



Economic Development Strategic Plan Version 2.0

Amended December 9, 2014

“The Economic Development Committee shall create a unified vision promoting the unique Lake County resources including historical, natural and cultural amenities that enhance the capacity of the local economy”

December 2014

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“The development of this Economic Development Plan would not have been possible without the engaged participation of citizens from all corners of Lake County. Their common sense insights and local knowledge were invaluable during the 12 months process creating this plan of action.”

Barb Stenger, Chairperson of the Economic Development Strategic Plan Subcommittee

The Lake County Economic Development Strategic Plan Subcommittee

Matt (Carrie) Bearup
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Sandy Clarke, 1st District
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 John Fairbanks 5th District
 Karl D. Walls 7th District

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 Barbara Stenger 4th District
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Overview-Process History

Unique. During a unique planning process to develop an Economic Development Strategic Plan, the word was used over and over again. Unique citizens of Lake County hungry for direction, hungry for action and implementable pathways forward propelling the economic interest differently than those tried before.

We started a dialogue on Friday, November 22, 2013 at the Lake County Business Development Center. A gathering of a couple of County Commissioners and citizens who extended an invitation to The Right Place, Inc. to “help with economic development.” A unique meeting because it was a posted meeting complying with the Open Meetings Act on a cold, damp Friday afternoon. The posting was not necessary, but the tone was “openness” and a welcome to a stranger from Grand Rapids. Within 15 minutes of meeting this unique gathering of citizens my head was spinning with ideas and out of my mouth flowed directives! “I recommend you not hire an economic developer” and “you are not ready to hire staff” and “you first need an economic strategic plan.” I left Baldwin 2 and a half hours later thinking they really want to do something unique or they might instead have been so offended that they will never ask me back again.

On Monday morning a phone message from Commissioner Barb Stenger suggested a desire to meet again soon and to chart out a course of action.

A Wednesday, January 22 meeting of the Lake County Board of Commissioners formally set into action efforts to develop an economic development strategic plan. After consultant-business mentor Bill Johnson and I were introduced, we opined again the need for a strategic plan and The Board without hesitation, created an “Economic Development Committee” comprised of 3 County Commissioners. Uniquely, three tasks were envisioned to drive forward the economic interest of the County. First, create a strategic plan and do so with a committee of citizens representing a variety of interests from around the entire county. Second, create another committee who would work on the creation of a new organization to implement the strategic plan. Third, complete a business directory profiling the business assets within the county and who could directly benefit from economic growth.

Thus enabled, the three initiatives commenced with a goal of completion by the end of the year. The efforts were to be public, engaging of citizen and business interests, countywide in focus and actionable. We were tasked with responsibilities that had to be real, make a difference and not become another plan that would sit on a shelf.

If these citizens are emboldened to do economic development business different than in the past, then by God, I remember telling myself, then I too representing a regional economic development organization must approach this unique collaboration differently. I reached out to Ms. Erin Kuhn, Executive Director of the West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission to co-facilitate the strategic plan development process---a challenge she relished without an ounce of hesitation.

Erin and I met with Commissioner Barb Stenger (our County Commissioner liaison and spirited director for the preparation of the Strategic Plan) on March 4, outlined a calendar of 6 meetings and more importantly, commenced with a warm and meaningful relationship destined to create good things---- including an economic development strategic plan. An advisory committee of citizens (acknowledged in the front of the Strategic Plan) was appointed by the County Board over the next couple of months and then, we commenced together to create a county-wide economic development strategic plan.

We committed that the meetings would be public, transparent, minutes would be prepared, posted and distributed countywide. Nobody would be denied participation but the bulk of ideas generated for the plan came from the Advisory Committee members. To emphasize openness and a countywide scope of effort we assembled and deliberated in the following locations.

Irons	July 10
Idelwild	July 24
Luther	August 10
Lake Twp.	August 25
Chase Twp.	September 11
Baldwin	September 25

Erin and I facilitated these “thinking sessions” with ideas flowing forth like a volcano spewing forth heat, energy and intensity never felt before—a very impressive and creative openness. We too, left every meeting energized and in awe of the uniqueness, sincerity and determination of the community meeting participants to achieve a attain a different course of action for Lake County’s economic development efforts.

Delivered and described within this document are the ideas of the Advisory Committee and citizens who participated freely in the meetings. The charge of Erin and I has been to craft those ideas into a plan of action, not another “plan” that eventually fades away because of a lack of interest. Ultimately, it becomes the job of anyone who reads this document to implement the called for actions. You must commit to a sustained process to review and update the plan annually. It is your responsibility (elaborated in more detail in the “Governance” section) to hold each other accountable and to allocate the financial resources advancing the success and sustainability of effort for this economic development strategic plan.

We are proud to have been a part of your effort and look forward to watching your leadership, learning from your successes and welcoming of your emergence as a County of Economic Excellence!

Erin Kuhn, Executive Director, West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission
Rick Chapla, Vice President, Business Development, The Right Place, Inc.

Strategic Plan Definition and Rationale

So, what is a Strategic Plan and why does Lake County need a Strategic Plan for Economic Development? A Strategic Plan or strategic planning is a process of defining an organization's vision and direction, as well as identifying the potential resources to implement the strategy.

Lake County with a population of approximately 11,500 is one of the poorest counties in the State of Michigan. Historically, the county has left any economic development efforts to individual organizations and/or communities within the area. However, don't let these facts and figures be misleading. Lake County has much to offer in the way of economic development including its people, passion, natural resources, historic attributes, and proximity to metropolitan areas just to name a few. All of these features along with many others come together to create the uniqueness of Lake County.

The timing was right in Lake County for the development of a Strategic Economic Development Plan that will define a clear direction for the county as a whole. Initial enthusiasm for planned economic development was accomplished by direct outreach to the public throughout the county with four community hearings in 2013. In 2014, Citizens from every corner of the county came together to provide their input for the strategic plan and define just how Lake County is unique! This direction will meet two very important needs within the county: 1) it will provide guidance for current and future leaders within the county, and 2) it will share the Lake County vision with the rest of West Michigan, and the entire State.

The Stewardship of the Natural Environment

It is all about the physical environment. Lake County is an amazing place within the region and the State of Michigan with its 156 lakes and 46 rivers and streams, the quality of many being such that they attract persons from around the world to fish and recreate. The Advisory Committee wisely recognized that Lake County's forest land and water are its number one resource. With it goes a unique responsibility of stewardship that must be exercised by residents, business interests, recreationalist and elected officials if this resource is to be protected, enhanced and become the foundation of economic development. For the most part, the following strategies were identified by the Advisory Committee.

1. Protection and enhancement strategies should be developed for all lakes, streams and rivers and sources of ground and surface waters that contribute to the 156 lakes and the 46 rivers and streams.
2. Education institutions like Michigan State University and Hillsdale College (who has land ownership in the County), should be enlisted to help with the development of management plans and the financial and technical resources to prepare such plans.
3. Threats to the unique quality of all water bodies should be a high priority to address. For example, failing or failed septic systems no matter how small should not be ignored.
4. Complementing addressing septic systems could be municipal or association operated collection and treatment systems where a critical mass of waste generators is present. Examples could be around and adjacent to surface water bodies like Big Star Lake.
5. Promote the creation of lake management associations beyond the 10 or so that exist within the County. The Big Star Lake Association is a very good "best practices" example and has staff assets that have been offered to help form other such organizations within the county. This form of self governance alternative to traditional government might be a preferred alternative to an expanded township or county government role.

6. The expanded use of conservation easements can be an effective tool for protecting not only unique land environments, but also the bodies of water these lands adjoin. For example, the Land Conservancy of West Michigan has worked with several properties owners especially along the world class Pere Marquette River to protect the woods and waters through easements requiring low growth or no development for generations to come. In fact some 6.26 miles of the PM Watershed is protected (11 projects) because of the collaborative efforts of the PM Watershed Council and the Land Conservancy of West Michigan.
7. The County Brownfield Plan should be revisited and updated periodically and as necessary for the potential of state and federal funding assistance. Threats to the environment should be prioritized and actions taken to eliminate or alleviate these sites, parcels or tracts of land that ultimately will impact water quality somewhere. For example, underground storage tanks use for storage of petroleum products should be inventoried and condition assessments performed be they used for residential or business purposes.

Infrastructure

As always, infrastructure is vital to any economic development vision or effort. The stakeholders in Lake County understand this issue and have clear ideas regarding the infrastructure needs within the county. These needs not only include the traditional water, roads, and sewer; but also broadband internet accessibility, affordable private utilities, the potential of alternative energy, and the asset of a local airport. Listed below are the proposed strategies:

1. The availability of municipal water and sewer in Lake County is limited and located mostly near the Village of Baldwin, Idelwild and parts of Webber Township. However, in order to maintain water quality and recreation assets near and adjacent to the 156 lakes located throughout the county, the extension of water and/or sewer to these areas in an affordable manner is vital. In addition, new or expanding business should be encouraged to local where water and sewer is accessible. And where possible, water and sewer should be expanded to existing businesses to aid in their maintenance and expansion efforts.
2. Broadband internet accessibility and affordability is one of the highest priorities in Lake County. The county recently began an initiative through Connect Michigan to assess current availability of broadband internet service within the county, as well as identify a strategy to increase access, and eventually become a certified broadband community.
3. The cost of energy through private utilities such as propane and electric can become cost prohibitive barriers for business attraction efforts especially manufacturers who prefer natural gas. Therefore, there is a need to work with private utilities within the region to promote cost saving energy solutions and alternatives. Great Lakes Energy is already a cost effective provider who should be enlisted for greater economic development partnering initiatives.
4. Seek out energy business opportunities within Lake County especially where wood can be used as a feedstock. This is not to suggest that existing propane selling businesses should go away, but rather how might a variety of energy production choices be enhanced.

Recreation/Assets

Lake County’s outdoor recreational assets are amazing. The county boasts 156 inland lakes, 46 rivers and streams, thousands of acres of state and national forest lands, and mile upon mile of hiking, biking, ORV, water, motorized, and non-motorized trails. The county is interested in implementing activities that will bring addition tourist traffic to Lake County.

1. Promote the vast variety and numerous trails located throughout the county. Embrace the state’s initiative to promote Michigan as a “Trail State” and seek to become a state designated Trail Town. Adopt and promote the tag line: “All Trails Lead to Lake County”.
2. Lake County has much to offer for year-round recreation. Promote the many opportunities in Lake County for year-round recreation and identify opportunities for “visitor packaging”—experiences where visitors intersect and interact with woods and water resources.
3. In order to promote the recreational opportunities within the county, community stakeholders felt it necessary to develop a county-wide travel guide in paper and electronic forms. These guides can and should be used for promotional efforts both inside and outside the county.
4. Through local connections with leaders in the video game industry, an effort has begun to develop and video game that features the trails and recreational opportunities in Lake County. Local stakeholders felt it essential to support this effort through promotional and fundraising activities.
5. Work to coordinate with and assist in the implementation efforts of the recently passed Lake County Recreation Plan. The Lake County Strategic Economic Development Plan and the Lake County Recreation Plan should complement each other, and implementation efforts should be coordinated.
6. Acknowledge the National Historic Designation of Idlewild along with its multiple resources and ensure that cultural, historic and physical planning be facilitated by professionals experienced in historic cultural and community planning.

Messaging, Marketing and Outreach (MMO)

The stakeholders of Lake County have many reasons to be proud and optimistic about the future especially if new orders of collaboration are created and practiced. No one organization has enough human or financial resources alone to effectively tell the great story of Lake County's unique assets. No one existing organization alone can message, market or reach out to the rest of the world and attract them to share, protect and enhance the county's bountiful natural resources. Word of mouth is very effective but those talking also need a common messaging framework especially for interests who have no clue about Lake County or have never visited. At the beginning and at the end, Lake County is open for business but its' stakeholders can do much more to attract others to visit, spend money, invest in or relocate or start up business ventures. Strategies include:

1. Agreeing to create one countywide in focus economic development 501.c.3 type organization that should become the primary coordinator of Lake County promotion of tourism and economic assets. Eventually, this organizational approach should lead to common language speak, create a common look for various websites that are linked to each other and begin to standardize printed marketing materials regardless of the community or organization in Lake County. The outcome should be the creation of common platforms that permits one, countywide look, but can provide communities and organizations to blend their messaging into without blurring a message.
2. Target other resident and business interests in other Lake Counties for promotion and marketing focus especially in the states of Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. These neighbors already come to parts of Michigan like Grand Rapids and Traverse City and many are unaware that they have a name in common with Lake County Michigan.
3. Complete and regularly update business directories as another means of helping visitors and resident stakeholder interest alike to find the businesses and services they need, or want to try. Odds are that they are many hidden or almost invisible services that exist within the county that only word of mouth is the form of preferred marketing.

4. Employ unique MMO efforts like a video game built around Lake County's vast trail networks, connections to world class video gaming expertise. Such non-traditional approaches can reach unique audiences of users, create social media buzz and bring the prospect of royalties to sustain other MMO activities. Think out of the box and enlist celebrities like NASCAR and rock music stars to lend their names and credibility to this type of creative MMO undertaking.
5. Explore MMO efforts targeted to aging persons especially those with high disposable incomes to become more regular visitors and residents who could enjoy Lake County assets.
6. Identify celebs who visit Lake County to become MMO spokespersons. Who really knows the number and caliber of celebs who discreetly and secretly slip into Lake County undetected? It just can't be assumed that they do. You need to find out who they are and enlists their help with MMO!

Business Retention/Expansion/Attraction

A large percentage of businesses in Lake County are considered Small Businesses, and many of them are tied to the tourist industry. Stakeholders felt it essential to provide a strong support system for these small businesses, as well as for potential start-up business that have the opportunity to positively impact the local economy in Lake County. It was also determined that leaders need to seek out additional opportunities to seek new business potential within the county. In addition,

1. Lake County is geographically located in the middle of Michigan’s fruit belt which runs from the northwest tip of the Lower Peninsula to the south central Michigan boarder. There exist opportunities to build upon this geographic advantage potentially through the development of supply chain connections to the larger agribusiness/food processing companies operating within the region
2. There is a growing recognition that there may be value in the development a small business incubator and/or product development center. The purpose of the center would be to foster entrepreneurialism amongst county residents by providing traditional incubator functions---this may represent another partnering opportunity with Michigan State University extension services.
3. Community stakeholders recognize that a Micro Loan/Angel Investor program will directly impact the economic opportunity for new business development within the county. Therefore, the establishment of such a program should be a high priority. It is also a priority to increase the accessibility to capital for current and potential business owners.
4. Educational attainment in the county is well below the state and federal averages. However, the Baldwin school district was recently selected to receive a state grant to allow the school district to operate year-round. It is anticipated that this initiative will increase student test scores and encourage local students to continue their education by attending college. Local stakeholders advancing student success needs to be the interest of all residents and businesses; new partnerships with area school students and administrators, as well as two and four year postsecondary institutions to increase the education attainment or area residents should be identified and undertaken.

- A unique initiative example is the 5 year old Baldwin Promise. This is a terrific initiative offering up to \$20,000 to Lake County High School graduates to attend college. Last year, 95% of high school graduates qualified or chose to utilize this financial assistance to attend Michigan colleges and universities.
5. Forestry and logging industries are the county's top private sector employer. Efforts should be initiated to identify other growth opportunities in this sector like utilizing waste wood for fuel pellet manufacturing or furniture making. Given the vast public ownership of acreage suggests that the appropriate federal and state agencies could be enlisted as partners to expand this most important employment and business sector.
 6. There are vacant buildings like the former school in Luther that might be re-utilized for other purposes than for which they were previously built for and used. Development of an inventory of useable structures should be developed and used for business incubation, expansion and attraction efforts.

Governance Sustainability

Creating a new, county-wide not-for-profit economic development organization is a bold action. It is the County government that is leading the effort to create new, different and necessary organization to coordinate countywide economic development. Securing sustained funding from a variety of sources based upon a multi- year commitments from a wide variety of public and private “investors” will send a strong signal of seriousness to advance business retention, expansion and attraction efforts. It is recommended that:

1. The County Board expand its leadership role and move to create a county-wide, private-public 501.c.3 not-for-profit economic development organization. A creation of a c.3 tax exempt mechanism will be advantageous for fund solicitation and development efforts. This means the exercise of leadership to direct the incorporation and the initial appointment of a Board of Directors. The Board’s first tasks should to create a multi-year funding plan, hire a staff person and provide the organization with operating assistance. From community conversations a \$100,000 annual funding plan should be built on a base of public and private “investments” along with some philanthropic assistance.
2. Expanded participation and partnership with other organizations will assist with economic development initiatives. Be it the Governor’s Regional Prosperity Initiative or the West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission (WMSRDC), Lake County needs to more strongly and consistently advocate for a share of state and federal resources through regional organizations. Another year should not pass without Lake County having projects listed in the WMSRDC prepared Community and Economic Development Plan Strategy (CEDS).

Strategic Plan Implementation

Implementing a strategic plan is not a sprint, but a marathon. The implementation process can and should be slow, steady, and persistent. There will be small wins and milestones along the way. The County may even hit some walls from time to time, but nothing that persistence and determination can't overcome.

It is important to remain flexible during the implementation process. Unforeseen opportunities may arise causing tasks to gain momentum quickly. While on the other hand, tasks that are moving along with implementation can stall or lose momentum just as quickly.

The Lake County Economic Strategic Plan should also be evaluated annually. The Vision, Goals, and Implementation Tasks should be reviewed and discussed to evaluate their relevance and existing needs of the county.

Implementation of the plan will take the efforts of numerous organizations and individuals from all sectors and geographic areas of the county to accomplish. Regional, state, and federal partners should also be engaged often to assist with implementation of the Strategic Plan.

Let the race begin and keep your eye on the finish line....