

Earth Day panel looks at Lake Michigan

By **Mona Shannon**
Zion Benton News

The Village of Winthrop Harbor hosted an Earth Day panel discussion April 20 focussing on Lake Michigan and the Great Lakes Region.

Lake Michigan is a huge resource as well as a responsibility and the panelists discussed how the region can tap that potential.

The five panelists represented a diverse group of agencies but all agreed the key is cooperation among the multitude of government entities that each oversee a part of the Great Lakes.

The Great Lakes Basin and St. Lawrence Seaway contain 20 percent of the Earth's fresh water and encompass two countries, numerous states/ provinces and counties and 15,000 towns and cities.

Clint Bautz, of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, an urban-planning firm, said there's not really anyone in charge. There are dozens of efforts but the Great Lakes region needs a shared vision.

He said SOM has created strategic "pieces of that vision" which include envisioning the region as bigger than a national park, a borderless region of natural and cultural heritage; bringing the region's universities together to work on innovating a post-carbon economy--moving beyond coal and oil to tap the region's abundant sources of renewable energy; and connecting major hubs in the region by high speed rail which would keep people off short hop flights and free up planes for longer flights.

Water allocation

One of those dozens of individual efforts Bautz referred to is the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. Hala Ahmed, a certified planner with CMAP said the agency is responsible for planning for seven northeastern Illinois counties including Lake County. She said along with transportation, one of CMAP's focuses is water--Lake Michigan water.

"This is a growing region and we need to think of our water resources. We have specific allocations of water from Lake Michigan for our region which were decided by the U.S. Supreme Court. Will the allocations be enough? Probably not if continue as we are. But with more sustaining practices, it could be enough."

Dredging the harbor

Water isn't just for drinking. Duncan Henderson, executive director of the Waukegan Port District, shared the headaches of dealing with multiple government agencies while trying to keep the Waukegan Harbor clean and operable.

Henderson explained the Waukegan Port District operates on its own and receives no tax money. It includes the Waukegan airport, marina and the commercial harbor. He said the harbor has basically been closed since September and is not expected to open until June or July because sand is migrating from the north and has closed the harbor to deep water vessels.

"The state says we can't take sand out of the water and put it back in water and we can't put it on the beach because that is habitat," he said. The federal government is conducting a Superfund cleanup at the former OMC site. The EPA is buying clean material for the Superfund site while at the same time the Army Corps of Engineers has clean sand from its dredging project that it can't get rid of. "The dredging is easy, disposal of the material is hard," Henderson said.

Solutions require cooperation

Todd Main, deputy director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources said the solutions are not unknowable, but they require working together in a transparent and open way.

Main said states that have set up Coastal Management programs are eligible for federal funding of \$2 million a year. Main said Illinois couldn't get it together so the state has foregone that money.

He said Gov. Quinn decided to dedicate staff time to approve a Coastal Zone Program, which Main and IDNR Director Marc Miller have been working on for the last few years. "It was approved in February and the state will get \$2 million this year. We will allocate this money to communities."

He said the funds can be used for public access, pollution control, historic preservation, community planning, education/public awareness, habitat restoration, land acquisition, government coordination and planning but it can't be used to build restrooms, for beach re-nourishment, maintenance or large construction.



Offshore wind

Main also discussed offshore wind programs as alternate energy sources. He said they are not economically viable on the Great Lakes right now.

"Offshore wind is governed at the state not the federal level. Ohio mapped out quadrants to lease. Michigan has a detailed scheme but couldn't get it through the state legislature. Illinois has a more nuanced and enlightened approach."

He said offshore wind programs need to consider commercial ship routes, fishing operations, birds and bats. "We want to create an opportunity that if a business comes here they have an idea of regulations and requirements." He said a study looking at an offshore wind program in Illinois is to be released in June.

OECD conducting study

Peter Creticos, president and executive director of the Institute for Work and Economy, said the international Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development was invited by the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce to participate in a review of the region.

He said there is a functional area from Milwaukee to Michigan City that has never been looked at as a single entity. "We don't know how it works or how well it works. We are amassing a tremendous amount of information."

He said this region is not as strong as it once was. "It is a fractured region with 21 counties and 2,100 units of government. The government entities don't work together, they compete against one another. We are blessed with resources but they are used in counterproductive ways."

He said Chicago was once the hub of the electronics industry with mom and pop companies supplying innovative ideas. He said six of the top 20 research and development universities are in California. The only one in this region is the University of Wisconsin. Next is the University of Illinois but it is not in the top 20.

Creticos said the region has a harbor system ranging from Milwaukee to Burns Harbor and the airport system should include Milwaukee's Mitchell Airport in Milwaukee. "We are a hub but we don't take advantage of it," he said.

The solution

Creticos said the recommendation of the OECD is to focus on how the region can get its act together. "The local people get it, the mayors and local officials get it. At the state level that is not the case. It is difficult for state legislatures to think beyond the borders of the state. A lot is statutory. State statutes stop at the border. We need planning organizations to be able, legally, to work together and use their budget within the region as a whole."

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