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TOP STORY

## Will Twin Cities harbor plan float?

Consultant sees tremendous potential, though government cooperation will be crucial

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer Oct 16, 2019

BENTON HARBOR — There is a great opportunity for the Twin Cities to catch a wave of growth along its waterfront over the next 20 years, according to a consultant who has been studying the issue for several months.

“You have a tremendous resource right in your backyard,” commented Don Carpenter, with Drummond Carpenter, conducting the final community discussion on the harbor plans at Kinexus in Benton Harbor on Tuesday.

The Twin Cities Harbor Sustainability Initiative, encompassing Benton Harbor, St. Joseph and St. Joseph Township, has been put together over the last 15 months with public gatherings, focus groups, meetings with government officials and other efforts to collect ideas for the waterfront. It is sponsored by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy’s Office of the Great Lakes in partnership with Michigan Sea Grant, Lawrence Technological University, the Harbor Conservancy and other groups.

The harbor is extremely important to the region, bringing in \$20 million a year from recreational boating and generating \$250 million in income from commercial shipping of construction and road materials, Carpenter said. Both can and need to co-exist, he added.

Comments from residents identified “potential” as a key description of the asset, but found current planning as “divided” and “disjointed.”

The study area took in 728 acres within a quarter-mile radius of the waterfront and harbors, and did not include downtown St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, where separate planning is taking place.

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 the LaFarge silos on the north side of the river.

The vision for Riverview Drive includes a Market Shed with business incubator and retail space for young entrepreneurs; a trailside brew pub; a sidewalk or boardwalk along the river for walking and fishing; and a connecting trail to the canal. At the far end of Riverview, drawings show a multi-purpose green space for sports, festivals and a cultural center.

On Marina Island the residents and planners included condominiums, a natural area for fishing and piers to promote eco-tourism.

For Fisherman's Wharf, across from Marina Island, drawings showed trails and a pedestrian bridge, and locations for seasonal waterfront businesses, such as a kayak launch. Showing photos of downtown Muskegon, Carpenter said this type of development has been "extremely successful" there.

Popular recommendations for the courthouse location include an underground parking garage, topped with levels for retail and residential space. The green space slopes with an amphitheater leading to the river. A seasonal market, and a harborfront hotel and restaurant are considered for current commercial dock space. A marina and boat house were suggested for the outer harbor.

People could get around using a trolley and water taxis, Carpenter said, and street plans call for 10-foot wide, protected bike lanes.

The biggest plus is the "tremendous opportunity," the consultant said. The biggest challenge, he offered, is getting government cooperation. This is their only project with three municipalities involved, he said.

Working together will benefit everyone, Carpenter said. "A rising tide raises all boats."

The next step will be to present the finalized plan to those government leaders, who will then decide how to move forward.

"None of this is written in stone," and much of it will be market-driven, Carpenter said.

Attending the first of two community sessions, Sodus Township resident Tony Benhart pointed out that the plan does not include any manufacturing jobs that he said are needed to sustain the local economy.

John Egelhaaf, director of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, said his agency, Cornerstone Alliance and others are working on regional job planning which includes looking for suitable sites for industry. The waterfront is not the right place for such development, but the employees might live along the harbor, he said.

Another resident commented that light rail is needed to get people to jobs, homes and attractions. Egelhaaf responded that rail is too expensive for this area, but acknowledged that better public transportation is needed and is being studied.

Jeff Noel, Whirlpool Corp. executive and president of Harbor Shores, said he sees the plan as being “about what, and not about how,” which will come in the future.

If nothing else, the harbor plan will be “a call to action,” Noel said.

Detailsof the harbor plan are at [www.sustainablemallharbors.org/communities/st-joseph-benton-harbor](http://www.sustainablemallharbors.org/communities/st-joseph-benton-harbor).

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