

County Administrator's Digest

December 2, 2011

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AGRICULTURAL TOURISM (Mark Knudsen)

Agricultural Tourism (i.e. Agri-tourism) involves any operation or activity that attracts visitors to an area in order to interact with the agricultural community. Agri-tourism is a growing trend in rural communities as individuals become more interested in connecting to rural culture and learning more about farming. In addition, farmers are becoming more interested in Agri-tourism in order to supplement their income as agricultural production costs rise.

Agri-tourism businesses vary in the types of services that are offered. One example is businesses that offer hands-on activities such as U-pick operations, hay rides, corn mazes, cider-making demonstrations, and farm petting zoos. Another example is local farm markets in which individuals can purchase agricultural goods directly from the producer. Also, some Agri-tourism businesses offer accommodations for overnight and weekend getaways.

There are many benefits to farmers participating in Agri-tourism. Farms can market their products directly to the consumer thereby raising their profit margins. In some instances, farms can start an Agri-tourism business for a low investment since they already own the property and necessary equipment. Finally, increased tourism on farms raises awareness of farming and improves the public's perception of farming in general. In addition to local farmers, an increase in Agri-tourism could benefit other businesses within Ottawa County such as hotels, restaurants, and retail stores.

Local governments and not-for-profit organizations can also be involved in Agri-tourism such as the development of farmers' markets in downtown districts. Another good example in which local governments and not-for-profits can also be involved with Agri-tourism is by creating festivals around an agricultural strength such as the Asparagus Festival in Hart or the Cherry Festival in Traverse City. Recently, the West Michigan Tourism Association received a \$72,700 grant from the Michigan Department of Agriculture to develop a Regional Agri-tourism Marketing Plan.

Due to the wide range of agriculture goods produced locally by the County's numerous farming operations, Ottawa County is better positioned than most counties in Michigan to benefit from Agri-tourism. Examples of Ottawa County Agri-



tourism operations include; the Coopersville Farm Museum, the Ottawa County Fair, Vander Mill Cider Mill & Winery (Spring Lake), Ven Roy Blueberries (U-pick blueberry operation in Coopersville), DK Orchards (U-pick operation offering hay rides and a corn maze in Conklin), as well as the various downtown farmers' markets throughout the County. Countryside Greenhouse in Allendale is currently investing \$7 million to develop an Agri-tourism operation on M-45. The new facility will feature a farm market, U-pick pumpkins and strawberries, sweet corn and lavender fields, hay rides and other farm activities.

In summary, the growing Agri-tourism industry provides opportunities for local small businesses, and local farmers in particular, to sustain and expand their operations.

OTTAWA COUNTY EDC REACTIVATED

The Ottawa County Economic Development Corporation was reactivated over the past couple of months in order to assist Hope College with a bond refunding sale. A provision of the law allows a private non-profit corporation to sell tax exempt bonds through an Economic Development Corporation up to \$10 million dollars. The refunding bond sale allows Hope College to restructure its debt and experience significant savings estimated at over \$3.2 million which will be used to finance new improvements on campus beginning next year including a cafeteria upgrade and new student housing.

The EDC had gone somewhat dormant because no one had asked to sell bonds with this mechanism in twenty years or more. Earlier tax code changes and the development of other bond program and economic development finance alternatives had resulted in widespread lack of use of EDC's. For many years many EDC's met only to approve the annual paperwork required on outstanding bond issues and in the case of the Ottawa EDC, this activity was not necessary in many years. The bond pre-closing will be held next week with the closing following soon after.

The same members of the Ottawa County EDC also comprise the Ottawa County Brownfield Development Authority Board of Directors.

OUT AND ABOUT

I participated with a panel presentation at the Michigan Association of Certified Public Accountants (MACPA) conference yesterday morning in Lansing. The session was called Best Practices in Budgeting and my presentation was called Pre-Budget Consensus Building. My presentation can be viewed on miOttawa.org at <http://www.miottawa.org/CoGov/Admin/>. Joining me on the panel were Daryl Delabbio, Kent County Administrator; Keith Sawdon, Finance Director, City of Rochester Hills; Bill Wolf, County Administrator, Berrien County; and the session was moderated by Laurie Van Pelt, Director of Oakland County Management and Budget.

On November 14, John Scholtz, Mark Knudsen presented on County government to the Lakeshore Republican Women who met in one of our conference rooms. Former State Representative Barbara Vanderveen set up

and hosted the meeting for the group. Also On November 14th, I stood in as a replacement for Commissioner De Jong at the Coopersville City Council Meeting to recognize a retiring Councilmember with a long record of city service in various positions. On November 15th I joined Commissioners Jane Ruiter and Denny Swartout at the **Ten Year Anniverary and Grand River Greenway-North Opening** ceremony at Heritage Landing in Spring Lake. It was a very nice ceremony and both Jane and I offered comments.

On October 17 I presented one of many updates at the Holland Chamber Government Affairs breakfast.

I included this so readers can see a sampling of the types of events I speak at now and then. Many other County officials and employees speak frequently at various functions.

WEST MICHIGAN TRANSIT LINKAGES STUDY BACK ON TRACK (Nate Lisenbee)

The Planning & Performance Improvement Department has hired a new consultant for the West Michigan Transit Linkages Study. The Study had been delayed due to the original consultant terminating their contract prior to completing the work.

The purpose of the Study is to identify new routes for regional public transit services, and determine the feasibility of operating these routes. This Study will be important for future decision making about public transportation.

In order to hire a new consultant to conduct the Study, a Request for Proposals (RFP) was distributed in August 2011. Three transportation consultant firms responded to the RFP, and a sub-committee of local stakeholders reviewed their proposals. After a thorough review, the sub-committee recommended the consultant firm, Mp2planning LLC, to finish the Study. However, before Mp2planning could be hired their proposal and contract had to be approved by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT). The proposal and contract were submitted to MDOT in September. MDOT's approval process has just been completed, and Mp2planning LLC has been hired.

A projected schedule of work tasks for the Study is attached. Mp2planning is already scheduling meetings with the local service providers to discuss their existing transit services.

In addition to hiring a new consultant, the Planning Department has also been working with MDOT to extend the grant deadline for this project. Grant funding was set to expire on February 12, 2012. In order to ensure that grant funds will not expire prior to the completion of the Study, MDOT has approved the extension of grant funding to September 30, 2012.

West Michigan Transit Linkages Study

Mp2planning LLC

-Proposal Summary-

Assessment of Existing Public Transportation Services

The consultant will review and update the previous Existing Public Transportation Services Report. This update will reflect any changes in existing public transportation service, and/or routes.

Estimated Completion Date: December 15, 2011

Public Transportation Needs Assessment

The consultant will review and update the previous Needs Assessment Report. The previous report was based on 2000 census data and included a survey that did not provide statistically valid results. 2010 census data will be incorporated into the Report and a new statistically valid survey of public transportation needs will be included as well.

Estimated Completion Date: January 15, 2012

Commuter Transit Service Options Report

The consultant will utilize data from the previous drafts of the Commuter Transit Service Options Report to develop potential routes for public transportation services. Each potential route will include projected stops, transfer stations, vehicle fleets, multi-ride tickets, estimated ridership, and a review of potential service providers. The consultant will determine which potential route(s) are most likely to be feasible, and require further analysis.

Estimated Completion Date: February 15, 2012

Commuter Transit Service Feasibility Analysis

Utilizing the potential route(s) recommended for further analysis from the Commuter Transit Service Options Report, the consultant will determine the feasibility of establishing these route(s). Feasibility will be based on cost; availability of funding; ability of major employers to alter shift schedules or provide financial support for the route(s); and the ability of service providers to implement the route(s).

Estimated Completion Date: March 15, 2012

Public & Stakeholder Meetings

The consultant will present the Commuter Transit Service Options Report and the Commuter Transit Service Feasibility Analysis to the public, the County Planning Commission, and the Coordination Committee. If necessary, these documents will be revised based on comments received at these meetings.

Estimated Completion Date: March 15, 2012 – March 31, 2012

Estimated Completion Date if revisions are necessary: April 15, 2012**Final Report**

The consultant will compile the results of the Study into a single report. If any of the route(s) have been determined to be feasible, the consultant will develop recommendations to implement the plan to establish and operate the potential route(s).

Estimated Completion Date: May 15, 2012**Presentations**

The results of the study will be presented to the Coordination Committee, the Ottawa County Planning Commission, and the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners.

Estimated Completion Date: May 15, 2012 – May 31, 2012**GOVERNOR SNYDER'S TALENT SPEECH** (Bill Raymond)

Governor Snyder gave his fifth special message on Thursday, December 2 and the Michigan Works system was keenly interested in this particular message on Talent Development.

As the following information demonstrates, there were two major components to the Governor's message:

MiTalent.org was introduced. The website provides information on talent needs and connects individuals with employers. It will be a great resource for job seekers and employers to connect to and promises to be a more robust site than the current Michigan Talent Bank. There is still much development needed to finalize the site, which should occur by mid-summer 2012.

The Governor also listed several reforms to transition the State's focus from Workforce Development to Talent Development- an effort that requires government, educators, and the private sector. Ottawa County Michigan Works is active in many of these areas, as indicated below.

A. The following especially captured my attention as I read the Governor's speech.

1. Align Michigan's 25 workforce investment agencies with the MEDC's seven economic development regions. Ottawa County Michigan Works (OCMWA) is already doing much in this regard, especially in relation to work with organizations such as Lakeshore Advantage, Grand Haven/Spring Lake/Ferrysburg Chamber of Commerce, and the Ottawa County Economic Development Organization. We have also been working closely with Michigan Works in Kent, Muskegon, and Allegan Counties on regional initiatives and collaboration.
2. Provide more effective employment resources to employers; encourage mentorships and internships. We are well positioned to continue working in this area, especially as Cindy Brown, a member of the Ottawa County Workforce Board is the Executive Director of Hello West Michigan, an organization specifically focused on internships.

3. Better organize resources to support entrepreneurship. Here also we have worked closely with the Small Business Technology & Development Center at GVSU to assist aspiring entrepreneurs.
4. Tap into the knowledge, skills, and ability of veterans to fill talent shortages and reduce the chronic unemployment of this group. The recent location of a variety of Veterans Services to our James Street location helps us to have a closer connection to the issues facing veterans as we look to assist them with a variety of needs, including employment.
5. Focus on the displaced workers who struggle with a lack of skills or illiteracy. Our partnership with the West Michigan Strategic Alliance, Literacy to Work program, and Sparta Public Schools through the Lakeshore Adult Learning Center positions OCMWA to help provide critical services in this area. We are also working with Lakeshore Advantage and GRCC on an upcoming event to connect employers, who are having difficulty finding qualified employees, and job seekers who need work.
6. Redesign the Jobs, Education & Training (JET) program. This program helps those on welfare/cash assistance transition to work, but it is definitely in need of reform and redesign. The Michigan Works system has been advocating for this for a long time and this is a welcome opportunity.
7. Governor Snyder also called for reauthorization and more flexibility in the federal Workforce Investment Act. The act is long overdue for reauthorization and it is great that the Governor included this call in his speech. Increased flexibility would help the Michigan Works system more effectively assist both employers and job seekers.

B. Other initiatives

1. Pursue waivers from the Federal government to increase legal immigration
2. Seek legislative reforms; two were mentioned specifically:
 - a. Allow employees to scale back their hours to avoid layoff and be compensated with unemployment insurance; 25 states allow this now. I think this is a great idea and it should help employers retain talent, while helping workers continue to work and avoid a total layoff.
 - b. Allow individuals to pursue a waiver to develop a business plan instead of conducting a job search while they are unemployed; a number of states do this already. This is also a great idea - entrepreneurship can be a key tool and OCMWA was able to creatively experiment with this idea during the recession when some job seekers wanted to explore starting businesses. We worked closely with the Small Business Technology & Development Center on this.

Governor Snyder also highlighted Talent 2025, an organization focused on attracting and retaining talent in West Michigan, as an example of the type of collaborative effort that needs to expand. OCMWA has been working closely with Talent 2025 and its new CEO, Kevin Stotts, to develop solutions to the talent issue. Talent 2025 is comprised of a number of key West Michigan businesses, and together with education, Michigan Works and other aspects of the public sector, can be a strong force for change and progress for our economy.

This was the Governor's 5th special message and the one he was most excited to deliver. Governor Snyder

made it clear that the strategies he set forth Thursday are not final- they are looking for successful strategies and partnerships that can be highlighted or implemented. These strategies are an effort to transition to a mind-set of Talent development and Ottawa County Michigan Works looks forward to working with a variety of partners to help accomplish this goal, especially as we are seeing a surge in hiring activity in Ottawa County. Yet in the midst of that surge we are hearing that many companies are having difficulty finding qualified workers. There is still much to do and as we develop strategies to address the so-called skills gap, I can provide more updates on what OCMWA and our partners are doing to address the issues and connect the employers and talent in Ottawa County. Included below is the press release that went out with a link to the Governor's full speech.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, Dec. 1, 2011

Snyder urges better alignment of talent with current, future career opportunities

Online talent marketplace a highlight of special message

LANSING, Mich. – Michigan must better align the talent of its people with the needs of job providers to ensure success in the new economy, Gov. Rick Snyder said today.

The governor released his Special Message to the Legislature on Talent Development during a news conference at Delta College in University Center. It offers strategies to reinvent the way in which we prepare children for fulfilling careers, reshape how Michiganders look for work and redesign the way in which employers obtain the skills they need.

"Tomorrow's opportunities cannot be realized with yesterday's skills," Snyder said. "It's time to develop the next generation of talent. Today's young employees will have multiple careers in their lifetimes. The skills they attain must be marketable and transferrable. We need to align the aptitudes and career passions of job seekers with the current and evolving needs of employers."

Too few workers have the skills to meet employer demands in the new economy. Thousands of jobs remain unfilled despite Michigan's 10.6 percent unemployment rate. The state faces significant staffing challenges in areas such as agriculture, nursing, engineering and welding.

The governor announced the launch of an online tool that will help ensure the state's economic development and talent enhancement are occurring in tandem. Pure Michigan Talent Connect is a talent marketplace available at www.MiTalent.org. It eliminates the need for the multiple websites that now exist, many of which are duplicative or incomplete.

The site will feature tools that job creators and job seekers need to make better-informed decisions. Users will be able to assess their skills, evaluate the return on investment for an education or training program, browse careers and connect with mentors.

The site is being launched in phases for a June 2012 completion. The first phase, now available, features the Career Matchmaker and the Career Investment Calculator. The Career Matchmaker helps individuals determine the industries and locations where their skills are in high demand today and where they are projected to be. The Career Investment Calculator helps those who are pursuing training or retraining to make informed decisions.

Once completed, Pure Michigan Talent Connect will let Michiganders create an electronic talent portfolio early in their educational careers, driving everything from curriculum choices to career paths. It is developed by the Michigan Economic Development Corp. and the Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget.

The governor's special message also cites the need to:

- o Do a better job of connecting Michigan veterans with career opportunities. Despite their skills and transferable technical expertise, there was an unemployment rate of 29.4 percent among Michigan's Afghanistan and Iraq veterans in 2010. The national average was 11.5 percent. The governor is directing the Workforce Development Agency, Michigan Works! and the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to create a seamless delivery system for veteran benefits and employment services. The governor also is challenging more businesses to reach out to veterans. He is asking the Detroit Regional Chamber to partner with the state to promote the benefits of hiring veterans.
- o Focus on producing talent in areas where the state has a high occupational demand. State support for post-secondary education should concentrate on areas that enhance Michigan's economic development strategy and encourage students to stay in the state. A recent Center for Michigan report concludes that the state graduated 20 percent too few computer and math professionals, 14 percent too few health care professionals and 3 percent too few engineers in 2009-10.
- o Address the critical need for computer programming talent. The MEDC is creating a program called Shifting Code that generates a supply of high-demand programmers while giving small businesses the technology assistance they need. The initiative launches in January 2012 with pilots in Ann Arbor, Detroit and Kalamazoo.

Bring greater flexibility to the nation's immigration laws so foreign investment and job growth is not impaired. For example, Snyder will petition the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to renew, modify and make permanent the EB-5 Immigrant Investor Regional Center program, which is set to expire in September 2012. The program gives international investors the chance to live here by investing in Michigan's economy and creating jobs. He also is directing the MEDC and Michigan Department of Civil Rights to implement a Cultural Ambassadors program that leverages Michigan's natural, technological and human resources to integrate new talent into our communities.

Other initiatives include promoting mentorship by asking the Michigan Jaycees to continue its leadership through a collaboration with the state Community Service Commission's Mentor Michigan program; redesigning Michigan's Jobs, Education and Training (JET) program to include meaningful performance measures; modernizing the Michigan Works! program; urging greater flexibility in the federal Work Investment Act; creating a Governor's Talent Investment Board that will bring citizen involvement and oversight to Michigan's talent enhancement ef-

fort; asking legislative partners to enact a work-sharing law that lets Michigan retain more of its talent; and asking lawmakers to allow the Unemployment Insurance Agency to let displaced Michiganders pursue entrepreneurship through self-employment assistance.

The entire Special Message on Talent Development is at www.michigan.gov/snyder.