
Chamber Alliance seeks to address rural economic development at state level

By Charles O'Neill

Harbor Light Newspaper

An alliance of Northern Michigan chambers of commerce recently announced an ambitious state-wide legislative agenda focused on economic development for rural Michigan communities. The Northern Michigan Chamber Alliance, of which the Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce is a founding partner and the Harbor Springs Area Chamber of Commerce is an associate partner, introduced its "Four Pillars of Rural Prosperity" agenda for 2019-2020 in a news release last week.

"For businesses and communities to thrive in Northern Michigan, we need to establish a basic foundation for success with right-sized programs and incentives that can work for our region," said Kent Wood, Director of Government Relations for the alliance. "The Chamber Alliance's 'Four Pillars of Rural Prosperity' approach will seek additional tools for Northern Michigan businesses and communities to help achieve sustainable economic growth and improve the quality of life for our residents."

The agenda spans the two-year legislative term and focuses on four primary areas: Rural Business Development, Talent Attraction to

-CONTINUED on page 10.

Chamber Alliance seeks to address rural economic development

-CONTINUED from page 1.

Rural Areas, Rural and Small City Housing Development, and Access to Quality Child Care.

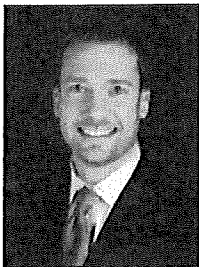
"The Northern Michigan Chamber Alliance has been working for the past few months on developing a platform to elevate our voice at the state level, especially on behalf of northern Michigan communities, and rural areas throughout the state," said Carlin Smith, president of the Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce. "Since the alliance formed way back in 2004, we've learned a couple of things. 1) State policies and programs often favor urban areas. 2) The Chamber Alliance has emerged as the most influential rural-centric voice in the state, especially regarding economic development.

"There are no rural communities in the state doing what we're doing in regard to collaboration around advocacy. Hopefully we're in a position to better influence change, and our new Pillars of Rural Prosperity are going to guide our work."

The Northern Michigan Chamber Alliance now



Carlin Smith



Kent Wood

has nine partner- ing cham- bers and six associ- ate part- ners. The alliance spans 14 counties in North- ern Lower Michigan and the U p p e r Peninsula and rep- res- ents a r o u n d 8 , 0 0 0 member businesses. Other partners include the cham- bers from Alpena, Benzie County, Cadillac, Charlevoix, Gaylord, Manistee, Traverse City, and the Lake Superior Partnership in Marquette. Associate partners include chambers in Boyne City, Cheboygan, East Jordan, Elk Rapids, Harbor Springs, and Sault Ste. Marie.

"So many programs offered by the state are geared toward urban centers and don't fit rural areas," Smith said. "We have many of the same chal-

lenges in northern Michigan and believe that programs and initiatives can be scaled to work here too," he added.

An example Smith cited is with housing programs offered through the Michigan State Housing and Development Authority (MSHDA). He says their application process for project funding is skewed to favor projects in urban centers so that rural areas of the state can't compete for those dollars.

"Yet we have serious hous- ing challenges here but no ac- cess to these state programs," Smith noted.

Affordable housing is an issue at the forefront locally with a new group Little Traver- se Bay Housing Partner- ship forming and hosting a community dialogue earlier this week (as reported in the newspaper April 3, 2019). The Emmet County Board of Com- missioners heard a presenta- tion from Innovalab on land banks and affordable housing options at their most recent board meeting. Smith said the Alliance effort can work in tandem with such initiatives.

"HousingNorth is a regional organization that was recently

established to address hous- ing issues in a 10-county region. The alliance is already working closely with Housing North in developing a con- sistent advocacy message, and teaming up to take this message to Lansing," Smith said. "I see plenty of oppor- tunities for the Little Traverse Bay Housing Partnership to weigh-in and contribute to this process as well."

Wood noted that progress on these issues will require working through complex policy challenges with state lawmakers and regulators.

"The Alliance will offer common sense solutions to these challenges that will be effective not only in northern Michigan, but in rural areas and small cities throughout Michigan," he said.

Smith said some of those "common sense solutions" have been developed and others will develop over the next couple of years.

"There are some things we've already tried to tackle, most notably changes to the MSHDA application process which is very skewed to favor urban centers," he said. "We'll continue to work on that, while at the same time, work with lawmakers and de- partment heads to find other solutions."

"The challenge for our region is using growth in traditional industries like tourism and agriculture to springboard and bolster other industries like health care, technology, advanced manu- facturing and environmental research," Wood said.

Further information about the Four Pillars of Rural Prosperity can be found on the Petoskey Chamber's web site at www.petoskeychamber.com.