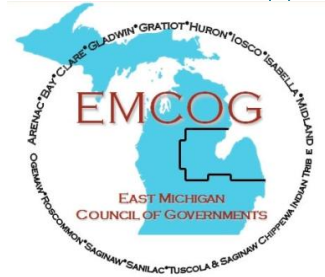


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A Report of “What I Heard” from Listening Sessions on Regional Economic Recovery

Prepared for the EMCOG Regional Economic Development Team by

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Introduction:

During the months of December, 2021 through May of 2022 Jane Fitzpatrick, EMCOG Economic and Community Development Programs Manager¹ conducted a number of listening sessions with various partners throughout the 14 County EMCOG Region (Region) to gather insight on the development of an economic recovery/resiliency strategy for the Region in response to two events: (1) the May, 2020 flooding and infrastructure failures in five counties and (2) the COVID pandemic. Invitations were sent out to 112 individuals representing economic development, workforce development, local governments, education, business, social and health services and for-profit and non-profit organizations throughout the 14 counties. Based on the response to the invitations, listening sessions were held with 80 individuals, or 71% of those sent an invitation. Most of the sessions were one-on-one and the majority were held virtually. The invitation itself stated:

I am writing to you to ask that you engage with me in providing your insights and thoughts for the development of an addendum to the EMCOG 2021-2025 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) focusing on Resiliency, Equity and Sustainability.

It is our intent that this Regional economic recovery strategy will provide a clear nexus between COVID-19 response plus the recent (2020) catastrophic flooding and infrastructure failures suffered after heavy rains caused flooding damage through 5 of our 14 counties including the collapse of two major dams and damage to a third. This type of approach speaks to the need to approach development of any economic recovery strategy by also analyzing the need for integrated asset management and hazard mitigation planning and adjustments in how we do economic and community development moving forward.

The pandemic and 2020 flooding and dam failures have and continue to reveal the vulnerabilities of our communities to these and any other types of disaster/interruption in the sustainability and growth of our communities and economy. I would like to schedule some time with you during the next couple weeks (30 minutes or more) to get your thoughts on what we should address in our economic recovery strategy. We can do this through a phone call or virtual meeting. Or, if it works out better for you, you could send me your thoughts via email.

As I told participants at the start of a listening session, no one would be quoted in this subsequent report to the EMCOG Regional Economic Development Team (RED Team).

¹ Jane Fitzpatrick is the author of this report which is based on what she heard during the listening sessions. Any reference such as “what I heard” refers to her.

However, I have inserted quotes without named sources as part of the description of what I heard. There are also a number of historic quotes from other people, for which the source is identified. These quotes are favorites of mine as they relate to the topics within this report. As George Bernard Shaw said...."I often quote myself. It adds spice to my conversation."

The purpose of this report is to continue the discussion at the September 16, 2022 Council and RED Team meetings and to continue this dialogue as we collectively develop strategies and action items to address our post disaster and post pandemic movement forward as a Region and develop an addendum to our 5-year 2021-2025 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who either participated in a listening session with me or, due to scheduling conflicts, provided written comments. A complete list of participants is listed in Appendix A of this report.

WHAT I HEARD FROM THE REGION:

The listening sessions provided perspectives from a wide array of subjects depending on both the work focus of the participant as well as their own personal observations over the past couple of years. One perspective that was expressed by many is that both the COVID pandemic and the May 2020 flood and infrastructure failures peeled back what could be described as a thin covering over issues that had been in existence prior to 2020. The pandemic and May 2020 five-county disaster (Arenac, Gladwin, Iosco, Midland and Saginaw) made it difficult to ignore certain situations.

This report of what I heard from throughout the Region is presented in seven focus areas. The focus areas are not presented in any priority order except for my selection of “Regionalism” as the first and “Economic Development” as the final. I selected Regionalism as the first focus area because Regional boundaries are often confusing and our resiliency as a Region, no matter the challenge, is stronger if we have good Regional alliances. I selected Economic Development as the final focus area because, without all of the programs and initiatives within the focus areas preceding it, economic development does not happen.

The focus areas for reporting on the listening sessions are:

- A. Regionalism;
- B. Disaster Mitigation and Preparedness;
- C. Community Development and Place Making;
- D. Talent and Workforce Development;
- E. Taking Care of Our People – Health Care, Childcare, Commuting; Housing
- F. Infrastructure; and
- G. Economic Development

A. REGIONALISM

A number of participants expressed numerous comments and suggestions about the status of “Regionalism” within the Region and the need for stronger Regional alliances.

WHAT WE ARE:

The East MI Council of Governments was first established in 1968 by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration as a Federal Economic Development District. In 1972, it was designated by the State of Michigan as a statutorily created Regional Planning Commission.

The Region is a multi-purpose, multi-jurisdictional organization and forum designed to discuss issues of mutual interest and concern for local units of government and their residents within the east central region of Michigan and to create plans and reports designed to be of assistance to its members. The common goal of these efforts is to improve the quality of life for all who reside in the east central region of Michigan. Membership is voluntary. In addition to counties, cities, villages and townships, the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe is also within the Region.

As a U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration Economic Development District (EDD), EMCOG is also responsible for the development of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the 14 county region which qualifies the region for federal and state funding.

EMCOG encompasses 336 local units of government with taxing and zoning authority:

14 counties; 33 cities; 44 villages and 245 townships

The number of local governments within EMCOG exceeds the total numbers for 21, or 42% of the 50 States in the USA.

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

----Theodore Roosevelt

REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (RED) TEAM: The RED Team is a standing committee of the EMCOG Council and serves as the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Committee. Establishment of a CEDS Committee is a requirement for the Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA) funded Economic Development Districts such as EMCOG. As the designated

CEDS Committee, the RED Team is the principal facilitator of the CEDS process and is responsible for developing and updating the CEDS. The RED Team members are appointed by the EMCOG Council Chair. The EMCOG Council Second Vice Chair serves as the RED Team Chair. The RED Team appointed membership as of July, 2022 is shown in Appendix B of this report.

What I heard:

“We are missing the big pieces of the Region.”

“We would be so strong if unified”

“How do we form a stronger alliance?”

Although there is some degree of representation from stakeholders throughout the 14 counties, it was expressed in various ways during the listening sessions that we need membership of all 14 Counties engaged at the Council as well as at the RED Team meetings. The absence of membership² of two of the “big three” counties (Midland and Saginaw) is of concern. Another concern expressed is the need for diversity both on the RED Team and other boards and councils.

Regarding unification of the Region, one suggestion was to prepare an annual “United Front” report of the Region that can be vetted at the State and Federal level. It was noted that the CEDS does represent a Regional strategy from which such a more specific report could be developed.

“Engage our youth!”

Another aspect of the composition of the RED Team membership was the suggestion that our youth should be engaged with the RED Team. The comments ranged from (a) bring youth to the RED Team meetings and listen to what they want for our Region; what they want to see in their communities to (b) the establishment of a young RED Team with representation, for example, from student councils across the Region. No matter the platform for doing this it was communicated throughout the listening sessions that we need to hear what our youth has to say.

² Membership designates financial support of the Region through the annual assessed fee plus representation on the EMCOG Council.

“The Tribe is a government but it is also a business.”

The future of the Region is intricately and inextricably bound with the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. People do not fully understand what the Tribe is about. We need better outreach and education. Tribes do not have any real say on any larger board at the State level. Of all of the economic development organizations, they do not have a presence on state boards.

Tribal economic development is driving Regional job creation. We need to get the word out on what the Tribe can do for economic development in the Region. The Tribe is a resource for the Region and it encourages others to reach out to them for possible partnerships.

“Getting people to think regionally is a challenge.”

“There is still a county by county approach out there.”

“The distribution of ARPA funds contributes to the non-regional thinking with no incentives to think regionally.”

There were a number of comments regarding economies of scale and how to utilize resources regionally rather than in a fragmented fashion. Examples include school district shared services, Emergency Medical Services shared and correctional facilities. As noted in one of the quotes above, the distribution of ARPA funds to local governments did not include incentives for coordination as a regional approach to utilize the funds. Much frustration about the process was expressed during the listening sessions.

Within the EMCOG Region the allocation of ARPA funds to some local governments was less than \$1,000. Michigan is one of a handful of states with so many local units of government: 1,856 (only six other states have more jurisdictional boundaries than Michigan). With so many jurisdictional boundaries the dollars are spread thinner across the Region. Coordination of ARPA funds or any other funding distribution across jurisdictional boundaries would leverage the impact of those dollars.

“Encourage Participation”

Several participants lamented the post pandemic return to the Michigan Open Meetings Act requirement of board and council members being physically present in order to meet quorum and conduct business. The virtual meetings created opportunities for more participation at public meetings. We’ve mastered the technique so to speak. How do we keep this participation level up?

Another item that was noted throughout the listening sessions was the need for more or better training regarding how to better network among communities.

B. HAZARD MITIGATION AND PREPAREDNESS

*“Preparedness, when properly pursued, is a way of life,
not a sudden, spectacular program.”*

---- *Spencer W. Kimball*

The COVID pandemic and other “natural and manmade disasters such as the 2020 flood and dam failures continue to reveal the vulnerabilities of our Region to these and any other types of disaster/interruption in the sustainability and growth of our communities and economy. Recovery is not quick and it requires different ways of doing things to decrease our vulnerability moving forward. Many of the issues and need to pivot areas that the pandemic peeled back the curtain on are addressed in the next sections of this report. How to prepare and lessen the impacts of something like a major health situation or a natural or man-made disaster are addressed in this section.

It was not that long ago that the Region had to look back to the great flood of 1986 as a reference to what could happen. Lessons learned from that event resulted in a number of public infrastructure projects to prevent or at least lessen the impacts of such an event. Those projects, including those within the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge were crucial in reducing the damage from our most recent 2020 disaster.

The COVID pandemic’s direct impact on the health and lives of the people of the Region varied from county to county. As of August 16, 2022 the number of confirmed COVID cases in the Region equate to 26.5% of the population (Statewide the cases equated to a slightly lower 23.5%). The Region’s death rate is a bit higher than for the State as a whole. Within the Region the number of deaths to date is equal to 0.5% of the Region’s population; State-wide the percentage is 0.3%

In addition to the impacts of the COVID pandemic the Region has experienced three federally designated disasters since 2013, including the five county disaster of May, 2020. The following is a summary of the over \$142.0 million in federal assistance that was provided from the three disasters:

Individual Assistance:	\$35.3 Million
Public Assistance:	\$38.5 Million
SBA Loans:	\$38.0 Million
National Flood Insurance Payments:	\$30.3 Million

“Hazard Mitigation is sustained action taken to reduce or eliminate long-term risk to people and their property from hazards.”

--- www.emcog.org

What I heard:

“Pivot our focus to being ready rather than responsive”

“We have water, and combined with climate projections, Michigan will be a more attractive place for people and businesses. We need to be ready regarding hazard mitigation.”

Whether the responses were to the COVID pandemic or to the May 2020 five-county disaster, there were a number of focus areas in the Region that had to spring into action without the benefit of an established platform to work from. Counties are required to have hazard mitigation plans which primarily focus on natural disasters rather than pandemics. In general, these plans focus on the “how to” of the immediate initial response to a disaster rather than the long term response/readiness. A huge complication was the result of the pandemic itself and that was the need to conduct as much “business” remotely as feasible. However, through this experience we’ve mastered the method of working remotely and this can be a part of our disaster response procedures moving forward to the extent feasible and sufficient.

“An established Long Term Recovery Group (LTRG) should be in place in every county”

As the COVID pandemic progressed and also following the immediate response to the May, 2020 floods, long term recovery groups were organized to address the needs of the impacted counties moving forward. It took time to work out the membership and organization to begin the work that needed to be done. There were identified champions who stepped up and did it. And, through “on the ground” lessons learned, these champions/groups adjusted their organization and delivery systems. We have much to learn from them.

I heard frequently that the LTRG structure should be formally established with identified organizations and that they should hold annual or bi-annual meetings to update their

operations delivery system, keep up to date on FEMA and other resources and be ready to function when needed and as needed. An example given was the request by the State to a county EDC to provide a list of businesses that were damaged by the 2020 flood disaster. There was no established means of communicating at the time of the request to gather this information.

Some of the LTRGs that were established in response to the May 2020 floods are formalizing their organization and structure and expanding the stakeholders to be prepared for the next health or natural disaster. Focus areas of expertise to include are fiduciary manager, volunteer manager, water manager, food manager, set-ups manager, and public health manager among others.

The impacts of both the floods, dam failures and the COVID pandemic revealed other areas of focus for LTRG preparedness. Access to health care in the rural areas; ambulance access; and the food supply chain were all brought up in multiple listening sessions.

“A big issue for hazard mitigation planning is lack of participation of the local governments and other entities within a county.”

The comments I heard most often focused on the lack of participation³ from local governments and other entities including transportation, drain commissioners and utility providers in the development of these plans. As an example, transit providers, whose specialty is moving people, were not part of a county planning process or called upon in response to a disaster including the COVID pandemic.

“Services were identified by county lines; People do not relate to county lines.”

I heard quite a few statements of wishing that there were more collaboration across county lines. These comments applied to both the COVID pandemic and the May 2020 floods and dam failures. Both the FEMA and State of Michigan structures also follow county lines.

An example of an already existing entity that crosses county lines yet was not utilized to the extent that it could have been was 211 Northeast Michigan which is already a call center and is established as such. A 211 Disaster Coordinator already exists and training is available for emergency managers to familiarize them with the 211 services.

³ Lack of participation was described as either “invited but did not participate” or “not invited to participate”.

As mentioned earlier in this report, every county has an emergency manager and a hazard mitigation plan. Our Region is within a vast 22 county watershed. I heard comments about the need for regional watershed planning that intersects with the localized hazard mitigation plans. Also comments were made that regional training in and knowledge of the connections for a mass water supply is needed for our emergency managers.

It was suggested that the county emergency managers delivery of services would benefit from both having an assistant to focus on the post immediate responses as well as someone from the regional or state level that they can pull in for support and guidance as needed.

“There is a disconnect between land use planning and hazard mitigation planning.”

Counties have hazard mitigation plans which primarily focus on natural disasters rather than pandemics. Local governments also adopt master plans and zoning ordinances as set forth In the Michigan Planning Enabling Act. EMCOG is one of the entities within the Region that a local government must solicit for written comment on a proposed master plan or master plan update. With one exception since I have been doing these reviews, proposed master plans do not include references to the respective county hazard mitigation plans. EMCOG provides suggested language for policies to include in the proposed master plans as part of our formal comments to encourage the connection of master plans to hazard mitigation plans.

“Areas beyond the flood zones are being impacted.”

I also heard about local zoning relating to hazard mitigation. Comments included such suggestions as giving local governments the tools to not allow development along river banks and inundation areas.

The concern that there is not enough focus on dams was expressed multiple times; in particular that dams and their eminent threat are not seen as a priority for planning purposes. Even a small dam failure will impact communities downstream, wear away bridge footings and cause other damages along the water route.

“Getting water off-site as soon as possible is not always the best way.”

The role of local drain commissioners and such entities as the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge came up a number of times regarding flooding events. The Farm Bureau was mentioned as well as a suggestion for being at the table for hazard mitigation planning.

There is an opportunity for agriculture drainage retention to help mitigate the flashiness of rain events. The development of a regional strategy for flood retention that adds to where our current capacity was/is and that looks at the issue of lack of retention as opposed to drainage was a suggestion/recommendation.

C. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND PLACE MAKING

“Industry is not interested in coming to a community that is interested only in industry. Industry wants to know: Does the community provide facilities for the individual to grow?”

---- Alden B. Dow, 1958

What I heard:

“For those that tell us that creating quality of place matters, the next discussion is quality of place for whom?”

The pandemic created a pivot point for which a sense of place and one’s home became pretty darn important. The shift to remote working which it appears will continue beyond any restrictions from the pandemic begs the question of why are we here and where do we want to be? Along with the growth in remote working it was noted that workers also tend to want to live where they work if their employment requires them to work onsite. For whom do we provide a quality of place?

There was discussion about the changing demographics of the Region (declining population numbers along with a younger workforce) and the question of how do we get people to understand the crucial need of creating places where younger people want to live and work? There were frequent statements that what young adults are looking for in a community is not the community that Boomers and Generation X found as attractive.

“Invest in the things that people touch every day.”

As organizations throughout the Region were looking at economic recovery strategies a suggestion that came up frequently during the listening sessions was that communities should focus on touch points – that it all goes back to capacity and improving and maintaining the everyday touch points for local people that would greatly improve our quality of life. An example of a touch point is a neighborhood park.

“Our residents are our number one customer”

Other comments included the existence of empty storefronts from the COVID pandemic. This situation, along with a shift to remote working for a number of people creates a challenge to fill these storefronts so that residents will return to their downtowns for shopping, dining and other activities. There were comments about treating our residents as tourists in their own towns, meaning providing amenities and a sense of place for them to enjoy and to bring others in to enjoy. We must reward the people who make the decision to stay here and/or move back here. I repeatedly heard the thought that if a community shows that it cares about those that live there, those residents will be the best ambassadors for attracting people.

“Communities that are winning are the communities that are taking care of themselves.”

As noted in the beginning of this report there are 336 local units of government with taxing and zoning authority in the EMCOG Region. Master Plans and the accompanying Zoning Ordinances, Capital Improvements Plans and Asset Management Plans are the basic tools for developing and enhancing place making and economic development.

“Communities lack the overall capacity to do what is required to take advantage of resources and dollars”

A comment that was widely expressed is the lack of capacity in many of our communities to take advantage of programs and funding opportunities that are available for community development and infrastructure improvements. Capacity is lacking regarding staff to prepare and administer grant applications including the necessary time to devote to the grant work itself if funded. Another aspect of the lack of capacity is the ability to come up with the local match funding requirement, especially for grants that require a 50% local match.

Other comments expressed included an overall lack of capacity within our local governments to enforce zoning regulations, thus diminishing the quality of life work that is done in the development of master plans and zoning ordinances.

“It is difficult to get funding into communities that do not have a defined downtown; there are not many State funding opportunities to support these communities.”

One of the programs that does exist for communities is the State’s Redevelopment Ready Communities, or RRC program. A number of comments stressed encouraging communities to participate in the RRC Program to take advantage of the resources and funding for certification. To date five (5) communities within the Region are RRC Certified and thirty-one (31) are RRC Engaged. This equates to 12% of the total communities Statewide that are either Certified or Engaged.

Other comments include how the ARPA funds will be spent and that the funds are providing an opportunity to create or improve communities assets and attractiveness for residents. Also it was noted that the employers of a community should be convened for the purpose of communicating to them the need for public investments for place making as this has a direct benefit to their economic health.

As communities across the Region organize themselves to decide on the will of the communities regarding how to spend their ARPA dollars it was suggested that local governments should have visioning sessions every 3-5 years without the pressure of making decisions relatively quickly as a funding opportunity such as this arises. The visioning session could be a “what if”; “what if someone gave us money, what would we do with it” discussion.

“How can we become the place of choice to live even if working someplace out of state?”

“How do we get people to understand the crucial need of creating places where younger people want to live and work?”

As stated earlier in this report there were many comments among those who participated in the listening sessions that acknowledged the changing dynamics of our population and workforce age and what this changing population is looking for in a community.

Among the comments two focus areas were in the forefront:

1. *Historic Preservation* came up as necessary for defining a sense of place. The history of a community makes that community a place and not what the author James Howard Kunstler refers to as “The Geography of Nowhere”...a place that could be anywhere.

2 Another area of frequent comment was the ***shift to the outdoors*** brought on by the COVID pandemic. Mid-level income employees are tending to want to work locally and not commute. This demographic is mostly younger and is looking more at outdoor amenities.

Given our environmental qualities right here in our Region, we should be waving the flag about this area being a good place to either work locally and play locally or work remotely and play locally. The outdoor activities discussed include the establishment of social districts within a city or town; four-season community driven outdoor events including walkable events; active and passive parks, campgrounds, water access for boating; our trail system for bicycling and our numerous preserves including the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge and the many nature preserves that exist through Huron Pines, the Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy and others.

D. TALENT AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

“Talent attracts capital rather than the other way around.”

“Building the thing is a by-product of the workers.”

What I heard:

“We have a small workforce and it is getting smaller.”

Comments evolved around the importance from an economic perspective, that workers come from our Regional labor shed. The following illustrates the population trends in EMCOG by age group as reported through the American Community Survey.

	1990	2000	2010	2020
EMCOG Population	753,698	796,595	780,869	773,763
Age Group % of Pop.				
Less than 5	7.1%	5.8%	5.5%	4.9%
Ages 5-17	17.1%	18.6%	12.2%	10.6%
Ages 18-24	10.2%	9.3%	15.0%	13.0%
Ages 25-44	17.1%	26.4%	22.1%	23.1%
Ages 45-64	20.1%	20.7%	28.5%	26.4%
Ages 65 and Older	17.8%	15.7%	16.8%	21.9%

The pandemic has raised a concern about students that were “lost” during the COVID pandemic; those that dropped out of school but will be seeking jobs. A youth program and GED program is going to be very important. At some point these “lost” students are going to need jobs and will need a diploma. We need a recovery program to address this both in the schools and post K-12.

As it relates to our future workforce, the K-12 school system was brought up quite frequently including school districts economies of scale. Do our districts have enough students to be able to afford to provide the broad curriculum needs and also the ancillary costs of a school district? Options expressed include shared service agreements and regionalization of school districts to provide the ancillary support services.

An example of shared services with intermediate school districts was brought up including the pros and cons of such an arrangement. Such services that can be shared include transportation; accounts payable/accounts receivable; and technology services.

“This is a job seekers time.”

In general what employers are struggling with regarding workforce is the talent pipeline. People are willing to move to different places and are looking at flexible work schedules. For some employers the type of work they offer lends itself to this. For manufacturers there are limitations to this type of flexibility regarding production. How do we work with manufacturers on this?

Statements that were made by multiple participants:

- They are starting to see an uptick in apprenticeships.
- Community colleges dual enrollment programs have been a game saver.
- Workforce and remote working culture is the future.
- Workforce and childcare for that workforce are a huge issue.

“The biggest issue from a workforce standpoint – finding participants and workers.”

“Companies will pick up and move if they cannot find workers.”

To summarize comments: The unemployment rate is considered “full employment or above”. Quite a few people left the labor force since the COVID pandemic started. Enrollments in universities have declined. There are more deaths than births. As a Region, how much do we pay our talent compared to other Regions within Michigan? We do a good job of training employees in a variety of skills but it is not tied to the conversion of wages. Are those trained here going to stay or go where the pay is greater? Specific comments noted include:

- The great resignation: age 50+ are starting to take retirements.
- A manufacturer from within the Region needs workers and is saying they will “steal from others” if necessary.

- Tele-work and virtual opportunities as full time jobs are resulting in losing higher and upper management workers.
- We must stop devaluing the skilled trades.
- The employers policy of hours required to be worked in an office post-pandemic is becoming a challenge.
- Training programs are available but they cannot find people to enroll even for the no cost programs.
- Going Pro: there was a shift in focus during the last year with the lowest number of awards to date: 43% of applications were funded compared to 60% to 70% in prior years with observations of uneven grant awarding across the State.

“We need to collectively attract and retain people or we will be exporting workers.”

I heard much about the pivots that are, or will be, or need to be made for workforce development.

People are looking at jobs and careers differently. The COVID pandemic gave more time to do some soul searching. We are seeing an increase in career tech programs as Gen Z are looking at a different way to get trained other than a four year college.

Gen Z is the largest generation ever, greater than the Boomers. They are ages 10-25 and born between 1987 and 2012.

Characteristics of the Gen Z as a workforce:

- They like a plan
- They like informed decisions
- They are entrepreneurial
- They are less likely to take us at our word. Employers may have to explain why instead of saying “just do it”.
- They can filter things much quicker to make decisions.
- They are or prefer to be mobile.

Employers are beginning to move away from a general broad scope knowledge to specific industry knowledge which has a shorter and more targeted training focus. Some employers are doing this but not enough.

Employers should pause and look at their advertised education requirements for positions including the traditional rule that a Bachelor's degree is required. There are a number of people out there that do not have a Bachelor's degree. How much does experience count in lieu of a degree? As employers are experiencing a large number of retirements they are losing experience. There needs to be a lot of on the job training programs as employers are hiring less qualified folks with fewer skills.

Coordination of training between those that hire and those that train our workforce was discussed by many. Community colleges must continue to create relationships with manufacturing. ISDs are partnering with community colleges including coordination with 4 year institutions for articulation agreements for transfer.

Are the people that do the work at the table for development of the training?

Are we ready to do hybrid, remote and face to face training with flexible scheduling options?

Areas of focus that were highlighted as needing more coordination with workforce development include Natural Resources, and Public Safety (police, fire, EMS),

“When we think of supportive services to help get the workforce to work IT should be included.”

Several comments were made regarding IT support for students and employees. Who provides the support if there are issues with IT? What services are schools and employers providing for IT support? Where is the support for those working at home? Small businesses do not typically build in IT support as part of their operating budget.

“How do we address the cost of working?”

There are barriers to working families – the COVID pandemic has made these barriers greater, but they existed prior to 2020. Access to health care, childcare, transportation, and housing are the needs that were mentioned most often regarding barriers to the workforce. The following Section E of this report (Taking Care of Our People) addresses these barriers.

E. TAKING CARE OF OUR PEOPLE: Four Focus Areas

The COVID pandemic has raised the awareness of our residents' needs. Certain needs have been underlying issues pre-pandemic that have grown more obvious and are more widely acknowledged. People have learned that their home life is so important; that time is so important.

There are four focus areas in this section:

- Health Care,
- Childcare,
- Commuting and
- Housing

These focus areas could have been embedded within the other sections of this report, but the degree to which comments were provided merit them being highlighted here. The COVID pandemic brought to the forefront the overall issues that had been simmering for quite some time. These are issues that we need to work to improve upon to recover, to move forward, and to thrive.

What I heard:

HEALTH CARE

“There is a direct link between the well-being of a community and its ability to thrive.”

There is still a large disparity in access to health care in the rural areas of the Region. It has been a challenge to bring medical professionals to some areas to live. Tele-med has been an option but the technology needed for this to work remains unreliable.

One issue that grew during the COVID pandemic relates to mental health with higher rates of child protection reports and foster care needs. It was noted that there are voluntary participant programs available.

Ambulance service is a challenge in the rural counties. Mutual aid agreements or even multi-county services would be of great benefit. I heard from a number of participants of

the frustration of having to wait for an ambulance to come across the county when there is a station just across the county line but no mutual aid arrangement. Also there is a shortage of EMTs and paramedics. As the population in the northern counties of the Region is aging, the demand for EMS response is increasing.

“The co-pay is a barrier to preventative health care services.”

One topic that was brought up a number of times is the affordability of health care for those purchasing through the Exchange where the affordability of the premium along with the deductibles may mean foregoing needed preventative care due to the out of pocket costs.

“Access to fresh food.”

Diet and nutrition and access to food is another issue Region-wide. Increased localization of the food supply would be very beneficial, especially in the rural areas. Another suggestion to address the need for fresh produce is to expand the local farmers market scenario through the use of hoop houses for year round fresh produce.

CHILDCARE

A fallout from the COVID pandemic is the reduced availability of childcare for our families. For those that can find childcare services the cost has increased. As has been well documented through the A.L.I.C.E. studies, the cost of childcare within our Region amounted to an average \$1,047 per month (pre COVID) which is 20+% of monthly expenses for a family with two children at the Survival income level (Note: 40% of households in the Region earnings are below the A.L.I.C.E. threshold to be sustainable). There are slight variations of childcare costs per County within the Region but the highest costs were in our rural counties, counties which tend to have lower hourly wages. Thoughts were expressed that one of the reasons people are not returning to the workforce is either the lack of good childcare or the realization that the cost of childcare, as one of the costs of working for those with children, requires a significant portion of income.

One solution for this issue as it relates to our workforce is to incentivize employers to participate in a childcare program to cover a percentage of cost of their employees. A number of counties in the Region are already participating in a pilot program through the State of Michigan called MI-Tri-Share, in which the cost of childcare for an employee is split three ways among the employee, the employer and the State of Michigan. There

are also companies that are looking in to establish their own childcare facilities for their workers.

COMMUTING

“We do not have the public transit infrastructure that other countries do.”

Another topic that was elevated at the start of the COVID pandemic is the issue of transportation, including commuting to work, and the cost to own and operate a vehicle. The main mode of transportation throughout our Region is by automobile. I heard throughout the listening sessions that, although the transit providers have a good relationship with each other, there is still lacking connectivity across the Region. Also based on comments I heard, some are seeing a trend of people not getting drivers licenses and are ‘self paying’ for rides to work which is also expensive.

People are stranded so to speak without affordable and reliable transportation.”

There were numerous remarks about the cost of vehicles and the financial struggle for families to keep up – making it to work on time, making it to necessary appointments including health related appointments, making it to classes and workforce training. Often times, when medical facilities are in a different county, traveling to an appointment can take up to three different transit providers with a fee for transfer to each one.

Our Transit Authorities are talking with employers to coordinate transit services for employees. An example of a success story is the STARS Pigeon Express service for employees of Blue Diamond Steel Casting, LLC, and Huron Casting Inc. This type of service could eliminate the need for a two vehicle household, thus reducing the cost of working.

HOUSING

“Remove barriers to happiness such as lack of quality housing.”

There was a huge focus on housing throughout the listening sessions. Housing availability was already a pre-pandemic issue that was identified during the development of the EMCOG 2021-2025 CEDS. The pandemic has raised the

awareness of family needs and an underlying issue pre-pandemic that has grown more obvious and is more widely acknowledged today is that family needs are more prevalent. As stated earlier, people have learned that their home life is so important; that time is so important. The opportunity to live and work at the same place is important. This change/pivot in our residents' mindset is directly impacted by the availability of housing options. It was noted that as demand for rentals increases, rents increase, further exasperating the quality housing accessibility situation.

Another aspect of housing that was brought on during the COVID pandemic is the shift of college attendance to a virtual class environment where appropriate. This shift may continue post pandemic and will impact housing inventories in towns where college students typically reside.

Other housing comments relating to health and welfare ranged from the homeless to expansion of our health care system. It was pointed out that the homeless population numbers are under-reported in the rural counties because the Point in Time (PIC) counts, which are the basis for identification of homeless populations, are not typically conducted in the rural areas. And, in the efforts to improve and expand the availability of health care services in the rural counties, there is little to no housing for doctors and nurses who, based on comments expressed, want to live in the communities in which they work.

There were some suggestions for addressing the housing situations as described, including utilizing County Land Banks and Brownfield Authorities as partners for addressing the housing needs in a given community or county. Another comment was to review the MSHDA scoring criteria which favors urban areas over rural areas.

F. INFRASTRUCTURE

“Infrastructure is the backbone of economic growth. It improves access to basic services such as clean water and electricity, creates jobs and boosts business.”

--Alok Sharma

What I heard regarding Infrastructure:

“We must look at our Capital Improvement Plans in the filter of sustainability.”

There were a number of comments about the importance of Asset Management and Capital Improvements Plans (CIPs) and that a weakness within the Region has to do with inadequate sustainability planning and readiness relating to our aging infrastructure including utilities and transportation systems. For the purpose of sustainability CIPs should also (a) address the operating impact of a project and (b) be the implementation outcome of an integrated asset management plan.

As communities make decisions about how to best utilize their ARPA funds, how many are turning to their CIPs for needed and sustainable projects? Guidance and resources are available to infrastructure providers through the Integrated Asset Management initiative of the Michigan Infrastructure Council (MIC) in combination with the TAMC (Transportation Asset Management Council), and the WAMC (Water Asset Management Council).

“Broadband is a utility; a modern version of Rural Electrification.”

Along with general discussions about infrastructure there was much discussion about the condition of broadband access within our Region. Broadband was a high level topic during the development of our 2021-2025 CEDS back in 2020. The focus then was the highly disadvantaged rural areas and the struggle to function and thrive while existing in a “remote” world...remote in that (1) due to the COVID pandemic our population functioned in a remote environment where good broadband access was necessary and (2) during the initial responses to the May 2020 disaster, the extent of the shortcomings

of broadband access became a hindrance to communications and mobilizing relief groups.

The COVID pandemic has taught us that we are not nearly as ready for what is needed in broadband. Broadband infrastructure gives many small businesses more diversity for selling product online including online auctions. The web infrastructure is a necessary tool that can complement the bricks and mortar companies to keep them resilient in the future.

There was expressed a general disappointment in the lack of local government commitment and use of ARPA funding for broadband. However, some local communities are looking at using their ARPA funds for broadband enhancements or expansion. The reality is that it costs from \$30,000 to \$50,000 per linear mile to run fiber and a smaller local government's ARPA allocation of \$60,000 to \$100,000 does not go far.

“There is the need for a lead from the Region on broadband across the Region.”

It was noted several times that the broadband solutions are being dealt with primarily at the local level and there was a desire that the Region take this on. Other smaller Regional entities/collaboratives have not identified broadband access as a priority within their respective geographic areas. Some communities are going it alone where they have the resources. We need to be proactive and have a Regional effort to accomplish the planning and integration of broadband across the entire area. The State of Michigan has received Federal money for a statewide broadband initiative. EMCOG and the other Regions in Michigan are striving to be at the table as this is developed.

Comments addressing the broadband status included the need to have the same type of setup as we currently have for the planning and hierarchy that is already in place for road CIPs and planning.

“Those without good internet access will be behind in their education and this will have a long term impact on our workforce.”

In many areas of our Region our school children bore the brunt of inadequate to no broadband access. In many cases the access was only through a cell phone. We need to be proactive in getting reliable and sustainable access to our un-served areas.⁴

⁴ “un-served versus underserved

Transit

“Moving humans are what we are good at.”

Transit services throughout the Region came up frequently for a variety of reasons. In addition to the discussion in Section E of this report, other issues were brought up including sustainability relating to the availability of parts and new vehicles and mechanics to keep our transit systems operating.

Of concern is the sustainability of transit’s long term funding. Michigan’s transit funding is a finite amount that is based on ridership. The calculation and formula for funding has not kept up with inflation. For example, what happens in Southeast Michigan and their move to a Regional transit system will impact dollars allocated to other transit providers.

Cross-transit service area operations were discussed by a number of participants as it relates to the location of employee base compared to the employer’s location and also the needs of college students who do not have vehicles. One area of discuss was the feasibility of the MBS Airport as a hub for intermodal operations for transporting people from community to community across counties.

Airports

The discussion regarding airports focused on both the smaller local airports and the MBS International Airport.

Comments about the basic utility airports in the Region included the difficulty of funding the upgrades required to be classified as a general utility airport which would then make these airports eligible for FAA funding programs. Discussions about the MBS International Airport focused on infrastructure pertaining to rail access and also improvements to the access roadways and the feasibility of the airport as a transit hub.

Rail

Our Region is home to Lake State Railway (LSR). In 2018 LSR was awarded the Railway Age Shortline of the Year award. In 2022 LSR was the recipient of the Railway Age Regional Railroad of the Year award. The U.S. Department of Transportation is expecting total freight demand to grown 30% by 2040. The expansion of commercial rail was brought up in the discussions about economic development opportunities. Also the potential of passenger rail linkages was mentioned as part of the need for multi-modal transit hubs.

“A bridge collapse is very localized geographically but it is nowhere near the damage of a failed dam.”

In the quest to invest in crumbling infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and dams, dams continue to be lower on the list. The dams are still not being seen as a high priority and the eminent threat that they are. Even a small dam failure can impact communities downstream, wear away bridge footings, and so on.

“Is refueling infrastructure a local zoning issue or something bigger than local?”

Where are we headed regarding our technology such as the need for charging stations for electric vehicles and the issue of locating these charging stations. Should we make them criteria for new development and redevelopment?

G. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

“Economic Development has become more holistic.”

*“Place making is economic development; talent attracts capital;
place making attracts talent.”*

I placed “Economic Development” at the end of this report because everything noted in the previous pages are issues and concerns that impact and create or hamper economic development. All of the previous six focus areas are the foundations upon which economic development happens.

What I heard:

“We need to bring equity to rural economic development”

There was much discussion about doing a better job of sharing of resources and capacity among the economic development organizations throughout the Region. Also frustration was expressed about the slow movement and even lack of action regarding “rural” at the State level.

*“A positive outcome of the COVID pandemic is the recognition
of small businesses by State government.”*

The majority of comments relating to economic development had to do with small businesses, including entrepreneurs. In response to Executive Order 2020-20 regarding business units identified as having to close due to COVID-19, economic developers were applauded in their ability to pivot quickly to implement it. Now many of these businesses are looking at ARPA funding as another source for recovery. There were many sources of capital over the past couple of years but these were one time grants. Will the businesses be in a position to sustain once they are on their own? Are they out of the woods? Economic developers discovered while working with small businesses to issue the COVID relief funds that a number of the small businesses they were assisting were already in trouble pre-COVID.

The lesson learned is that there is a gap in small business support from our economic development organizations (EDOs). The EDOs cannot walk away from the assistance to small businesses post pandemic. And they are not. Some EDOs are setting up programs for small business support. The support provided pre-pandemic did not entail the type of retention calls that economic developers made to large businesses and manufacturers.

“Businesses run on customers, not on grants.”

As noted above, there could be a mass exodus of businesses that should have closed before they got stimulus money; they were already in trouble and the stimulus dollars prolonged the closing. There will be a correction which we will see in the future.

How do we do a better job of connecting ideas with resources for our small businesses and entrepreneurs? An option relating to support of local business is Investment in local entrepreneurial businesses including looking at options for social capital operations which create an opportunity to be an investor in a product of interest. Examples given include kayak shops and a brewery. Right now there are no banks willing to be the fiduciary bank. There are many farmers who want to invest money and to invest that money locally, as do people who have moved away but have links to an area.

Generational transition plans were brought up and as noted, the CEDS does not address this. It is needed because if companies close, those jobs are gone. We should focus on up and comers and putting them in the transition realm for companies that are in transition rather than the companies shutting down. Community colleges may be ahead on this regarding their potential of having students who would be interested in buying a local business.

“Competitors could be suppliers.”

Supply chain issues were and still are an issue. As noted during the listening sessions, many of the shops in the Region are job shops. This is where supply could be produced locally. The COVID pandemic highlighted the challenges of access to food and the supply chain challenges.

Another aspect of supply chain is recycling of construction and manufacturing scraps as a means to address some of the supply chain issues. It also creates jobs.

“We are so dependent on large scale processors. What should we be doing on a local basis: small milling operations for flour; specialty crops.”

“Taste the local difference.”

“Urban agriculture is an option for providing local fresh food.”

The COVID pandemic highlighted the challenges of access to food and the supply chain challenges. Supply chain was part of the discussion about our strong agriculture market and what is grown here versus what is processed here.

How do we hyper-localize our local food supply? How do we create a relationship with the local producer? How do we make what we need here? We cannot compete with the big box stores for supply. It was noted that the Northern counties are not at the top of the food chain as the big box stores are getting the supply.

In addition to statements of bringing in companies to the Region to produce products here where they are grown it was stated that we also have discussions with the agriculture processing facilities that are here about the feasibility of offering small scale deliveries instead of bulk deliveries.

Other comments and ideas include the use of local connections for ingredients for food production, whether small or larger operations. Relating to this would be the expansion of Specialty Crop Block Grants and growth of related apprenticeships.

We have a short growing season here. Development of innovations and food preservation would be useful.

“Invest in good solid things, not just the shiny new penny.”

As the Region pivots from the impacts of the COVID pandemic concern was raised about how to support our industrial parks as the Certified Industrial Parks initiative is no longer being offered.

A number of participants noted that we are and will continue to train our workforce locally. For this reason we need to bring in some high tech companies to hire those that are getting the training locally rather than seeing those trained here leaving for elsewhere for jobs.

Regarding the freight rail service in our Region comments include having a greater recognition of our rail services and increased integration of rail infrastructure in to the RFI site selection responses. In particular, this integration would include the identification of rail-accessible properties for development and marketing to industries looking to locate on rail, ***even to those who might have a need*** rather than expressing a need.

And finally, there were recent announcements from the State to have big industrial sites ready. The overall consensus from those who talked about business and manufacturing recruitment was that our Region's growth will come from small and medium manufacturing and this will serve Michigan well.

Appendix A: EMCOG Listening Sessions Participants

Natasha Allen	Michigan Works Association
Rex Anslie	MI DNR
Cathy Baase, MD	Michigan Health Improvement Alliance (MiHIA)
Brenda Bachelder	MiWorks Region 7B/Roscommon County EDC
Robert Balzer	Consumers Energy
Heather Bauman	The WELL Outreach
Jerry Becker	Clare County Emergency Management
Ed Bergeron	Private Sector/Roscommon County EDC
Maja Bolanowska	Midland Area Transportation Study (MATS)
Mike Bowers	Arenac & Ogemaw County Emergency Mgmt.
Sean Bowers	Iosco County Emergency Management
Zachery Branigan	Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy
Cody Brodie	EMCOG
Gloria Brooks	Develop Iosco
Stephanie Buffman	Arenac County EDC and Michigan Works
Tracy Byard	Clare County
James Canders	MBS Airport
Jennifer Carroll	Delta College Corporate Services
Jamie Caruthers-Soboleski	Iosco County
Terri Close	Hampton Township
JoAnn Crary	Saginaw Future Inc.
John Dantzer	City of West Branch
Todd Dickerson	Oscoda Township
Zygy Dworzecki	Tuscola County Planning Commission
Steve Erickson	Tuscola County EDC
Bill Ernat	EMCOG
Matt Felan	Great Lakes Bay Regional Alliance
Jamie Forbes	Saginaw Transit Authority & Regional Services
Sue Fortune	EMCOG
Tony Fox	SBDC Mid Michigan
Nicole Frost	Isabella County
Meaghan Gass	MSU Extension, MI Sea Grant
Lou Glazer	Michigan Future Inc.
Avram Golden	Small Business owner/Developer
Scott Govitz	Mid Michigan College
Wayne Hofmann	Wade Trim
Brad Jenson	Huron Pines
Steve Jonas	Saginaw Future Inc.
Jacob Kain	City of Mt. Pleasant
Mark Justin	Gladwin County

Appendix A: EMCOG Listening Sessions Participants

Jacob Kaine	City of Mt Pleasant
Yvette Keast	Sacred Heart Mission
Mike Kelly	Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative
Trevor Keyes	Bay Future, Inc.
Sarah Kile	211 NE Michigan
Jon Lynch	Three Rivers Corporation
Demetra Manley	Saginaw Area Transportation Authority
Keith Markstrom	Bay Veterans Foundation
Kathy Methner	Roscommon County EDC & Brownfield Authority
Diane Middleton	Midland Business Alliance
Karen Moore	Gladwin County Commission
Kati Mora	Middle Michigan Development Corporation
Bill Mrdeza	City of Mt Pleasant
Kathleen Murphy	Iosco County
Rodney Nanny	Union Township
Samantha Nellis	Huron Pines
Tim Nieporte	Isabella County
Michael Nunneley	GLB and NE Region SBDC
Samantha Nellis	Huron Pines
Donald Jay O'Farrell	Iosco County
Pam O'Laughlin	Middle MI Dev Corp– Clare County; MichiganWorks
Carl Ostentoski	Huron & Sanilac Counties Economic Development
Lynn Parker	EMCOG
Sean Pengelly *	Lake State Rail Company
Debbie Powell	Village of Cass City
Sheryl Presler	Clare-Gladwin RESD
Chris Rishko	Great Lakes Bay Michigan Works
Erik Rodriguez	Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe
Beth Roszalycki	GLB & NE Region SBDC
Annette Rummel	GLB Visitors and Convention Bureau
Brian Smith	Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe
Kathleen Sperling	DHHS – Arenac and Bay Counties
Tony Stamas	Midland Business Alliance
Erin Strang	CMURC
Heidi Tracy	Michigan Health Improvement Alliance (MiHIA)
Rich Van Tol	Bay-Arenac ISD
Joel Vernier	Secord Township
Nicole Wilson	Midland Business Alliance
William Wright *	Citizen at Large, environmental and transit focus
Kasey Zehner *	Greater Gratiot Development Corporation
Cassie Zimmerman	Saginaw Future Inc.

* provided written comments

Appendix B: EMCOG Regional Economic Development (RED) Team

Natasha Allen	Michigan Works Association
Brenda Bachelder	MiWorks Region 7B/Roscommon Co EDC
Robert Balzer, Chair	Private Sector - Consumers Energy
Gloria Brooks	Develop Iosco
Stephanie Buffman	Arenac County EDC and Michigan Works
Terri Close	Hampton Township
Todd Dickerson	Oscoda Township Economic Development
Zygy Dworzecki	Tuscola County EDC Board
Steve Erickson	Tuscola County EDC
Jamie Forbes	Saginaw Transit Authority & Regional Services
Tony Fox	SBDC Mid Michigan
Meaghan Gass	MSU Extension, MI Sea Grant
Scott Govitz	Mid Michigan College
Eric Johnson	Clare-Gladwin RESD
Steve Jonas	Saginaw Future Inc.
John Kacznski	Saginaw Valley State University
Trevor Keyes	Bay Future, Inc.
Demetra Manley	Saginaw Area Transportation Authority
Jim McBryde	Middle MI Development Corporation
Kathy Methner	Roscommon Co EDC Board Chair, Brownfield Authority
Bill Mrdeza	City of Mt Pleasant
Tim Nieporte/Nicole Frost - Alternate	Isabella County
Michael Nunneley/Beth Roszatycki - Alternate	GLB and NE Region SBDC
Donald Jay O'Farrell	Iosco County
Pam O'Laughlin	Middle MI Dev Corp– Clare County; MichiganWorks
Carl Ostentoski	Huron & Sanilac Counties Economic Development
Erik Rodriguez/Brian Smith - Alternate	Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe
Annette Rummel	GLB Visitors and Convention Bureau
Rich Van Tol	Bay-Arenac ISD
Heidi Tracy/Cathy Baase MD- Alternate	Michigan Health Improvement Alliance (MIHIA)
Joel Vernier	Secord Township
Nicole Wilson	Midland Business Alliance
William Wright	Citizen at Large, environmental and transit focus
Kasey Zehner	Greater Gratiot Development Corporation