cooperation, partnerships, stewardship, and perseverance."

The core values of the organization are actually posted routinely. They value:

- Highly skilled and trained staff with diverse skill sets, ideas, and experiences...
- A team that is enthusiastic about its work...
- An atmosphere of mutual respect among team members where staff can freely share ideas...
- All people having a voice in solving the challenges their communities face...
- Quality data....
- A regional perspective providing a unique vantage point to address multi-jurisdictional issues...
- Actions connected to well thought out plans...
- Successful solutions that are a balance between the needs of people, the economy, and the natural environment....
- Responsible stewardship of the natural and built environment...
- Returning the highest possible value for every dollar spent through the SWMPC...
- Accurate, dependable, reliable, thoughtful, and customer focused service in all we do...
- The perseverance necessary to guide projects across time and changes in participants and conditions...

Together, the small but powerful team at SWMPC has achieved a lot, including:

- Improvements to public transportation service by working with transit agencies to provide fixed routes and expand service hours...
- Working with communities to secure grant funds for the IN-MI River Valley Trail and several other park improvements...
- Developing water trails on the Paw Paw River, Dowagiac River and Lake Michigan...
- Secured funding for the Berrien County Drain Commissioner to implement stormwater best management practices to improve Ox Creek...
- Secured several Community Development Block Grants for communities in SW Michigan to upgrade public infrastructure to accommodate new or expanding businesses...

Organizational leaders admit that it is often difficult to bring together people with diverse ideas and find consensus. They add that "Many of the problems we face today are very complex with no easy fixes, but require long term, multi-faceted solutions." Additionally, they point out that, "We are a planning agency and do not really have the authority to implement anything. So we have to partner, provide quality data and information, and assist with securing grants and other resources for our local governments and agencies."

Nevertheless, Marcy Hamilton says, "Every day our work contributes to making southwest Michigan a better place to live, work and play. We work on improving transportation infrastructure and options. We are working to protect and improve water quality. We partner with other agencies to educate the public about our water resources and how they can protect them. We assist communities to develop visions, goals and action plans to become more prosperous and successful places. We are actively bringing in state and federal resources/grants to cost share projects that improve southwest Michigan's quality of life and business climate."

The team at the planning commission engenders an atmosphere for brainstorming, sharing ideas and assisting others when needed. Employees are given latitude to work on projects and issues that they are passionate about. That evokes the response from Hamilton, "I love working at SWMPC because I get to work on issues that I am passionate about. I also get to work with so many wonderful people around southwest Michigan on great projects that will improve our community for generations to come."

She also brags that their workplace "is dog friendly and we have opportunities for flexing work schedules to achieve a better work-home/family balance." The team also has a focus on wellness as part of *Be Healthy Berrien* and offers employees fresh fruit, access to exercise equip (by way of example they have 2 bikes available in the office to ride to meetings), showers and outdoor places to eat lunch and have meetings.

If you'd like to learn more about this award-winning team, click this link: <http://www.swmpc.org> (<http://www.swmpc.org>) or you can call them at 269-925-1137.



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