



CHEBOYGAN COUNTY MASTER PLAN

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NATURAL RESOURCES SPECIAL TOPICS

Meeting Date: April 11, 2012

Staff Report

There were 33 people in attendance at the Doris Reid Center conference room to discuss the current state and future of Natural Resources in Cheboygan County. This was a meeting that was part of the Cheboygan County Master Planning process. Public notices were posted and an article was written in the Cheboygan Tribune on April 7th inviting the public to the meeting. Invitations were made to representatives of local lake associations, townships, DNR, and recreational trail user groups. A summary of the Master Planning process and a list of framing questions for the discussion were provided on the County's website and sent to all who RSVP'd for the meeting. The conversation was facilitated by Steve Schnell, Community Development Director, and notes were taken by Rick Deuell of NEMCOG. Introductions were made by each individual in attendance.

Natural resources and related topics are mentioned as a required element of a Master Plan. The Planning Enabling Act (PA 33 of 2008) requires that a master plan include a land use plan that consists of "classification and allocation of land for agriculture, ...recreation, ...soil conservation, forests, woodlots, open space, wildlife refuges...". Also mentioned are waterways and waterfront developments, pollution prevention, flood prevention and drainage. These topics, among others, are to be included insofar as they can be considered as pertinent to the future development of the county.

Introduction of the day's topic included some brief discussion about this plan being an umbrella plan that covers many topics and works to incorporate other plans and goals and objectives.

Themes of the discussion

The framing questions were used loosely to guide conversation. The conversation followed mostly topics as they were raised by those in attendance. There were four topic areas that the conversation touched upon. These topic areas were:

- water quality and the importance of water for Cheboygan County's future
- natural gas extraction and associated "fracking"
- the Pigeon River Country
- the role of Natural Resources as an economic development tool

Comments on these four themes varied widely between the concern that there is too much regulation in the county and there not being enough regulation and concern that the quality of the County's natural resources is declining. There appeared to be consensus that measures should be taken to protect our valuable natural resources, but the question of who should manage those resources, how they should be managed, and to what extent was seen differently by attendees.

It was also agreed upon by most in attendance that the natural assets in the county need to be promoted better. Also, many agreed that very few people really know what is available and few are knowledgeable of the condition of those natural assets.

WATER QUALITY

There is a long history of water quality monitoring in the northern part of Michigan as a result of efforts of local lake associations, public and private agencies. According to Grenetta Thomassey of the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, water quality in Cheboygan County is high and aquatic ecosystems in the county are in reasonably good shape based on these studies. She mentioned that there are three areas of increasing stress on the water systems in the county. Grenetta stated that there is increasing nutrient pollution from agricultural practices and poorly maintained residential septic systems. She also mentioned that there is a gradual loss of riparian vegetation which causes poorer fish habitats, shoreline erosion, and spread of invasive species. Some attendees mentioned concern about the contamination associated with road maintenance. They mentioned the poor conditions of river crossings and associated culverts which cause sedimentation in the rivers and streams.

A number of years ago there was a zoning ordinance amendment which removed private land owners from a zoning district that was considered to be too restrictive due to steep slope regulations. It was mentioned that this should not be forgotten and other overly restrictive zoning requirements reviewed in relation to waterfront regulations. There was concern expressed about making drastic changes in regulations such as shoreline setbacks that might impact private property rights and property values. While some expressed concern about the need for increase setbacks and natural shorelines to preserve fish habitat that impacts economic viability of their properties in proximity to quality fishing spots.

NATURAL GAS DRILLING AND FRACKING

The discussion on “fracking” in Cheboygan County focused on what local governments can and can’t do to mitigate the impacts on land use and natural resources. Most aspects of this activity is regulated by the state of Michigan and consensus was that Michigan is actually doing a good job regulating and monitoring drilling sites. Local governments can influence somewhat the buffering that would be required around a drilling site. There seemed to be some interest in exploring buffering regulations such as fencing or setbacks but to ensure that they do not deter drilling and its economic development benefits for this County.

Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council’s Grenetta Thomassey mentioned that they keep tabs on fracking operations in the region and have confidence that the state of Michigan currently monitors these operations very well and have done a great job at minimizing potentially negative impacts on our water resources. One concern expressed about these operations in a recent survey was that our emergency responders did not feel they knew enough about the operations.

There was some concern that the Michigan regulations may not adequately address the newer, deeper wells in the Utica-Collingwood formations that exist in Cheboygan County. But some attendees expressed their belief that natural gas exploration presents a significant and positive economic potential for the county.

Other resources on this topic:

- [Michigan DEQ Office of Oil, Gas, and Minerals website](#) for drilling permits and information on fracking and oil & gas drilling
- DEQ website showing [current drilling units](#) in Cheboygan County
- [Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council's website \(www.watershedcouncil.org\)](http://www.watershedcouncil.org) more information on [hydraulic fracturing](#)

PIGEON RIVER COUNTRY

The Pigeon River Country (PRC) is a Special Management Unit under the DNR. Scott Whitcomb is the unit manager of the PRC and was in attendance. He was asked to speak about the uniqueness of this area and the challenges faced recently and concern that authority to manage the PRC locally was being taken away by legislators. Scott mentioned that the PRC is over 100,000 acres of forest with elk, bobcat, bear, and a strong recreation focus. This area is the most restrictively managed in the state of Michigan as part of the goals of the management plan. Quiet recreation is the priority when making management decisions for this area. Scott Whitcomb mentioned that wildlife habitat maintenance is the primary focus of the PRC and that there are federal funds involved in PRC management which dictate somewhat how it is used.

According to Scott, input received on the management planning sessions and in general are mostly from Otsego County entities. Fewer municipalities and other entities in Cheboygan County get involved. Scott mentioned that there are opportunities for more communities to make themselves gateways to the PRC and take economic advantage of this park and the tourist draw that it is.

Some in attendance expressed concern that it is too restrictive and this is why there aren't more people using the park. It was suggested that ATV's and horseback riding can provide more people who are less able to do quiet sports access to the PRC.

Some expressed a concern that some areas should be kept as quiet areas and others areas might be more appropriate for motorized sports. Horseback riding in the PRC is currently part of legislative action and part of some debate.

NATURAL RESOURCES & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

There were many ideas about how to better utilize our natural resources for economic gain. Generally there appeared to be an understanding that not very many people in the community are aware of how many economically valuable natural resources exist in Cheboygan County. Here is a list of the ideas shared:

- Lower campground fees to bring more people back to camping.
- Promote hunting opportunities in the county.
- Restore streams for fish habitat and improved fishing.
- Re-open gravel pits that were closed recently by the state.
- Improve water quality to allow for growth in sport fishing, but retain fish planting services.
- Natural gas drilling is one of our biggest natural resources and should be facilitated.

- Raise awareness of timber resources and opportunities for wood manufacturing and small wood industries (ex: handmade furniture and similar businesses that use raw wood). Most wood industries are outside the county and there should be more here within the county.
- Encourage more niche agriculture production.
- Explore local USDA-certified processing facility for local farm products.
- Promote tourism and advertise forests, lakes, and recreational trails.
- Utilize the principles of the New Economy, understanding that people and their businesses locate where there is a higher quality of life.
- Promote the Earth Day celebration.
- Visitors Bureaus need to promote more of the natural resources recreation opportunities especially in the shoulder season.
- Utilize natural resources themes when promoting the Sense of Place project and other placemaking efforts.
- Emphasize marketing efforts in the south part of the county and extensive natural resource base there.
- Collaborate when marketing the area.
- Establish more kayak launches and portages.
- Use more road ends for public access.
- Raise awareness of the opportunities for more maple syrup production in the area.
- Use both private and public organizations to promote natural resources.
- Promote the elk herd viewing. (Elk herd tour most popular of tours provided by Little Traverse Conservancy.)

Generally, the attendees were very positive about the potential for natural resources in the county to be a driver of economic development. Again the theme was that the county is currently in poor economic shape. Also, comments were made that regulations that could create barriers to economic development should be minimized, but that the water quality, woods, and trails are economic development drivers and must be maintained. As with the other topics, there appears to be a need to build awareness of what the county has going for it in the area of economic development from natural resources. No more should residents of Cheboygan County take for granted the resources that are here.

Collaboration was mentioned a few times citing existing successes for chambers of commerce and the County's Sense of Place project as building awareness and capacity for more economic opportunities. Currently, the city of Cheboygan is building on the new "Gateway to the Waterway" logo developed as part of the Sense of Place project.

OTHER RESOURCES

All attendees were asked to provide information on other plans, documents or websites that could be integrated into this plan and others. Some of those resources for the water quality issues were included previously in the summary of that topic. Others include:

- Soil Conservation District Office – Tim Paulus, board member, mentioned that they are looking for projects and could assist with such projects as reestablishing road end use by the public, which was mentioned at the meeting.
- Little Traverse Conservancy – They provide grant assistance, Natural Resource Trust Fund grant applications, they help write grants and use master plans and other planning

- documents to support grant projects. They also work with local communities and private land owners who want to preserve their land.
- Tuscarora Township – The township has their own Master Plan and would like to make sure it is recognized and referenced in detail in the upcoming County Master Plan.
 - The Cycle Conservation Club (CCC) has an extensive trail network and provide materials for those considering trail use and the sport of motorcycling.

Staff Summary

There was much discussion about how to strike the right balance between allowing people to do what they want with their property and regulating use of private property in order to manage natural resources for the good of all. Although a consensus was not necessarily sought at this meeting, a few things can be said of the tone of the discussion. It is apparent that those in attendance understand the county has very valuable natural resources. The people could do more to take advantage of those natural resources. County stakeholders need to know more about these resources and how to utilize them without depleting them and there needs to be more education about what we have and the state of our natural resources. Personal choice based on thorough knowledge of the natural resources is the preferred method of natural resource maintenance and utilization.

Just as any business needs to know how many and the quality of resources it has to create its widgets, the county needs to know the state of some of its greatest economic assets so that they remain a viable economic asset. In the existing zoning ordinance, there are requirements for the county planning staff to annually educate the public on waterfront resources. More education could assist in maintaining the county's natural resources and withhold the need for more regulations. The preferred method is to monitor the state of the county's natural resources, ensure that there is education of the public to make proper choices, and to use regulations only when necessary.

Staff recommendations from this meeting are to:

- Establish a land use goal that seeks a non-intrusive process of seeking information periodically on the state of Natural Resources in Cheboygan County, providing education to general public to assist in private property owners' decision making, and to establish regulations when there is a clear threat to the quality and supply of Natural Resources in the County.
- Include an educational component in the Master Plan with the goal of remaining informed on the state of the County's natural resources.
- Provide annual or at least periodic monitoring reports to the Planning Commission and to the general public on the state of natural resources in the County. Utilize existing reports of other agencies such as DNR, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, Health Department and other health and natural resource-based agencies.
- Provide material to applicants considering waterfront construction through the soil erosion permitting process that assists homeowners to be aware of the impacts of their project.
- Utilize information gathered on Natural Resources and make available for those who work to promote these for economic development.