

CEDS 2024-2028

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the West Michigan Shoreline Economic Development District

Lake, Mason, Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana Counties



West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission

The West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission is a federal and state designated regional planning and development agency serving 120 local governments in Lake, Mason, Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana counties.

The mission of the Commission is to promote and foster regional development in West Michigan through cooperation amongst local governments and other regional partners.

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Introduction

West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission (WMSRDC) is an Economic Development District (EDD) of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA). This designation enables communities within the district to remain eligible for EDA funding programs. As the region's EDD, the WMSRDC is responsible for developing and maintaining a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) designed to identify regional priorities for economic and community development. Since 1966, EDA has made over 55 investments in the WMSRDC region, including industrial park and infrastructure improvements, technology centers, technical assistance, and loans.

The West Michigan Shoreline EDD consists of Lake, Mason, Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana counties. The WMSRDC maintains a number of other regional programs as well, many of which extend beyond these five counties. The mission of WMSRDC is to promote and foster regional development in West Michigan through cooperation amongst local governments and other regional partners. WMSRDC provides services and administers programs in transportation planning, economic development, environmental planning, community development, local government services, and other special projects.

A CEDS can help establish and maintain a robust economic ecosystem by helping to build regional economic development capacity that contributes to individual, business, and community success. The CEDS process provides a vehicle for individuals, organizations, local governments, institutes of learning, and private industries to engage in meaningful conversations and debate about what efforts and initiatives would best serve economic development in the region.

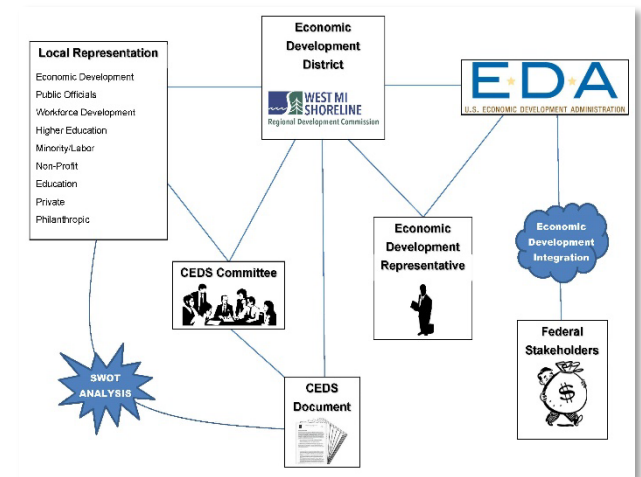
CEDS Process

This plan follows CEDS development guidelines released by EDA in April 2023. **The CEDS is a strategy-driven plan for regional economic development and is the result of a regionally-owned planning process designed to build capacity and guide the economic prosperity and responsiveness of a region.** Development of the CEDS is led by WMSRDC, overseen by the CEDS Strategy Committee, and approved by the WMSRDC Board. The CEDS Strategy Committee meets quarterly and includes representatives from throughout the WMSRDC region.

This CEDS is a significant update of the previous plan which was effective from 2019 through 2023. Notable revisions of this edition, which will span 2024 through 2028, include a thorough regional SWOT analysis process, updated demographics, incorporation of the WMSRDC

Pandemic Response and Recovery Plan, and an overhauled action plan chapter.

Development of this plan began in the winter of 2022-2023 with the regional SWOT analysis, which entailed focus groups held in each of the district's five member counties. The proposed draft was completed in early 2024; made available for a 30-day review period in February 2024; and approved by the WMSRDC Board in March 2024.



The CEDS Cycle

Summary Background

The WMSRDC Economic Development District (EDD) is geographically rural, although much of the population is concentrated in the urbanized Muskegon metropolitan area. Agriculture, tourism, retail, and manufacturing are the primary economic sectors of the region.



Environment

The district is in West Michigan along the Lake Michigan shoreline. The counties of Mason, Muskegon, and Oceana share a western border with the “big lake.” Due to the influence of Lake Michigan, temperature extremes are typically moderated and annual precipitation, especially snowfall, is enhanced. This creates a unique

climate which allows for a longer growing season than areas away from the lake.

Unique landscapes in the district include Great Lakes coastal plains, shoreline sand dunes, inland prairies and savannahs, and various types of forests.

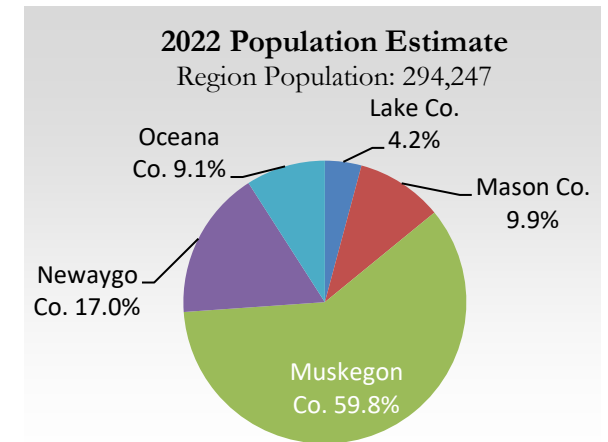
The region is well-known for its agriculture, expansive forests, freshwater resources, and bountiful outdoor recreation opportunities. Major river systems include the Muskegon, Pentwater, Pere Marquette, and White; all of which include some of the most pristine and flourishing cold-water streams in the Midwest.

Compared to other areas of the United States, the district is relatively safe from natural hazards. Winter weather, severe winds, flooding, wildfire, and extreme temperatures are the most threatening natural hazards cited in local hazard mitigation plans.

Population Centers

The industrial and commercial hub of the district is the Muskegon metropolitan area, where about sixty percent of the district’s population resides. Ludington, the county seat of Mason County, serves as the secondary nucleus of the region. Other communities that serve as commercial and/or industrial centers for the surrounding area are the cities of Fremont, Newaygo, and White Cloud in

Newaygo County, the White Lake area in northern Muskegon County, the City of Hart and Village of Shelby in Oceana County, and the Village of Baldwin in Lake County. There are 120 local units of government in the region.



Source: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Socio-Economics

The median age and poverty rate in the region are greater than the national averages. Over forty percent of the district’s population either lives within the ALICE threshold or in poverty. ALICE, a United Way acronym which stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, represents the number of individuals and families who are working, but are unable to afford the basic necessities of housing, food, childcare, and transportation. Affordable housing and good quality housing are in short supply in many areas throughout the district,

hampering efforts to attract workforce and expand businesses. These trends mirror the conclusions of a 2017 report from the Home Builders Association of Michigan regarding housing in the state.

Industry Clusters

Thanks in part to its rich history of manufacturing, the district maintains a manufacturing supercluster that has close ties to the automotive, aerospace, chemical, and food processing industries. Leading employment industries in the district include manufacturing (21.1%), retail trade (17.0%), health care & social services (13.4%), and accommodation & food services (10.4%).

Recreation & Tourism

Economic activity from recreation and tourism in the district is often derived from, and dependent upon, the beauty and quality of the area’s lakes, rivers, and forests. Much of the region is heavily reliant upon tourism and recreation during the warm months from late spring through early fall. Opportunities for recreation and tourism exist in the other seasons as well, but to a much lesser extent. Such opportunities include agri-tourism and hunting in the fall, and snowmobiling and ice fishing in the winter. Due to the seasonal nature of this sector, annual economic statistics tend to understate its value and importance to the district.

The Manistee National Forest covers a large portion of the area, and there are seven state parks and two designated state recreation areas spread throughout the region. These assets provide numerous opportunities for outdoor recreation, including camping, hiking, fishing, and off-roading. Local public entities and private businesses also offer an abundance of high quality recreation opportunities.

Lakes and rivers provide ideal settings to play and relax; from over 75 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline and sandy beaches, to world-class trout streams. Natural harbors along Lake Michigan provide recreational boating access to the Great Lakes via Mona Lake, Muskegon Lake and White Lake in Muskegon County; Pentwater Lake in Oceana County; and Pere Marquette Lake in Mason County.

Non-motorized trails are emerging as a strength of the region’s tourism strategy. One example is the 22-mile Hart-Montague Trail State Park, which connects the City of Hart to the City of Montague. In Newaygo County, efforts are underway to complete Michigan’s Dragon Trail at Hardy Dam, which is becoming a major attraction for world-class mountain biking, hiking, and running experiences. The North Country Trail, which was designated as a unit of the National Park System in 2023, also wanders through Lake, Mason, and Newaygo counties.

Off-road vehicle (ORV) riding is yet another unique and growing attraction within the district. State-designated ORV trails exist in all five counties of the district, highlighted by a prevalence of trails in Lake County and the Silver Lake Sand Dunes in Oceana County.

In addition to outdoor recreation, the region supports a strong collection of cultural and historical attractions including museums, playhouses, festivals, agri-tourism, Victorian Era architecture, and historic downtowns.

Agriculture

Agriculture and food processing are important components of the district’s economy and identity. Many rural communities in the region are heavily influenced by the economics and culture surrounding agricultural endeavors.

Agriculture in the District
2012 to 2017

- Market value of products sold **increased 3.6%** 🟢
- Total acreage in farms **increased 0.18%** 🟢
- Average farm size **increased 4.5%** 🟢
- The number of farms **decreased 6.52%** 🔴

Source: [Census of Agriculture \(2012, 2017\)](#)

According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, Newaygo County led the district in number of farms, land in farms, and market value of products sold. Oceana County was second in those categories. Together, these two counties

produced 70% of the district's total market value of products sold.

Built Infrastructure Assets

Most of the cities within the district operate water distribution and wastewater collection systems. Age and lack of capacity are frequently cited as current or future economic threats. One exception to this is the Muskegon County Wastewater System, which is one of the most advanced wastewater treatment facilities in the nation. The total capacity of the facility is 46 million gallons per day. However, the county's largest wastewater user closed in 2009 and the system has since remained underutilized. In addition, the City of Hart received an EDA grant in 2021 for wastewater system improvements.



Muskegon County Wastewater Treatment Plant

Lack of access to gas and electric utilities in rural areas has been considered a limitation to economic development in rural areas of the

district, such as Lake County, where large assemblies of federal and state owned land already limits the pool of potential areas for development. Consumers Energy has a strong presence in the district, even after the decommissioning of a coal power plant in Muskegon in 2016. In Mason County, there is the Ludington Pumped Storage Plant as well as the Lake Winds Energy Park. In Newaygo County, Consumers Energy owns and operates the Croton and Hardy hydroelectric dams on the Muskegon River. There is one other hydroelectric dam in the district, the Hart Hydroelectric Dam, which is owned and operated by the City of Hart in Oceana County. Great Lakes Energy Co-Op also has a significant service area in the district, mainly northward from northern Muskegon County.

DTE Energy is the primary provider of utility natural gas. Access to this service isn't necessarily available throughout the district, though it has been improving.

Infrastructure failure is consistently cited in local hazard mitigation plans as one of the top threats to life, property, and the economy. In Newaygo County, flooding/dam failure is considered the number one hazard threat due to the two large dams on the Muskegon River.

Transportation Infrastructure

Air, water, and land modes of transportation are available within the WMSRDC region. Each

county contains at least one state or federal highway that runs north/south and one that runs east/west. Overall, highways within the district are considered to be assets. Still, some rural areas of the district, such as northeast Oceana County, lie more than 10 miles from the nearest highway. There are three transit agencies in the district: Muskegon Area Transit System in Muskegon County; Ludington Mass Transit Authority in Mason County; and Yates Dial-A-Ride in Lake County.

Deep-water harbors in Muskegon and Ludington offer water-borne shipping access to the Great Lakes. Muskegon Lake boasts the largest deep-water port in West Michigan and has the capacity and port facilities to accommodate the largest ships on the Great Lakes. According to the US Army Corps of Engineers in 2018, Muskegon Harbor annually handles 773,000 tons of cargo including limestone, sand/gravel, clay, salt, and cement. Ludington Harbor annually handles 473,000 tons of cargo including salt, limestone, and sand/gravel. Both harbors feature car-ferry service. The Lake Express high-speed car ferry docks in Muskegon Lake and offers a seasonal connection to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The S.S. Badger, the only coal-fired passenger vessel on the Great Lakes, provides seasonal service between Ludington and Manitowoc, Wisconsin. In 2015, the Badger was officially designated as part of highway U.S. 10.

Railroad infrastructure exists in four of the five counties in the district (all except Oceana). Short lines operate in the Muskegon area; between Muskegon and Fremont; and between Grand Rapids and Manistee, via Lake and Mason counties. Commercial air service is available at the Muskegon County Airport with daily service to Chicago O'Hare.



Broadband & Telecommunications

Historically, broadband and telecommunication services have been generally available in populated areas of the district, while seriously lacking in rural locales. This has long been

identified as a significant weakness and barrier to economic development within the district. The early 2020s exposed and magnified this weakness as many aspects of daily life, such as work, commerce, education, and health care, pivoted to a reliance on virtual platforms. In response, a wave of public and private investments in broadband was set in motion and improvements are underway.

Workforce

Maintaining a ready, skilled workforce has been consistently identified as a weakness and vulnerability in the district. Although trending in a positive over the last five years, the area continues to trail the nation in 24-month average unemployment, labor force participation, and percentage of the population with any college degree. Community colleges, K-12 systems, and promise zones are highly valued within the district. Still, access to higher education and career/skills training opportunities have historically been lacking, especially in rural areas such as Lake and Oceana counties.

Higher Education

The West Michigan Shoreline EDD is fortunate to have two well-regarded community colleges, a private college, and a number of facilities within the district affiliated with universities.

Muskegon Community College (MCC) in Muskegon and West Shore Community College, located near Ludington, both offer high quality two-year curriculum which allow students to gain any number of certifications or transfer to four-year institutions. MCC has a satellite campus near Fremont in Newaygo County and the Sturges Technology Center, a technology training facility, in downtown Muskegon.

Baker College is a private institution with a campus in Muskegon as well as the Culinary Institute of Michigan in downtown Muskegon.

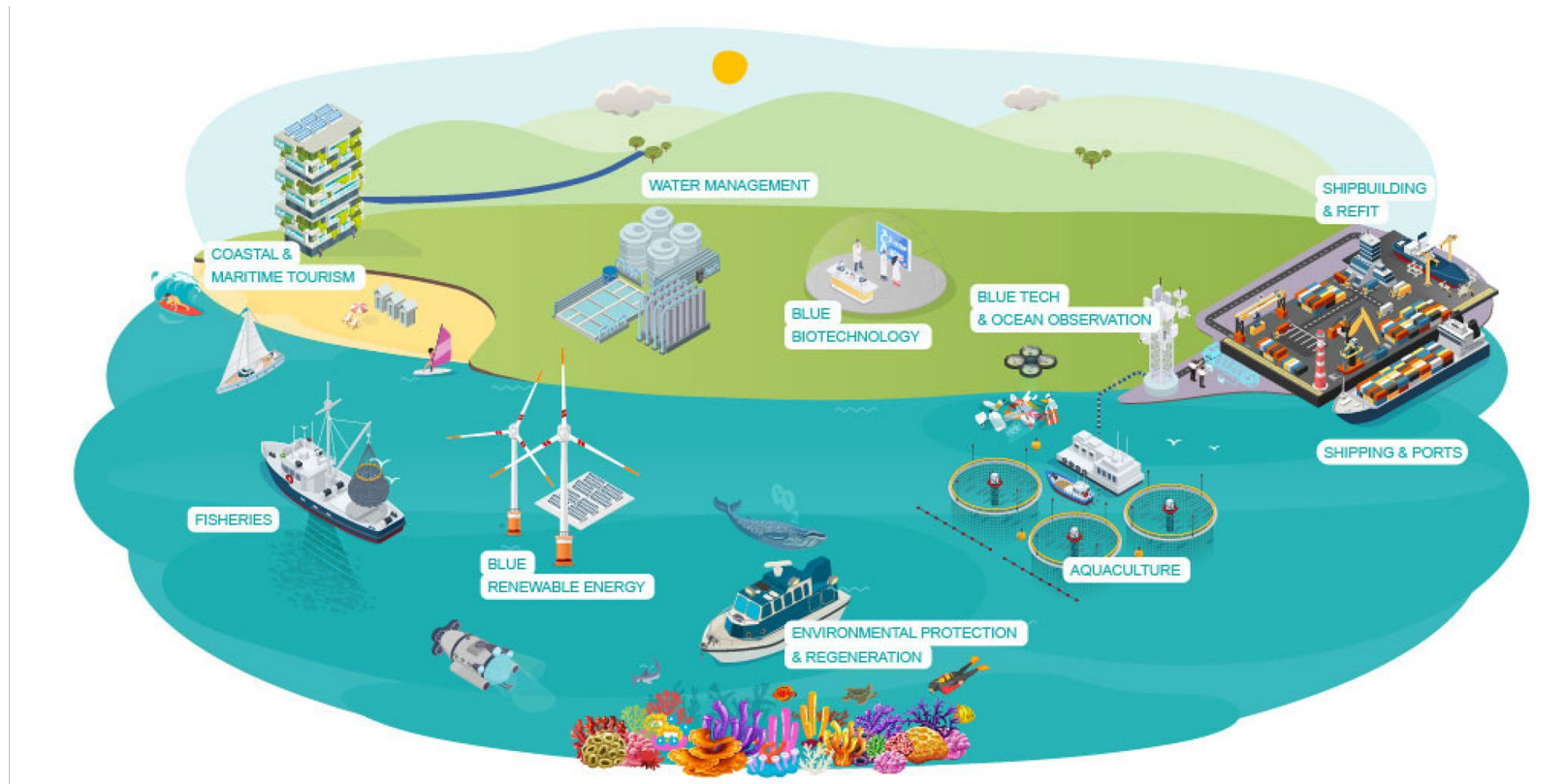
Grand Valley State University has a strong presence in Muskegon with the Annis Water Resources Institute and the Muskegon Innovation Hub, both next to Muskegon Lake.

Michigan State University has affiliations with two significant facilities in the region both of which are focused on agriculture: the MSU AgBioResearch West Central Michigan Research and Extension Center near Hart in Oceana County and the Food, Agriculture, Research, Manufacturing Center (FARM) accelerator and business development center located at the Muskegon Community College campus.

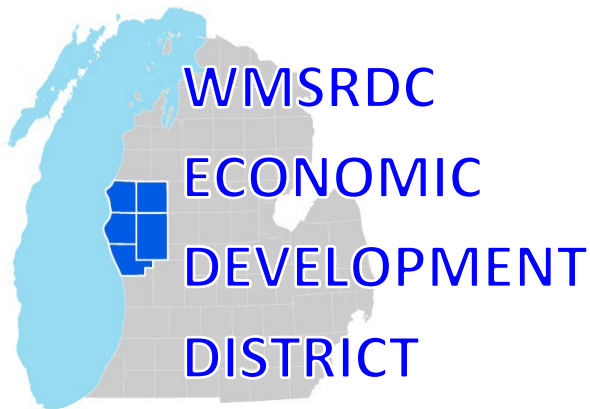
What is the Blue Economy?

“Blue Economy” refers to sustainable use and conservation of ocean (including the Great Lakes) resources, encompassing economic activities such as fisheries, tourism, shipping, and renewable energy that aim to balance environmental and economic interests.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the blue economy is a major driver of urban and regional development, creating millions of local jobs in water-dependent sectors such as fisheries, tourism, and shipping.



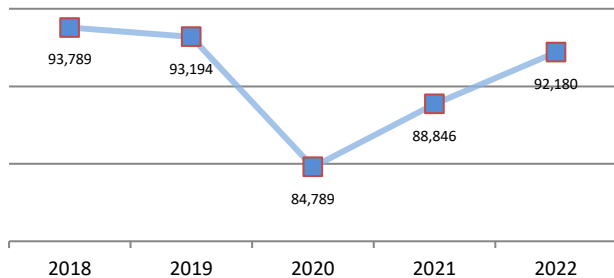
Ten sectors of the “blue economy” analyzed by a 2023 report by the European Commission



**2022 Labor Force
Participation Rate ¹ **58.4 %****

**Approximate
Change since 2017 **↑1.6 %****

WMSRDC EDD EMPLOYMENT ³

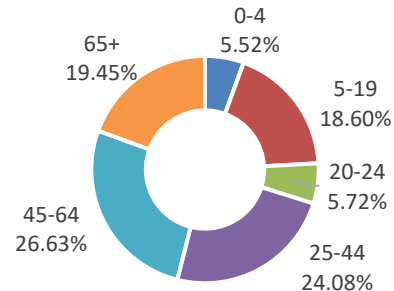


Sources:

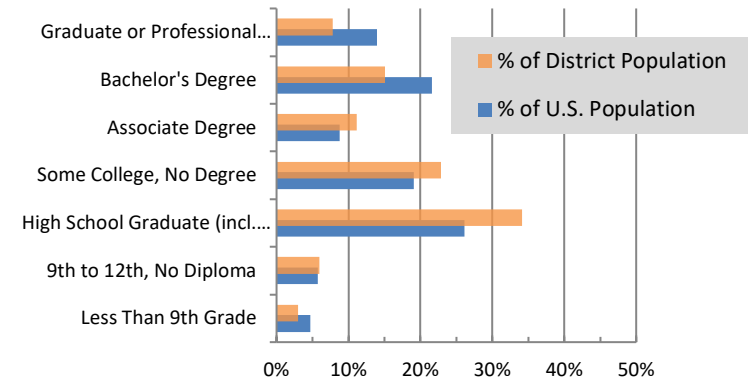
1. Calculation based on 2022 ACS 5-year estimates
2. 2022 Bureau of Economic Analysis (via StatsAmerica.org)
3. Calculation based on 2022 US BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages
4. Top employment industries, by location quotient (StatsAmerica Regionizer tool)
5. Calculation based on 2021 figures in the United Way ALICE Report - Michigan (2023)
6. Calculation based on 2021 figures from map.feedingamerica.org
7. 2022 US BLS (via StatsAmerica.org)
8. 2021 figures from <https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>

2022 Population ¹	% Change from 2010	Median Age ¹
294,247	+2.18%	41.6

AGE DISTRIBUTION ¹



EDUCATION ATTAINMENT, Age 25+ ¹



UNIQUE EMPLOYMENT CLUSTERS ⁴

Automotive
Downstream Chemical Products
Upstream Metal Manufacturing
Upstream Chemical Products
Food Processing and Manufacturing

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

Per Capita Personal Income ² \$45,029
Avg. Annual Wage per Employee ³ \$48,206
Households in Poverty + ALICE* ⁵ 43 %
Food Insecurity Rate ⁶ 12.4 %
Worked Outside of District ⁸ 33.5 %

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY ⁷

Manufacturing	21.1 %
Retail Trade	17.0 %
Health Care and Social Services	13.4 %
Accommodation and Food Services	10.4 %
Educational Services	5.9 %

HOUSING ¹

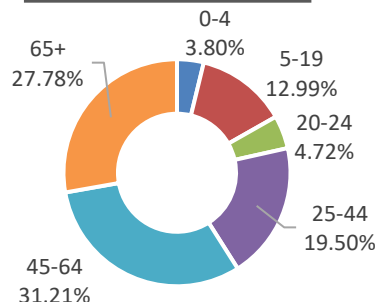
Median Home Value	\$162,059
Total Housing Units	145,851
Vacant Housing Units	22.9 %
Occupied Units, Rental	20.3 %
Occupied Units, No Vehicle	6.5 %

* ALICE = Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed

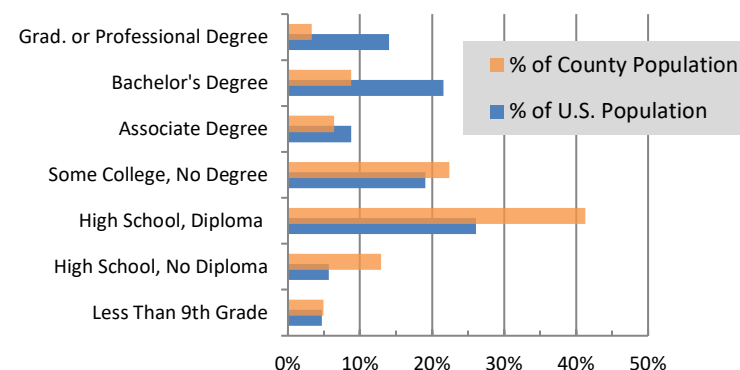


2022 Population ¹	% Change from 2010	Median Age ¹
12,285	+6.47%	51.8

AGE DISTRIBUTION ¹



EDUCATION ATTAINMENT, Age 25+ ¹



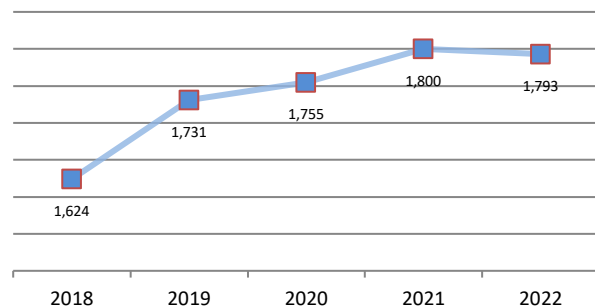
**2022 Labor Force
Participation Rate ¹**

38.7 %

**Approximate
Change since 2017**

↓ 1.2 %

LAKE COUNTY EMPLOYMENT ³



UNIQUE EMPLOYMENT CLUSTERS ⁴

Forestry
Wood Products
Government
Local Services

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

Per Capita Personal Income ² \$36,434
Avg. Annual Wage per Employee ³ \$43,031
Households in Poverty + ALICE* ⁵ 56 %
Food Insecurity Rate ⁶ 17.1 %
Worked Outside County of Residence ⁸ 84.2 %

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY ⁷

Accommodations & Food Services 14.3 %
Public Administration 11.7 %
Retail Trade 11.0 %
Construction 3.6 %
Manufacturing 3.2 %

HOUSING ¹

Median Home Value \$117,100
Total Housing Units 13,460
Vacant Housing Units 66.2 %
Occupied Units, Rental 15.8 %
Occupied Units, No Vehicle 9.3 %

Sources:

- 2022 ACS 5-year estimates
- 2022 Bureau of Economic Analysis (via StatsAmerica.org)
- 2022 US BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages
- Top employment industries, by location quotient (StatsAmerica Regionizer tool)

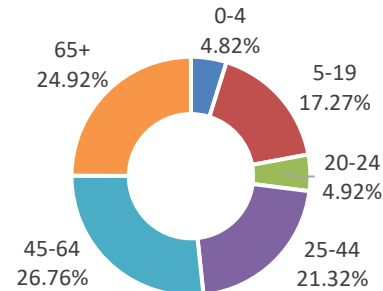
- 2021 figures from the United Way ALICE Report - Michigan (2023)
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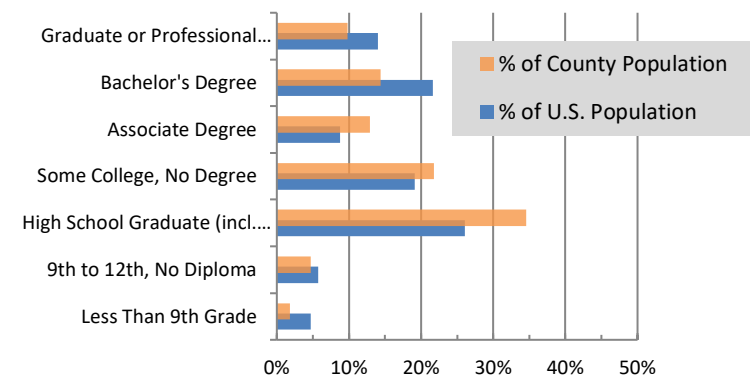


2022 Population ¹	% Change from 2010	Median Age ¹
29,178	+1.65%	46.7

AGE DISTRIBUTION¹



EDUCATION ATTAINMENT, Age 25+ ¹



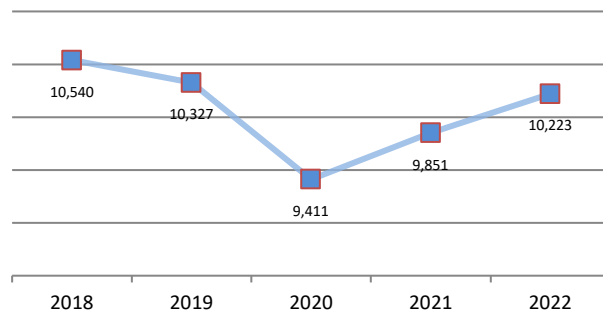
2022 Labor Force Participation Rate ¹

55.1 %

Approximate Change since 2017

↓2.1 %

Mason County EMPLOYMENT ³



UNIQUE EMPLOYMENT CLUSTERS ⁴

Furniture
Upstream Metal Manufacturing
Local Industrial Products & Services
Upstream Chemical Products
Electric Power Generation and Transmission
Food Processing & Manufacturing

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

Per Capita Personal Income ² \$47,049
Avg. Annual Wage per Employee ³ \$46,875
Households in Poverty + ALICE* ⁵ 42 %
Food Insecurity Rate ⁶ 13.4 %
Worked Outside County of Residence ⁸ 54.5 %

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY ⁷

Manufacturing 20.3 %
Retail Trade 14.4 %
Health Care and Social Services 10.9 %
Accommodation and Food Services 9.9 %
Educational Services 7.4 %

HOUSING ¹

Median Home Value \$181,200
Total Housing Units 17,451
Vacant Housing Units 29.5 %
Occupied Units, Rental 21.9 %
Occupied Units, No Vehicle 6.8 %

Sources:

- 2022 ACS 5-year estimates
- 2022 Bureau of Economic Analysis (via StatsAmerica.org)
- 2022 US BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages
- Top employment industries, by location quotient (StatsAmerica Regionizer tool)

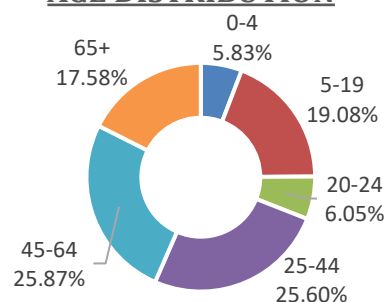
- 2021 figures from the United Way ALICE Report - Michigan (2023)
- 2021 figures from map.feedingamerica.org
- US BLS (via StatsAmerica.org)
- 2021 figures from <https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>

* ALICE = Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed

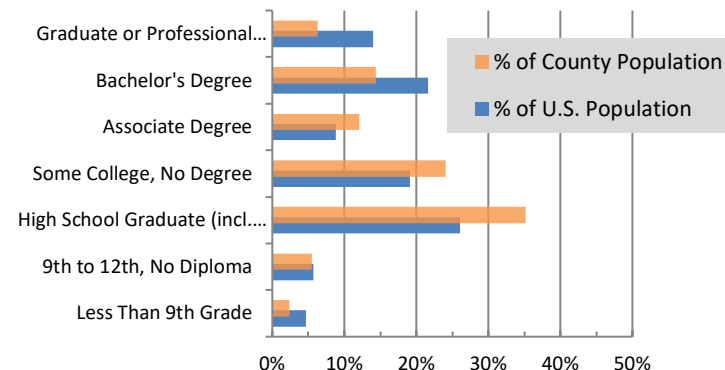


2022 Population ¹	% Change from 2010	Median Age ¹
175,947	+1.88%	39.4

AGE DISTRIBUTION ¹



EDUCATION ATTAINMENT, Age 25+ ¹



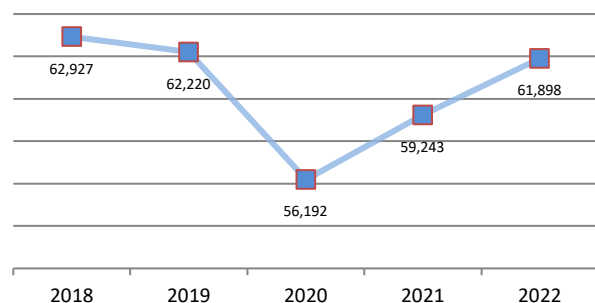
**2022 Labor Force
Participation Rate ¹**

59.3 %

**Approximate
Change since 2017**

↑0.4 %

Muskegon County EMPLOYMENT ⁴



Sources:

- 2022 ACS 5-year estimates
- 2022 Bureau of Economic Analysis (via StatsAmerica.org)
- 2022 US BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages
- Top employment industries, by location quotient (StatsAmerica Regionizer tool)

- 2021 figures from the United Way ALICE Report - Michigan (2023)
- 2021 figures from map.feedingamerica.org
- US BLS (via StatsAmerica.org)
- 2021 figures from <https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>

UNIQUE EMPLOYMENT CLUSTERS ⁴

Automotive
Downstream Chemical Products
Upstream Metal Manufacturing
Local Industrial Products & Services
Metalworking Technology
Upstream Chemical Products

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY ⁷

Manufacturing	21.9 %
Retail Trade	17.8 %
Health Care and Social Services	16.2 %
Accommodation and Food Services	9.9 %
Educational Services	7.4 %

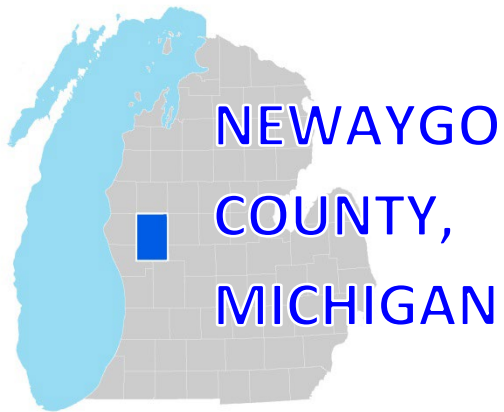
SOCIO-ECONOMIC

Per Capita Personal Income ²	\$45,571
Avg. Annual Wage per Employee ³	\$49,465
Households in Poverty + ALICE* ⁵	42 %
Food Insecurity Rate ⁶	11.8 %
Worked Outside County of Residence ⁸	52.5 %

HOUSING ¹

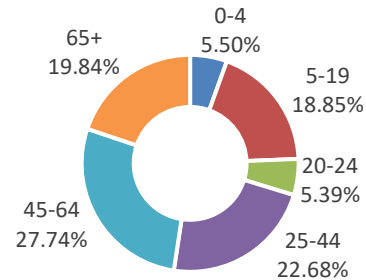
Median Home Value	\$162,300
Total Housing Units	74,639
Vacant Housing Units	10.8 %
Occupied Units, Rental	22.7 %
Occupied Units, No Vehicle	7.1 %

* ALICE = Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed

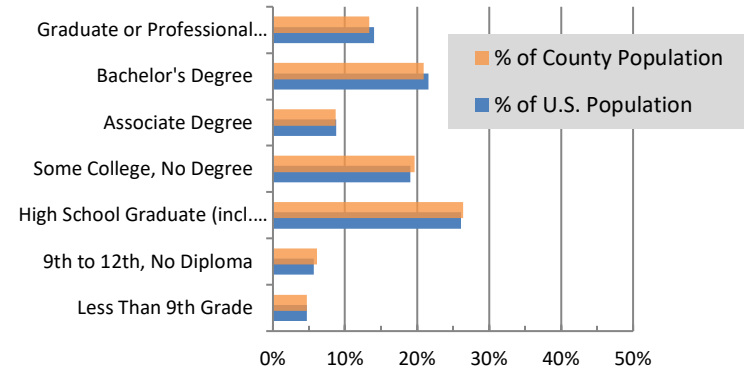


2022 Population ¹	% Change from 2010	Median Age ¹
50,130	+3.45%	42.4

AGE DISTRIBUTION ¹



EDUCATION ATTAINMENT, Age 25+ ¹



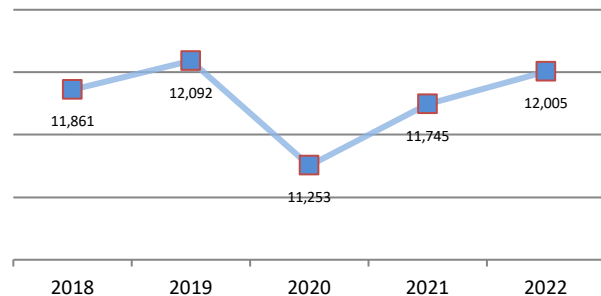
**2022 Labor Force
Participation Rate ¹**

**Approximate
Change since 2017**

63.6 %

↑9.0 %

Newaygo County EMPLOYMENT ⁴



Sources:

- 2022 ACS 5-year estimates
- 2022 Bureau of Economic Analysis (via StatsAmerica.org)
- 2022 US BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages
- Top employment industries, by location quotient (StatsAmerica Regionizer tool)

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- 2021 figures from map.feedingamerica.org
- US BLS (via StatsAmerica.org)
- 2021 figures from <https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>

UNIQUE EMPLOYMENT CLUSTERS ⁴

Food Processing & Manufacturing
Vulcanized & Fired Materials
Livestock Farming
Crop Farming
Insurance Services

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

Per Capita Personal Income ² \$44,140
Avg. Annual Wage per Employee ³ \$46,426
Households in Poverty + ALICE* ⁵ 44 %
Food Insecurity Rate ⁶ 13.1 %
Worked Outside County of Residence ⁸ 73.1 %

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY ⁷

Manufacturing 18.7 %
Retail Trade 18.6 %
Health Care & Social Services 9.9 %
Finance & Insurance 5.5 %
Accommodation and Food Services 5.1 %

HOUSING ¹

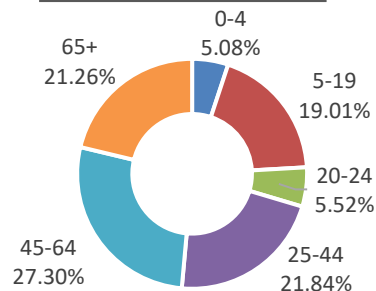
Median Home Value \$165,000
Total Housing Units 24,689
Vacant Housing Units 22.9 %
Occupied Units, Rental 14.4 %
Occupied Units, No Vehicle 4.4 %

* ALICE = Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed

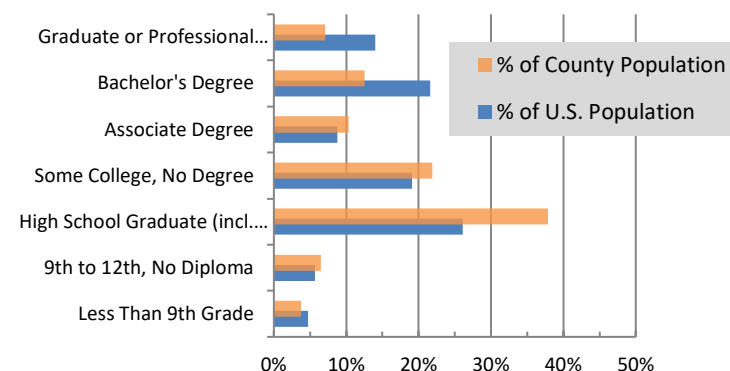


2022 Population ¹	% Change from 2010	Median Age ¹
26,707	+0.52%	43.8

AGE DISTRIBUTION ¹



EDUCATION ATTAINMENT, Age 25+ ¹



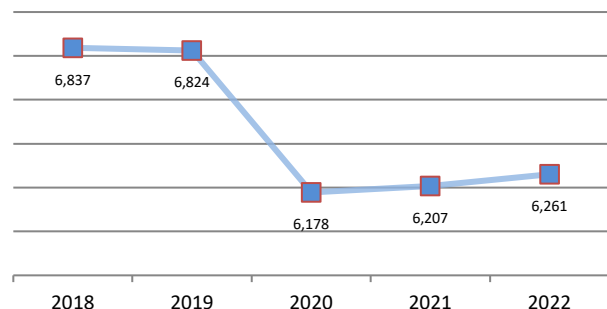
2022 Labor Force
Participation Rate ¹

56.6 %

Approximate
Change since 2017

↑1.1 %

Oceana County EMPLOYMENT ⁴



UNIQUE EMPLOYMENT CLUSTERS ⁴

Crop Farming
Food Processing and Manufacturing
Recreational and Small Electric Goods
Automotive
Agricultural Inputs and Services

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

Per Capita Personal Income ² \$44,970
Avg. Annual Wage per Employee ³ \$42,828
Households in Poverty + ALICE* ⁵ 43 %
Food Insecurity Rate ⁶ 12.4 %
Worked Outside County of Residence ⁸ 50.3 %

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY ⁷

Manufacturing 24.3 %
Retail Trade 12.5 %
Accommodation and Food Services 12.0 %
Agri., Forestry, Fishing, & Hunting 7.9 %
Public Administration 7.9 %

HOUSING ¹

Median Home Value \$151,700
Total Housing Units 15,612
Vacant Housing Units 36.4 %
Occupied Units, Rental 15.3 %
Occupied Units, No Vehicle 6.5 %

Sources:

- 2022 ACS 5-year estimates
- 2022 Bureau of Economic Analysis (via StatsAmerica.org)
- 2022 US BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages
- Top employment industries, by location quotient (StatsAmerica Regionizer tool)

- 2021 figures from the United Way ALICE Report - Michigan (2023)
- 2021 figures from map.feedingamerica.org
- US BLS (via StatsAmerica.org)
- 2021 figures from <https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>

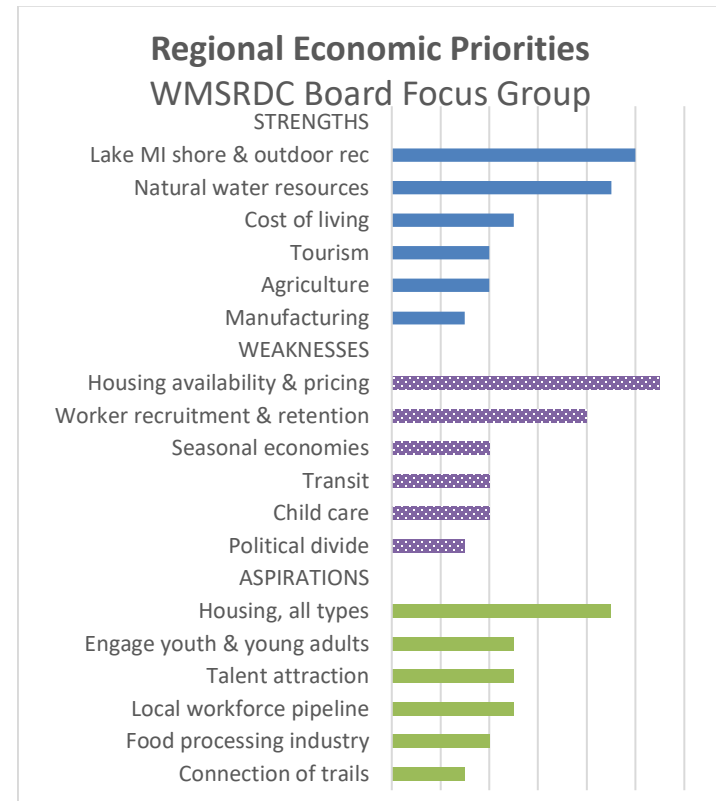
* ALICE = Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed

SWOT Analysis

From December 2022 through March 2023, WMSRDC conducted a series of economic development focus groups across the region to fulfill a CEDS planning requirement, which is to conduct a “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats” (SWOT) analysis. Online SWOT questionnaires were also made available to reach economic development stakeholders that may not have been able or interested to join a focus group in person. More than 100 individuals participated in the activities with representation from private businesses, non-profits, higher education, local and elected officials, utilities, private citizens, and high school students.

A unique approach was applied to this SWOT analysis: “Opportunities” and “Threats” were replaced with “Aspirations” and “Results.” This alternative approach was intended to help guide participants toward action-oriented and forward-thinking responses. Over 600 unique comments were collected during this exercise, which were subsequently tabulated and described in the Regional SWOT Analysis Report, included as an appendix of this document.

The following section summarizes regional themes that emerged through the SWOT analysis. Inherently, there are strengths and weaknesses of most themes. At the top of each section there is an indication of whether the theme was predominantly mentioned as a strength, a weakness, or both. Categorization of comments can be difficult due to the varying context in which they were given, and the interconnected aspects of the region’s economic landscape. This is not scientific, and it is not precise. Rather, themes are organized to help unpack nuances of the ever-changing regional economy, and to allow for a greater understanding of comments given at the time the SWOT analysis was conducted.



In March 2023, district staff held an economic development focus group with the WMSRDC Governing Board. Members were presented with a list of common topics which had already been collected and distilled from county-level SWOT focus groups throughout the district. Attendees were asked to choose their top three (in no particular order) regional strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. The results of this exercise, shown in the graphic above, show that topics involving quality of life, housing, and workforce development were most valued at that point in time.

Regional SWOT Themes

Agriculture ☒ Strength ☐ Weakness

Agriculture in the district is viewed as a strength in terms of crop production, food processing, and the overall agricultural community feel. Noted weaknesses include low wages, pollution, and large or intense farming operations which are sometimes viewed as unsustainable.

Aspirations / Results

- Preserve and support agriculture

Community Characteristics ☒ Strength ☐ Weakness

Sub-Themes: Available Land, Community Traits, Geographic Location, Public Policy & Leadership

‘Community Characteristics’ entails the various traits that help describe the district’s character. These traits are often closely related to quality of life. Geographic location was frequently cited as a strength and weakness of the district, as the area has desirable natural resources and access to metropolitan areas yet is sometimes limited by the “peninsula effect” of Lake Michigan which can make logistics more costly. Large tracts of state and federal land are also a strength and weakness: providing quality of life benefits yet limiting the tax base and potential land area for development. Issues of public policy and leadership were mostly viewed as a

weakness, including elected leaders and reactive planning practices.

Aspirations / Results

- Invest in downtowns
- Placemaking
- Educated local officials
- Improved image / beautification
- Population growth

Community Mindset ☒ Strength ☐ Weakness

Sub-Themes: Community Attitudes, Cooperation/Collaboration, Philanthropy

Across the district there exists a sense of cooperation and collaboration, as well as strong support from community foundation organizations. Conversely, weaknesses include resistance to change, “brain drain,” and an overall lack of a unified vision for the future.

Aspirations / Results

- Intergovernmental relations
- Consensus building
- Alignment of planning efforts
- Improved communication
- Common vision for the future

Economic Development Resources ☒ Strength ☐ Weakness

Sub Themes: Marketing / Messaging

Economic development resources (organizations, institutions, programs) within the district provide support for businesses of all sizes, including entrepreneurs such as marketing and media messaging, business attraction/expansion, and workforce development. Noted strengths include a current perception of economic growth, revitalized downtowns, and business expansions in recent years. A few weak aspects of this category include resources for small businesses, the current tax base, private investment, and business incentives. Another weakness inherent for rural and agricultural areas is a historical imbalance in the distribution of state and federal funding sources that are dependent upon population.

Aspirations / Results

- Business incentives
- Additional services for small businesses
- Economic diversification support
- Investments in economic development
- Coordinated promotion strategies for:
 - Year-round tourism
 - Local identities (places)
 - Local products
 - Small businesses

Education Resources ☒ Strength ☐ Weakness

Education resources are closely related to workforce development. Muskegon Community College, West Shore Community College, K-12 education, and promise zones are considered strengths in the district. Access to higher education and skilled trades training are weaknesses, especially in rural areas. Opportunities exist to partner with local and regional higher education institutions to fill the skills gap.

Aspirations / Results

- Local talent pipeline
- Access to higher education
- Access to skilled trades training
- Local apprenticeships
- Advanced high school courses

Industry ☒ Strength ☒ Weakness

Sub-Themes: Energy Production

Manufacturing continues to be valued as a strength of the district, as well as renewable energy production. Still, additional manufacturing businesses are highly desired to diversify local manufacturing and help provide well-paying jobs.

Aspirations / Results

- Increase manufacturing
- Increase food processing
- Renewable energy production

Infrastructure ☒ Strength ☒ Weakness

Sub-Themes: Municipal Infrastructure, Utilities, Communications Infrastructure

Although a marked improvement in broadband availability has occurred in recent years, quality and affordable internet access remains a weakness throughout the district. Further investments in broadband infrastructure are needed, especially in rural areas.

Aspirations / Results

- Proper/reliable utilities
- Broadband for all

Natural Resources ☒ Strength ☐ Weakness

Natural resources are revered as a strength throughout the district, including water resources and environmental cleanup efforts. PFAs was noted as a growing topic of concern. Natural resources form the foundation for much of the Tourism & Leisure sector, and positively contribute to the district’s quality of life. Natural resource opportunities include utilization of nature-based solutions, blue economy potential, and development that leverages natural beauty.

Aspirations / Results

- Address PFAs contamination

Quality of Life ☐ Strength ☒ Weakness

Sub-Themes: Cost of Living, Health Care & Services, Housing, Poverty

Overall, Quality of Life in the district is generally considered a strength and a point of pride, highlighted by access to natural resources, health care, decent school systems, and an affordable cost of living relative to other areas. According to the SWOT analysis, however, many aspects of life are increasingly difficult as wages fail to keep pace with inflation and costs of living increase. Housing (lacking quantity and quality of all housing types) and individual health were commonly cited as weaknesses throughout the district. The strengths of this theme present opportunities to attract and retain needed workforce talent, so long as affordable and appropriate housing is available.

Aspirations / Results

- Childcare
- Housing availability and quality
- Living wages

Tourism & Leisure ☒ Strength ☒ Weakness

Sub-Themes: Retail, Accommodations

Tourism & Leisure is closely related, and often dependent upon, the district’s natural resources. It includes a spectrum of outdoor recreation activities as well as arts, culture, agri-tourism, and retail. Throughout the district, Tourism & Leisure is considered a major economic strength. One inherent weakness is the seasonal nature of outdoor recreation-based activities. Many opportunities were identified to leverage and build upon this aspect

of the economy, including the development and promotion of winter and “shoulder season” recreation to foster a year-round recreation economy. There is also a strong desire to locate lodging and conference space in Lake County, where those amenities are currently lacking.

- Aspirations / Results**
- Increased agri-tourism
 - Festivals & community events
 - Quality overnight accommodations
 - Year-round tourism

Transportation Infrastructure ☒ Strength ☒ Weakness

Sub-Theme: Public Transportation

Transportation infrastructure is generally considered a strength of the district. This includes highways, railroads, deep water ports, airports, and in certain areas, public transportation. Weaknesses are closely tied to rural areas that are solely dependent on trucks/roadways for commercial purposes. Also for many rural areas, intra- and extra- county transportation for residents is cited as a weakness.

- Aspirations / Results**
- Commercial port utilization
 - Rural public transportation

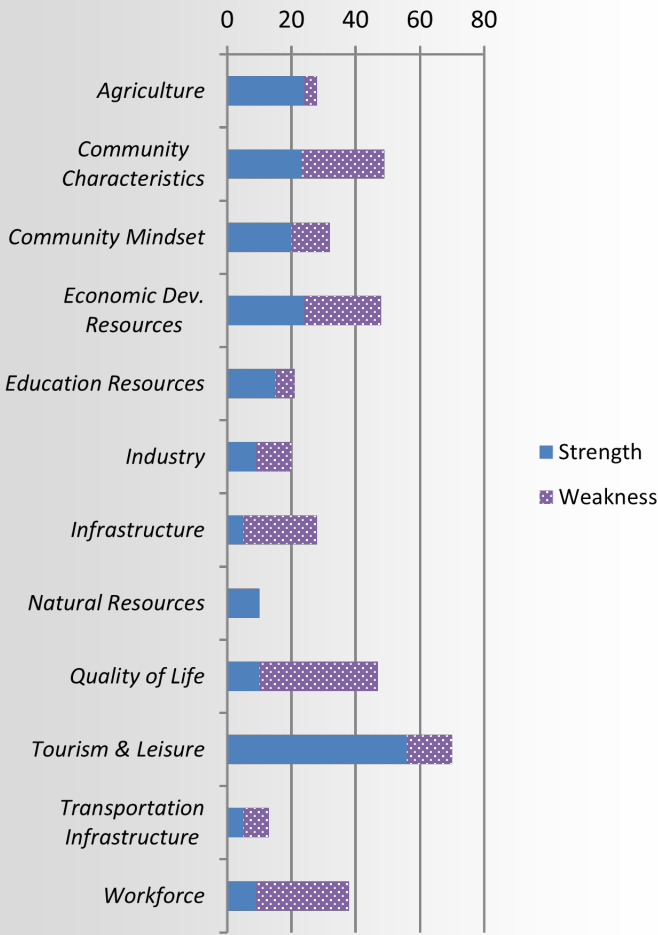
Workforce

☐ Strength ☒ Weakness

Across the district, there is a nearly unanimous perception that the workforce is a weakness, especially in areas such as skills/training, educational attainment, talent retention, youth relocation, and workforce motivation and age. Depending on individual perspectives, how to address those weaknesses can be viewed as an opportunity and/or a threat. On one hand, addressing those weaknesses presents opportunities for success; on the other, failure to address weaknesses is a critical threat. Other opportunities noted include utilizing retirees as an asset/resource, leveraging quality of life to attract talent, and leveraging partnerships with educational institutions to create “stackable credentials” to bolster the workforce and fill skills gaps.

- Aspirations / Results**
- Attract talent
 - Attract quality employment
 - Year-round employment opportunities
 - Skilled workforce

Distribution of SWOT Analysis Comments



Action Plan

The Action Plan is ambitious and comprehensive in scope. A concerted effort of local and regional leaders and organizations will be required to bring the desired outcomes to fruition. **The ultimate purpose of this CEDS is to increase economic capacity to sustain regional economic prosperity in the West Michigan Shoreline Economic Development District.** A broad strategy to increase prosperity over the next ten to twenty years is outlined in the following vision statement and list of goals.

Vision Statement:

The West Michigan Shoreline Region is known for its highly skilled and motivated workforce, reliable infrastructure, economic diversity, vibrant natural settings, and exceptional quality of life. The region's sustained prosperity is supported by resilient networks fueled by communication, cooperation, creativity, and optimism.

Goals:

Goal #1: Infrastructure

Maintain and invest in infrastructure critical to sustaining the region's economy and infrastructure that will enhance the region's competitive economic advantages.

Goal #2: Workforce

Cultivate a workforce that meets the needs of the region's economy and can readily adapt to rapidly evolving workforce demands.

Goal #3: Economic Variety

Expand and retain existing businesses and diversify the region's economy through innovation and attraction.

Goal #4: Regional Integration

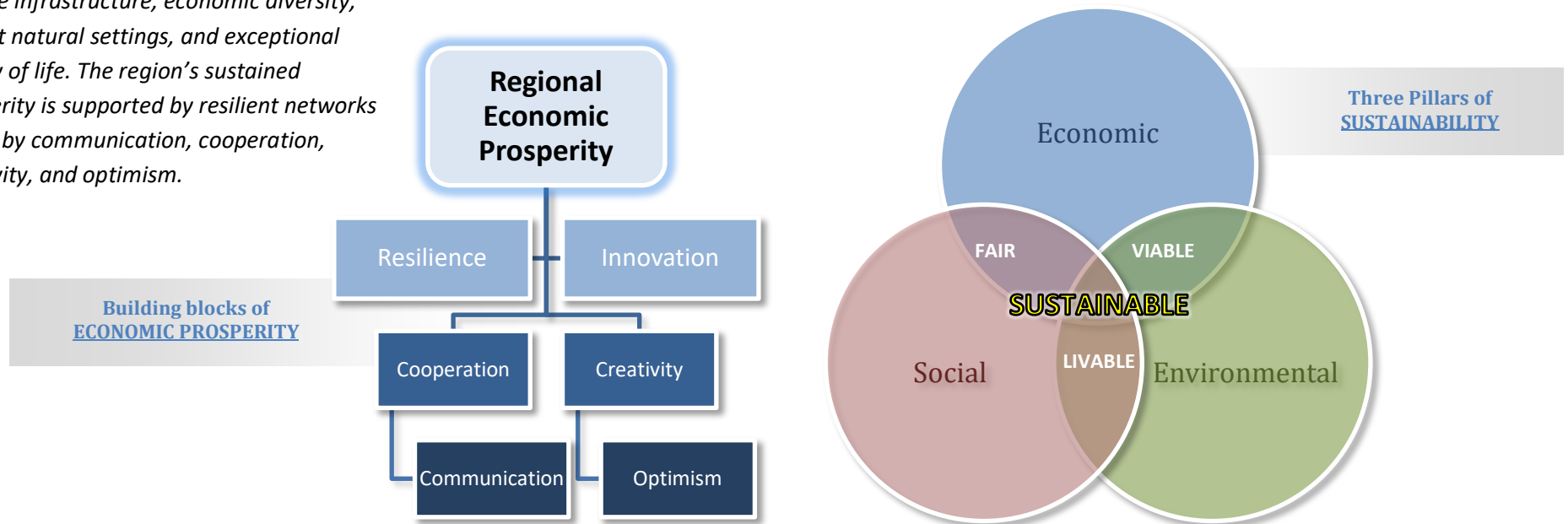
Promote a regional mindset that is cooperative and optimistic and seeks innovative and collaborative solutions.

Goal #5: Natural Resources

Practice stewardship of the region's natural resources while leveraging assets for economic gain.

Goal #6: Quality of Life

Provide desirable places to live and recreate; with housing, goods, and services needed to retain and attract talent, and amenities to attract visitors and tourists.



Goal #1: INFRASTRUCTURE

Maintain and invest in infrastructure critical to sustaining the region's economy and infrastructure that will enhance the region's competitive economic advantages.

Objectives

- Expand availability of broadband infrastructure
- Maximize utilization of waterborne commerce
- Maintain reliable transportation networks
- Provide infrastructure and utilities to support the economy and eliminate barriers to growth and expansion
- Prioritize the impacts of severe weather events in infrastructure maintenance and improvements

STRATEGIES	STAKEHOLDERS
1. Expand broadband availability.	WMSRDC, broadband service providers, county broadband advisory committees, Michigan Highspeed Internet Office (MIHI)
2. Enhance capacity and utilization of deep-water ports in Muskegon and Ludington, as well as seek opportunities for growth.	County-level economic development organizations, commercial port operators, waterfront property owners
3. Relay information to local governments and economic development stakeholders regarding state/federal programs and resources as they become available. Provide technical support when needed to secure state and federal resources.	WMSRDC, CEDS Strategy Committee, County-level economic development organizations
4. Coordinate economic development with planning for infrastructure asset management.	WMSRDC, county-level economic development organizations, infrastructure owners, local/state/federal governments
5. Incorporate nature-based solutions into the maintenance, improvement, and design of built infrastructure.	WMSRDC, infrastructure owners, local/state/federal governments
MILESTONES	TIME FRAME
1. Demonstrated increase of broadband access throughout the region	Assess annually
2. Sustained and enhanced tonnage in commercial ports	Ongoing
3. Continued coordination of infrastructure projects across multiple assets (water/sewer, broadband, transportation, etc.)	Ongoing
4. Inclusion of severe weather impact resiliency in local and regional planning documents and infrastructure projects	Ongoing
5. Increased number of Michigan Infrastructure Council (MIC) Asset Management Champion graduates	Bi-annual training programs

Goal #2: WORKFORCE

Cultivate a workforce that meets the needs of the region's economy and can readily adapt to evolving workforce demands.

Objectives

- Invigorate partnerships between private industry clusters and higher education and career technical education
- Reinforce the labor force through talent attraction
- Increase workforce participation through mitigation of barriers
- Increase K-12 exposure to alternative career paths
- Meet local demands for training and education programs

STRATEGIES	STAKEHOLDERS
1. Public/private partnerships to meet diverse employer workforce needs.	K-12 Education, Higher Education, Economic Development Organizations, Employers
2. Increase awareness of available training and certification programs within the region.	WMSRDC, Economic Development Organizations, Workforce Development Organizations, K-12 Education, Higher Education
3. Utilize student engagement initiatives to increase awareness of career opportunities and develop the local talent pipeline.	Economic Development Organizations, Workforce Development Organizations, K-12 Education, Higher Education, Employers
4. Reduce barriers to workforce participation such as childcare, transportation, housing, etc.	WMSRDC, Workforce Development Organizations, Local Governments, Employers
5. Compete for workers through promotion of the region's quality of life, remote working capabilities, etc.	Economic Development Organizations, State & local Governments
MILESTONES	TIME FRAME
1. Implementation of workforce development and diversification initiatives.	Ongoing
2. Develop a regional training and certification inventory.	Near-term (0-5 years)
3. Discussion of ongoing workforce matters during quarterly CEDS meetings.	Quarterly
4. Increased working age population within the region.	Annually
5. Increased workforce participation within the region	Annually

Goal #3: ECONOMIC VARIETY

Expand and retain existing businesses and diversify the region's economy through innovation and attraction.

Objectives

- Support and retain existing businesses
- Promote an ecosystem of innovation and entrepreneurialism
- Capitalize on economic strengths and advantages, including targeting new industries that are complementary to existing businesses
- Leverage public/private partnerships to attract private investment
- Provide space and infrastructure capacity for economic growth and expansion
- Mitigate negative impacts of seasonal industries

STRATEGIES	STAKEHOLDERS
1. Prioritize reactivation of idle commercial and industrial properties.	WMSRDC, Economic Development Organizations, Local Governments
2. Support for small businesses, innovators, and entrepreneurs.	WMSRDC, Economic Development Organizations
3. Grow agri-business through transportation and logistics support, increased food processing and storage capacity, and targeted workforce development.	Economic Development Organizations, Agriculture Sector
4. Inclusion and advancement of the Blue Economy in planning and policies.	WMSRDC, Economic Development Organizations, Local Governments
5. Cultivate and promote year-round recreation and tourism opportunities.	Economic Development Organizations, Chambers of Commerce, Convention and Visitors Bureaus
MILESTONES	TIME FRAME
1. Shovel-ready space for development/redevelopment and/or expansion.	Ongoing (review annually)
2. Maintain Brownfield Redevelopment Authorities in each county.	Ongoing (review annually)
3. An established Blue Economy strategy for the region.	Near-term (2-3 years)
4. Coordinated campaigns to promote year-round tourism.	Mid-term (5 years)

Goal #4: REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Promote a regional mindset that is cooperative and optimistic and seeks innovative and collaborative solutions.

Objectives

- Coordinate regional economic development initiatives
- Collaborate across demographics, places, and sectors
- Unify the regional economic narrative
- Strengthen unique industry clusters within the region

STRATEGIES	STAKEHOLDERS
1. Maintain intergovernmental networks, public-private partnerships, and relationships with economic development stakeholders in neighboring counties and regions.	WMSRDC, Economic Development Organizations, Local Governments
2. Incorporate economic development into various planning processes, such as hazard mitigation, transportation, and community development.	WMSRDC, Local Governments
3. Foster collaboration and specialization in unique industry clusters to enhance competitiveness and attract investment.	Economic Development Organizations
4. Work alongside communities and populations to identify and pursue economic development resources and assistance.	WMSRDC, Economic Development Organizations, Local Governments
MILESTONES	TIME FRAME
1. Quarterly meetings of the CEDS Strategy Committee	Quarterly
2. Attend local meetings (county boards, townships associations, etc.) to discuss economic development efforts and opportunities for outside assistance.	Ongoing
3. Coordinated response and recovery following an economic disruption (natural disasters, business closures, etc.)	Following economic disruption

Goal #5: NATURAL RESOURCES

Practice stewardship of the region's natural resources while leveraging assets for economic gain.

Objectives

- Protect surface water and groundwater resources and fisheries
- Maintain healthy greenspaces and forests
- Achieve resiliency through nature-based solutions
- Remediate and restore compromised natural habitats
- Prioritize redevelopment over development of open space

STRATEGIES	STAKEHOLDERS
1. Normalize nature-based and resiliency best practices within planning and construction projects.	WMSRDC, Economic Development Organizations, Local Governments
2. Mitigate damage from natural hazards and reduce long-term maintenance costs of built environments.	Public and Private Infrastructure Owners and Operators
3. Support the West Michigan Watershed Partners to improve and protect water quality through watershed planning.	WMSRDC, Watershed and Conservation Organizations
4. Improve communication of natural resources management between local, state, and federal agencies.	WMSRDC, State and Federal Agencies, Local Governments, Watershed and Conservation Organizations
MILESTONES	TIME FRAME
1. Muskegon Lake delisted as a Great Lakes Area of Concern (AOC).	Near-term (0-2 years)
2. Regional dialogue focused on nature-based solutions and resiliency best practices.	Mid-term (0-5 years)
3. Communicate environmental cleanup and restoration assistance opportunities to local governments and provide technical assistance to leverage those opportunities, as needed.	Ongoing
4. Incorporation of consistent resiliency goals and strategies into local and regional planning documents.	Ongoing

Goal #6: QUALITY OF LIFE

Provide desirable places to live and recreate; with housing, goods, and services needed to retain and attract talent, and amenities to attract visitors and tourists.

Objectives

- Practice principles of SMART Growth
 - Improve quantity and overall quality of the housing stock
 - Competitive wages and benefits
 - Develop unique places
- Develop a regional non-motorized trail network
 - Create a culture of long-term community stewardship
 - Maintain public access to waterbodies, including channel dredging to sustain waterborne access to the Great Lakes

STRATEGIES	STAKEHOLDERS
1. Connect regional trail systems and identify an all-seasons strategy for motorized and non-motorized trails.	WMSRDC, MDOT, West MI Trails & Greenways Coalition, Chambers of Commerce, Convention and Visitors Bureaus
2. Incorporate SMART Growth principles in review of local government plans.	WMSRDC, County Boards of Commissioners, Local Planning Commissions
3. Assist local efforts to promote traditional downtowns and support placemaking activities throughout the region.	WMSRDC, Economic Development Organizations, MEDC
4. Work with community-based organizations and local governments to address local and regional housing needs.	Everyone
5. Support and promote ongoing community service and engagement opportunities.	Everyone
MILESTONES	TIME FRAME
1. Regional trail inventory and gap assessment.	Near-term (0-5 years)
2. Increased municipal participation in the MEDC Redevelopment Ready Communities program.	Near-term (0-5 years)
3. Implementation of recent county-level housing needs assessments.	Ongoing
4. Regional gap analysis of retail, services, and amenities.	Near-term (2-3 years)

Economic Resilience

A region's economic prosperity is linked to an area's **economic resilience: the ability to adapt, avoid, withstand, and/or quickly recover from major disruptions to an economic base.** Three ways in which disruptions of an economic base can occur include:

- Downturns or other significant events in the national or international economy which impact demand for locally produced goods and consumer spending;
- Downturns in particular industries that constitute a critical component of a region's economic activity; and/or
- Other external shocks (natural or man-made disaster, military base closure, exit of a major employer, impacts of severe weather events, etc.).

The CEDS process provides a critical mechanism to help identify regional vulnerabilities and prevent and/or respond to economic disruptions. WMSRDC, the keeper of the region's EDD designation, engages in both *steady-state* and *responsive* initiatives which enhance the economic resilience of the district. Steady-state initiatives tend to be long-term efforts that seek to bolster an area's ability to withstand or avoid a disruption. Examples of steady-state initiatives maintained by WMSRDC include:

- Hazard mitigation planning (including identification of community risks and vulnerabilities).
- Geographic Information Systems capabilities.
- Coordinated local and regional planning (including promotion of Smart Growth principles, Blue Economy initiatives, and infrastructure asset management).
- Facilitating broadband infrastructure improvements to achieve universal access to quality and affordable broadband.

Responsive initiatives can include establishing capabilities for an area to be responsive to needs following a disruption. Examples of responsive initiatives maintained by WMSRDC include:

- An established process for regular communication, monitoring, and updating of regional initiatives through the WMSRDC website, newsletter, and social media.
- An established CEDS Strategy Committee, which meets quarterly and can be convened or contacted with little or no notice.

WMSRDC, by virtue of the ongoing CEDS process and EDD designation, is well-positioned to be a source for information and a convener of regional stakeholders and a proponent of collaboration after a disruption. The CEDS process, in and of itself, provides resilience and stability in times of economic disruption and is extremely beneficial to constituent local communities, especially those seeking recovery funding and assistance in the wake of an event.

Hazard mitigation aims to reduce or eliminate potential losses by breaking the cycle of damage, reconstruction, and repeated damage. It's an important component of economic resilience.

Mitigation capabilities include, but are not limited to, community-wide risk reduction projects, efforts to improve the resilience of critical infrastructure and key resource lifelines, risk reduction for specific vulnerabilities from natural hazards and severe weather events, and initiatives to reduce future risks after a disaster has occurred.

Each county within the WMSRDC Economic Development District maintains a FEMA-approved multi-jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan, which is a prerequisite for certain types of pre- and post-disaster hazard mitigation assistance. Future updates of Hazard Mitigation Plans (required every five years) should incorporate economic resilience as a part of the overall emergency management strategy.



Emergency Management Cycle

Evaluation Framework

The evaluation framework serves as a tool to gauge progress on the successful implementation of the overall CEDS. It is an important element of the ongoing planning process and helps to answer the questions “How are we doing?” and “What can we do better?”

At minimum, this CEDS will be reviewed annually to maximize the utility and relevance of this CEDS, and also to complete the CEDS Annual Performance Report as required by EDA. Evaluation will include an assessment of progress towards the Strategies and Milestones outlined in the Action Plan. Evaluation will also include a review of background statistics presented in the Data Fact Sheets section.

With an updated CEDS in hand, WMSRDC EDD staff will pledge to discuss at least one CEDS goal during each quarterly CEDS strategy meeting. For example, one meeting might feature a review of Goal #1: Infrastructure, while the next meeting might focus on Goal #2: Workforce, and so on. Objectives, Strategies, and Milestones for each goal will be presented and attendees will have an opportunity to have a meaningful discussion.

In response to findings of the annual evaluation and quarterly goal reviews, the CEDS may be adjusted by the West Michigan Shoreline EDD under the guidance of the CEDS Strategy Committee. This will allow the CEDS to be flexible and consistently relevant and responsive to the district’s economic development needs.

Conclusion

There are many virtues of the CEDS and CEDS planning process, such as providing baseline data and resources; establishing consensus for a regional economic vision; and helping communities qualify for assistance from EDA. Perhaps the greatest value lies in the development of synergy through convening a spectrum of stakeholders, enhancing the regional presence, and sustaining a cooperative environment throughout the district.

The success of this CEDS will depend upon the level of synergy achieved by regional stakeholders, and their collective commitments to pursue the objectives outlined in the Action Plan.

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this CEDS document is to increase economic capacity to achieve regional economic prosperity in the West Michigan Shoreline Economic Development District. The WMSRDC EDD staff is committed to pursuing and promoting the intents outlined in the Action Plan over the next five-year period. The primary challenge in doing so will be to maintain lines of communication established during development of the CEDS. In many cases, implementation of Action Plan strategies will ultimately be the collective responsibility of stakeholders in the region.

SYNERGY:

“The combined power of a group of things when they are working together that is greater than the total power achieved by each working separately”

-Cambridge Dictionary