

County Commissioners, EDC Members Eye Progress of Development Program

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not committed enough to bringing in or creating jobs for the county, yet we can't secure funding to begin projects."

Ms. Walk worries that if EDC functions are halted, its connections to resources and interested parties for certain EDC projects will be lost and hard to reconnect. She pointed out one example where she thinks commissioners may be misled by EDC's budget numbers. Last year, EDC received a \$50,000 community development block grant from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation that was placed in the EDC budget and quickly transferred to the Eastern Upper Peninsula Nature Tourism Alliance, thus leaving the possible perception that EDC spent \$50,000 and had nothing to show for it, said Ms. Walk.

The \$50,000 did, however, fund marketing and consulting assistance for the alliance's new Web site for its Great Waters project that promotes tourism focusing on the Upper Peninsula's natural features.

Former county EDC and Planning Commission project coordinator Cindy Oliver, who helped get the Hot Spots funding

through a grant last November, believes the money EDC has spent is minimal. With an annual budget of \$50,400, Mrs. Oliver said the EDC spent about \$12,000 last year, with its average spending for a year being only \$10,000.

Her husband, Dick Oliver, who serves on the EDC board, said the Hot Spots is an indication that the EDC is moving toward being self-sufficient.

"The EDC is, for the first time, bringing in money," he said at the EDC meeting. "It's not enough to support itself, but it is a good start. We can't do it now without the county help, but we've made more progress now than we ever had years before."

"I think the County Commission is waving around the administrator's office cost through the EDC," said former EDC member Linda Hudson, who pointed out that part of Mrs. Oliver's salary was in EDC's budget. Mrs. Hudson, who is now the Clark Township supervisor, said she resigned from EDC in frustration with the County Commission for its lack of commitment and support of the EDC. "We have not had enough money in the budget to make any kind of impact."

Mrs. Hudson said she was appalled to hear that the County

Commission may halt the EDC.

"What are they thinking? How do they think the county operates?" she asked, "especially when Mackinac County has the highest unemployment rate in the state."

Mrs. Hudson believes the commissioners must realize the EDC is developing the county's economy for tomorrow as well as today.

"If you just look at the Hot Spots program, it's a huge thing," said Mrs. Hudson. "It is bringing in a technological infrastructure to the county seat. Almost any conceivable economic development hinges on this, but the Commission doesn't seem to recognize the importance of that achievement. It's the first step in the EDC's attempt to be self-sufficient."

EDC Vice-chairman Brandon Postma said the problem with the EDC board is that it focuses too much on getting feasibility studies together and not enough on actually getting projects going.

"We're too worried about the County Commission and not enough about the actual economic development," he said.

He also believes a full-time director is not needed now because there would not be enough projects for that person.

The EDC was formed in the mid-1980s, but stalled in 1988, with EDC members meeting only once a year as a formality. The board was revived in 2000 with the hiring of Jill Eyre as the county's administrator. With Cindy Oliver

on her staff, she assisted the EDC and Planning Commission in projects such as Hot Spots, a kitchen incubator for small product businesses, a lending program with Northern Initiatives of Marquette, and the 1st Step program (both programs that provide consulting and financial assistance for businesses), developing a county master plan, and expansion of the county airport facility, which was completed last year.

When Ms. Eyre resigned last November to take a city manager position at Douglas, the county administrator's office was eliminated and Mrs. Oliver was taken off both committees to be a direct assistant to the County Commission.

The Extension office agreed to take staffing responsibilities for both EDC and Planning Commission earlier this year, providing commissioners could come up with a strategic plan by October 31. That strategy may be to lay off the two boards.

The EDC and County Commission agree that a full-time director would direct the EDC in a more productive manner and, eventually, that person could steer it toward being fully self-sufficient.

"We need a dedicated, passionate person," said Chairperson Nelson at the EDC meeting. "This is going to take a full-time director or staff to make this succeed."

"I agree that we need a full-time

person to make EDC work," Ms. Walk told The St. Ignace News later, but the question is, Will the County Commission pay for it? If they are going to hire a director, you're looking at \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year for a salary, and that's on the low end. Anything lower than that probably won't attract the kind of person they're looking for."

EDC member Tom Augugliaro likes the idea of hiring a director, as well.

"If we can hire a good director, I think a lot of opportunities for the Eastern Upper Peninsula and Mackinac County would open up to allow businesses to sustain themselves," he said. "But I also understand it could be difficult to hire someone good for only \$25,000 a year."

Mrs. Hudson said another improvement the EDC and County Commission can make is to broaden their focus away from St. Ignace.

"I believe St. Ignace is always the central interest for EDC and the County Commission," she said. "I'm afraid they are using 'St. Ignace' and 'Mackinac County' interchangeably."

Mr. Oliver said he would like to see the EDC be more involved in County Commission meetings, providing the board with updates on progress of EDC projects and letting them know more about its strategic planning in the county's future economic development.

County May Freeze Budgets

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ting federal grants for several years. "I think we're wasting money on it," he said.

Mr. Durm agreed. Added Mrs. Nelson: "I don't see any economic development we can put our finger on."

Carl Frazier said he could not see anything that has been done to enhance economic development at either the eastern or western end of the county. He said they've had about six months to show some progress and he has not seen any.

Larry Leveille said he could not support the EDC, noting that they have cost the county a lot of money.

"If they could come around and show us where they have some projects going, where we can work with them on them, and look at some figures, then I probably would be in favor of the EDC. The only problem I see right now is there is no sense of direction," he said. "If I was to vote on it today, I'd vote against it."

Next up was the Planning Commission, which is working on the county's fact book. The EDC also has been supporting the project. The fact book is needed before the

Planning Commission can begin work on a county-wide master plan, a project it has been working toward for a couple of years. Commissioners are leaving \$20,000 for completion of the fact book and will consider amending the 2005 budget to \$24,000 from the current \$86,650.

Commissioners wanted to see more progress from the Planning Commission and acknowledged they are not up-to-date on the group's projects. They mentioned several municipalities already have master plans in place.

Though not on the agenda, discussion focused on the treasurer's office. Commissioners decided to ask County Prosecutor Clayton Graham to attend their next meeting so they can find out how to proceed with contacting the State Attorney General regarding treasurer Jane Hampton's \$5,000 disbursement of county funds to herself and a staff member. She did not have board authorization to do so, and has since returned the funds.

Commissioner Joe Durm said he had been advised by an auditor other than the county's that the board had

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