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The 2009 Benzie Summit for Communication and Cooperation Moves Participants from Vision to Action

Submitted by Sharron May

That buzzing sound in Benzie County on February 21st wasn't just coming from snowmobiles. It was also the buzz of a community conversation at Platte River Association Hall in Honor as over 60 participants from Benzie local units of government, agencies, business, and citizenry converged for the 2009 Benzie Summit on Communication and Cooperation.

With global economic forces and energy realities seemingly beyond our control, the need for local resiliency and collaborative efforts has never been greater. The Summit provided a proactive forum for those efforts.

At the first Summit in November 2007, key issues were identified and prioritized then task forces were formed around those issues. **The top priority identified at the 2007 Summit was communication between units of government and government and citizens.** The Intergovernmental Communication and Cooperation Committee (ICC) arose from that Summit to address this top priority and function as a steering committee to monitor and report on the progress of task forces and organize the next Summit.

The **2009 Summit featured speakers on communication and the local and sustainable production of food, energy and goods.** Speakers were selected for their ability to provide concrete, working models of communities achieving economic independence. At least two perspectives were represented in each segment.

Alcona County Michigan State University (MSU) Extension Director Bonnie Wichtner-Zoia opened the Summit with an interactive workshop about **effective communication to gain trust**, especially in committee and meeting settings. Merit Incorporated from Ann Arbor is a nonprofit organization that helps provision broadband service for other non-profits. Jason Russell and Bob Stovall demystified broadband **communication technology** and mapped existing as well as potential fiber network pathways appropriate for Benzie County.

Benzie's own Chris Saffron, associate professor at MSU, specializes in biotechnology and biosystems. He provided MSU data, research and **examples of successful renewable energy projects in Michigan communities** as close as McBain. Tom Karas of The Michigan Alternative Energy Project in Traverse City focused participants on the long view. His graphic images of different **energy scenarios projected into the future**, allowed participants to draw their own conclusions. Citing the fact that the U.S. put a man on the moon within 10 years, his resounding message was "you are the people we have been waiting for." Planning commissioner Karen Roberts concluded the segment with an **update on Benzie County's Wind Energy Ordinance.**

Local Agriculture was a new addition to the Summit. Patty Cantrell from the Taste the Local Difference program and Lee Lutes from Black Star Farms and the Michigan Wine and Grape Industry Council's Research and Education Committee spoke of the **emerging trends and 'ripe' opportunities for both small and large scale farming and viticulture in Benzie County.** The economic impact of capitalizing on **Michigan's status as the second most diverse agricultural state in the U.S. was underscored as agriculture encroaches on the number one slot in the state's economy** held by the auto industry.

Fittingly, The Mayfair Tavern in Elberta prepared a **menu of artisan foods and ingredients from local farms** including: **local apple** sourdough turnovers from Still Grinning Kitchens; Higher Grounds Coffee; **local cream, milk and butter** from Cream Cup Dairy; quiche with **local eggs** from Mockingbird Farm; **local greens** from Creation Farm with **local Honey Mustard Vinaigrette** from Sleeping Bear Farm; **local beef** chili from the Rice Farm and borscht soup with **local root vegetables** from The Ware Farm; **local freshly baked bread** from Eastshore Market; **local root beer** from Mayfair Tavern/Northwoods Beverage and cherry iced tea flavored with **local cherry concentrate** from Graceland Fruit.

Economic Growth and Development with a 'Triple Bottom Line' impact was a connecting thread woven throughout The Summit. A Triple Bottom Line weighs and measures the social and environmental as well as economic impacts of a solution or project.

Building on the work of task forces formed at the November 2007 Summit, groups engaged in brainstorming sessions in the afternoon. Out of this process, **Initiatives were formed around the areas of Communication, Broadband, Alternative Energy, Local Agriculture, Grant writing, Smart Growth, Education, and Affordable Housing.** Facilitators used action worksheets to move the groups from visioning to the preliminary steps of creating an action plan. These were reported to the larger group. **Two representatives from each group will attend the March 6th ICC committee meeting to fine tune their action plans** which will be posted on the county web site and publicized in other venues. With all objectives met, the meeting adjourned early.

Diverse community input and representation is encouraged. For more information, see www.benzieco.net or contact Kathy Ralston at [kathy\(at\)kathyralston.com](mailto:kathy(at)kathyralston.com) or 342-2155.