

MI Biz

Prosperity Alliance to boost regional collaboration

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Regional stakeholders would like to encourage more commercial traffic at the Port of Muskegon, such as for wind turbine components being offloaded above. *COURTESY PHOTO*

The model for Michigan's economic development policy is changing.

While Lansing once largely dictated Michigan's development strategy, a move toward regional collaboration has replaced the dated Capitol-centric model.

"For a long time, the state believed that Lansing should drive the economic development policy," said Sara Wycoff, senior strategic policy adviser to the Governor's Office. "We learned, frankly, we're not always great at forecasting the future.

It's really our partners at the regional level that know what their community needs moving forward."

The push for regional collaboration ultimately led to the creation of the **West Michigan Prosperity Alliance**. The alliance was officially formed in January to create a regional specific economic support organization that combined business development, talent attraction and planning agencies to focus on development projects.

As the alliance closes in on the end of its first year, the group plans to decide which development projects will be its main focus going forward into 2015, said John Weiss, executive director of the **Grand Valley Metro Council**, the organization with fiduciary responsibility for the alliance.

The alliance encompasses Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kent, Lake, Mason, Mecosta, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newaygo, Oceana, Osceola and Ottawa counties.

The 13-county region accounts for approximately 1.5 million people, 15.5 percent of the state's total, according to the group. The region also contains around 10,000 employers that account for \$5.7 billion in economic output.

A 26-member steering committee including transportation planners, workforce development boards, community colleges, economic development firms and other organizations is spearheading the group.

The alliance plans to vote in early October to decide on the handful of projects it will support going into 2015, Weiss said.

To determine which projects to support, the alliance invited organizations across the region to submit their requests. A Project Evaluation Team narrowed the list to approximately 31 projects categorized into three tiers based on the level of support given to each — with the lion's share of the alliance's focus dedicated to a select group of top-tier projects.

Those projects include promoting the Port of Muskegon as a logistics hub, finding a dedicated revenue stream for Lake Michigan watershed management, enacting a technology plan, creating the E-Merge West Michigan web portal, completing a strategic redesign of the Michigan Works! service delivery model and launching the Michigan Work Ready Community Initiative. (See sidebar for more detail.)

"I think you're going to see after October and into next year some of these projects get legs because (now) they have regional support," Weiss said.

The alliance received a \$250,000 grant from the state in January as part of Gov. Rick Snyder's **Regional Prosperity Initiative**, which was originally announced in August 2013. The initiative created 10 separate regions across Michigan based on a combination of economic, labor pool and community identification data.

While the majority of the grant is dedicated to covering the group's operating expenses, the alliance plans to dedicate a portion of the money to help fund segments of those high-priority projects, Weiss said.

“In the end, if we can make a project jump start by taking part of our grant and re-grant \$25,000 to do an economic impact study or something like that, that’s how we are planning on operating,” he said. “At the same time, we are working the cooperation and collaboration aspect.”

While the alliance’s end goal involves better collaboration among the public, private and nonprofit entities throughout the region, the early stages have been focused on creating the relationships to build on the collaborative environment, Weiss said.

“This first year was about organizing these people from all around the state to say that what’s important in Ludington may have an impact on Barry County, even though they are a long ways away,” Weiss said.

The alliance was intentionally created with relatively few rules attached beyond standard transparency requirements, Weiss said. This flexibility gives the alliance the ability to form economic development programming specific to West Michigan’s needs, he said.

One of the few state mandates for the program requires the alliance to submit a five-year Regional Prosperity Plan along with maintaining reporting and monthly meeting requirements.

“A lot of what this team is working on are the underpinning foundations that organizations like The Right Place are going to use to spur more business development and investment in the region,” said Tim Mroz, vice president of marketing and communications at The Right Place Inc., a Grand Rapids-based regional economic developer.

In the future, Weiss also hopes that the alliance will give projects a collective regional voice to carry more weight when they head to state and federal lawmakers for funding or approval.

“We’ll be able to go to Congress and say that this isn’t just a Kent County or Barry County project, but a West Michigan project,” he said.

Beyond encouraging collaboration through the Regional Prosperity Initiative, the state saw a chance to revamp its own operations and align itself around this new set of regional parameters, Wycoff said. In the past, the state’s service area boundaries were not aligned with state-sponsored services. Every time a department needed to form a new region, it

would do so over dozens of other overlapping areas. With the new regional-based system, the state aims to streamline its operations through singular points of contact to increase efficiency, she said.

For example: An organization in West Michigan would have a specific regional contact for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development rather than negotiating numerous intertwined layers of bureaucracy.

The state also hopes to promote greater cooperation among its departments to eliminate any silos throughout its agencies, Wycoff said.

Going forward, Weiss plans to continue promoting collaboration to push the alliance's tier one projects forward.

"Can we say that a deepwater port in Muskegon has enough economic impact to the prosperity of our region that we can support that, and if so, what can we do now?" Weiss said of the questions the organization must consider. "That's where we're at."

Sidebar: Proposed Tier One Projects

Of the 31 proposals submitted from across the region, the West Michigan Prosperity Alliance chose six tier-one projects that will be the primary focus of the group moving forward. The alliance plans to vote in early October to determine the handful of tier one projects it will support immediately in 2015. Here's information on the tier one projects and their sponsors.

Port of Muskegon Regional Logistics Hub

West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission

Leaders throughout Muskegon County are working to further develop the Port of Muskegon by establishing the port as a local food hub and encouraging increased traffic from the alternative energy industry. The group is petitioning the U.S. Coast Guard to allow river barges from the Mississippi River system to travel to Muskegon. Currently, river barges do not meet the Coast Guard's requirements for unrestricted service on the Great Lakes, forcing the vessels to undergo costly inspections. In the past, the Port of Muskegon had been underutilized as shippers passed it by for other ports in Indiana and Illinois.

Dedicated Revenue Stream for Lake Michigan Watershed Management

Macatawa Area Coordinating Council

The project aims to create a sustainable revenue stream for managing and protecting the quality of watersheds across all 13 counties. While most counties have watershed management plans, dedicated funding would allow each area more control over projects best suited for their communities, according to the Macatawa Area Coordinating Council. The program cites the growing importance of waterways as strategic resources for future economic growth as a key driver for the program.

Michigan Works! Strategic Redesign

Muskegon Michigan Works!

The Muskegon Michigan Works! organization plans to partner with a human-centered design firm, such as California-based IDEO, to understand both employers' talent needs and job-seekers' circumstances to attempt to close the skills gap.

Connected Community Engagement Program — Technology Action Planning

Connect Michigan Inc.

Lansing-based **Connect Michigan Inc.** plans to launch a community engagement program across 10 West Michigan counties without similar plans in place. The program aims to advise residents and businesses on technology-related issues and educate them on the benefits of adopting tools like broadband access. Connect Michigan also plans to establish a regional broadband plan for further expansion.

E-Merge West Michigan

Talent 2025

A partnership including **Talent 2025 Inc.**, the E-Merge West Michigan executive committee, business incubators, economic development organizations, local units of government and other groups plans to create the framework for a regional entrepreneurial support organization. A portion of the project involves creating a web portal as the regional hub for entrepreneurs. The portal will allow entrepreneurs to identify partner organizations and will track the startup's activities. As the portal evolves, the organization plans to use it as a tool to identify gaps in the region's entrepreneurial support system. E-Merge West Michigan will also address challenges regarding talent retention, attraction and retraining.

Michigan Work Ready Communities

Talent 2025

Grand Rapids-based Talent 2025 Inc. plans to develop a framework for a regional talent pipeline for employers sourcing their local workforce. The Michigan Work Ready Communities (MiWRC) will match skilled workers entering the workforce with regional industry sectors — many of which are reporting trouble finding workers. The MiWRC will also work with potential employees to develop relative skill sets in the key areas. MiWRC is part of the Certified Work Ready Communities program (CWRC) — developed by the testing agency, **ACT Inc.** — along with 16 other states.

- See more at: <http://mibiz.com/item/21855-prosperity-alliance-to-boost-regional-collaboration#sthash.nMuBqjsk.dpuf>