

VAN BUREN COUNTY 2008 STRATEGIC PLAN



FINAL REPORT

**This plan was made possible by the dedication of the
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*The Regional Planning Agency for Berrien, Cass and Van Buren Counties***

Van Buren County Strategic Plan

Table of Contents

PURPOSE	1
METHODOLOGY	1
ROLES OF THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS	2
PRIMARY ISSUE CATEGORIES	3
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	3
Survey Results	3
Economic Development Issues Raised by the Steering Committee.....	4
Water Resource Protection:.....	4
Efficient Transportation:	4
Skilled Workforce:.....	5
Support Services to Facilitate Development of Small & Medium Sized Businesses:	5
COLLABORATION AMONG LOCAL GOVERNMENTS.....	6
Survey Results	6
ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES FOR JUVENILE DELINQUENCY, SUBSTANCE ABUSE, ETC.....	6
Survey Results	6
Alternative Strategies Issues Raised by the Steering Committee.....	6
Effective Technology:	6
Good Service to Residents:.....	7
Proactive not Reactive:.....	7
Safety:.....	7
LAND PLANNING	8
Survey Results	8
Land Planning Issues Raised by the Steering Committee.....	8
Unsustainable Development/Urban (“Rurban”) Sprawl:	8
Connecting the County & Local Units Together for Common Planning Purposes:.....	9
INFRASTRUCTURE	10
Survey Results	10
Infrastructure Issues Raised by the Steering Committee	10
Lack of Linkage Between Parks & Recreation and Economic Development/Tourism:	10
Countywide Parks & Recreation Plan:	11
FAMILY SERVICES	11
Survey Results	11
Family Services Issues Raised by the Steering Committee	12

State & Federal Rules and Regulations Controlling Education:	12
Lack of Consistency in Education:.....	12
Unknown Educational Resources:	12
SENIOR ISSUES	13
Survey Results.....	13
STRENGTH, WEAKNESS, OPPORTUNITY, & THREAT ANALYSIS OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT.....	13
Strengths in Van Buren County Government.....	14
Weaknesses in Van Buren County Government.....	14
Opportunities for Van Buren County Government	16
Threats to Van Buren County Government.....	17
APPENDIX A	18
APPENDIX B	20
APPENDIX C	23
APPENDIX D.....	26

PURPOSE

The strategic planning exercise was performed at the request of the Van Buren County Board of Commissioners. The purpose of the study was to assist the Board of Commissioners in goal setting and prioritization for initiatives over the next three to five years. Some aspects of the study branch off into broad themes or issues upon which the Commissioners may only have a marginal direct impact. However, the process began by looking broadly at the County then systematically focused more closely on matters within closer reach of the County Board of Commissioners. The findings most directly applicable to the actions of the Commissioners were organized and moved to the front of the report. Those findings that suggest broader based action across multiple fronts can be found farther into the report or in the appendices.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed a process where general issues were gradually refined, placed into categories, and prioritized. A steering committee of individuals from Van Buren County was instrumental in generating the information products of this study. Three strategic planning sessions were held. Sessions one and two were facilitated by Ann Nieuwenhuis, Director of the Kalamazoo County branch of Michigan State University Extension. Session three was facilitated by Julie Pioch, Director of the Van Buren County branch of Michigan State University Extension and K. John Egelhaaf, Executive Director of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

Representation was sought and included members from State government (state representative), County level government (commissioners, Administrator, department heads), Mayor or Managers from three Cities (Hartford, Paw Paw, South Haven), township government (supervisors), human services, education (intermediate school district, university dean, extension service), workforce development, and private business owners. The group was intended to provide input from a range of perspectives on how County government functions now and how it should function in the future.

Session one: The first session began with an overview of Van Buren County demographic and statistical information. The group was divided into nine smaller groups and asked to list general observations about the current situation within the County. These observations were not asked to be within specific themes, only a reflection of existing conditions. The next task assigned to the nine subgroups was to ask them to picture the County another ten years into the future. They were asked to list how they would like it to be. Next, the group performed an analysis of the gaps that reside between the existing conditions and the future they had envisioned. Finally, the last task in that first session was for the group to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for the County.

Session two: Session two included five expert presentations on important topic themes that were intended to inform the group. The topics included education, parks and recreation, land use planning, family and court, and economic development. The group was then split into five groups with each choosing their focal point to be one of the five

topic areas. For each topic, priority issues were agreed upon. Within each of those priority issues, suggestions for forward progress were made and obstructions were highlighted. Additionally, the existing conditions and the desired future situation for each priority issue were listed. Members rotated to each topic and provided their input.

Session three: The third session involved a survey where the most prominent themes raised in the previous two sessions were explored in order to understand how the group prioritized the various topic areas.

The findings: Findings of the steering committee have been consolidated (like responses combined together) and grouped into similar issue themes. These same issue themes have been used throughout this report to help clarify and organize the findings.

ROLES OF THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

For the purposes of the strategic planning process, the roles of the Van Buren County Board of Commissioners were consolidated into four essential categories: Advocate, Facilitator, Steward, and Funder. The purpose was to provide the Commission with guidance on a range of topics. The opinions of the strategic planning committee were polled using a survey that helped to clarify, quantify, and determine consensus on the primary issues of concern raised earlier in the process. Before the survey results are explained, the roles of the Board of Commissioners should be defined. The strategic planning committee was provided with definitions for each of the four roles which follow below.

Advocate: The role of advocate was defined by; “active support, especially the act of pleading or arguing for something.” Examples of advocacy included: speeches and attendance at special interest meetings.

Facilitator: The role of facilitator was defined as; “the act of assisting, or connecting parties, making easier the progress or improvement of something.” An example of facilitation included: joint meetings with representatives of local governments.

Steward: The role of steward was defined as; “the responsibility, care, or maintenance of a valued resource.” An example of stewardship included: passing an ordinance or law.

Funder: The role of funder was defined as; “the provision of money in support.” An example of how the role of funder would be manifested was: budgeting for an agency or administrative position.

PRIMARY ISSUE CATEGORIES

In much the same way that the roles of the Board of Commissioners were distilled into four categories, the concerns or issues raised by the strategic planning committee were consolidated into seven basic categories. Each of those categories was also defined for the purposes of the survey.

Economic Development: The effort to sustain and increase wealth and stability for a community through the facilitation of market-driven, public private partnerships that create long-term jobs, income, and improved quality of life.

Collaboration among Local Units of Government: Seizing opportunities to link local units of government with like needs and potentially complementary resources in order to improve efficiencies, lower costs, and increase service delivery.

Alternative Strategies for juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, etc: Techniques to lessen the likelihood or reoccurrence of debilitating personal and societal ills.

Land Planning: Directed research that allows a community to achieve its unique goals and objectives for the use and stewardship of its finite land-based resources.

Infrastructure: The framework of interdependent networks and systems that provide a reliable flow of essential products and services and the smooth functioning of government at all levels (including: utilities, public transportation, and county-wide high-speed internet access).

Family Services: Support in the form of programs, professional expertise, and general resources to address issues that are potentially debilitating to the family structure or the larger society (including: poverty support, food security, homelessness services/prevention).

Senior Issues: The effort to understand the impact and accommodate the needs of the 55⁺ year old age demographic. The County can expect explosive growth of that segment in the in the next 15-20 years.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Survey Results

In matters of economic development the survey showed that it should be the highest priority for the Board of Commissioners in their role as advocate and in their role as steward. In the role of facilitator, economic development was deemed the second highest priority only slightly behind the highest (collaboration with local governments). In the role of funder, economic development was the third highest priority also only slightly behind the second priority issue (alternative for juvenile delinquency & substance abuse).

Economic Development
Rank as Issue Priority

	Advocate	Facilitator	Steward	Funder
Economic Development	1st	2nd	1st	3rd

Economic Development Issues Raised by the Steering Committee

Water Resource Protection:

Water was seen by the group as an important resource for economic development. Many businesses that may choose to locate or remain in Van Buren County do so because of the supply of clean fresh water. Thus, water protection emerged as a significant issue.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Advocacy to State legislators to enforce and implement rules and regulations to protect supply & facilitate sustainable use
- Land use plans should strive to protect water quality
- Watershed management research and planning
- Advocate a user friendly system of water use and protection

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Bureaucracy of rules and regulations
- Lack of communication between agencies

Efficient Transportation:

A functional and efficient transportation system was seen as a necessary element to attract and retain business by moving workers to and from jobs and to move goods and services.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Conduct a countywide transportation study
- Study energy cost savings throughout the transportation network.
- Can we incorporate innovative ideas (like rent-a-bike)?
- Measure demand
- Incorporate transportation into a County comprehensive plan

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Cost of study and cost of changes to the transportation network
- Motivation to implement a transportation study
- Rural make up of the County, it's hard to serve rural areas with public transit and to provide adequate road maintenance
- Communication across the County
- Allocation of resources among other needs and priorities

Skilled Workforce:

Workforce development and the maintenance of a skilled workforce pool were identified as priorities for most employers.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Quality education
- Mentoring
- Partnerships between business & educators
- Drug court
- Drug enforcement

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Costs
- Motivation
- Accessibility of education opportunities
- Timing and availability
- Poverty
- Social issues
- Mental health

Support Services to Facilitate Development of Small & Medium Sized Businesses:

The range of support services and infrastructure to support modestly sized business was also identified as a concern for business attraction and retention.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Better internet/call services (i.e. broadband, over the power lines)
- Educational support services for small businesses
- Incubators
- Financial support services

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Costs
- Communication of services available
- Coordination of services

Current Conditions:

1. Lack of rail service is consistently identified as an impediment to manufacturing growth
2. No rail connections to South Haven
3. Transportation of workers is a problem to workplace
4. We do not have enough skilled workers to fill current demand
5. Drug use is a problem

COLLABORATION AMONG LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Survey Results

The survey found that collaboration among local governments was the highest priority for the Board of Commissioners in their role as facilitator. Collaboration among local governments was found to be the second highest priority for the Commissioners in their role as advocate, just slightly behind economic development. As a stewardship issue, collaboration among local governments was the fifth priority. Finally as funding priority, it was sixth out of seven of the issue groups.

Collaboration among Local Governments
Rank as Issue Priority

	Advocate	Facilitator	Steward	Funder
Collaboration Among Local Governments	2nd	1st	5th	6th

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES FOR JUVENILE DELINQUENCY, SUBSTANCE ABUSE, ETC.

Survey Results

Alternative Strategies for Juvenile Delinquency, Substance Abuse, and other similar programs were found to be the highest priority for the Commissioners in their role as facilitator. They were the third highest priority for advocacy. In the role of stewardship, it was polled as the fourth highest priority. As a funding priority, the issue was rated as the second highest.

Alternative Strategies for Juvenile Delinquency, Substance Abuse, etc.
Rank as Issue Priority

	Advocate	Facilitator	Steward	Funder
Alternatives for Juvenile Delinquency, Substance Abuse, etc.	3rd	3rd	4th	2nd

Alternative Strategies Issues Raised by the Steering Committee

Effective Technology:

The incorporation of technology was seen as an important opportunity to derive better results, better safety, and increase options.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- A video courtroom is cheaper than hiring new personnel
- Could be used to build capacity
- Fits the existing facility
- Accurate

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Loyalty to staff
- Unions
- Job security
- Unable to retrofit
- Still have to have transcription

Good Service to Residents:

The level and quality of service to the public was raised as an ongoing issue.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Improve education services
- Website information
- Press releases and public service announcements, notes in tax bills
- Happening now on a small scale

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Lack of knowledge
- Status quo State information
- No one is responsible
- No larger effort happening

Proactive not Reactive:

The committee noted that the history of the County has been to be less apt to be innovative than to merely respond to obligation and crisis.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Drug court initiative
- BARJ
- Mediation
- Truancy program

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Who will pay the cost if an important grant fails
- Criminal Justice System
- Lawyers, judges, community
- Schools are more apt to use programs only after a student is caught

Safety:

The safety of employees within the court system was a clear concern.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Critical incidents have occurred
- Improve communication throughout the facility
- Disseminate a plan for safety

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Too many sites and multiple entrances
- Lack of information in the community and for the Board of Commissioners

Current Conditions:

1. Multiple sites
2. Overlapping job tasks (duplication)
3. No security at several sites
4. Lack of current technology
5. Societal breakdown

Desired Future Situation:

1. State of the art facility that can meet future need
2. Fully implement unified court
3. More integration of County services with courts
4. Use alternative resources (BARJ-Mediation)

LAND PLANNING

Survey Results

The land planning issue group was the second highest priority in the Board of Commissioners role as a steward. It was the fourth highest priority within the area of both funding and facilitation. In the realm of advocacy, land planning ranked as the fifth priority (tied with infrastructure).

Land Planning
Rank as Issue Priority

	Advocate	Facilitator	Steward	Funder
Land Planning	5th (tie)	4th	2nd	4th

Land Planning Issues Raised by the Steering Committee

Unsustainable Development/Urban (“Rurban”) Sprawl:

Concerns were expressed that the existing practices of land development are not sustainable. The ongoing costs of development as it is currently practiced may prove too costly for the County to maintain (roads, public transit, etc.).

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Raise property taxes in rural VBCO
- Increase disincentives for development outside of areas with existing infrastructure
- Redevelop brownfields
- Seek outside funding from federal and state government
- Incentives for sustainable development
- Develop things that attract people and children (sports, activities, the arts...)
- Make more resources available to urban areas
- Be advocates for efficient development

- Education on the cost of unsustainable development
- Policymaking to encourage wise development – make the county a resource for wise development information and policy

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Reasons for development in rural VBCO
 - Less cost
 - More space
 - More privacy
 - The perception of more safety
 - Rural character/quality of life
- Reasons to not live in urban VBCO
 - Too much noise
 - Overcrowded
 - A perception of less safety
 - High taxes
 - Aging infrastructure
 - Ordinances, restrictions too plentiful
- It's complicated to redevelop brownfields

Connecting the County & Local Units Together for Common Planning Purposes:

The committee raised concerns that the quality of land use planning across the County is inconsistent. They noted that a higher level of connection between local units may lead to higher levels of proficiency in addressing land use issues.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Education of planning board members at all levels
- Wider exposure to local plans
- Consensus between County and local units on planning objectives
- Agreement on long range goals
- An environment of cooperation
- Skilled staff available- knowledgeable resources
- Highly organized process – synchronized, everyone on the same page
- Strong advocates for process

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Self interest within each level of government
- Lack of understanding of issues facing each local unit, larger issues facing the region etc.
- Narrow focus in time and geography
- Lack of financial resources, tendency to take the easy way out, short term solutions to long term problems
- Inefficient use of current resources
- Lack of communication/coordination
- Lack of an existing structure to accomplish the objective

Issues Identified:

1. Decentralized Land Use Planning – Water resources in particular (wetlands, watersheds)
2. Parks and Recreation – A common approach to linking parks and making them close to County users
3. Planning commission involved as a resource before an issue arises rather than after
4. Inefficient development (urban sprawl) – public transportation, infrastructure, cutting up of agricultural land

Current Conditions:

1. Townships are independent of one another and the county. This breeds inconsistencies and conflict
2. Parks and Recreation – not much on the east side, less than uniform coverage or quality of life across the county
3. Sprawl is beginning, but we have a good opportunity to manage it

Desired Future Situation:

1. County could be the facilitator to bring local units together on common land use issues
2. Cluster development incentives, density bonuses

INFRASTRUCTURE

Survey Results

In matters regarding infrastructure, the survey reflected that it should be the top priority for the Board of Commissioners in their role as a funder. The survey showed infrastructure to be the third highest priority for stewardship. It was shown to be the fifth highest priority for both advocacy and facilitation.

Infrastructure
Rank as Issue Priority

	Advocate	Facilitator	Steward	Funder
Infrastructure	5th (tie)	5th	3rd	1st

Infrastructure Issues Raised by the Steering Committee**Lack of Linkage Between Parks & Recreation and Economic****Development/Tourism:**

Parks and recreation were seen as an important County resource. The steering committee suggested that previously the County has not recognized that a strong parks and recreation network is an asset in recruiting and retaining business.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- The recognition that quality of life is a factor in business and residential location

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Funds not available or difficult to acquire
- Tough to measure the benefits of parks & recreation
- Lack of a master plan or master recreation plan

Countywide Parks & Recreation Plan:

The committee noted that the development of a countywide parks and recreation plan would be an important step in identifying opportunities and a strategy for capitalizing on them.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- North Pointe property has generated a renewed interest in parks & recreation across the County

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Cost of a plan would be greater than \$15,000

Issues Identified:

1. Master plan required but it costs money
2. Link between economic development planning and recreation/tourism
3. How developed do we want to get?
4. Coordinating existing recreation programs

Current Conditions:

1. No resolution to do a plan.
2. No funding for a department
3. Need a study of returns on investment for parks. What sort of a tool for economic development is a good parks system?

Desired Future Situation:

1. Have a department or parks board
2. Full time staff
3. Kal-Haven Trail/Van Buren Trail/North Pointe/Almena Area
4. School/education partnerships
5. Linkage to township/village/city parks
6. Would like to have a complete master plan with community support in place within two to three years

FAMILY SERVICES

Survey Results

The survey showed that family services ranked as the fourth highest priority for the Board of Commissioners in their role as advocate. In their role as funder the survey ranked family services as the fifth highest priority. It was the sixth highest priority for stewardship and for facilitation.

Family Services
Rank as Issue Priority

	Advocate	Facilitator	Steward	Funder
Family Services	4 th	6 th	6 th	5 th

Family Services Issues Raised by the Steering Committee

State & Federal Rules and Regulations Controlling Education:

The ability of the County to control its education system is limited by the rules established at the State and federal level. This was seen as a challenge by the committee.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Representation in Lansing Statehouse is strong
- Changing curriculum standards (changes have good and bad built in)

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Too many staff resources are going into a small pot with little impact on overall student success (the “small pot” was seen here as education for those with special needs)
- Not all students are the same or come from the same mold

Lack of Consistency in Education:

The level of quality in Van Buren County schools was identified by the committee as inconsistent.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- In certain areas we have great programs
- Willingness to partner and create programs
- Commitment to come together

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Funding is limited
- Space is limited
- Limited pool of instructors
- Limited time available

Unknown Educational Resources:

The committee observed that between various levels of business and education, there was not enough awareness of the programs and areas where they can collaborate.

Opportunities for mutual benefit between business and education exist that are not readily capitalized upon.

How can the County move forward on this topic?

- Develop partnership with business and industry
- Market programs and educational resources to community and business partners
- More agencies and citizens coming together

- Business coordinator can market educational offerings to business

What might hold the County back from progress on this issue?

- Costs, personnel, time

Current Conditions:

1. Need to take away the red tape-NCLB/High school standards, etc...there are too many
2. Lack of community awareness
3. Not recognized in the community

Desired Future Situation:

1. Need an advocate to change rules/regulations
2. County needs to be advocate/facilitator to get information to citizens

SENIOR ISSUES

Survey Results

Senior issues ranked as the seventh (lowest) priority in all four of the roles taken on by the Board of Commissioners.

Senior Issues
Rank as Issue Priority

	Advocate	Facilitator	Steward	Funder
Senior Issues	7th	7th	7th	7th

STRENGTH, WEAKNESS, OPPORTUNITY, & THREAT ANALYSIS OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT

The steering committee was invited to engage in an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to Van Buren County government. The results of that analysis have been divided into five categories: administration, budget issues, public interaction, infrastructure, and the structure/philosophy of government. The issues relating to government personnel management were grouped into the administration category. If the critique related to revenue, finances, or resources, it was grouped into the budget issues category. Matters relating to buildings, roads, and utilities fell into the infrastructure category. Public interaction issues were those relating to the way that citizens are able to access various facets of County government. The structure or philosophy of government category involved the overarching approach or mission objectives that determine priorities within government.

Committee responses that conflict with one another have been retained in this report. Examples of this duplicity include identified weaknesses such as; “not many citizens know what county government does-a need to let people know what county government does,” or “Board meetings not part of what the public ever sees-put the meetings on

TV/internet,” while an identified strength of Van Buren County government is; “Board is very accessible.” This sort of dichotomy deserves to remain in the final report because it is presumed to be a reflection of the observations of the general population. It can be inferred from them that the County still has work to do in order to address the underlying issue of successful public interaction.

Strengths in Van Buren County Government

Administration

1. Professional delivery of services
2. Dedicated, skilled employees and department heads
3. Highly qualified administrator, commissioners, department heads
4. Human resources – low turnover, high commitment, decentralized

Budget Issues

Fiscal house in, or getting in, order

Public Interaction

1. Board is very accessible.
2. County government is professional and open to the public.
3. County board of commissioners is accessible and open to look ahead to the future
4. Interested and involved citizens
5. Local talent and expertise

Structure/philosophy of VB County Government

1. No major city, but small local governments, so the County takes on a lot of responsibility to provide services that local units don't. Opportunities to consolidate services.
2. Desire to collaborate, cooperate with each other and across all units
3. Desire to improve
4. Moving closer to local units of government
5. Cooperation between judges, prosecutor, sheriff to handle jail population
6. Good, capable leadership
7. Committed to improving quality of life
8. Open to input
9. Brain power is at hand
10. A willingness to go forward
11. Government can act as a service umbrella organization to provide services countywide that local units of government cannot provide-this is efficient
12. History to draw upon
13. Location
14. Youth with new ideas

Weaknesses in Van Buren County Government

Administration

1. Barriers through small departments taking in money, processing money office hours are bad, phone system is bad, little economy of scale
2. Employees duplicate effort
3. 19th century system for a 21st century population
4. Union contracts can make personnel changes difficult
5. Turfism between departments
6. Inconsistent policies & practices. Need to streamline services to our citizens and to ensure quality customer service.
7. Too many small departments

Budget Issues

1. Financial condition is tied to the state
2. Decreased revenue from state & property taxes means we budget with less money

Infrastructure

County building is not very people friendly, doors are all blank and foreboding

1. Decentralized facilities, can technology help bridge that gap?
2. Older buildings and equipment
3. 19th century structure for 21st century population.
4. Old technology (computers, payment systems, online services, credit card acceptance, etc)
5. Space inadequacies

Public Interaction

1. Lack policies and practices to insure quality control for services to public
2. Not many citizens know what county government does-a need to let people know what county government does
3. Board meetings not part of what the public ever sees-put the meetings on TV/internet
4. Communication with citizens – make people aware of what their tax dollars are buying
5. People need more from government
6. Public relations are a weakness

Structure/philosophy of VB County Government

1. The structure of townships, etc is antiquated
2. Large geography to cover (harder to communicate across boards/departments/staff)
3. Too much emphasis on low bid
4. Too accepting of what is or isn't the role of the County in social, human, or economic development roles
5. State/county/township form of government duplicates efforts, wastes time and money and has too much red tape
6. Decentralized government and services and duplication of effort
7. A primary focus on police and roads

8. Lack of follow through
9. Many very small communities that do not have resources to provide services on a local basis
10. County structure creates individual “fiefdoms”
11. Fragmented efforts – changes in direction

Opportunities for Van Buren County Government

Administration

1. Expanded coordination/collaboration for such things as health insurance, training, purchases, multi-jurisdictional projects, purchasing, facilities, etc.
2. Coordinate services
3. Continuing education – invest in our employees (this is a weakness now)

Budget Issues

Identify true needs, priorities, facilities, and attach a cost to them. Increase collectable property taxes by vote of public.

Public Interaction

1. Willingness to include more than just direct county government people in strategic planning
2. Communicate better w/less

Structure/philosophy of VB County Government

1. Commitment to the future, willing to step out and blaze a trail
2. Public transit system in its infancy-innovation is coming and this might be key
3. Fully integrate units of government-schools, etc into overall economic development scheme. Employable jobs base.
4. How will immigration laws impact the county? County will need to take the lead
5. Lead the way
6. Capitalizing on the strength, knowledge, abilities of diverse group of community leaders
7. Geographical location of the county
8. Good time to do strategic planning as generally there are good relations among all
9. Consolidate and build green, low impact development – advertise and promote itself
10. Welcome to look at the future.
11. Look at all policies in county government
12. Intergovernmental cooperation
13. Preservation of farmland and water resources for future generations
14. Planned development
15. Economic environment better than the State’s
16. Work better together – become more efficient
17. Need for change and new direction

18. Big resource base

Threats to Van Buren County Government

Administration

Building security very low

Budget Issues

1. Declining property values = less revenue which will restrict our ability to deliver quality services
2. Health care costs/increases
3. Unfunded mandates
4. Failure to act on opportunities because we think we can't afford to.
5. Legacy costs
6. Financing-investment versus budget balancing

Public Interaction

1. Older population not willing to be active in government
2. Citizen resistance

Structure/philosophy of VB County Government

1. Territorial thinking
2. May run into "anti-change" attitude
3. We must debate whether certain services are the county's roll or not
4. A crazy world
5. County government will refuse to change or will not even entertain change due to the legacy systems and "the way we do business" paradigm.
6. Failure to have a clear vision for all to follow
7. Infighting and a lack of cooperation
8. Politics & micromanagement
9. Complacency
10. Implementation – all talk
11. Fear of change and fear of the unknown or failure

APPENDIX A

Strategic Planning Steering Committee Members and their Affiliations

Yemi	Akinwale	Hartford, City Manager
Dorothy	Appleyard	South Haven, Mayor
Lynn	Bullard	VBC Friend of the Court
Douglas	Cultra	VBC Administrator
Tony	Dacoba	VBC Public Transit
Jeff	Elliott	VBC Public Health Department
Tom	Erdmann	VBC Commissioner
Art	Fenrick	SMCAA/Executive Director
Dave	Foerster	Citizen
Dick	Freestone	VBC Commissioner
Dale	Gribler	VBC Sheriff
Shafeeq	Hameed	VBC Computer Information Services
Susan	Hammond	VBC Commissioner
Wayne	Hammond	VBC Facilities Maintenance
Paul	Hamre	VBC Circuit Court Judge
Don	Hanson	VBC Commissioner
Debbie	Hess	VBC Mental Health Department
Larry	Hummel	VBC Road Commission
Lori	Jerue	VBC Department of Human Services
Juris	Kaps	VBC Prosecuting Attorney
Tina	Leary	VBC Clerk
Joe	Leary	VBC Court Director
Karen	Makay	VBC Treasurer
Jack	McCloughan	City of South Haven
Kathy	Miller	VBDHS
Jeff	Mills	VB Intermediate School District
Carole	Motycka	VBC Register of Deeds
Larry	Nielsen	Paw Paw, Village Manager
Joe	Parman	VBC Drain Commissioner
Lisa	Phillips	Business Owner
Julie	Pioch	MSU Extension
Chris	Randall	VBC Commissioner
Jim	Ray	VBC Commissioner
Arnie	Redsicker	Lovejoy-Inc/BCVB MichiganWorks!
Tom	Richardson	VB Intermediate School District
Dan	Ruzick	Antwerp Township, Supervisor

Mark	Savage	Business Owner
Tonya	Schuitmaker	State Representative 80
Twyla	Smith	SW MI Community Action Agency
Douglas	Stiles	Almena Township, Supervisor
Ted	Thar	VBC Planning and GIS
Mike	Toth	VBC Commissioner
Ed	VanderVries	VBC Equalization/Economic Development
Janice	Varney	Executive Dean Lake Michigan College

APPENDIX B

Existing Conditions in Van Buren County

The attendees were asked to list observations about the existing conditions in Van Buren County. The attendees were separated into smaller sized groups to facilitate more discussion. Each group's response is listed below.

Economy

1. Tourist destination
2. Strong agriculture, tourism base
3. Service economy especially tourism based industry
4. Decreasing property values
5. On cusp of economic prosperity; some exciting developments in the County
6. Weakness in central business core of the County
7. Dependant on Kalamazoo County marketplace
8. Two extremes – haves and have nots

Education

1. ISD is an asset
2. School systems are good
3. Disconnect between business and education (policy)
4. Undereducated adults
5. Educational benefits (LMS, MSUE, ESD)
6. Schools & human service cooperation
7. Low education level/income
8. Income versus education a direct correlation
9. Connection between jail time and drop-outs
10. Good basic technological education at the ISD
11. Largest summer migrant school in the state

Government

1. Good communication between governmental units
2. Need to dispel the placement of county seat argument
3. Need a better sense of working together- need to work cohesive as a “group” for the betterment of whole county-not only the separate units
4. Strong human service collaborative
5. Bedroom communities receive fewer services
6. Need to improve collaboration
7. Some outdated facilities at the county level
8. Excellent human service agencies

Infrastructure

1. Electric Power block (nuclear, gas)
2. No centralized park system (park authority, board)
3. Aging infrastructure (lack of broad band)
4. Power plant
5. Recreation opportunities lakes, parks, trails
6. Outstanding recreation opportunities
7. Lack communication technology

Land Use

1. Abundant natural resources
2. Loss of agricultural land (to development)
3. Sensitive environmental areas
4. Lack of zoning and land use planning, not enough consistency, not prepared for influx
5. Tension between commercial and residential “development” and community character
6. Mindset that says do it on the cheap without regard for quality

Transportation

1. County public transportation millage support
2. Two interstate highways bring goods services & access
3. Improving public transportation system
4. Limited public transportation choices
5. Good roads, infrastructure

Workforce

1. +65 year old population educated workforce is underutilized
4. Strong agricultural workforce
5. People – good work values
6. Uneducated workforce pool
7. Workforce barriers (substance abuse)
8. Low wages predominant
9. Workforce barriers, transportation, substance abuse
10. Rapidly growing Hispanic population

Youth

1. Too many young people leaving, not enough professional jobs
2. Juvenile delinquency (too high cost)
3. Not investing in youth

General

1. A great place to live and work and play
2. Active community involvement
3. Lake Michigan and associated benefits
4. West side /east side division
5. Migrant residential conversion
6. Rural quality
7. Growing second home bedroom communities
8. Changing population
9. High quality of life
10. Good food, water, natural resources
11. Safe
12. Poverty spread out
13. Willingness to change
14. Collaborative/cooperative
15. Lots of uninsured/underinsured
16. Great historical assets
17. Good water supply
18. Stuck in transition between old & new
19. Trying to figure out County identity

APPENDIX C

Future Vision

The attendees were then asked to picture Van Buren County in 2018 and list what evolution they would like to see. Those responses are listed below.

Economy

1. Convention centers
2. More hotels
3. Alternative energy
4. Increase in value added jobs to benefit agricultural related businesses
5. Promote local agriculture products
6. Promote entrepreneurial growth
7. #1 in agricultural production and processing
8. Motion picture industry-move to VBC
9. Disneyworld on Lake Michigan
10. Cruise Ships in South Haven
11. Mall of VBC
12. Ample economic opportunities. Reduced poverty increased income levels, young people stay/return
13. Agricultural resources retained/expanded
14. Gap between haves & have nots reduced
15. Hotbed of entrepreneurial activity
16. Diversified economic opportunities
17. Well paying, rewarding jobs
18. Increase economic growth-diversity business growth (ACG)
19. Property values reflect our healthy economy and environment
20. Communities are prepared and equipped to assist small businesses and entrepreneurs

Education

1. ISD expand to include 2yr degree program
2. Stronger high education opportunities KUCC partnership
3. ISD technical educational offerings quintuple
4. ISD facilities used to 100% capacity
5. Educational assets maximized
6. TV does educational channel available for all
7. Bridge digital divide for all ages
8. Employers use NCRC (career resources)
9. Increase school quality
10. Centralized educational system, 521 school districts to 83
11. Education and information is tailored to an individual's needs (content, method, delivery style)

Government

1. Court system security
2. Regional detention for sentenced inmates (tri-county)
3. Combined 911 center with Cass County
4. Combined central governmental services
5. County park authority
6. State fees not generated on the backs of people that can't afford it
7. Uniform tax, flat tax, tax reform
8. County solves long-term facility needs
9. Human service agencies are proactive not just reactive or crisis oriented
10. Bridged communication gap between local and County government
11. Centralized County government – services, consolidated, township government
12. County government is efficient and responsive

Infrastructure

1. Long term facility needs met
2. High speed internet
3. Sewer where needed to protect lakes & planning for development on water bodies
4. Free Countywide broadband
5. Green industries, energy, methane dig, nuclear-no waste.
6. Highspeed/broadband/WIFI available throughout
7. Comprehensive park recreation system for youth, families & tourists
8. Strong marketable infrastructure - transportation, power, tech, communication
9. Additional power plants
10. Complete telecommunication system: computers, TV, radio, telephone, i-pod, etc
11. Developed County properties with all infrastructure, zoning, etc, to encourage attract industrial growth
12. People have a clear understanding of their impact on clean water and support infrastructure upgrades

Land Use

1. Improved and more coordinated planning
2. Continue development along major transportation corridor
3. Promote sustainable development – energy efficiency, design, environment, etc.
4. Sensitive natural resources protected
5. Participatory and coordinated land use planning throughout County
6. County brownfield sites redeveloped
7. Less urban sprawl/well planned community growth
8. Preservation of natural assets: preservation of lakes/rivers
9. Agricultural land conservation

Transportation

1. Improved rail system
2. Total & complete free transportation
3. Accessible efficient economical countywide transportation.
4. High speed – French style passenger train connection

Workforce

1. Disband workforce dev – “0” unemployment
2. Well trained workforce

Youth

1. Holistic approach to reduce juvenile delinquents through partnerships – courts, law enforcement, schools, SSA
2. Free k-16 education
3. Educational levels rise, income levels rise
4. Every child 0-5 loved and nurtured and given essential tools for healthy development
5. Juvenile delinquency/crime reduced, no need for new jail
6. Zero drop out rate
7. Alternative educational/training opportunities for at-risk youth
8. Communities are prepared and equipped to develop young people into healthy, productive adults

General

1. Stronger family base
2. Promote local communities and activity
3. Cultural and intellectual opportunities
4. Sell VBC to regional partnerships
5. Growing Hispanic population involved in all communities
6. Suicide rate lowered, citizens educated on mental health first aid
7. Access to safe affordable housing for all
8. Health care accessible for all (first class health care)
9. Substance abuse lowered
10. Low crime rate
11. Adequate, well maintained public housing
12. Opportunity for residents: jobs, affordable housing, quality health care, transportation
13. Today’s migrants will be “us”-how will we adjust?
14. Retiree based population – medical, housing, transportation, recreation, income
15. Organized implemented countywide housing standard (code)
16. All families are healthy and functional

APPENDIX D

Gap Analysis

Between where the County is now and where the group would like to see it in 2018 are gaps. They were asked to identify the gaps or to attempt to identify where the County should be focused in order to progress toward their vision for 2018. The gaps were identified and have been consolidated into general categories below.

Economy

1. Economic development through retention and attraction and growth of new entrepreneurs
2. Entrepreneurial business development-help to preserve agricultural product development
3. Future agricultural products
4. Bio fuels
5. Methane use

Education

1. Technical jobs and ISD to provide job skill training
2. Redesign educational delivery system-making it countywide (k-16 seamless system) education
3. Attraction of colleges/universities
4. Internet schooling and decreased bus travel
5. Maintenance & attraction of colleges/universities

Government

1. Stronger regional collaboration amongst governmental bodies/educational institutions, etc.
2. Champions and leaders that are accountable in strategic planning, etc
3. County government performance
 - b. Great cooperation among elected officials and appointed officials, resourcefulness too.
 - c. Retirement of some officials
 - d. Too much duplication of services, tasks, and employees – a shared services coordinated government may prove to be more economical/efficient.
 - e. All areas in Van Buren County seem to be willing and wanting to cooperate as much as asked. A formal consolidation of effort is needed.
 - f. Increase staff
 - g. Training for improved performance and efficiency (poorly trained therefore poor or inefficient service
 - h. Communication and interoperability between agencies/departments
 - i. Leaders willing to listen

4. County government finances
 - a. Limited finances tied to economy and state reductions
 - b. MERS retirement, using social security, US government national healthcare would reduce County budget
 - c. 911 funding
 - d. Fees
 - e. Largest threat to VBCO is the limitation of its budget
 - f. Tax increases from Washington & Lansing – may erode support for local millages (revenue cuts also limit government programs)
5. Flat sales tax to eliminate income & manufacturing taxes - decrease manufacturing costs
 - b. 10 cent sales tax could eliminate income and business taxes.

Infrastructure

1. Park authority creation-park system for tourism
2. Infrastructure improvement
3. Communication infrastructure-improving high speed internet, etc

Land Use

1. Coordinated comprehensive planning
2. Integration of townships in a shared planning language
3. Ongoing strategic planning & implementation
4. Ability to look forward and plan for future issues to minimize their impact.
5. Protection of natural resources
6. Low impact development
7. Sustainable building & design-build things that last (social structures that last too)

Transportation

Software to improve scheduling of public transportation available to all

Workforce

Retired worker program-educational programs to help them continue to work in the community

Youth

Engage youth in the community - Mentoring or coaching youth-local business, retired workers, etc

General

1. Larger conference center
2. Aging population
3. Integration of exploding technology-extremely fast rate of change
4. Address poverty and family services
5. Substance abuse and suicide prevention plan
6. Jail overcrowding, tethers