



Photo by jimfrix

A GRAND VISION

for Northwest Michigan's Future

By Brad Broberg

A decade has passed since the federal government earmarked funds for a bridge in Grand Traverse County, Mich. Although it will never carry any traffic, the bridge is complete. But instead of a steel span across the Boardman River as originally planned, it's a concept called the Grand Vision that connects six neighboring counties to their future.

The Grand Vision is a bridge to what the region wants to look like 50 years from now. Conceived with funds shifted from the Boardman River span after the project was mothballed, the Grand Vision paints a picture of smart growth in the northwest corner of lower Michigan. Infill development, mixed-use urban centers, walkable neighborhoods and public transportation are all part of a collectively imagined future in which growth is focused where development already exists.

"You see this type of thing a lot in metro areas, but this is some pretty forward-thinking for a rural area," says Kim Pontius, chair of the coordinating committee for the Grand Vision and executive vice president of the Traverse Area Association of REALTORS®.

The Grand Vision sprang from a land-use and transportation study in Grand Traverse County that mushroomed into a regional framework for guiding all facets of



Photo by Andrew McFarlane



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(Above) Michigan citizens meet to discuss the Grand Vision

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growth and development — everything from energy to housing to employment. Articulated in a 32-page document and driven by citizen involvement, the Grand Vision is both a plan and a movement that is leading the region's many parts in a common direction.

"We've started to create a culture of systemic thinking where everybody understands that what happens upstream has an effect downstream," Pontius says. "It's sort of taken on a life of its own."

More than 340 projects that reflect Grand Vision themes — everything from coordinating transit and rail services to developing a regional marketplace for locally produced food — are in various stages of progress and nearly \$10 million in state, federal and private foundation funding has been leveraged, according to a 2012 report to the coordinating committee. Meanwhile, the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments is gathering information and developing strategies that local governments can use to incorporate the Grand Vision into their policies and planning.

"We've got our direction," Pontius says. "Now, it's a matter of working together to implement it."

The six counties that comprise the Grand Vision — Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau and Wexford — are home to 176,000 people spread across 3,300-square-miles of farms and forests along the shores of Lake Michigan. With the six counties expected to welcome 50,000 more people by 2060, the region is looking to the Grand Vision to preserve the area's small-town character, natural beauty and agricultural vitality as it grows.

"Economic prosperity, to a certain extent, comes through growth," says Evan Smith, senior operations manager at Cherry Capital Foods in Traverse City who's been involved with the Grand Vision from the beginning. "But growth can affect your quality of life. [The Grand Vision] is about minimizing the impact of growth on the things we value and making positive changes where we want to change."

That's a lot to expect considering the Grand Vision is not a legally binding plan. The region includes 98 units of local government and each county, city, township and village is free to give the Grand Vision the grand kiss off. "Nobody can mandate anything. In fact, that would never work," Pontius says. What gives the Grand Vision weight with decision-makers is the energy invested in it by the region's citizens.



Photo by jimfix



Courtesy of Travel Michigan

“The concepts clearly have a lot of public support,” says Marsha Smith, executive director of Rotary Charities of Traverse City and member of the Grand Vision coordinating committee. “People here have always known that our future depends on how we take care of this place and how we grow.”

More than 15,000 people took part in the public process that developed the Grand Vision. Many attended one of a dozen planning workshops while more than 12,000 participated in a poll that showed overwhelming support for steering growth to existing population centers and helped establish the Grand Vision’s six guiding principles.

- A regional multi-modal transportation system that supports energy conservation.
- Sustainable energy uses in construction, transportation and economic development.
- Protected and preserved water, forests, natural and scenic areas.
- Unique and vibrant communities that strengthen the local economy.
- Local farms and regional food systems as a viable part of the region’s communities.
- A diverse mix of regional housing choices with affordable options.

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Photo provided by Michigan Municipal League



“The Grand Vision ties a lot of different issues together,” Evan Smith says. “Historically, we were making our decisions in silos (and) starting to create an urban sprawl that is not really the vision most people have for our region.”

The Grand Vision came together without its own staff, office or even phone under the direction of a diverse 32-member coordinating group and is moving ahead with the same collaborative approach to making decisions and providing resources. “There is no entity that is the Grand Vision,” Pontius says. “This was all built on a shared leadership model.”

The Grand Vision’s coordinating committee — dubbed CORE for Communications, Organization, Resource Development and Education — keeps the ball rolling now. It consists of representatives from the Michigan Land Use Institute, Michigan State University, Northwest Michigan Council of Governments, Northwestern Michigan College, Rotary Charities of Traverse City, the Traverse Area Association of REALTORS®, the Traverse City Chamber of Commerce, United Way of Northwest Michigan and the Watershed Center.

Six issue area networks — one for each of the six guiding principles — bring together people from

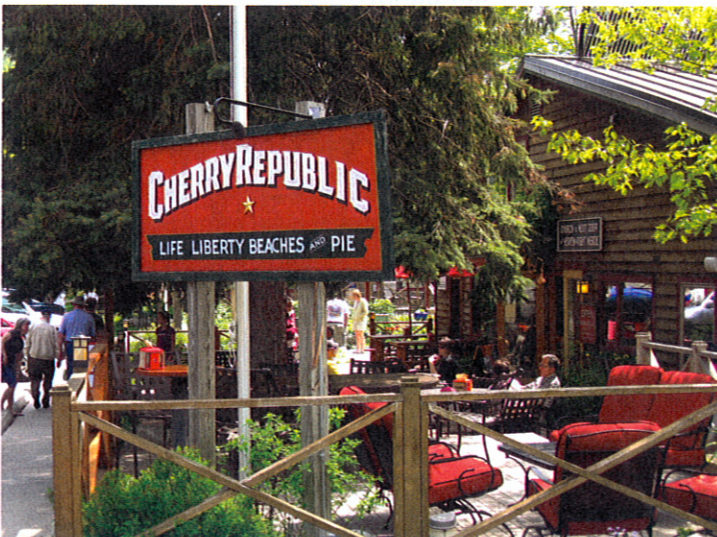
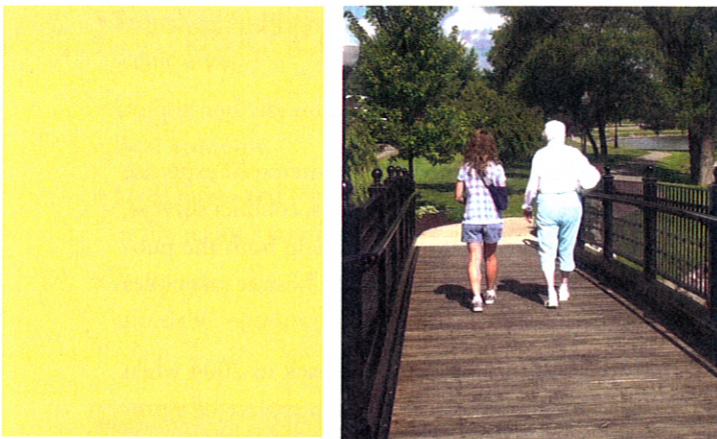
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various walks of life who have an interest or expertise in those areas. They host workshops, conduct surveys, create educational materials and help both the public and private sectors put Grand Vision principles into practice.

The Grand Vision timeline goes back to 2004 when the Boardman River bridge — centerpiece of a proposed bypass for downtown Traverse City — was shelved amid criticism the bridge would degrade the river and the bypass would contribute to sprawl. Faced with losing the money earmarked for the bridge and bypass, Grand Traverse County convinced Congress to reappropriate the money to help launch a long-term, land-use and transportation study.

The county appointed a study group in 2005. The closer the group looked at the issues the more they realized there was more to consider than roads, bridges and land use. There were also things like housing, economic development, energy and farming. And all of the issues they were studying crossed county lines. As a result, they expanded the scope of their work and ultimately included five other counties in the

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process, which along the way came to be known as the Grand Vision.

Consultants were hired in 2007 and an aggressive public involvement campaign was launched before a final Grand Vision document was completed and presented to the community in 2009.

Although there's been no shortage of activity that supports Grand Vision themes, it's not clear that the Grand Vision has had a major impact yet, says Mike Estes, mayor of Traverse City. "It's really too early to tell because so many other dynamic situations are happening at exactly the same time," he says.

Take the recent surge of people moving into Traverse City, the region's largest community with 15,000 people. Are they coming because the Grand Vision encourages growth in existing population centers, asks Estes, or do gas prices make them want to live closer to work? And is the Grand Vision saving the region's farmland from development or is the growing demand for locally grown food responsible?

"To actually see the results of the Grand Vision will take a long time," Estes says. "What the Grand Vision has done is get people talking about the issues — and that really is the first step."

The next step is where the rubber will meet the road. The Grand Vision describes what people want the region to look like. The Northwest Michigan Council of Governments is tackling how to make it happen.

"This is going to be a different conversation for a lot of people — and a tougher one," says Matt McCauley, director of regional planning for the agency. "The Grand Vision took a 30,000-foot view. It's going to become much more [personal] going forward because we're going to be looking at specific communities."

The council is leading a public process to develop a Framework For Our Future that will identify potential growth areas and develop zoning models, policy language and other tools that local governments can use to realize the Grand Vision.



Photos provided by Michigan Municipal League

The council is leading a public process to develop a “Framework For Our Future.”

The challenge is that each of the 98 units of local government in the region is free to go their own way, but that’s also why creating a Grand Vision with broad support was so important. “It could be viewed as not the most effective way of moving forward,” McCauley says, “but we have to work within the constraints we have for land-use planning in Michigan where it’s done at the city, village and township level.”

The proof of the Grand Vision’s value is that it continues to drive discussion and collaboration throughout the region. “No one thing will make the Grand Vision

a reality,” McCauley says. “It will be an aggregate of many different projects. We’re now in our eighth year and it doesn’t show any signs of being a plan that just sits on a shelf.” ●

Brad Broberg is a Seattle-based freelance writer specializing in business and development issues. His work appears regularly in the Puget Sound Business Journal and the Seattle Daily Journal of Commerce.