



WEST MI SHORELINE

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Issue

Regional Development Commission

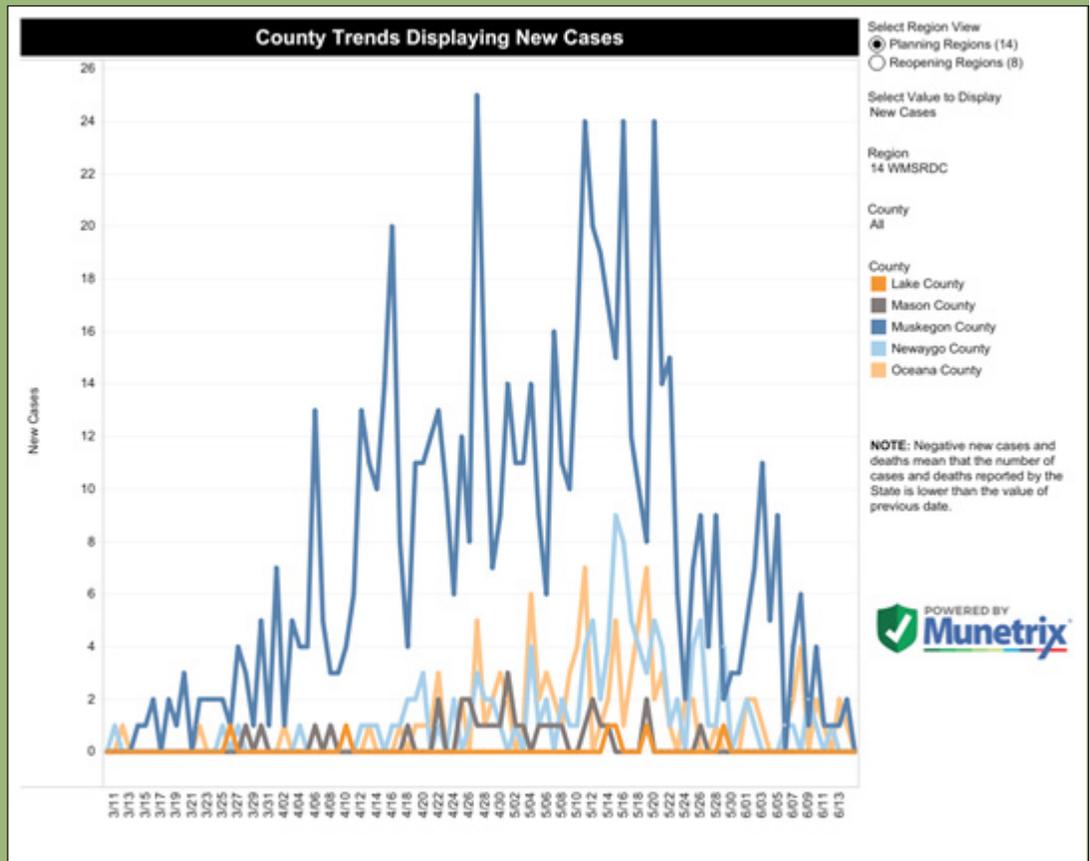
WMSRDC and COVID-19

The world has been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic, and we have all had to deal with a new sense of normal. This fact is no different for WMSRDC staff and our region. Due to the government shutdown, the WMSRDC offices closed on Monday, March 16 and staff began to work from home. We never imagined, three months later, we would still be working from home. Staff had to figure out how to continue official WMSRDC business, maintain our public involvement process, and be a resource to our region through this uncertain and challenging time.

Each one of the WMSRDC programs has been affected by the pandemic and government shutdown. The transportation program was nearing the completion of the 2045 Long Range Transportation Plan which included a public involvement period and committee approvals that were required to be conducted per the Open Meetings Act. Environmental construction projects were placed on hold with some requiring an extension of time to complete work. The Clean Air Action Program had to make a pivot to incorporate social distancing guidelines into program outreach. Meanwhile the economic development program received an influx of federal dollars through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to help regions respond to economic injury as a result of the coronavirus.

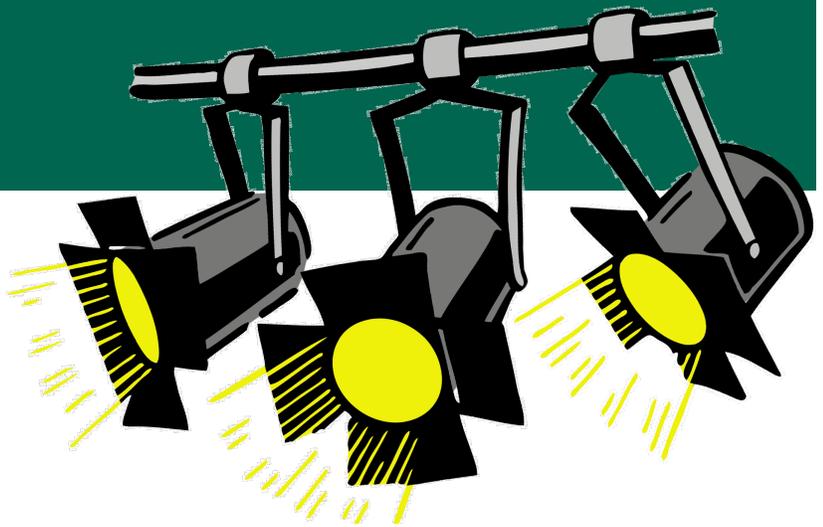
WMSRDC staff has stepped up and really has not missed a beat in the services we provide throughout our region. This newsletter will demonstrate and highlight the tremendous work accomplished over the past few months. While the WMSRDC offices remain closed and all meetings have been transitioned to virtual platforms, staff will continue to work hard and serve our region from home until we are able to return to the office.

As far as COVID-19 numbers in the WMSRDC Region, a total of 1,006 positive cases and 46 deaths have been reported at the time this article was written.



SPOTLIGHT STORY

WMSRDC Turns the Big 5-0!



2020 marks a significant milestone for the West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission. This year the agency turns 50. Created in 1970 as a local, state, and federally designated regional planning agency, WMSRDC's mission is to promote and foster regional development in West Michigan through cooperation amongst local governments and other regional partners.

WMSRDC was created, is governed, and funded by local units of government. The agency was formed by the counties of Oceana, Muskegon, and Ottawa in 1970. In the early 1990's the regional boundaries were redrawn to include Lake, Mason, Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana. WMSRDC is currently governed by a 21 member board with representation from throughout the five counties. The agency is funded through dues paid by member communities, which are then leveraged against state and federal grants.

Over the years, the agency has made a tremendous impact in West Michigan by quietly working with local, state, and federal partners behind the scenes to provide technical assistance, planning services, and bring grant dollars into the region.

WMSRDC provides services, management and administration in transportation planning, economic development, environmental planning, community

development, local government services, and other special projects. Historically, WMSRDC has also managed programs in housing and homeland security.

To commemorate this milestone, WMSRDC staff and board have been working over the past year to plan a variety of activities. While much of the activities have been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this newsletter issue unveils a new WMSRDC logo that staff, in collaboration with a local professional graphic designer, have developed. In addition, staff is currently working on a 50th anniversary newsletter that will highlight the accomplishments of the agency over the years. Stay tuned for more details regarding WMSRDC 50th anniversary activities and see the logo below.

The hard work and dedication of both past and present staff, as well as the leadership of the WMSRDC board, have made WMSRDC what it is today. As planners, we are excited and strategically planning for the next 50 years.



Transportation Committees Approve Plans and Amendment at Virtual Meetings

The West Michigan Metropolitan Transportation Planning Program (WestPlan) Technical and Policy Committees have been meeting virtually throughout the pandemic and have approved the 2045 Long Range Plan (LRP) at their April virtual committee meetings. After that, staff submitted the LRP to the required federal and state agencies of which it was promptly approved. The LRP plan development process began in 2018 by staff and included input and guidance from the transportation technical and policy committees as well as state and federal partners. The WestPlan Public Participation Plan was followed to allow for public review and input as the plan was being developed.

The LRP is a federally mandated document that provides for a multi-jurisdictional, multi-year look at the Muskegon and Northern Ottawa area and its future transportation system. Used as a guide for investment of public funds, the document plans for 20 plus years of strategy and capital improvements to the transportation system within the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) area. Technical modeling and analysis of the current system provided a guide to plan for future deficiencies on the network. The overall goal of the plan is to address these deficiencies with projects and solutions that will allow the network to run more efficiently. The plan also includes the use of local, state, and federal transportation goals and objectives to guide transportation plans and projects. The plan must be financially constrained, and must adhere to other federal regulations such as air quality conformity, performance based planning, environmental mitigation, environmental justice, and public involvement. Another important component of

the plan is transit and non-motorized transportation planning.

The WestPlan MPO Committees recently adopted Amendment 8 of the FY2020-2023 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). MPO Committees reviewed and approved the amendment during the May meetings. The amendment was submitted to the MPO by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) and addresses a change to an existing TIP project for repairs on the bridge over the Grand River on US-31. MDOT had submitted a request through the Big Bridge Program to fund the work on the bridge. The work will be completed in 2021.

The WestPlan MPO Technical and Policy Committees approved the FY2021 Unified Work Program (UWP) for the MPO. The federally required plan was approved in May. The UWP outlines the budget and activities for the MPO for the next fiscal year. Budget estimates for the UWP are provided by MDOT and are allocated to several different program areas for the MPO.

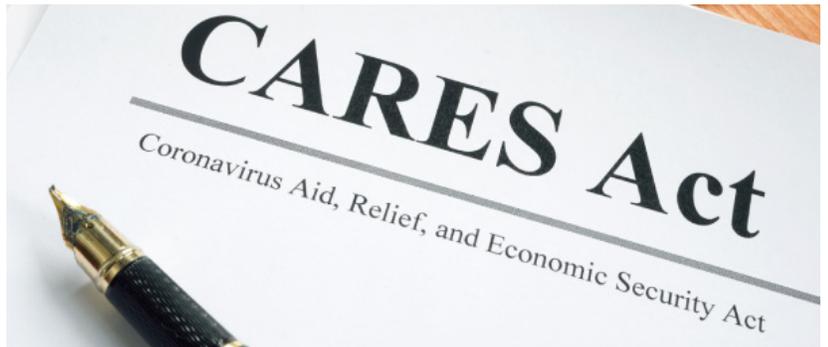
Key roles for the MPO outlined in the UWP include developing and maintaining short and long range plans, assistance to MDOT in updating traffic and socio-economic data, maintaining and updating public involvement and consultation processes, transit and non-motorized planning, and air quality planning. MPO work elements are guided by federal law and the WestPlan MPO works closely with partner MPO agencies throughout the state to develop strategies and best practices to fulfill the requirements.



Economic Development Program Update

Since late March 2020, WMSRDC staff has been incredibly busy working to identify local economic development projects that qualify for US Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) funding made available under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Securities (CARES) Act. This funding is being channeled through the EDA Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance programs with grants to be awarded on a competitive “first come, first served” basis.

As an EDA-designated economic development district, WMSRDC’s roles have been to facilitate communication with EDA representatives, respond to the flurry of inquiries from local units of government, and work with qualified applicants to identify projects and develop competitive applications. WMSRDC has already played a significant role in one application that was submitted in early June. As of this writing, WMSRDC was actively assisting the development of additional projects in all five of the region’s counties. Questions regarding the EDA CARES Act funding may be directed to Stephen Carlson, scarlson@wmsrdc.org.



Looking Ahead

WMSRDC will continue providing support and technical assistance to local governments for the foreseeable future. In addition, WMSRDC has applied for a supplemental, non-competitive EDA planning grant made available through the federal CARES Act. This funding is intended to help regions respond and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as support efforts to enhance regional resilience to future economic disruptions. If the application is successful, WMSRDC will develop a regional resilience plan that is informed by lessons learned during this transformative period.

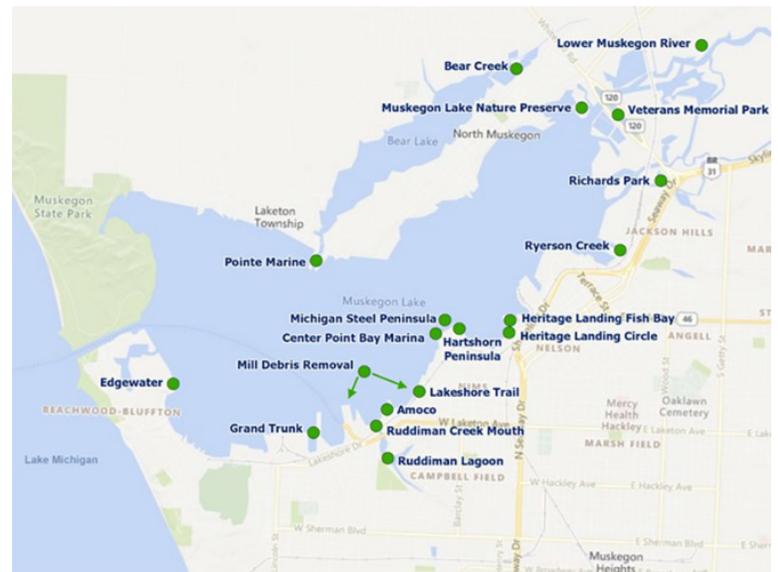
Ideally, the plan will be formed such that it provides a common thread across planning sectors including economic development, environmental planning, transportation planning, and hazard mitigation. WMSRDC will also partner with the CEDS Strategy Committee and local governments to provide assistance and support where it is needed the most. For example, one potential area of focus is broadband infrastructure. Recent events have highlighted not only the critical importance of high-speed internet, but also the gaps in this essential infrastructure.

Stewardship of Restored Natural Resources

WMSRDC received a grant from the NOAA/Great Lakes Commission Regional Partnership and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to develop a Long Term Habitat Management Plan to support the future maintenance of restored natural resources in the Muskegon Lake Area of Concern (AOC). The lake's fish and wildlife habitat had been degraded by historic, industrial filling of the lake and the hardening of its shoreline. The planning effort includes the development of a web-based management plan, with workshops and hands-on training for volunteers, educators and landowners.

The web-based plan includes a wide variety of resources that can be useful for any West Michigan lake that needs some care. But, it is tailored specifically to engage the Muskegon Lake watershed community in the stewardship of more than 20 restored habitats along the shorelines of Muskegon Lake, Ruddiman Creek, Bear Creek and Muskegon River.

The Muskegon Lake Watershed Partnership Shoreline Steward volunteers are adopting restored habitats and using the web-based plan as a resource to learn about native plants, invasive plants, and the types of hands-on maintenance activities needed to maintain each location into the future. The plan is available at muskegonlake.org/habitat-management-plan/. If you are interested in supporting this effort, adopting a restored habitat or becoming a shoreline steward, please contact Kathy at kevans@wmsrdc.org.



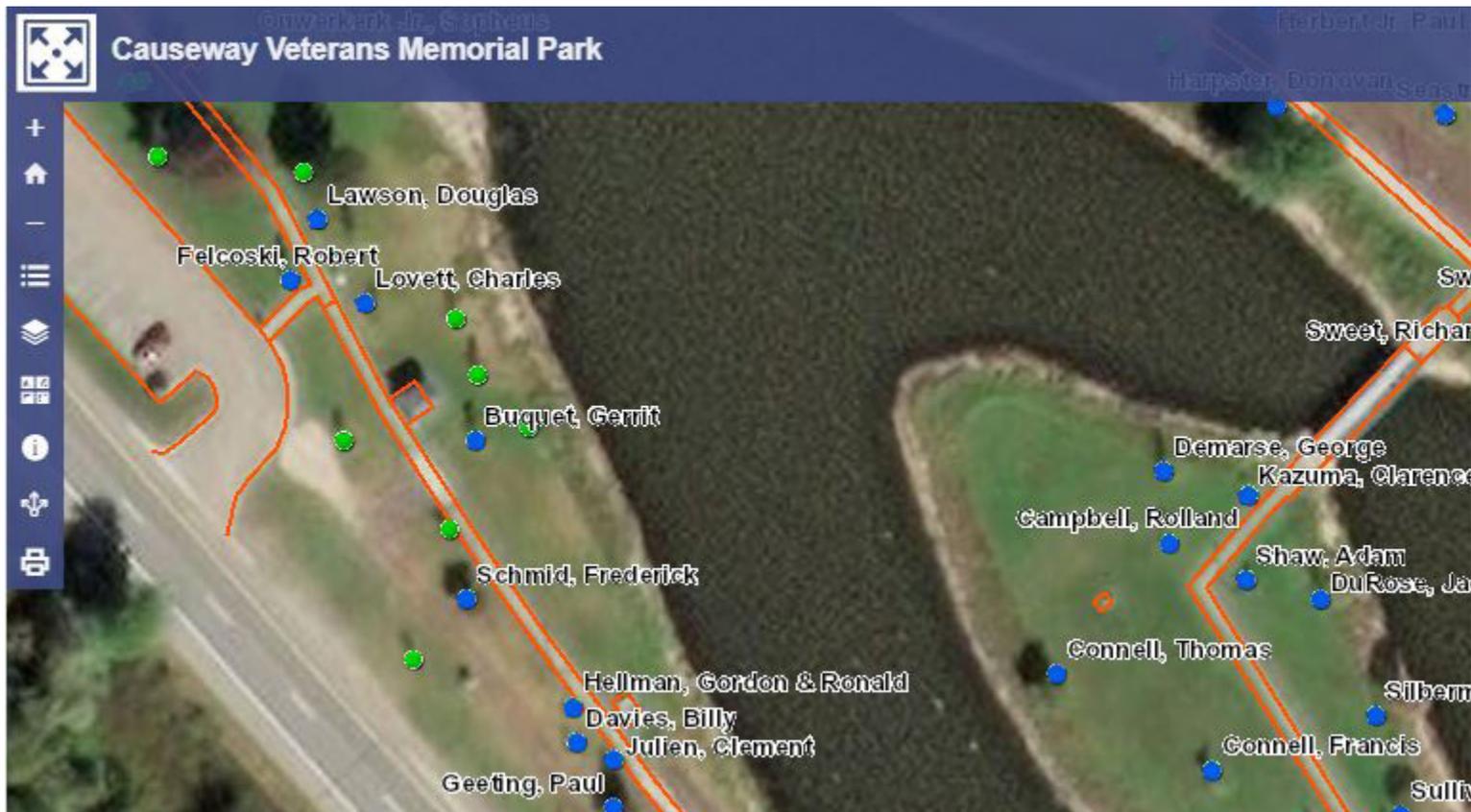
Above: Beautifully restored natural habitat at Heritage Landing.
Right Top: Location of restored habitats on Muskegon Lake.
Right Bottom: Natural habitat along Muskegon Lake.



Veterans Park Memorial Markers

While work on the Veterans Memorial Park was focused on environmental restoration of the park and reconnection to the Muskegon River, care was also taken to restore the park to its original 1934 design. One major concern was the safety and restoration of veterans memorial trees and markers throughout the park. WMSRDC's GIS technician was responsible for recording the location of each memorial marker and inventorying all of the trees within the park. This will assist the Muskegon County Veteran's Office to keep track of which trees will be available for future markers and which trees have been claimed. Once a database of the markers and their locations was created, detailed maps were made to help collect and store the markers until the project was completed so that the markers could be placed back at their original trees or at a new tree. This June, the markers were unpacked and placed back in the park. Thank you to Anita and Kayden from Jackson Merkey Contractors for working so hard to get all of the markers returned to their designated trees.

A web map has been created and the public can go to the GIS Mapping Page at the WMSRDC website to see the names and locations of all veterans' tree markers. Included in the web map is an outline of the park's sidewalks that includes the numbers of the sidewalk memorial bricks placed along the paths. You can find the memorial park web map at www.wmsrdc.org/program/gis-maping-services/ and the list for the sidewalk memorial bricks at the Muskegon County Veteran's webpage at www.co.muskegon.mi.us/1448/Veterans-Memorial-Park. Below is an static image of the interactive online map.



Asset Management Readiness Assessment Scale

In February and March, WMSRDC in partnership with the Michigan Infrastructure Council (MIC) and the Michigan Association of Regions (MAR) was in the process of debuting an Asset Management Readiness Assessment Scale tool to infrastructure owners in our region and across the state. These activities were put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. WMSRDC partners are now ready to resume this work through virtual meetings with infrastructure owners across drinking water, wastewater and storm water system, transportation, utilities, and communications.

The Scale embraces five asset management competencies – People and Leadership; Data and Information; Planning and Prioritization; Policy and Governance; and External Communication and Knowledge Sharing – so infrastructure owners can rank their asset management strengths and improvement areas through “readiness levels.” WMSRDC staff will be reaching out to local asset owners to encourage the completion of the tool and provide assistance where needed.

To learn more about the MIC and to download the Asset Management Readiness Assessment Scale, go to www.michigan.gov/mic.

Do Your Share for Cleaner Air

The hot, summer months are here which also means that WMSRDC, as a partner of the West Michigan Clean Air Coalition (WMCAC), requests that you do your share for cleaner air.

The WMCAC is a partnership of businesses, academic institutions, government agencies, industry, and non-profit organizations in Muskegon, Ottawa, Kent, and Kalamazoo counties working together to achieve cleaner air through the education and promotion of voluntary emission reduction activities.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the WMCAC will refrain from promoting several voluntary emission reduction activities this season, including carpooling with non-household

members and using mass transit, in order to adhere to social distancing guidelines. Free bus rides on Clean Air Action Days are also suspended until further notice. We plan to actively encourage these voluntary actions in our future messaging when public health conditions deem it safe to do so. Until then, we encourage you to follow current governmental guidance when participating in a voluntary emission reduction activity and above all, to stay safe. There are still plenty of ways that you can make a positive difference in our air quality this summer, such as walking, riding a bike, telecommuting or waiting until after 6:00 pm to mow your lawn. Together, our voluntary efforts all add up to cleaner air.



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. WMSRDC is also the planning agency for the metropolitan transportation planning (MPO) program for Muskegon and northern Ottawa Counties.

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Charles Lange, Secretary, Mason County Commissioner

Kay Beecham, Councilperson, City of Norton Shores

James Brown, Oceana County Commissioner

Burt Cooper, Newaygo County Board of Commissioners

Dean Gustafson, Oceana County Board of Commissioners

Jennifer Hodges, Supervisor, Muskegon Township

Rich Houtteman, WMSRDC Appointee

Marcia Hovey-Wright, Muskegon County Commissioner

Ken Johnson, Commissioner, City of Muskegon

James Kelly, WMSRDC Appointee

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