

West Michigan Region Four Prosperity Initiative Steering Committee meets in Ludington

By STEVE BEGNOCHE | Managing Editor | sbegnoche@ludingtondailynews.com | Posted: Friday, May 30, 2014 12:13 pm

Working to determine five projects that would benefit the entire region

Members of the West Michigan Region Four Prosperity Initiative Steering Committee met in Ludington Thursday learning first hand about what Mason County brings to the 13 county regional group that is seeking to identify five potential projects to benefit west Michigan as a region.

The effort arose out of “Regional Prosperity Initiative” Gov. Rick Snyder announced Aug. 12, 2013 that made \$2.5 million available for potential grants through existing planning organizations in 10 regions identified by the state.

According to John Weiss, chairman of the steering committee being spearheaded by the Grand Valley Metropolitan Council of which he is executive director, this 13-county region was awarded a \$250,000 grant to see what “big idea” projects it could devise to help the entire region.

It’s a tall order since the 13 counties include communities stretching from Ludington to Hastings. Some regions, he noted, are made up of only three counties.

That said, West Michigan Regional Prosperity Alliance, serves an area with about 1.5 million people and 345 governmental units.

“Could we work together to take down boundaries and borders?” Weiss said was a consideration.

The group has been meeting around the region so members get to know the region and each other.

About 35 people, including at least a dozen or more Mason County business and community representatives, attended Thursday’s session at Harbor View Marina.

“It is really cool that we could get a group of people like this together,” Weiss said.

For the regional effort to succeed, he said all will have to work together and to trust one another. Part of trusting, he said, is getting to know each other.

During the hour or so formal meeting that followed an informal box lunch, the committee members discussed the process being created to review potential projects already being proposed from throughout the area.

A key requirement, attendees were told, is a potential project should have the potential to benefit the entire region, not just a local community.

Committee member Dave Bee, director of the West Michigan Regional Planning Commission, reviewed

county has to offer in terms of:

- County assets — a deep water port, three industrial parks, rail access, freeway, regional airport, cross-lake carferry service, Ludington Pumped Storage Plant and Lake Winds Energy Park.
- Cultural assets — Port of Ludington Maritime Museum opening soon, WSCC Performing Arts Series, Ludington Area Center for the Arts, Sandcastles Children’s Museum. Historic White Pine Village, Western Michigan Old Engine Club, SS Badger, two lighthouses, Waterfront sculpture park, Barn Quilt Trail and Scottville Riverside Park.
- Natural assets including Lake Michigan, Nordhouse Dunes Wilderness Area, Pere Marquette River, Manistee National Forest, Hamlin Lake and Ludington State Park.
- Tourism — eight miles of public beach, Ludington State Park, a top salmon port, more than 1,200 lodging units with a convention and visitors bureau budget of \$525,000 generated from room taxes.
- A multitude of community events
- Economic development projects such as the \$800 million upgrade to Ludington Pumped Storage Plant now under way., The \$235 million Lake Winds Energy Park, the \$14.7 million renovation of the Ludington Hospital now part of Spectrum Health. and the projected \$300,000 development project at the west end of Ludington Avenue
- Downtown revitalization in Ludington and Scottville
- More than 450 farms and 76,446 acres of great diversity of crops.
- And manufacturing

In addition they noted major employers, globally competitive companies, education and workforce development entities and a high level of community collaboration.

“We have great cooperation in our county,” Maclean said. “We work well together..”

Now, that same spirit of cooperation is being asked to be extended to a 13-county region area.