

COMMUNITY PROFILE: ONTONAGON



The Sustainable Small Harbors project received funding from Michigan Sea Grant, Michigan Department of Natural Resources – Waterways Program, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality – Office of the Great Lakes, and Michigan State Housing Development Authority to engage stakeholders in waterfront communities around Michigan. In 2015-2016, through public workshops and design charrettes, the project team helped community leaders assess challenges and opportunities related to the economic and environmental sustainability of their waterfronts. This community profile captures the insights and future visions developed through that process. For more information, see: sustainablesmallharbors.org.



Community Basics

Waterfront: Ontonagon River, Lake Superior

County: Ontonagon

Area: 3.86 square miles

Population: 1,494 in 2011 (-15.5 percent change from 2000-2010)

Median Household Income: \$32,950

Median Age: 51 (52 percent residents 50+ years old)

Source: U.S. Census, 2010

COMMUNITY INVENTORY

The Village of Ontonagon is located at the mouth of the Ontonagon River, on the south shore of Lake Superior in the Western Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The village is the county seat and the only incorporated municipality in the county, positioning the village as a cultural and social center for a large part of the west-central Upper Peninsula.

Most of the village's residential and commercial development is established along the east side of the Ontonagon River, with industrial development adjacent to the harbor, which is located on the opposite bank of the river.

The village and township have historically depended on the extractive industries of mining, forestry and agriculture. The local economy has undergone a pattern of booms and busts related to copper and wood markets. Most recently, the copper mine closed in 1995, the shipbuilding operation in 1998, and the paper mill in 2010. The paper mill was razed in 2011, but the site is being considered for future industrial use.

Recently, tourism has influenced the local economy. The Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park, located 15 miles west of the village, has drawn roughly 300,000 visitors annually in recent years. New interest in recreational land use has stimulated

planning efforts for snowmobile, off-road vehicle (ORV) and water trail development.

Source: Village of Ontonagon, Township of Ontonagon Consolidated Recreation Plan: 2012-2017

PLANNING DOCUMENTS

- Ontonagon Village Master Plan (May 2007)
- [Village of Ontonagon, Township of Ontonagon Consolidated Recreation Plan: 2012-2017](#)
Village of Ontonagon, Michigan – Access Management Plan (September 2006)
- [Ontonagon County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan: 2013-2018](#)
- [USACE Harbor Infrastructure Inventories: Ontonagon Harbor, Michigan](#)
- Ontonagon Snowmobile & ORV Rules of The Road
- Ontonagon County Water Trails: Lake Superior and Ontonagon River

WATERFRONT INVENTORY

Ontonagon Harbor: Ontonagon Harbor is a deep-draft commercial harbor with over 4,800 feet of structures, including piers and revetments, and approximately 3/4 mile of maintained federal channel. The harbor also serves as a Harbor of Refuge (USACE, 2013).

Ontonagon Marina: Constructed in the early 1970s, the marina is open from May 1 to October 15. It consists of floating docks with 29 seasonal slips and 7 transient slips. Daily dockage rates range from \$24 to \$177. Amenities at the marina include water, electricity, restrooms, showers, gasoline, diesel, pumpout, ice, fish cleaning station, boat launch, hoist, long-term parking, day-use dock, and a playground with picnic tables and grills.



Nearby Facilities: Black River Harbor is approximately 40 miles west of Ontonagon and includes eight transient slips, seventeen seasonal slips and five commercial slips. Amenities and services include a boat launch, gas dock, grills, hoist, ice, picnic tables, playground and park, public phone, pump-out, restrooms and water. Approximately 55 miles to the east, Houghton County Marina has 54 seasonal and transient slips and a variety of amenities.

Source: [USACE, 2013](#)

Dredging and Federal Infrastructure

- Approximately 40,000 cubic yards of material must be dredged each year; the harbor was last dredged in 2011.
- Maintenance dredging is currently required within the harbor. Project depth is 23 feet in the entrance channel of Lake Superior, 22 feet in the inner harbor channel, 30 feet in the sedimentation basin, and 21 feet at the western upstream portion of the channel.
- The West Pier is currently in need of minor repairs.

Source: [USACE, 2016](#)

VISIONING AND PLANNING ASSETS AND LIABILITIES

As part of the visioning process, the community self-identified the following assets and liabilities:



Figure 1: Assets (left) and weaknesses or barriers (right) reported by the community, where larger text size indicates a higher frequency of mentions.

Source: Sustainable Small Harbors



Figure 2: Current view of shipyard (left) and “Ontonagon 2035” design rendering (right). The final design of the shipyard beach includes a hotel with meeting space, access to the pier and beach, lookout tower, beach amenities, handicap-accessible overlook, and new housing. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

COLLABORATORS

To draw upon community expertise, the following technical meetings were convened:

- Marina and Waterborne Recreation (Harbormaster, Marina Commission, Sport Fishing Club, boaters, paddlers, and waterfront-related business representatives);
- Recreation and Tourism (Recreation Commission, Snowmobile Club, ORV Club, County Recreation Advisory Group, Museum/Historical Society, Chamber of Commerce, and community event representatives); and
- Business and Industry (Highland Copper Company, White Pine Electric, Ontonagon County Economic Development Corporation, Chamber of Commerce, County Economic Partnership, commercial real estate developers, Village Council, Planning Commission, and elected planning representatives).

To facilitate implementation support, the following initial state and regional partners were identified:

- Upper Peninsula representative from the governor’s office;
- Trust for Public Lands;
- Regional Prosperity Initiative field staff;
- Michigan Sea Grant staff; and
- Michigan State University Extension staff.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE: “ONTONAGON 2035”

“Ontonagon 2035” represents a shared future vision of the community based on the charrette design process. Alternative 1 had the majority of community approval votes, so the “preferred alternative” was developed primarily from Alternative 1 with aspects of Alternative 2 and 3 included, based on voting and oral feedback.

The final design would include converting the shipyard property into public beach access with a small amount of development. Rose Island would have an extended boardwalk and would follow closely with the current parks and recreation plan, with the addition of dockage and development along the north end. At the marina site, access to the lighthouse would be restored and marina facilities and amenities would be enhanced.

The area to the north of the marina was left as industrial land, and beyond adding access to the lighthouse, it was not altered for the final design. That property could host new industry for Ontonagon, like a bulk material terminal, light industry, or boat building.



Figure 3: Ontonagon Design Focus Areas. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

Full Charrette Report

For additional information on the three alternatives the community evaluated and the development of the “preferred alternative,” please see the full charrette report, [available for download on the website](#).



Figure 4: At the marina, a playground and athletic fields were added to the design to create more activities near the marina. The pavilion added along the water could be rented for events or used by marina and park visitors. Inside the marina, a small boat launch and docks for small boats were added to allow easier launching of small craft in the safety of the marina instead of into the river current. The marina itself has expanded services with indoor boat storage and winterizing of boats. This figure shows boat storage and the boat club in the marina. This building is a warming station for boaters to get food or drink. Retail was also added near the marina with a new complex for marina-related shops, shown in this figure. Trades like small engine repair, fiberglass, and boat maintenance could be achieved through public-private partnerships at the marina. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors



Figure 5: Rose Island improvements include an “entertainment district” (destination restaurant, plane tours), rails-to-trails multi-use bridge, additional fishing piers, and a trail information center in this design. A boardwalk would connect current fishing piers, the historic fishing village, and the north end of the island. The old pump house would be restored as public restrooms for the island and the historic tug boat would be moved over to the fish shanties. This figure depicts a kayak landing added on the island along the slough. A pedestrian bridge over Paddies Creek is also shown at the end of Houghton Street. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors



Figure 6: At the opposite end of the site, the design includes conversion of an old rail station building for use as a trail center. This location would be a hub for pedestrian use, ORV, and snowmobile traffic since it is near the bridge crossing the Ontonagon River and would provide a back entrance and parking for downtown. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

CONNECTIVITY

Given that the marina is physically separated from the downtown area by the Ontonagon River, connections by water, trail, and road are important. Also, improved signage along MI-64 may help capture more activity, since many visitors to the Porcupine Mountains pass by Ontonagon along this route. Clearer signage advertising local businesses and attractions would help direct people into the village.

VALUE CAPTURE – INITIAL EFFORTS

As a part of the engagement process, the team encouraged the community to reinvest in the downtown area, take steps to attract Porcupine Mountains visitors, and explore bulk cargo options. The team also outlined opportunities to incorporate the harbor vision into existing planning documents and provided an overview of potential funding sources.

To remain on the US Army Corps of Engineers' roster of commercial harbors, the community may want to explore use of the commercial pier. Potential users of a bulk cargo terminal on the west pier property include:

- Road salt, sand, and aggregate for the road commission;
- Limestone and aggregate for construction firms;
- Sand and gravel for landscaping;
- Dimensional and heavy lift cargo for industrial use; and
- Fertilizer for agriculture or landscaping.



Figure 7: Potential connections for current and proposed non-motorized transport, kayak access, water trail, snowmobile/ORV, rail line, bike lanes, and bridges. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

Ontonagon's greatest economic challenges arise from diminishing population and local employment opportunities. The drop in local mining and forestry jobs has partially driven Ontonagon and the surrounding county to lose an average 1 percent of population annually since the 1970s. The town's proximity to the popular Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park means that tourism could become an important new economic driver for Ontonagon, given targeted infrastructure and quality-of-life improvements.

Potential tourist draws could include a boutique hotel, a destination restaurant, and airplane tours. A tourism evaluation indicates that an 18-room hotel with seasonal occupancy rates similar to Upper Peninsula averages could capture 1.9 percent of state park visitors. The hotel would directly support 6 jobs. A destination restaurant could garner total revenues of \$956,000, based on 23,900 visits with an average tab of \$40 per meal. The restaurant would directly employ 24 people.

IMPLEMENTATION

USE OF DESIGN AND VISIONING PRODUCTS.

Within the Village of Ontonagon, the Village Council, the Recreation Commission, and the newly reestablished Downtown Development Authority (DDA) are all working to implement the sustainable harbors vision. The Village Council is hiring a grant writer to assist with funding proposed improvements. The DDA and Recreation Commission are identifying the easy-to-implement proposed improvements and potential funding sources. Ontonagon County, Ontonagon Township, MI-TRALE (trails user group), the snowmobile club, the Historical Society, the Chamber of Commerce, and Ontonagon County Economic Partnership (OCEP) have also added items related to the Sustainable Small Harbors Project to their agendas.

INITIAL IMPACTS. The Ontonagon DDA was reestablished as a direct result of the Sustainable Small Harbors study, effective March 2016. The DDA membership includes several individuals who championed the Sustainable Small Harbors study, including the newly elected president. The DDA has addressed beautification of River Street (e.g., plants, flowers,

cleanliness, and maintenance) and improvements for the Ontonagon welcome sign at M-64, and has worked to “crowd fund” a River Street outdoor amphitheater. The DDA has discussed using the images produced through the Small Harbor Sustainability study to support a request to the Michigan Department of Transportation for a needed paving project.

Regarding the Rose Island vision to develop a multi-use path to connect the marina and west side of town to downtown, the DDA president aims to facilitate cooperation between the Village Council, Recreation Commission, DDA, MI-TRALE and the Historical Society. The current pathway needs cleanup, railroad tie removal, grading, beautification, limestone/compaction, and signage. A representative from MI-TRALE has applied for grant funding from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to install rail bridge decking to improve connection between the east and west sides of town, effectively providing an additional connection point to the marina.

In a related effort toward improving tourism opportunities, some members of the community have been rallying around improvements for the airport, which would allow commercial charter operators to use the facility.

CHALLENGES. While many elements of the “Ontonagon 2035” vision are already moving forward, other elements of the 20-year vision will require more time. For example, there are other proposed uses for the historic rail station, envisioned as a public trail center, which would have to be addressed before it could be converted. All vested parties would have to agree on the best future use.

The DDA has agreed that the future use of the shipyard property “would best serve the Village if it is used as indicated in the Small Harbor Sustainability Study.” However, any change for this tract would be a major shift in land use and potentially cost-prohibitive, as the sale price for the property is estimated to exceed \$1 million.

PRIORITIZATION AND FUNDING. The informal implementation team has reported some difficulty in determining phasing for the 20-year horizon suggested in the “Ontonagon 2035” vision. Key questions include identifying project priorities, designating leaders, and securing funding.

MOMENTUM. One local champion created an “Ontonagon Small Harbor Sustainability Project” Facebook page to create a social media following for the project. The page has 218 members as of April 2017, and is actively chronicling efforts to support revitalization efforts in Ontonagon, including actions toward realizing the “Ontonagon 2035” vision. The page features design renderings from the charrette process, allowing for a visual reminder for what reaching a goal could look like.