

Port cities collaborative

Michigan communities look to maritime heritage to energize economy

Forty Michigan port cities share a common vision—to see the state branded as a premier maritime destination within the Midwest and beyond.

With 3,722 miles of coastline, more than any state except Alaska, a strong maritime legacy and active waterfronts, the state's port towns are positioned to drive a new wave of economic growth.

"Communities need to think of not only road gateways, but the water gateways as well," said Catherine Ballard, Chief of Michigan's Coastal Management Program.

Cities onboard are home to ports serving both commercial and recreational markets. These historic hubs of economic activity represent untapped potential in the 21st Century economy. Many ports have in place marinas and waterside parks and serve as venues for festivals and events, attracting a broad spectrum of visitors.

The two-year-old statewide collaborative partners the core communities with state agencies to develop strategies to bolster economic development, provide water education, preserve assets and resources and promote port-friendly legislation. It creates rare partnerships, uniting cities like Frankfort, population 1,500, to metropolitan Detroit in maximizing blueway benefits. Detroit's port currently provides 10,000 direct and indirect jobs and contributes \$150 million to the city's economy. The idea of multiplying benefits from existing resources is an attractive proposition to communities large and small.

"We all have an interest in enhancing recreational opportunity for the waterfront," said John Kerr, Director of Economic Development for the Detroit-Wayne County Port Authority. "We all are interested in tourism, have dredging needs, infrastructure to preserve and the need to learn how to incorporate neighborhoods into the waterfront."

Lack of a statewide port authority fragmented stakeholders in the past, stymieing efforts to promote common interests, according to Kerr, who supports the port authority's participation in the collaborative.

"As the only port authority in Michigan, our role with the Port Cities is not just to

advocate for the Port of Detroit, although it is our primary role, but to be a voice and provide leadership for all the state," he said.

Not only has this initiative brought together diverse communities, it creates some atypical government alliances. Collaborating agencies include the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, the governor's office, Travel Michigan, the Department of History, Arts and Libraries and the Michigan Housing Development Authority.

"This is really about getting beyond the community and thinking of ourselves as a state," said Sandra Clark, Director of the Michigan Historical Center.

The collaborative draws a holistic approach furthering, among other things, geotourism, a brand of tourism focused on sustaining or enhancing the geographical character and culture of a place. According to Clark, few things better define the State of Michigan than the inland seas and its maritime heritage.

"The thing that makes Michigan different from anywhere else in the world is the Great Lakes," she said.

Abundant maritime assets. Among the state's maritime assets are more than 80

harbors, 116 lighthouses, 15 maritime museums and Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, the first freshwater sanctuary. Thunder Bay encompasses 448 miles of northwest Lake Huron and is home base for the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) research center at Alpena. More than 50,000 people have visited its hands-on educational center since its opening last summer. The sanctuary contains 200 of the best preserved shipwrecks in the world and the fact that it has boosted tourism, drawing national and international attention, hasn't gone unnoticed. It is an essential consideration in a bill introduced by U.S. Congressman Bart Stupak (D-Menominee) in February. The proposed legislation would expand the sanctuary eightfold to include 3,772 square miles. Michigan Senator Carl Levin introduced a similar bill in the Senate.

Thunder Bay embodies the collaborative vision in several ways, including public education of the water resource, recreation and the greening of the Michigan experience with its operation of the *Huron Explorer*, the first U.S. research ship to operate on bio-fuels. Other state mea-

sures to create experiences for the eco-conscious tourist include the introduction of geothermal energy at some state park facilities and the new shower building at Grand Haven State Park, which employs both renewable energy and energy conservation to provide a prototype for future park construction.

As a group, the collaborative's collective voice is expected to forward the organization's mission by empowering communities to meet common goals, advance marine-related legislation, better integrate ports into the state's transportation system and to promote innovation like Manistee County's request for a federal Maritime Highway Corridor designation. The new marine highway would eliminate land congestion by ferrying truck traffic from Manistee's deepwater port to Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Short sea shipping and the introduction of Great Lakes cruise ship lines are other options on the table for Michigan, all with the potential to bring new vitality to harbors and redefine the working waterfront.

"It isn't just about industry or shipping or borders, but average people," said Mark Breederland, Michigan Sea Grant Extension Educator. "The coasts are linear markets for the people we boat in."

Developing new products. Developing high quality marine experiences for economic development will call for new products, according to collaborative strategies. Vice President of Sales and Marketing for the Traverse City Convention and Visitors Bureau, Jack Schripsema, is a member

of the collaborative's action team working to produce a detailed statewide port cities inventory. He would like to see a push to attract domestic and international cruise lines and position Traverse City as a cruise line destination.

"I believe we've only scratched the surface of potential for cruise ships on the Great Lakes," Schripsema said.

Enhancing maritime economic activity also means taking a close look at asset preservation, especially for the state's aging marinas, according to Breederland.

"No one has the money to build new marinas," he said. "If we lose the existing ones, chances are new ones won't get built. It's in our best interest to preserve the ones we have."

Following the completion of organizational planning, the collaborative will adopt a working model as its next step.

"It's still in the early stages, but to bring everyone together to focus on the maritime assets of Michigan will benefit us all," said Jill Foreman, Tourism Manager of the

Muskegon Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The community joined the collaborative at the prompting of Muskegon County Museum staff. Muskegon CVB now partners with the museum and the Great Lakes Naval Museum to promote both collaborative and community goals. The local partners launched a website (www.portofmuskegon.org) earlier this year to tout its Lake Michigan waterfront resources and raise awareness of the Port Cities Collaborative. Group marketing may be the next step for Muskegon participants.

"We're hoping to work with founding community groups and looking at marketing with the State of Michigan," Foreman said.

While the impact is yet unseen, the collaborative's partnership marks a turning point in how stakeholders promote the state's maritime assets.

"The ability for us to meet and work together is a great show of cooperation," she said. "We're looking for good things to come of it."

Sally Barber ■

Michigan Port Cities Collaborative Core Communities

Criteria

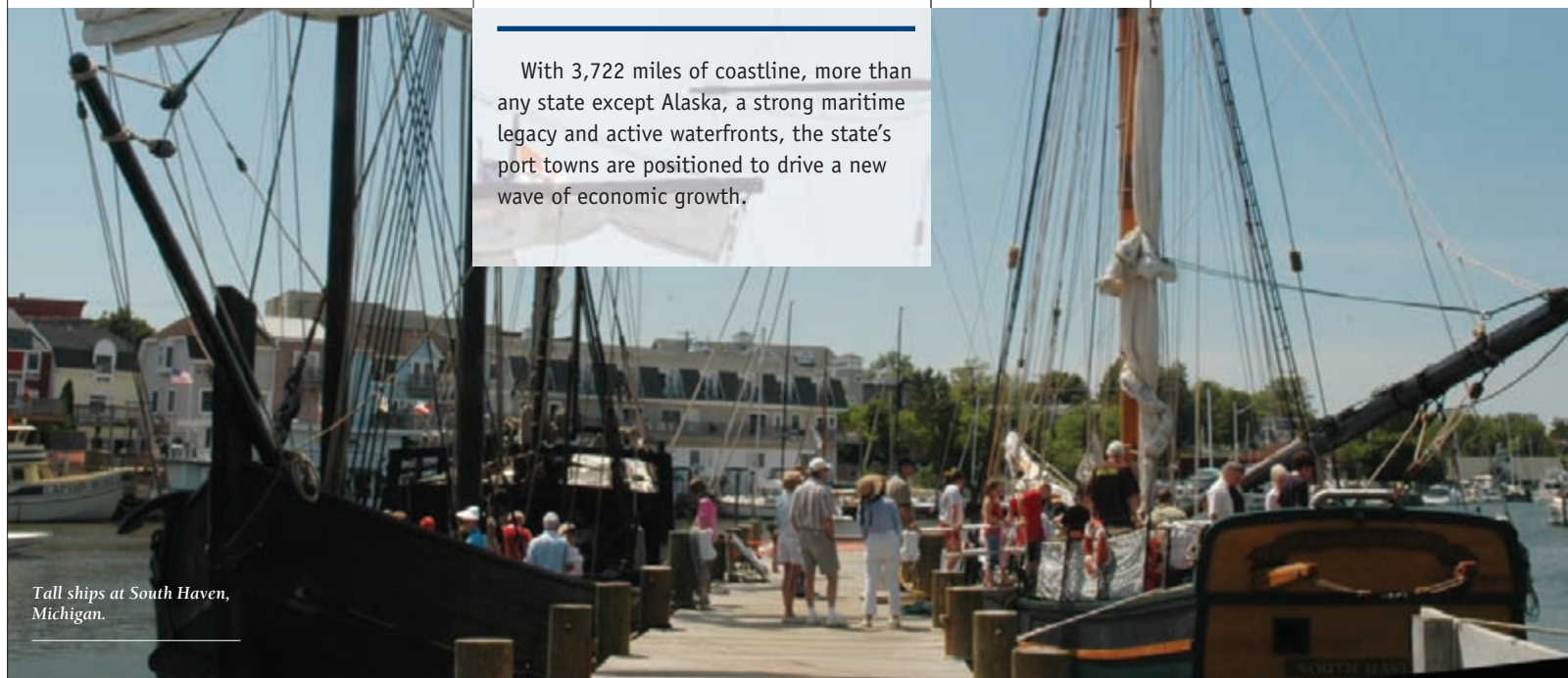
- Participants located on the coast or have direct access
- Provide waterfront access to the public
- Can accommodate deep draft vessels or tall ships
- Have or had commercial port activity

Port Cities

- Alpena
- Au Gres
- Bay City
- Benton Harbor
- Cedarville
- Charlevoix
- Cheboygan
- De Tour
- Detroit/Wayne County (Detroit, Ecorse, River Rouge, Trenton, Wyandotte)
- East Tawas
- Escanaba
- Essexville
- Frankfort/Elberta
- Grand Haven
- Harbor Beach
- Holland
- Houghton/Hancock
- Ludington
- Mackinaw City
- Manistee
- Marine City
- Marquette
- Marysville
- Monroe
- Munising
- Muskegon
- Ontonagon
- Petoskey
- Port Huron
- Presque Isle
- Rogers City
- Saginaw
- Saugatuck
- Sault Ste. Marie
- South Haven
- St Clair
- St. Ignace
- St. Joseph
- Tawas City
- Traverse City

Michigan Maritime Assets

- More than 80 harbors
- Soo Locks
- 15 museums featuring extensive maritime collections
- 116 lighthouses
- Historic shipwrecks preserved by the cold Great Lakes waters
- 12 underwater preserves including Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, the first freshwater marine sanctuary
- Charters, ferries, cruise and tour boats
- Performing artists focused on maritime heritage
- Maritime art galleries
- Community festivals celebrating maritime legacy
- Maritime art galleries
- Harborwalks
- Fish hatcheries



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Tall ships at South Haven, Michigan.