

GreenTown conference growing local interest

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, September 15, 2013 6:00 am

A contingent from Southwest Michigan will be going green in South Bend next month, but it doesn't have anything to do with carrying the colors of a certain school into Notre Dame territory.

Instead, the group will be offering and bringing home ideas on how to create healthier, sustainable communities during the GreenTown Michiana conference Oct. 11 in South Bend.

Michigan's Great Southwest Sustainable Business Forum is one of the sponsors, and its president, Becky Kliss, is on the event's steering committee, along with Jill Adams, environmental specialist with Berrien County, and Marcy Colclough, a senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, headquartered in Benton Harbor.

"For our region, Southwest Michigan, to continue to grow and be healthy we need to be at the table to discuss sustainability with northern Indiana and to come together as a region," Colclough said after a Tuesday GreenTown advisory committee meeting at Michigan Works in Benton Harbor.

John Harris, with a5, a Chicago firm co-producing the event with Seven Generations Ahead, said the conference is designed to attract participants from Michigan as well as Indiana and Illinois.

He agreed that solutions to problems facing communities - from keeping their water clean to reducing waste to getting more locally grown food to schools - must be regional in scope.

Paraphrasing a promotional ad for the University of Michigan, Harris told the advisory committee there is "so much to be done ... and undone."

GreenTown conferences have been held since 2007 in Indiana, Illinois and Ohio. GreenTown is a zero-waste event, and through Seven Generations Ahead all waste is either composted or recycled. Efforts are underway to reduce waste, encourage walking and provide locally grown food at the conferences.

The keynote speakers for the South Bend conference are Mark Fenton, host of "America's Walking" on PBS and an advocate for creating walkable communities, and Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell, whose city is recognized as one of America's greenest.

On the evening of Oct. 10 Fenton will lead a walk around downtown South Bend.

Also from 1-5 p.m. on Oct. 10, pre-conference discussions will be held on the topics of "The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development;" "Waste Not: A Forum on Jobs and Recycling, Commercial Food Scrap Composting, and Zero Waste Events;" and "Healthy Water, Healthy Communities."

An invitation-only breakfast for mayors and elected officials will be held Oct. 11 before the start of the conference, followed by the keynote speakers at 8:45 a.m.

On the day of the conference, topics to be discussed are health and wellness sustainability; energy and built environment; sustainable business; transportation; food and waste; and water.

Key speakers include Milan Kluko, owner of Green Spirit Farms, practicing indoor vertical agriculture in New Buffalo, and Norman Christopher, sustainability director at Grand Valley State University and author of "Sustainability Demystified."

The conference is recommended for people in the public sector, including government representatives, economic development professionals, health departments and school administrators, along with those in the private sector, such as planners, architects, builders, health care professionals, engineers and local food specialists.

Tom Hackley, a member of the Chikaming Township Planning Commission and a consultant on the township's master plan, expects to attend the conference.

"The township is shrinking in population, and we want to bring things back, build on our environmental assets and have a vibrant commercial community," Hackley said. "I'm looking for a theme. We want to have a coherent vision."

Colclough is interested in discussions about water quality.

One participant at the advisory committee meeting noted that the state of Maryland mandates that all students learn about protecting the Chesapeake Bay and other natural resources.

There is no such requirement for Michigan children to learn about the Great Lakes.

"People here don't learn about the Great Lakes," Colclough said. "The water here is a huge asset, but it's taken for granted."

For information about GreenTown or to register visit www.greentownconference.com.

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