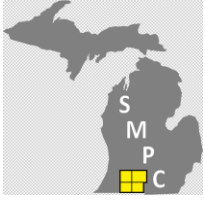


2020 SMPC Annual Report



2020 was undoubtedly a year of challenges. Nonetheless, the Southcentral Michigan Planning Council (SMPC) continued to provide service to Planning Region 3 (Branch, Calhoun, Kalamazoo, and St. Joseph counties). Even though SMPC staff spent most of the year working remotely, they continued to deliver high quality land use, transportation, economic development, education, and grant support services to member counties and local governments in our region. Most notably, SMPC worked to write an updated version of the

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Region 3. Although SMPC's fiscal year coincides with the State's ending September 30, this annual report covers the calendar year of 2020.

2021-2025 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Southcentral Michigan

Because the previous Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for Region 3 expired in 2019, SMPC began the process of creating a new plan that would address economic development issues collaboratively across sectors and jurisdictions. To fund the work, SMPC applied for and received a grant from the US Economic Development Administration (EDA) in February 2020. Throughout the year, SMPC organized and managed a committee-led planning process that brought together a broad cross section of stakeholders to review key issues and data, develop relationships, identify regional priorities, and shape collaborative economic development strategies. Although COVID-19 also brought several challenges to the planning process, developing the CEDS was a timely opportunity to identify the most important recovery needs and strategies with a broad group of economic development stakeholders. The result was the creation of a new CEDS with six goals and nine strategies that will guide our region's economic development projects during the next five years. The 2021-2025 CEDS is available here: www.smpcregion3.org/ceds.

SMPC's work does not stop with the publication of the plan. SMPC will continue to convene the CEDS committee twice a year to coordinate regional economic development projects and to create an annual report on our progress toward CEDS goals. Advancing CEDS strategies will make the regional economy more resilient, inclusive, and competitive, and will help our region's economic development stakeholders work towards recovery from the economic effects of COVID-19. In the short term, strategies will advance economic recovery by creating cross-sectoral communication channels, targeting workforce investments in communities of need, and providing technical and data support to local units of government. This work will rely heavily on the relationships created through the CEDS committee and planning process. SMPC's implementation of the CEDS over the long term will continue to focus on strengthening relationships among economic development stakeholders, identifying needs based on regional data, and coordinating strategies that address the key CEDS goals. In order to advance the CEDS goal of increasing regional resiliency, SMPC applied for an additional three-year grant from the EDA to build staff capacity and support implementation of recovery strategies such as broadband planning and increased technical assistance to local governments.

Technical Assistance

SMPC offers assistance to local groups who need to update or create land use, economic development, or housing plans and policies. SMPC provided several communities with technical assistance in 2020. SMPC started or finished master plans for Branch County, Sherman Township (St. Joseph County), Nottawa Township (St. Joseph County), Flowerfield Township (St. Joseph County) and the City of Parchment (Kalamazoo County). In each of these cases, SMPC worked with the Planning Commissions to complete the work. SMPC also started assisting communities with updates to their zoning ordinances; this work is more intensive than a master plan update which take more time and a greater commitment from the planning commission. In addition, SMPC staff provided informal assistance and guidance to several local units of government with their master plan updates.

In 2020, SMPC continued its relationships with the Kalamazoo Area Transportation Study (KATS) and the W.E. Upjohn Institute. SMPC currently has funding through MDOT to provide transportation planning services to rural areas in the region. Please contact Lee Adams for more information on these services.

Develop Housing Expertise

Following discussions had with the Southwest Michigan Prosperity Initiative committee and local government officials, SMPC recognized the need for developing organizational expertise in the realm of housing research, planning, and policy analysis. With the hiring of additional staff in late 2019, SMPC has been better able to answer this call, and has undertaken several new housing projects. Throughout 2019 and 2020, SMPC worked with the St. Joseph County Human Services Commission and its partners to write a plan that developed strategies and built collaborative relationships to address their most pressing housing needs. Both SMPC and county partners learned valuable lessons through this novel housing planning process that will improve their work going forward. For 2021, SMPC has two contracts in place to create housing plans for Kalamazoo County and the United Way of Montcalm-Ionia Counties.

In 2020, SMPC also completed the Regional Housing Toolkit, a project of the Southwest Michigan Prosperity Initiative. The toolkit presents a framework for communities who wish to create a housing plan, and includes best practices in housing policy, links to resources, and an interactive map that measures the feasibility of different housing types by Census tract. SMPC worked with a local design firm, LKF Marketing, to create a website and make all these tools available to west Michigan communities. As part of this process, the toolkit was rebranded as Plan4Housing.org. Because SMPC will continually update and expand the site, partners are invited to explore this website and share feedback with staff regarding additional resources that improve the utility of this toolkit.

Finally, in 2020, SMPC staff began a research project called RentAble with economists from the W.E. Upjohn Institute and from the Notre Dame Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities. The project is designed to help tenants with barriers to housing and limited income secure a place to live. This program will give participants help with their security deposit while offering landlords an “insurance policy” backstop against missed rent or damages to the unit. In addition to helping tenants and landlords de-risk, the program will seek to answer several socioeconomic research questions as well. While currently only active in Kalamazoo County, if successful, the program could be expanded to other areas.

Workshops

The pandemic limited the educational and workshop offerings from SMPC. Traditionally, SMPC will offer local governments and nonprofits the opportunity to learn and share best practices on relevant topics two times each year. In the past, SMPC has offered workshops on alternative energy and its impact on land use, economic development, the Open Meetings Act and parliamentary procedure, marijuana regulations, and land use policy. SMPC hosted one workshop in February 2020 on the impacts of codes and zoning on small businesses, over twenty people in attended. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SMPC was unable to host additional workshops, but we shared information on partner organizations’ educational opportunities with our extensive list of stakeholders in our four-county region.

Southwest Michigan Prosperity Initiative

The Southwest Michigan Prosperity Initiative Committee (SWMPI) completed its work in 2020. The program met for a final time in February 2020 but several of its initiatives remained active until completion later in the year. SWMPI empowered SMPC and the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission to complete Infrastructure Asset Management work. Additionally, SMPC was empowered to complete the creation of the housing toolkit. Finally, several grants were awarded to local groups who aimed to complete work that will work to accomplish the goals and objectives of SWMPI.

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