

Twin Cities Sustainable Harbor Meeting
Benton, Harbor, Michigan, September 24, 2018

Q Method Sort Summary:

- Strongest Assets are at the Top, Weakest Assets are at the Bottom
- First Sort
 - o Top Three Strengths of Twin Cities Region
 - Tourism
 - Recreation
 - Quality of Life
 - o Bottom Three Weakness of Twin Cities Region
 - Public Transportation
 - Workforce Development
 - Environmental Sustainability
- Reasons given for the first sort
 - o The region needs more public transportation to adequately connect the community.
 - o The region needs more attractions for younger people and families, especially indoor activities for families.
 - o The region needs more qualified employees for jobs, especially during tourist season.
 - o More parking during tourist season in St. Joseph.
 - o Other
 - People cannot get to work without public transit
 - Cannot fully utilize all community benefits unless proper connections between the neighborhoods and community assets exist; trails, bike lanes, public transit.
- Second Sort: Future thinking of 2028 after harbor has been redeveloped; what type of assets are the most desirable results of redevelopment
 - o Top Strengths of Twin Cities Region as a Result of Harbor Redevelopment
 - Improved, adequate and functional public transit;
 - Improved public access to St. Joseph River, Paw Paw River and Canal;
 - More businesses move to region and provide jobs and increased tax base;
 - Improved environmental health of river and landside parcels (site clean ups)
- The Second Sort was a lot more thoughtful of reversing the planning mistakes of prior generations, specifically;



Thornton Buckeye Group

Experience. Integrity. Results

- Environmental remediation and safeguards to protect Harbor from unnecessary pollution from upriver.
- More public access to the riverfront.
- Real public transportation options that connect workers to jobs, residents to community assets and alleviate summer traffic/parking problems.
- What Stops Second Sort From Becoming a Reality
 - Residents believe the local government of St. Joseph is not buying into the revision of the town (i.e. not moving quickly to relocate courthouse and county jail).
 - No public investments have been designated to redevelop riverfront.
 - Commercial shipping interest occupy very valuable real estate and moving them elsewhere will be difficult.

Questions and Conversation

- 1) Describe your relationship with the harbor/waterfront/river. How is it different than your relationship with the lake?
 - a. There was a contingent of lakefront property owners that were adamantly against moving commercial docks to the St. Joseph side of the river. They would prefer to leave commercial docks where they are and add a second city owned marina to the St. Joseph side of the river.
 - b. Lake front neighborhood residents feared boat traffic extending out into Lake Michigan if commercial docks were moved to land adjacent to cement plant.
 - c. Residents would like to see new condos and townhomes on land adjacent to sand and rock piles.
 - d. Residents expressed a willingness to loose commercial traffic within the St Joseph River, however, the lack of dredging support from USACE due to the disappearance of commercial traffic was not appealing to residents. Residents did not believe local governments could adequately maintain harbor dredging.
- 2) Mapping Exercise: Referencing the map, what are the areas you use most? Where are assets located? What about barriers (and future opportunities)?
 - a. Paw Paw River railroad bridge can be cut off from St. Joseph due to high water level. Residents would like to include \$500k within the redevelopment plan that raises bridge infrastructure to accommodate kayaks, canoes, and boats even during high water seasons.



Thornton Buckeye Group

Experience. Integrity. Results

- b. Berrien County Jail and Courthouse relocation would allow for a lot of river redevelopment
 - c. Fully build and maintain seawall at Harbor Shores
 - d. Residents would like the redevelopment of Morrison Channel to include mixed used development (housing, shopping, recreation)
- 3) Considering what we have talked about today and other projects you have implemented/experienced in the area, what are the most important social, economic, public health, environmental and aesthetic criteria you feel should be incorporated during implementation? In other words, what criteria should be used by the community or the municipal leaders in determining whether an improvement/change should be implemented?
- a. Residents believe workforce development has to be a primary goal of redevelopment. They would like to see some sort of training facility added to the plan that can develop skilled trades people.
 - b. Residents would like to see upriver environmental remediation. They would like special attention to the sewage overflows coming from South Bend and Elkhart Indiana communities.
 - c. Equitable access to water recreation
 - d. Common design thread for river front redevelopment
 - e. Social: Everyone has to have a piece of this plan in order to get buy-in from the multiple jurisdictions involved; Individual governments must have internal coordination to discuss how this happens
- 4) In your opinion, what type of education and outreach is needed to build public support for this project? Who would you suggest is important to talk with to gain future support for a shared vision?
- a. Residents believe that the final plan must be very ambitious in order to gain public support. Political people need something to campaign for and residents need something that they can be excited about.
 - b. The visionary plan would allow city governments to support project to public dollars.
 - c. Property owners would need to be engaged to discuss the increased tax revenues from redevelopment. Increased tax revenues from river development can stabilize taxes on land.
 - d. There has to be buy-in and coordination between city mayors, county government trustee/city council leadership in order for plan to be considered viable.

Thornton Buckeye Group Observations

The residents that attended the September 24th meeting were not fully representative of the Twin Cities region, however, I do believe they represented the sensibilities of waterfront homeowners along the St Joseph River and Lake Michigan. They seemed to not have much connection to Benton Harbor and less affluent St. Joseph residents, thus, the overwhelming majority of their development vision focused on recreation, workforce development (improving the pool of available workers) and increasing spaces for other affluent people to live and play. Those issues are valid but would be considered “luxury” issues by most residents who do not own a boat, own a seasonal business, have time to kayak or cannot afford a new waterfront townhouse.

In order for harbor redevelopment to occur, the issues facing the affluent waterfront communities and inland communities will need to be addressed in an equitable fashion. Taxes, housing, recreation tourism are credible issues to address and all improve the quality of life for the region’s residents. However, wages, entrepreneurial support, public transit, public access, affordable/updated housing and landside environmental remediation will also need to be addressed in order for the plan to not be attacked as gentrification, elitist or unattainable.

The riverfront in Benton Harbor is essentially a blank canvass. The buildings, barring any serious environmental issues, can be torn down rather easy. The city of Benton Harbor should conduct a national search for a developer willing to come into the city and provide long term property tax relief as an incentive. I believe Benton Harbor’s riverfront will be the most critical to the entire harbor plan because it has the highest ceiling for improvement. Improvements on the Benton Harbor side of the river will allow developers to bench mark success and create an ecosystem of river front living, work and play.

If the St Joseph and county governments can work with Benton Harbor to create a plan for Riverview Rd and attract the support of the State of Michigan (Enterprise Zone designation could dramatically lower the costs of development in Benton Harbor), property values on both side of the river will rise. Higher property values will allow for lenders to enter the market without subsidy and provide options like TIF for infrastructure and public connections/access.

Public transit can be addressed through a southwest Michigan regional approach due to the relatively small populations and property tax base on individual cities and counties. Berrien County should coordinate an effort and reach out to other communities as part of an economic development strategy of getting workers to work. The local chamber of commerce and county governments must take ownership public transit issue in order to gain necessary government coordination



and funding. The harbor redevelopment is probably not the right place to solve an issue as regional and business focused as public transit.