SHORING UP MICHIGAN'S SMALL HARBORS

Michigan is home to more than 80 public marinas and harbors, managed by state, county, or local governments. They are part of a boating culture that draws $2.4 billion in economic activity to the state each year. Even so, with increasingly scarce state and federal funding, public facilities face plenty of challenges.

TURBULENT TIMES

Michigan's harbor towns have weathered many storms in the last few decades. Factors such as fluctuating water levels and seismic shifts in the state's economy have left some harbor communities struggling to adjust.

But that's not the end of the story. Tourist dollars are returning to Michigan after the financial recession, and there is a growing interest in dining and outdoor recreation opportunities in towns along the state's coasts. Public harbors typically occupy prime waterfront real estate and could function as vital drivers for flagging local economies if bolstered with the right amenities.

A new state mandate also requires state-funded boating facilities to develop five-year management plans, so the time is ripe for managers to think carefully about the long-term future of their harbors.

The Sustainable Small Harbors project, funded by Michigan Sea Grant and a host of partners, aims to assist coastal communities in their planning efforts.

The project has enabled several coastal communities with public harbors to do in-depth self-assessments, uncovering strengths and weaknesses related to their waterfront assets. Participants brainstormed what they want their town's twenty-year future to look like and developed concrete ideas for projects that could help that future become a reality. In the past year, some towns involved in the project have already parlayed these insights into dollars and cents.

The Rogers City Marina was a focal point of the community's discussion about the future of its waterfront.

THE GOAL: Identify the barriers preventing small harbors from becoming economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Lawrence Technological University

Michigan Sea Grant

Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's Office of the Great Lakes

Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Michigan State Housing Development Authority

Additional partner support:

Environmental Consulting and Technology

Veritas Economic Consulting

David L. Knight, LLC

Edgewater Resources

FORMING PARTNERSHIPS TO SEEK SOLUTIONS

The Sustainable Small Harbors project was launched in 2014 as an integrated assessment — a type of research venture designed to draw together existing data into an overarching analysis of a given issue. The goal is to identify the barriers preventing small harbors from becoming economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable.

The project has been spearheaded by Don Carpenter of Lawrence Technological University. Funding came primarily from Michigan Sea Grant and multiple state agencies (see box for full list of project partners). An additional grant from the State of Michigan helped expand the project beyond its initial two-year run.

This co-funding model effectively leverages public dollars to benefit Michigan communities in an unprecedented level of partnership among Michigan Sea Grant and its state and university partners.

ELEVATING COMMUNITY VOICES

To complement the integrated assessment, the project team developed a series of case studies featuring small harbor towns from around the state. In 2015 and 2016, the project team visited the six case-study communities (see map) and facilitated in-depth visioning sessions to help community members develop and prioritize meaningful ways to make their waterfronts more environmentally, financially, and socially sustainable. The team was able to provide these highly interactive, public input-driven workshops, or "charrettes" — typically valued at tens of thousands of dollars — at no direct cost to the communities.

What happens during a charrette?

The Sustainable Small Harbors project team visits a community three times: a one-day orientation visit, the main three-day design charrette, and a final one-day visit a month or two later. During the charrette, the project team sets up a design studio where designers and architects illustrate and electronically render images for visions identified by the community. The community provides a public space to welcome participants in an iterative series of public input events. Attendees engage with fellow community members to sketch on large-scale maps, use color-coded stickers to vote on options, and participate in several feedback loops to ensure the project team is accurately reflecting a consensus vision.



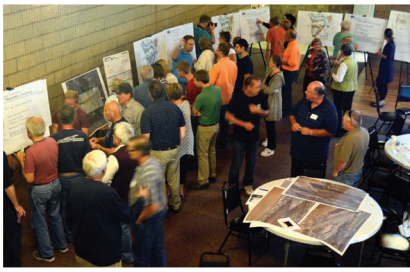


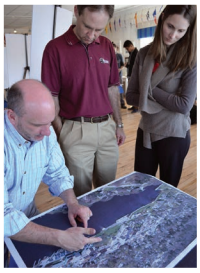





















1 DAY: INITIAL VISIONING MEETING

- Assets
- Barriers
- Weaknesses
- Connections

3 DAYS: DESIGN CHARRETTE

- Public input workshop
- Open house: Selecting a preferred option
- Public "work in progress" session

1 DAY: FINAL PRESENTATION

- Presentation to city/village council
- Updated graphics
- Final report

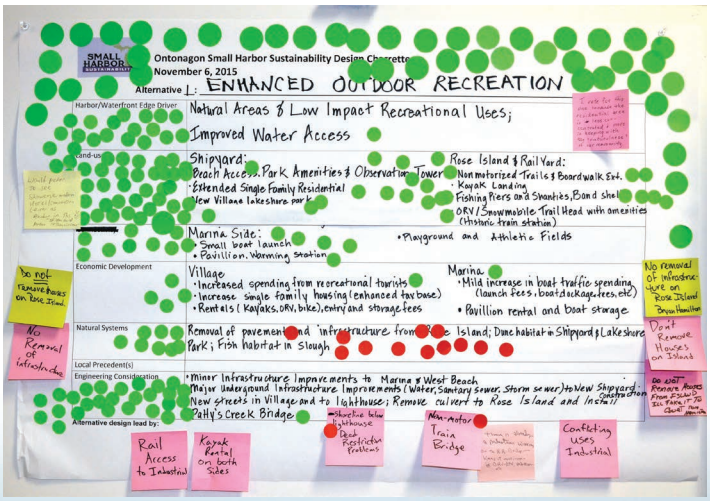
"Our project team and state agency partners facilitated community conversations about the waterfront and enjoyed the opportunity to get to know more about these communities and their concerns and aspirations for the future," says Amy Samples, Michigan Sea Grant coastal resilience specialist.

These brainstorming sessions typically involved three separate visits from the project team, which consisted of project lead Don Carpenter and representatives from Michigan Sea Grant and state agencies.

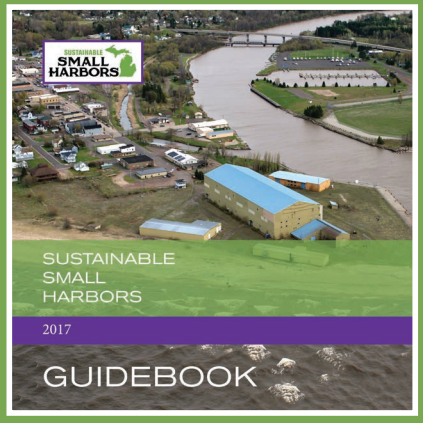
Before the team arrived in town, they already had worked with community leaders to gather information about the area's demographics, city planning documents, and waterfront set-up. The initial one-day visit included a preliminary visioning meeting that introduced community members to the Sustainable Small Harbors project and guided participants through a self-assessment of the factors that made their waterfronts more or less attractive to residents and visitors alike.

The second visit, a three-day design charrette, invited the public to refine concepts from the original meeting. The concepts were developed into three alternative designs reflecting unique futures for the waterfront. Through a "dot voting" process (see example on right), participants were encouraged to weigh in on potential development options gleaned during the first visit.

Participants reflected on improving access to public harbors or potential avenues for transforming underperforming facilities. They weighed designs featuring combinations of street redesigns, new bike trails, pocket parks, kayak rentals, boat ramps, wheelchair-accessible restrooms, and other potential upgrades that could boost the community's waterfront appeal. Upgrades that earned the highest participant support were compiled into a final series of design sketches and conceptual images, which the team presented at the end of the charrette.



At the Ontonagon Village Marina site, community members prioritized access to the Ontonagon Lighthouse and enhancement of marina facilities and amenities.



Find the guidebook and more information about the project at
sustainablesmallharbors.org

The charrette team discusses options for the Au Gres Mooring Facility with city officials.

During the final one-day visit a few months later, the team presented a report to the city or village council. The report included potential funding sources, such as federal or state grants, foundations, and local champions, which the community and council could draw upon to launch the phased projects proposed in the final designs.

TURNING VISION INTO ACTION

In several cases, the charrettes galvanized community leaders to seek funding opportunities to support the designs prioritized by charrette participants. Community leaders have now leveraged the charrette designs to seek more than $3 million in grant funds to support proposed harbor projects.

In 2015, the city of New Baltimore used the charrette designs to become finalists for a $2.85 million grant from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund. The funds are intended for the purchase of the private Schmid Marina on Lake St. Clair, which would be opened for public use. The city will use additional funds from a different grant to upgrade the marina facilities for handicap use. The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund has called the project "a rare opportunity for the city to obtain a site to provide public recreation, conservation, and environmental stewardship at a location in populous [southeast] Michigan."

Officials in Au Gres plan to use the charrette designs to market the city as a "silent watersport-friendly" destination for paddlers, anglers, and other groups. Au Gres also won a $30,000 grant from the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe to renovate the formerly state-owned Au Gres Mooring Facility — one of the main ideas that came out of the city's charrette process. Additionally, city officials plan to incorporate some of the charrette designs into their next master plan.

In Ontonagon, the charrette process prompted a revitalization of the Downtown Development Authority in early 2016. The Authority maintained momentum on several projects highlighted in the charrette designs, such as proposed improvements to local trails.

SPREADING THE WORD TO NEW COMMUNITIES

The Sustainable Small Harbors team hopes other communities can benefit from these examples.

"This project compiled best practices for coastal communities in regard to place-making strategies, smart waterfront growth, and tools that will allow communities to optimize their waterfronts and downtown connections to the water for local businesses, residents, and tourists," says Mark Breederland, Michigan Sea Grant Extension educator based in Traverse City.

Findings from the integrated assessment — along with the case studies and takeaways from an economic analysis of the multiple ways small harbors add economic value to communities — have been captured in the *Sustainable Small Harbors Tools and Tactics Guidebook*. The guidebook identifies the various stages of developing a strategy for harbor sustainability and serves as a tool for managers or officials seeking to do this kind of planning in their own communities.

"St. Ignace, Rogers City, and the other communities served as proof-of-concept case studies for the project, allowing city staff and volunteers a chance to review and provide direct input for the final *Sustainable Small Harbors Tools and Tactics Guidebook*," says Michigan Sea Grant's Amy Samples.

"The guidebook is a resource to assist communities with harbor-specific planning," she explains. It describes the importance of carefully planning for the long-term future of small public harbors, conveys best practices gleaned from the case-study communities, and provides resources for communities that want to walk through their own visioning process.

— Geneva Langeland