



Position Paper *The Case for Regional Collaboration*

Background on West Michigan Strategic Alliance

The notion of looking at West Michigan's future from a broad, regional perspective began in 1998 when business and community leaders from Grand Rapids, Holland, and Muskegon met to talk about working together on regional issues. The West Michigan Strategic Alliance (WMSA) was formally organized in 2000 to create a shared vision for the region for the next 25 years. This process began with an 18-month study led by two consultants that culminated in a sourcebook called "The Common Framework." The material in the sourcebook is the result of a strategic planning process involving input from 250 diverse participants. Ultimately, the process identified six priorities for regional collaboration:

- Create a Regional Mindset;
- Foster a Prosperous Economy
- Strengthen Community through Diversity
- Ensure a Stable Environment
- Revitalize our Urban Centers
- Develop a Tri-Plex Growth Strategy

Underpinning these priorities is the WMSA's vision: *To be a best place to live, work, learn and play in the Midwest*, and its mission: *To be a catalyst for regional collaboration*.

A Critical Look at the Current West Michigan

The notion of a region called "West Michigan" has been defined in many ways. But the WMSA has defined the region as it functions, without boundaries. Originally this was conceived of as a triangle formed by the anchor communities of Grand Rapids, Holland, and Muskegon and encompassing the counties of Allegan, Kent, Ottawa, and Muskegon. When the federal government reclassified the region's MSA (Metropolitan Statistical Area) to a CSA (Combined Statistical Area) in 2004, the Alliance grew to seven counties, adding Barry, Ionia, and Newaygo. In 2008 Montcalm County was added, making the definition of West Michigan an eight-county region.

West Michigan is a region in transition. The region, which already has a collective population of 1.4 million, is faced with declining growth. But the region still operates as an assortment of divergent entities. We have more than 219 units of government, 77 school districts, three metro planning organizations, and countless businesses and institutions. But if we continue to focus on separate local actions, we are in danger of ignoring the emerging common regional interests and issues. It is clear that we have become a region, in the formal sense of the word. It is obvious that we are interdependent. We are at a critical juncture. The future could either see us as a continuous urban environment melded together haphazardly. Or, together, we can seize the potential to be a region recognized throughout the Midwest and the nation for our quality of life, environmental assets, vibrant economic opportunities, and smart land-use planning.

The way to achieve that potential is through regional collaboration. Collaboration requires a certain attitude, a mindset. So, while no doubt we will all continue to act locally, the time has come for us to think regionally.

Thinking Regionally

The fact is, we already act like a region. According to the 2000 census, more than one-fourth of Muskegon County workers had to commute to another county for their jobs. That figure is up nearly 10 percent in the past decade. And Muskegon County is not alone--73 of Michigan's 83 counties showed an increase in inter-county commuting in the 2000 census.

And that's just one example of how we don't stay in one place in the West Michigan region as we live, work, learn and play. People who live in Grand Rapids may vacation in Holland. Residents of Grand Haven may drive into Grand Rapids for sporting or theatrical events. These and other regional activities collectively create both issues and opportunities regarding our region, including transportation, environment, and workforce. We must recognize that these issues do not exist in isolation. It is only by thinking regionally and collaborating on solutions that we can address them adequately.

Regional thinking and action made the difference in our selection as one of 13 regions in the United States selected by the Department of Labor for a \$15 million grant as part of its Workforce Innovations in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) program. Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm has already recognized and embraced the value of regional thinking. In her State of the State address in February 2003, she named a bi-partisan Land Use Commission charged with making recommendations on regional collaborations to create smart growth strategies around the state. James Brooks, Founding Chair of the WMSA, was one of 26 members of that new commission. One product of this effort was a law allowing and encouraging adjacent municipalities to collaborate in their planning.

We don't confine our daily activities of living, working, learning and recreation to one place. We shouldn't confine our thinking either. We need continually to see the big picture, to think, act and compete regionally. Once we do, the opportunities for productive collaboration will be endless.

Defining Collaboration

If some fear or oppose collaboration, it is due to misperception. Often the word compromise is used interchangeably with collaboration. But there is a distinction. In compromise, each party concedes or loses something in order to reach a consensus. Usually, people fear that their distinctness, control or viewpoint will be lost.

But collaboration is quite different. The goal of collaboration is a "win-win" solution, ensuring a solution of maximum and equal benefit to all parties. Individual units of government, businesses, and nonprofits will still maintain their autonomy. In collaboration, individual goals are not muted; they are realized with greater and broader effect.

Collaboration is defined as a "joint work toward a common end." It is by no coincidence that common is the root of community.

Who Should Collaborate

Collaboration can and should involve more than units of government working together over shared borders. Throughout the region, businesses, nonprofits and other institutions can share resources and ideas that achieve mutual benefits. Again, in many respects we are already doing this. Some city governments share police and fire departments or the delivery of water and sewer services. Nonprofit organizations have formed coalitions to address causes of common concern. Savvy businesses have formed working relationships to achieve strategic objectives.

Now the time has come to expand on these proven methods of working together. It is time for collaborations not just within the government, business and institutional sectors, but between them. We need discussions and actions that cross geographic, industry, and organizational boundaries. As we move forward, we will need to bring more regional interests to the table, take advantage of multiple resources and ideas, and emerge with plans that are cohesive and complementary rather than conflicting.

If We Do Not Collaborate

We are at a critical crossroads in the history of West Michigan. We have a choice. If we do not think regionally and collaborate, the result will be irreversible mistakes affecting our infrastructure, environment, economy and many other aspects of our life. We will see haphazard development, unplanned boundaries, and gridlock. We may also see lost opportunities as employees, tourists, customers and even federal and state grants go to other regions seen as more attractive or deserving. Communities fail gradually. Roads and houses are difficult to un-build. Negative perceptions are hard to overcome. If we do not collaborate, beginning now, we could arrive at a point where it's too late.

If We Do Collaborate

Collaboration yields mutual benefits. If we begin to think and act in collaboration, we will enjoy efficiency, creative solutions, improved quality of life, and sensible growth. We will be able to harness growth to our benefit rather than watch helplessly as growth overtakes us. If we think of ourselves in a regional mindset, others will think of West Michigan as a model region. *And, this is happening already....*

Examples of Regional Collaboration

Many in West Michigan have already embraced the spirit of regionalism. There are countless examples of collaborative projects that yield multiple, mutual benefits to the institutions, businesses, and governments in West Michigan. In projects large and small, either begun by the WMSA or others, the people of West Michigan are seizing the opportunities of regionalism.

Samples of regional thinking and actions begun by others include:

- Leadership West Michigan – West Michigan Regional Chamber Coalition
- West Michigan Trails and Greenways Coalition
- Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds (LGROW)
- Four West Michigan sustainability organizations are sharing and collaborating on materials, documents and initiatives to enhance each other's work and to help avoid duplication
- Green Print is a collaborative of five organizations identifying critical natural features to establish priorities for focusing preservation efforts.

The West Michigan Strategic Alliance has its own regional initiatives:

- Green Infrastructure
- Internship Initiative
- WIRED (Workforce Innovations in Regional Economic Development)
- Regional Indicators

To learn more, visit the WMSA online: www.wm-alliance.org