

Economic Conference Leaders: U.P. Has Potential for Job Growth

By Karen Gould

More than 75 area government officials, school superintendents and principals, community leaders, and business owners learned this region is ideal for certain businesses and it holds the potential for job creation in areas other than the tourism industry. This message was the focus of an economic development conference at the Sault Ste. Marie middle school October 21.

Area leaders attended the day-long conference called the E3 = C, Eastern Upper Peninsula Economic Development Summit. The three "Es" are education, economy, and environment, and the "C" stands for community.

"The value of this conference is to generate new ideas for the future to combine education and economics to create a job market for local students," said Jim Farero, a Mackinac County commissioner who attended the meeting.

"The only thing I'm scared about is not stretching," said Ric Peterson of Peterson Public Sector Consulting from Lansing. "It's about taking control." Taking control, he said, means students turning the television off, stepping away from electronic games and music, and making the choice to study. Future economic success, he added, also means that schools must require four years of high school mathematics and must prepare students for college or additional training after high school.

"Education is the only way out," Mr. Peterson said.

The Upper Peninsula, he said, is ideal for potential business opportunities, like airline repair facilities, computer software help desks, electricity generating plants, accounting services, technology repair facilities, and research services.

Gerald Peterson, the Negaunee city manager and former

Marquette city manager (not related to Ric Peterson), spoke to the crowd about tourism and economic development.

While city manager at

"We have to be good in the U.P., not cheap. We have to offer quality."

— Gerald Peterson, Negaunee city manager

Marquette, he said, a plan was developed to make the area one of the best biking locations in the county. The bike path that was built has brought people out and has resulted in a vibrancy in the community. The bike path wasn't that expensive, he said, and it served as a promotional vehicle

for visitors and provided community spirit.

"There has to be a clearly articulated vision for economic development," he said.

To promote the bike path and to develop a sense of community pride, he said, whenever an outside article was written about it, they publicized the information to the community to let area residents know the program was working.

People usually have to travel a long distance to get to the Upper Peninsula, said Mr. Peterson. "We have to be good in the U.P., not cheap," he said. "We have to offer quality."

"If we aren't willing to invest in our community, why should anyone else?" he asked. "It sends a message."

He told attendees they need to

know who their visitors are and what those visitors expect while visiting the area, not what they think the visitors want.

The Upper Peninsula, Mr. Peterson said, is rich in natural products. In a recent trip through South Dakota, he met a man who had used a tree stump to construct a chair and was selling it to a gallery in New Mexico. The man, he said, was selling the stump for \$20,000 and he suggested people look for products that are here naturally, like the tree stump.

He said Upper Peninsula communities need sustainable business besides tourism. Tourism, he said, "brings in money for gas and restaurants, but not the community."

He suggested communities seek partnerships and leaders provide a community vision. A proj-

ect, he said, can take up to five years to complete.

"The presenters and speakers reinforced the idea that economic development doesn't just happen," said Michelle Walk, director of the Michigan State University Extension office in St. Ignace, after the conference. "A community needs a clear vision and a willingness to invest its own resources before they can expect others to invest in their community," she said.

Other speakers at the conference included Steve Gordon, assistant superintendent at Sault Ste. Marie Area Schools, W. Toby Rhue of the Hiawatha National Forest, Dr. Gene Wicks, a science teacher at Sault Ste. Marie High School, Michael Porter of the

*Please turn to page 11

Declining Enrollment Trend Continues for Many Eastern U.P. School Districts

Only Mackinac Island, Rudyard, DeTour Districts Report Population Growth

By Ellen Paquin

An October count of student populations in Eastern Upper Peninsula schools reveals a continuation of the downward trend that school administrators have noted in the past five years. Five of nine schools interviewed reported student numbers are down this year, while three reported growth in student populations. Pickford Public Schools has 425 students enrolled this year, the same as last year.

For most schools, the number of students enrolled from one year to the next impacts the district's bottom line. This is because the state contributes money for each student enrolled, tentatively set this year at a maximum of \$6,875 per student, an increase of \$175 over last year. The funding, called foundation allowance, comes from homestead property taxes, two percent of the Michigan sales tax, and state lottery proceeds. The state contributes foundation allowance funding to districts that do not raise sufficient non-homestead property taxes within their district to completely fund the schools, a system which encompasses most of the schools in Michigan. A handful of schools in the state, including Mackinac Island, Mackinaw City, and Gros Cap School in Moran Township, do not qualify for foundation allowance funds because the money raised by non-homestead tax collections in those districts is sufficient to completely fund those schools. For all other districts, declining enrollments mean a loss of state dollars.

Schools, who reported 781 students attending this fall compared to 796 last year. "Last year, for whatever reason, we were up a little bit in the

"There is a big differential between outgoing senior classes and incoming kindergarten classes. Declining birth rates across the Upper Peninsula continue to mean declining numbers in our schools."

— Rod Goehmann, Les Cheneaux Schools Superintendent

fall, but this year is more a reflection of the decline we have been seeing." In the past six years, Mr. Springsteen said, the school district has noted a drop averaging just over eight students a year, a decline of 50 students over that time span, which he attributes in part to a declining birth rate. He said planners expect the trend to continue at that rate in area schools for the next few years.

"Families are smaller than they were 30 years ago," Mr. Springsteen said. "The declining birth rate has been documented. We have a fairly consistent population in the city, but the population is aging. In this area, there are not a lot of jobs to attract young workers. That is a trend in the state, but it really gets magnified in an area like ours."

Arriving at a student population number for the district is not as simple as merely counting the students,

Mr. Springsteen explained. School districts now use a "blended count," which is a weighted average of students counted in the fall with students counted in the winter. Because sparsely populated districts with declining enrollment are allowed to use a student population number averaged over the last three years, St. Ignace Area Schools actually uses an enrollment number of 789 for funding purposes this year. As reported in *The St. Ignace News* October 20, a recent audit of the school revealed a better financial outlook than anticipated for this year, owing in part to cost savings on planned school purchases, population figures, the state per-pupil funding hike, and tight bookkeeping practices.

Loss of 40 at Les Cheneaux Will Mean Cuts Next Year

Les Cheneaux Community Schools reported a drop of 40 students this year, the largest in the area. Superintendent Rod Goehmann said 375 students are enrolled this year, compared to 415 students last year.

"We saw this coming, but not to this degree," Mr. Goehmann said. "We were hoping for 385 students this year. There is a big differential between outgoing senior classes and incoming kindergarten classes. Declining birth rates across the Upper Peninsula continue to mean declining numbers in our schools."

The loss in funding will mean the school district will dip into its fund equity to maintain programs this year, he said. "We can maintain that for this year, but next year there will have to be budget reductions."

Engadine Schools Enrollment Meets Expectations at 265

Engadine Consolidated Schools has 265 students enrolled this year,

*Please turn to page 11



Halloween Fun at St. Ignace Middle School

St. Ignace seventh graders had fun with Halloween costumes as they participated in the school parade Friday, October 28. Pictured are (from left) William Pechta, Patrick Wyers, Chad St. Andrew, Amber St. Andrew, and Catrise Bunker.

U.P. Pet Rescue Operation Takes on Bigger Role Than Expected on New Orleans Trip

By Paul Gingras

"It was like a ghost town," said Denise Erickson, an animal control officer from Luce County who brought a team from the Upper Peninsula to New Orleans. Her team went to rescue as many animal survivors of Hurricane Katrina as possible.

"There were overturned cars and boats on trees," she said. "No life anywhere. And the smells, we didn't even want to know what they were."

The only human beings allowed in the city were law enforcement officers and animal rescue workers, she said.

Within half an hour, the U.P. relief workers began to see lost, abandoned animals in the nooks and crannies of New Orleans, animals of all kinds roving around in the 104 degree heat, trying to survive in the wake of the disaster.

"The first animal we saw was a yellow Sharpe-mix which was hanging around in front of a store," she said. "A man was feeding it an MRE," which stands for Military Ready to Eat ration.

It was the first dog they saw, and the first dog they rescued.

A staging area for animal rescue organizations was set up at a Winn-Dixie grocery store in downtown New Orleans.

Ms. Erickson, Lois Fighter, Jan Maskus, and Patty Newby of Michigan had arrived in New Orleans after spending one night at the home of Louisiana Senator Kathy Wells.

The group went to Louisiana to retrieve animals already housed in shelters. They intended to make room in the shelters for incoming survivors of the hurricane, but Senator Wells directed the group to New Orleans, where they were needed more.

In the wake of the hurricane, many homeless animals had found their way into houses.

"Dogs were forming into packs and getting in," Ms. Erickson said. "Some home owners living outside of the area were aware of this and contacted the senator." She, in turn, gave Ms. Erickson addresses and authorized her team to enter homes to look for vagrant animals.

"Some were alive," Ms. Erickson said. "Some weren't."

Animal rescue workers, including Ms. Erickson's group, the Upper Peninsula Katrina Animal Rescue Effort (UPKARE), cornered and caught dogs and brought them to the Winn-Dixie staging area.

The group encountered dogs, goats, pigs, snakes, ferrets, turtles, and even fish. Some of the animals

they found in houses, some on the streets

"It was stressful for us to see," she said. "We're animal lovers, and many of them were malnourished, traumatized, scared, and some were aggressive."

At the Winn-Dixie, Ms. Erickson was put in charge of what she called the "aggressive dog ward," a group of Pit Bulls, Chows, and mixes that had become dangerous. At one point, she was bitten by a dog.

Nonetheless, Ms. Erickson took the animals out for walks. She did so with a "catch pole," a six-foot-long rod with a noose at the end. That way, the dogs could be exercised, but couldn't attack her.

Lois Fighter and Jan Maskus of Newberry focused on the animals at the site. They cleaned cages, walked dogs, picked up trash, and battled the extreme heat and tight living conditions of the camp. They had bottled water with them, but no one had electricity or running water.

At Winn-Dixie, animals were fed, watered, held for a day or two, then shipped elsewhere. Their information was recorded on paper tablets to be posted online at petfinders.com. Workers detailed

*Please turn to page 10

District Court Adds Administrator Position

Will Shift Staff Responsibilities To Meet State's Request to Consolidate

By Karen Gould

The 92nd District Court is being asked to install an administrator to serve offices in Newberry and St. Ignace and Judge Beth Gibson plans to fill the position by shifting responsibilities with current staff. The state-requested position will cost Mackinac County about \$6,000 a year and become effective January 1, 2006, Judge Gibson told the Mackinac County Board of Commissioners Tuesday, October 25.

The court serves both Mackinac and Luce counties.

Jim Colvault, the regional director of the State Court Administrator's office, appeared with her.

"Increasingly, the court system has become more complicated," said Mr. Colvault. "It is helpful to have a person in the court that I can go to." He now has to contact several people in the two counties to get answers, he said, and he began working with the court to consolidate the administration more than a year ago.

The state, said Judge Gibson, has given the court a list of recommendations that includes integrat-

ing the two courts and the reporting system.

"One of the recommendations was to move the District Court from being a two-county court system, as it's set up now, to a single unit," Judge Gibson told commissioners.

Therefore, she said, "We need to consolidate responsibilities, making a single person in charge." The administrator will handle all of the reporting, deal with the financial concerns, and would manage personnel.

Some staff hours now budgeted for Mackinac County would shift to Luce County under her plan.

Commissioners asked Judge Gibson to revise her budget for 2006 and submit it and the administrator plan at an upcoming board meeting. County Clerk Mary Kay Tamlyn advised commissioners to "proceed with caution." She wondered if Mackinac County would be charged an administration fee from Luce County now.

Currently, the two counties share court expenses and neither county charges an administrative fee for the book work.

Judge Gibson said she plans to

move Jeanine Blakely, a Luce County magistrate, into the new position. Ms. Blakely has been working toward becoming a certified administrator, Judge Gibson told commissioners.

"This is somebody who is qualified and has ambitions to move in that direction."

She is proposing to increase Ms. Blakely's salary from approximately \$27,000 to \$30,000. Her salary, health insurance, and mileage cost would be shared between Luce and Mackinac counties, with 59 percent from Mackinac and 41 percent from Luce.

Judge Gibson told commissioners her department's revenues exceed expenditures and even though the function of the court is not to generate money, the funding is there for the new staffing organization.

"This will make the administration better," she said. "We will see a savings. It may not be huge, but we will see a savings."

As of October 25, the court has recorded revenues of \$373,000 and expenses of \$243,000, leaving a positive balance of more than \$130,000.