



*Central West Michigan* Tourism Strategic Plan  
2006

Lake, Manistee, Mason, Newaygo, Oceana



Strategic Plan 2006

# Central West Michigan Tourism

This plan represents the shared vision of tourism leaders in Lake, Manistee, Mason, Newaygo, and Oceana Counties called ***Central West Michigan***:

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Our Mission is:

## **“Partnering together to promote tourism for a stronger economy”**

On July 21, 2006, the tourism leaders above began participating in a series of strategic planning workshops facilitated by Michigan State University Extension. The participants were asked to answer a series of questions regarding the groups’

- Mission Statement
- History
- Direction and vision
- Strengths and Weaknesses
- Opportunities for Improvement
- Thoughts about the Future

The tourism leaders were involved in every step of the process, from the design of a mission statement to the identification of priority issues to the resulting four strategic initiatives below. The plan provides CWM (Central West Michigan) with a **framework for these four priority Goals**:

- **To establish & implement a coordinated education effort for internal and external tourism related stakeholders**
- **To formalize and strengthen the CWM Tourism Partnerships**
- **To be uniform in promoting CWM tourism**
- **To develop a regional listing of important events, tours, trails, scenic routes and natural features**

The strategic plan will be used to focus resources to enhance tourism for everyone in the region.

Overview

### **What is Strategic Planning?**

Strategic planning is an on-going, disciplined effort designed to assist in making decisions that shape and guide who we are, what we do and why we do it. Our strategic plan represents our shared vision of the future. It identifies our overall direction but does not specify how we will achieve it, and it has given us a framework that will be consistent over the next five years.

### **Benefits of Strategic Planning**

The main purpose of this process is to help us do a better job. A great strategic plan enables an organization to focus its collective energy, to ensure we are all working toward the same goals and

to assess and adjust our direction in response to an ever-changing environment. It will provide us with a uniform road map to address key issues and enhance Central West Michigan tourism through 2011 so that we may be responsive to a dynamic, changing environment.

The outcome of the strategic planning sessions reflects a snapshot of the history of Central West Michigan Tourism. Some of the major historical reference included:

### **I. Characteristics and Historical events of Central West Michigan Tourism – 1900-1950**

- ❖ Dunes– MacWoods oldest motorized tour of dunes (76 yrs)
- ❖ Taking the train from downstate
- ❖ Allure of fishing, best smoked fish in the state
- ❖ Pere Marquette River for fishing/canoeing
- ❖ All day affair to go to beaches
- ❖ Camps were vip; Boy scout, girl scout, church, etc.
- ❖ Perception of small towns – backward lifestyle
- ❖ Industrial areas began to transition to resort
- ❖ Cultural Diversity – African American resort @ Idlewild; famous for music
- ❖ Logging industry, festivals along river involving log rolling, etc.
- ❖ Oldest wooden train trestle @ White Cloud & historic train depots
- ❖ Dams along river built for hydroelectric
- ❖ Dams are popular fishing spots
- ❖ Hunting camps
- ❖ Railroad car ferries began in 1890 – lots of people came to vacation on these as well
- ❖ Gangs from Chicago used this area for recreation (Al Capone had several houses as hideouts – they all had stills)
- ❖ CCC camps –
- ❖ Federated Garden Clubs and USFS collaborated to start the Loda Lake Wildflower Sanctuary (1937)
- ❖ Community buildings, grange halls served as dance halls for family entertainment
- ❖ Lighthouses

### **II. Characteristics and recent historical events of Central West Michigan – 1950-2000**

- ❖ Industrial perception moving to resort
- ❖ Salmon fishing & snagging was unbelievable, fly fishing for trout
- ❖ Dune rides were challenged by individual dune ATVs coming
- ❖ Development of golf courses (30 +)
- ❖ Cross-country skiing
- ❖ Themed resorts – JJ, Michigan's Adventure
- ❖ Development of highway infrastructure
- ❖ M-37 was major link out of GR & highlighted some of special points along the way
- ❖ US 31 & 131 had great impact
- ❖ Development of agri-tourism
- ❖ Historic tourism
- ❖ Festivals
- ❖ Car ferry brings in over 100,000 people/year
- ❖ Beaches & water are 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest activity for tourists
- ❖ Bed & Breakfast industry
- ❖ Antiquing
- ❖ DNR Bicycle Rails to trails
- ❖ North Country Scenic Trail
- ❖ Rivers – canoe rentals, fishing guides
- ❖ Snowmobiling
- ❖ Cultural – Dogwood Center, Ramsdell in Manistee
- ❖ Professional performing groups make circuits
- ❖ Specialized shopping – sporting goods
- ❖ Ludington State Park
- ❖ Development of modernized state park system, private campgrounds

- ❖ Casino
- ❖ Fall color tours
- ❖ 2<sup>nd</sup> homes, condos
- ❖ End of segregation impacted Lake Co. tourism negatively
- ❖ Internet, cell phones – access due to improved communications
- ❖ Lighthouse preservation and tours
- ❖ Charter fishing
- ❖ Organized hunting; game preserves
- ❖ Shipwreck diving

### III. Vision of the Future

The visioning process requires consideration of what we would like the area to look like if we left the area and returned in 15 to 20 years. Here is what was envisioned.

- ❖ Active thriving downtowns
- ❖ Large resort properties (destination resorts)
- ❖ Preserved national forests
- ❖ Natural & cultural tourism system
- ❖ Total approach to land use planning - balance zoning for growth w/ preservation of natural resources
- ❖ Coordinated path system, motorized & non-motorized
- ❖ Maintain & build on what we already have
- ❖ Efficient, adequately funded, well maintained state land recreation facilities
- ❖ Neat, quaint communities – aesthetics – open when people are here
- ❖ Well defined consistent brand image – signage, etc.
- ❖ Vibrant, 12 month economy
- ❖ State completes US 31 & US 10 as 4 lane freeway, Indiana border to Mackinaw City
- ❖ Wireless service, cell phone reception
- ❖ Protect our water as a major resource
- ❖ Environmentally friendly jobs
- ❖ Idlewild preserved & developed
- ❖ Nice, high quality restaurants & wineries as destinations
- ❖ Counties working together, sharing information as a region
- ❖ Regional tours – heritage, natural, etc.
- ❖ No new transfer stations or land fills
- ❖ More museums, galleries
- ❖ Broadband access
- ❖ Adequate lodging facilities in a variety of styles
- ❖ Diversified natural products – more technology transfer from MSU
- ❖ Developed Hispanic culture as tourist asset
- ❖ More tourism package deals & networked marketing (offering redemptions, coupons) – businesses working in partnerships
- ❖ Regional aesthetics – “Up North” feel
- ❖ Creative & unique employment – organic/ag/horticulture
- ❖ Formalized training system for tourism businesses including service & other businesses

The group is aware of some of the obstacles or problems in working toward achieving this vision. These are the items we will work to minimize.

### IV. Problems

- 1) Not enough night time activities
- 2) Not enough legislative support
- 3) Businesses not flexible (hours open, etc.)
- 4) No formal organization to move regional effort forward - & no funding
- 5) Limited # of tours and packaging
- 6) Uncoordinated planning efforts within communities (strip development/aesthetics)
- 7) Lack of internal marketing (hospitality training needed)

- 8) Lack of tourist information (employee knowledge)
- 9) Dining & shopping limits (variety, hours of operation)
- 10) Entertainment options limited
- 11) Unified/more signage within the region
- 12) Low wages in tourism industry (at least perception), & seasonality of business results in people wanting not to be involved
- 13) Distance – too far away & between activities
- 14) Too much competition/not enough cooperation

The group is also aware of some of the threats and emerging trends in working toward achieving our vision. These are the items that we need to be cognizant of in planning our future.

#### **V. Threats and Trends**

- 1) Rising fuel costs
- 2) Changing demographics
- 3) Web based travel planning
- 4) Disappearing open space
- 5) Physical activities needed to promote healthy lifestyle
- 6) Creating tourism packages
- 7) Closer to home travel
- 8) Addiction to technology
- 9) Impatience (instant gratification)
- 10) Growing senior population & limited discretionary income
- 11) Travelers more demanding (value, service, price, quality)
- 12) Internet & cell availability are key factors in travel decisions
- 13) Global workforce & demand market
- 14) Traditional tourism predictor models are challenged by fear, uncertainty, economy, gas prices, terrorism, jobs
- 15) Overall state economy
- 16) Desire for destination travel experiences vs. transitory type
- 17) Aging population
- 18) Tourists more value conscious
- 19) State of Michigan is increasing promotional spending
- 20) Tourist profile is becoming more ethnically diverse

The group should utilize and build on the areas strengths in working toward achieving their vision. It is our strengths that we will emphasize and build upon.

#### **VI. Strengths**

- 1) Natural Resources
  - i) Beauty
  - ii) Differentiates activities
  - iii) Wildlife
  - iv) Hunting
  - v) Bird watching
- 2) Quaint/friendly/welcoming atmosphere
  - i) Themed events
- 3) Agriculture
  - i) Variety
  - ii) Tourism
  - iii) Economy
- 4) Reasonably priced & accessible (proximity) (Easy access)
- 5) Diverse product
  - i) Natural resources
  - ii) History
  - iii) Vistas
  - iv) Recreational opportunities

- v) Agriculture
- vi) Year round
- 6) Local support
  - i) Strong workforce
  - ii) General public supports
  - iii) Businesses willing to work together
- 7) Good amenities
- 8) Safety (86%)
- 9) Repeat visitors (97%)
- 10) Family friendly

Given the Strengths, Problems and Trends, the group has the energy and resources to focus on the following opportunities. These are the things that we can do ourselves to make our vision a reality.

### VII. Opportunities

- 1) Regional map, including festivals, outdoor recreation, agriculture tourism, color tours, seasonality.
- 2) Regional collaboration: cost sharing, funding applications. systems change, outreach & marketing
- 3) Website
- 4) Develop trail/route connections for 5 counties.
- 5) Develop core marketing materials for region
- 6) Develop educational programs - employees, employers, zoning administrators, public
- 7) Advocacy – legislative support needed (budget and policy)
- 8) Hospitality training
- 9) Compile “things to do” in the region document, map, etc. for training and advertising.
- 10) Promotion, promotion, promotion: \*be uniform in promoting mission statement and slogan.
- 11) Design specialty tours, trails, routes, especially for targeted groups (seniors, etc.) - That encompasses the 5 county area.
- 12) Networking with all tourism business sectors

VIII. Because we can't do everything at once, we have to prioritize, work together, share resources and focus on what we feel are the most important goals. By starting with the following four goals and objectives, we will move toward accomplishing our mission - **“Partnering together to promote tourism for a stronger economy”**, and develop a unified tourism theme of **“Naturally, Central West Michigan”**.

#### *Strategic Goal #1:*

**Establish & implement a coordinated education effort for internal and external tourism related stakeholders.**

##### **Team Objectives:**

- 1) To educate agencies/area leaders on regional tourism offerings
- 2) Create uniform training materials piece that each county can take and use.
- 3) Education of businesses and employers

#### *Strategic Goal #2:*

**Formalize and strengthen the CWM Tourism Partnerships:**

##### **Team Objectives:**

- 1) Convene regular meetings, define membership and organizational structure
- 2) Develop cost effective marketing and seek funding for same
- 3) Advocate for systems change to improve the tourism climate in CWM

*Strategic Goal #3:*

**Create uniformity in promoting CWM tourism.**

**Team Objectives:**

- 1) Create a consistent logo to be used in all five counties
- 2) Form a working group to promote the region
- 3) Hold annual forum for 5 county region

*Strategic Goal #4:*

**Develop a regional listing of important events, tours, trails, scenic routes and natural features.**

**Team Objectives:**

- 1) Develop each counties inventory.
- 2) Create five-county maps of various tours/routes described in the goal
- 3) Make maps available through different communication media: web site/portal, podcast, brochures, etc.
- 4) Update the inventory/maps/brochures/websites on a regular (frequent) basis.

**IX. Conclusion:**

On November 13, 2006 the Naturally, Central West Michigan group will host a tourism conference to improve knowledge and start to develop core work groups that can address the first four goals. Success will require commitment and participation from volunteers, private business and public entities and a sharing of resources from business, agencies and governments to address the goals. This plan represents a true picture of where Central West Michigan has been, and where we would like be in five to ten years. This plan represents a step by step goal oriented process to start us on our journey. Because we have planned, new partners can join work groups and contribute where they feel they can assist the most. Central West Michigan has the energy and resources to partner together to promote tourism for a stronger economy.