

TOP STORY

St. Joseph Township excited about joint harbor project

Benton Harbor also approves meeting on the topic

By JULIE SWIDWA - HP Staff Writer

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ST. JOSEPH — It will take major communication and cooperation among officials from three communities to make the Twin Cities Sustainable Harbor Project a success.

But if the long-talked about development spanning parts of Benton Harbor, St. Joseph and St. Joseph Township becomes a reality, it will bring all three municipalities in the region great benefits for years to come.

That was the message delivered Monday by a consultant on the project, and St. Joseph Township officials agreed.

“There’s not a huge spot of land (in St. Joseph Township), but if you develop the harbor, you’re going to draw other development. This is a regional project and it will be a plus for all of us,” St. Joseph Township Manager Denise Cook said at a board workshop.

The board of trustees, at its evening meeting, approved a resolution calling for a joint meeting with the Benton Harbor and St. Joseph city commissions to begin a partnership among the three communities and “work together toward building relationships for the best interest of the harbor and its future.” All three municipal bodies are being asked to approve the resolution.

Benton Harbor city commissioners also signed up to meet with St. Joseph and St. Joseph Township, by an 8-1 vote, but not without some controversy.

Commissioner Duane Seats cast the lone no vote, claiming the two other municipalities are trying to “take over” Benton Harbor.

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“I can’t support none of this because you are killing the future of your children,” he said.

Mayor Marcus Muhammad said the plan will bring in much needed tax money.

Muhammad said that a former basketball coach once told him, “Opportunity, when it knocks, successful people answer.”

At the St. Joseph Township meeting, Emily Finnell from Michigan's Office of Great Lakes provided an update on the plan for growth along the waterfront over the next 20 years. A study that took in 728 acres within a quarter-mile radius of the waterfront and harbor was the largest ever conducted by the OGL in Michigan and the Great Lakes area, Finnell said.

Through a series of community meetings, it was determined that development, transportation, connectivity, the environment and collaborative governance are priorities of not just elected officials, but area residents as well. Also important are public access to water, job and business opportunities, and government transparency.

Recommendations were generated for Riverview Drive in Benton Harbor; Marina Island; Fisherman's Wharf on the other side of the river; the inner harbor on the south side of the river near the Berrien County Courthouse; and the outer harbor, next to LaFarge silos on the north side of the river.

The vision includes a waterside boardwalk and trail connector, a trailside brew pub, residential townhouses, retail businesses such as a grocery store and hotel, plus event space and a cultural center.

Once a governing body for the development is formed, with representation from all three municipalities, the next step would be to prioritize opportunities to being implementing the plan.

"Early success leads to momentum," Finnell said.

HP staff writer Louise Wrege contributed to this story.

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