GROWING HOPE in Ypsilanti

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ST. CLAIR’S SKATE PARK

THE SKINNY ON RECREATION AUTHORITIES

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The Michigan Municipal League is the one clear voice for Michigan communities. Our goals are to add them in creating desirable and unique places through legislative and judicial advocacy to provide educational opportunities for elected and appointed officials, and to assist municipal leaders in administering community services. Our mission is that of a nonprofit but we act with the fervor of entrepreneurs to passionately push change for better communities and a better Michigan.

The Economics of Place

The Michigan Municipal League believes that our communities are at the core of our state’s economic turnaround, and that “place” is the huge economic driver. In 2011, The League published The Economics of Place: The Value of Building Communities Around People, which further details what Michigan must do to create the types of places people want to live, work, play, and raise families. The book, available at Amazon.com and economicsplace.com, was unveiled at the League’s Convention in October during a news conference that featured Governor Rick Snyder. It’s time to start talking about the importance of place as the economic development strategy that will create a positive, dynamic future for Michigan.

To Submit Articles

The Review relies on contributions from municipal officials, consultants, legislators, League staff and others to maintain the magazine’s high-quality editorial content. Please submit proposals by sending a 100-word summary and outline of the article to Kim Cekola, kcekola@mml.org. Information is also available at: www.mml.org/marketingkit/.

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Let MERS of Michigan point the way to simple, smart, budget solutions

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Citizens Place Great Value in Parks and Recreation

Pop quiz: What supports more than 6.5 million jobs and contributes $730 billion to the U.S. economy every year? Guess again if you thought it was auto manufacturing, healthcare or some other familiar “job creator” industry. The answer: recreation.

Yup, that’s right. Here at home, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources reports that more than 22 million people visit our state parks and recreation areas each year, with Michigan State Park operations contributing $640 million annually to local economies.

Want a great local example? According to the Mott Foundation, the Genesee County Parks and Recreation Commission pumped more than $16 million into the Flint-area economy in 2010 alone. In a region that’s taken a bad rap on nearly everything from crime to unemployment, Genesee County Parks officials have stubbornly ignored the naysayers and pushed forward with a placemaking vision to transform their region into a recreation destination.

So how is that working out so far? In 2006, a two-week kids’ event called Day Out with Thomas brought families from all over the Great Lakes region and generated $10.7 million for the local economy. In 2009, film production crews brought nearly $5.4 million into the Flint area. In 2011, the parks convinced Chicago-based Red Frog Events to bring its hugely popular “extreme athlete” race to mid-Michigan. The two-day event drew the second-highest entry total ever for a Warrior Dash in 33 sites all across North America. Total impact to the local economy: nearly $4.9 million. Who says play doesn’t pay?

But recreation is more than just another industry. It is one more crucial piece in the placemaking puzzle. Parks and recreational facilities enrich our quality of life, create a sense of community, and act as a magnet drawing both visitors and new residents alike.

They’re our playgrounds and campgrounds, our lakes and forests, our green spaces and ball fields, our bike paths and hiking trails. It’s also all the things we do there—from festivals and fishing tournaments to snowmobiling and mushroom hunting.

Look at any of the “hot spots” to live, from Austin and Denver to Portland and Seattle. Sure, they’ve all got great national offerings. Denver without ski slopes? Seattle without the Pacific coast? Austin without music festivals? Thankfully, more and more of us are realizing the value of all this to a community’s quality of life and its bottom line. As you thumb through these pages, you’ll find an article on successful park millages, how to market community events, recreation authorities, and a great park in St. Clair that shows the placemaking power of parks and recreation.

Want to learn how to apply all this to your own community? Parks and recreation funding is one of the great pre-conference sessions at the League’s 2012 Capital Conference in Lansing on March 20-21. Check it out at mml.org.

To paraphrase a popular quote this presidential campaign year: parks are people too. And people are what our communities are all about.
THE REVIEW
MARCH/APRIL 2012

Bringing Home the Gold:

Michigan State Park System

Best in Nation

By Caroline Weber Kennedy

M
ichigan received the National Recreation and Park Association Gold Medal for the top state park system in the nation in 2011. Michigan’s 99 state parks and recreation areas host 22 million annual visitors, providing access to more than 13,000 campsites, trails, inland lakes, rivers, and the Great Lakes. The state system is a key partner in the Pure Michigan tourism effort that generated $17.2 billion and created an estimated 152,600 jobs—so the gold is more than honorary, it’s monetary. The award recognizes Michigan’s innovative Recreation Passport Program and the state’s strategic planning that delivers a high-quality customer experience to every state park visitor.

Governor Rick Snyder appointed a Blue Ribbon Panel on Michigan State Parks and Outdoor Recreation to guide the system into the future. Snyder said, “This award is a credit to Michiganders and the state’s strategic planning that delivers a high quality of experience to every state park visitor.”

According to the Trails and Greenway Alliance, popularity for trails has skyrocketed, as people embrace trails for fitness, reconnecting with nature, commuting, and for Pure Michigan fun. Did you know that with 2,478 miles of non-motorized trails, we lead the country as the #1 trails state in America? We connect downtowns, schools, neighborhoods, shopping and cultural destinations and natural wonders.

#1 Trail State in America

Michigan is forging ahead toward its goal of collaboratively marketing the 22-county “Up North” region as one of the premier trail destinations in the country. The collaborative has collected more than $11,000 in donations and has begun their marketing efforts by creating a “one stop shop” interactive website providing detailed information about all types of trail systems in northern Michigan as well as the crucial economic maximizing factors of public and private points of interest near those trail systems. This unique public-private partnership will utilize the model of the award-winning US 23 Heritage Route program to collectively market public and private recreational assets with the goal of applying that model across the state in partnership with the Pure Michigan program.

Says Denise Cline, GIS specialist and community planner at the Northeast Michigan Council of Governments, “We know Michigan’s extensive trail systems rival any in the nation and are excited by the level of interest and participation in this initiative. Collaborative marketing and data centralization is an idea whose time has come! This initiative leverages our region’s fantastic trail systems to support new opportunities for community and economic development and also fits nicely into the initiative in Michigan to eliminate the silos of economic development, recreation, and tourism.”

St. Ignace Events Committee

The St. Ignace Events Committee is a loose-knit group consisting of representatives from the Visitor’s Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, and city along with business owners and community members with a passion for creating and sustaining events and activities in St. Ignace. A Visitor’s Bureau Board brainstorming session several years ago cited the #1 need in this tourist community as events and activities. In February 2007, U.P. Pond Hockey started it all—an event that drew less than 30 six-member teams—five years later had to be capped at 160 teams. In July of 2007, the Fish Feast was introduced at the beautiful, new downtown marina.

The St. Ignace Events Committee jumpstarted events and activities in the city in 2007. New activities occur every night of the week throughout the summer. In 2008, the Rendezvous at the Straits Powwow was added.

The St. Ignace Events Committee

By Caroline Weber Kennedy

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MARCH/APRIL 2012

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Citizens Keep Neighborhood Parks Going

When the city of Detroit determined that it no longer had the budget to operate Clark Park, citizens came together and refused to allow it to be closed. They took over programming and operations while the city agreed to mow and provide lights. It is now bustling with youth soccer, baseball, tennis, hockey, and many other programs. It would have joined the numerous ranks of abandoned land had citizens not stood up and taken responsibility for such an incredible asset.

Another city park, Roosevelt Park, lies in the shadow of the historically brilliant and infamously abandoned Michigan Central Station. Members of the community reached out to others for program ideas after Daimler Financial generously offered to bring sixty volunteers and $20,000 to do a project in the park. Each year, the budget, number of volunteers, and their impact has grown. Following the city’s master plan, community members have started to plan and design phases of the park based on community needs. The plan is to remain flexible and organic in order to adapt to the changing needs of the community. Over $600,000 of private dollars and in-kind donations has been dedicated to the park with more coming in.

The first Fish Feast was held in conjunction with the 150th anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge and continues to be a hit. In August 2008, the Rendezvous at the Straits Powwow was added to the events calendar, and in August 2009 the Bayside Music Festival was added. Activities occur every night of the week throughout the summer months. Ferry cruises on Mondays; wine tasting and historic walking tours on Tuesday; waterfront musical entertainment on Wednesdays and Thursdays; downtown fab Fridays; fireworks every Saturday; and outdoor movies on Sundays.

Says Dave Lorenz, manager, for Public, Media and Industry Relations of Travel Michigan, “Consider the Woodward Dream Cruise, a multi-jurisdictional event. It’s easy to see that events big and small provide positive outcomes for communities in multiple ways—direct financial impact, which retains and builds jobs and generates income and sales taxes to support great places.”

Caroline Weber Kennedy is manager of field operations for the League. You may contact her at 906-428-0100 or cweberkennedy@mml.org
Grant Writing is Child’s Play

By Heidi Foxworthy

Grant writing is child’s play,” or at least it can be. Several municipalities in our lovely state have utilized the grant process to develop multi-generational recreation places, including the Bay City State Park Spray by the Bay, and Marshbank Park in West Bloomfield. The current trends in childhood obesity, autism, sensory integration, importance of natural spaces, accessibility, and sustainability have created an increased awareness of the importance of innovative outdoor spaces for children’s development. Several grants are available to help address these issues. What should you do to capitalize on these opportunities? There are several steps in the grant writing process including:

1. Identify the need and provide a solution for that need. “Well-identified, high-priority needs boost the priority of your project,” according to the National Parks Service. You may want to conduct needs assessment of your community. Support that need with evidence. What percentage of the population is unable to access the current play structure? How many children are obese, have autism, or some other disability in your community? Meet with your local intermediate school district and solicit their input.

2. Identify partnership opportunities. Could the local community schools provide park activities to encourage utilization of the park? Are there opportunities to partner with occupational therapists to educate families of children with autism how the park equipment benefits children? Are there other unique and innovative opportunities that relate to your community like programming days at the park for the disabled? Are local businesses willing to support the project with donations or “in kind” services?

3. Identify potential funding sources. It is important to meet the needs of the funding source. Point out how your project connects with their interests. What sets you apart from others?

4. Determine grantor funding level and stick with that budget. A consultant will assist with the design process in helping to choose equipment and fully understand realistic budgets to meet your objectives and provide innovative design solutions. There is no charge for this service from Superior Play.

5. Get a copy of a successful grant from the agency to which you are applying.

6. Write the grant. Be sure to include all of the elements required by the grantor, including: who you are, the problem you are trying to address, the solution, your plan, your budget and how you will evaluate success of the project. Again, be sure you are addressing the criteria of the grantor.

7. Critique the grant writing before submission. Review the grant with peers and as many different departments as possible. Multiple perspectives can provide a more robust grant application and creates greater buy-in within your organization and community.

8. Get awarded and implement the grant. Provide the necessary reports and inspections during the projects construction and at completion.

9. Publicize & celebrate the success. Be sure to recognize the grantor.

If you are seeking funds for a playground, spray park, skatepark, or some other large equipment purchase, involve a recreation consultant from a playground manufacturer early in the process. They can assist with site analysis, safety standard considerations, and providing information relating to ADA guidelines, recycle content, and LEED information. Consultants can also offer customized, innovative design capabilities which can help set your park project apart and create a destination location. Consultants can help you pursue funding options such as state and federal purchasing programs like MiDeal, HGAC Buy, NJPA, GSA, and leasing as well as fundraising opportunities. After your project is completed, they can help you celebrate by providing support for press releases and grand opening events.

Spray by the Bay

The Friends of Bay City State Recreation Area, an educational nonprofit organization, raised $300,000 to build a spray park, including donated materials and services. Cathy Washabaugh, a member of Friends of Bay City State Recreation Area says, “We worked with Superior Play for more than four years in developing spray parks of varying sizes that we could afford.”

“We needed an initial design and cost estimate in order to pursue grants. Every foundation or organization wants to see a picture of what you are proposing and how you plan on using their funds. Success builds on success. As other groups see that you are realizing your goals, they will jump on board. Begin by targeting the largest potential donors first. Ultimately, you will want to have something at every price point so that everyone can participate.”

The Spray Park was an instant success with the community—the usually empty parking lot immediately overflowed with users. Through a $300,000 donation from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the “Friends” are now planning for phase two of the spray park, which will nearly double the size.

For a sample needs assessment survey, email the author at heidi@superiorplay.com. For a list of recreation grant opportunities, please visit superiorplaymi.com/grant-opportunities.htm.

Heidi Foxworthy is the marketing manager for Superior Play. You may contact her at 810-229-6245 or heidi@superiorplay.com.

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ARIZONA ILLINOIS MICHIGAN WASHINGTON DC
THE REVIEW

MARCH/APRIL 2012

Michigan Residents

Vote Yes on Parks

By Desiree Stanfield

Despite Michigan’s downturned economy, voters spoke volumes when they approved millages for four parks and recreation agencies in the August 2010 primary election.

“People realize parks provide value not only for themselves, but also for the community as a whole,” Michigan Recreation and Parks Association past President Linda Walter said. “We enhance neighborhood stability, generate economic impact with facilities, and make communities a more desirable place to live, work, and play.”

The city of Lansing and Oakland, Saginaw, and St. Clair County parks and recreation departments each received resounding support for their millage campaigns and make communities a more desirable place to live, work, and play.

According to then Director Murdock Jemerson (Jemerson retired, Brett Kaschinske is the new director), the 2010 millage was approved in 1990 and received five renewals. “The parks millage brings in $2.3 million annually,” said Jemerson. “Approximately half of that goes to general fund operations and the other half goes to capital improvements for the parks system.”

Top 5 Successes

1. Conducted face-to-face visits with nearly all of the county’s 62 cities, villages, and townships over a three-month period.
2. Engaged staff to educate park users, special interest groups, and volunteers starting six months before the vote.
3. Created “What You Value” communication pieces that explained the renewal and distributed to staff, park users, local businesses, and absentee voters.
4. Used emails to park users and social media efforts including Facebook and Twitter.
5. Received support from Citizens for Oakland County Parks and Recreation, a group that formed an honorary committee with political leaders, placed newspaper ads, and bought its own yard signs.

“Customer service and operations standards are of utmost importance every single day. That’s what keeps visitors returning and using word of mouth to share their experiences,” Stencil said. “If the grass isn’t cut or the bathrooms aren’t clean, you can bet what your guests are saying isn’t favorable. You should have the mindset that every day is millage day.”

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ST. CLAIR COUNTY

pop. 164,235
stclaircountyparks.org

Facilities: Six parks comprising 805 acres with county fair facilities, a historic village, splashpad, pavilions, beach, trails, and Fort Gratiot Light Station—the oldest lighthouse in Michigan

Annual cost: $25 for a home with a market value of $100,000 (0.4954 mil)

St. Clair County Parks has seen increased support for its millage since the 1990s. In 1994, it passed at 52 percent; in 2000, it passed at 66 percent. In August 2010, it was renewed for six additional years with millage over the years. Staff started preparing for the vote in December 2009. A 71.49 percent approval rating.

The St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission was formed in 1969 and currently manages six regional parks including the Saginaw Valley Rail Trail. The system has had a millage in place since 1990, it has passed three times—November 1990, August 2000, and August 2010.

Since the daily and weekly papers supported the renewal, previously, funds were used to purchase newspaper ads. The group also paid for the yard signs, radio ads, and parade entry fees.

Festival Parade.

Another approach focused on the tourism impact of county parks on the local community. According to the Blue Water Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, visitors to St. Clair County spend an average of $116 per day and $366 per overnight stay.

One of our strongest selling points is our program that distributes 25 percent of the millage funds collected each year to all of the local units of government on a per capita basis. Literally every park in the county has been improved by the millage.

Staff decided to forgo spending money on ad space. "We also told voters what projects listed in the master recreation plan would be pursued if the millage renewal passed," said Director Mark Brochu. "We demonstrated to our residents not only the significant impact we make in their quality of life, but also the value we provide to the local economy." Top 5 Successes

1. Strategic yard sign placement: quality locations over quantity of signs.
2. Ordered car window clings, provided by a "People for Parks" group that ran a "Vote Yes" campaign. The group also paid for the yard signs, radio ads, and parade entry fees.
3. Aired radio ads the week prior to the election on two stations. The message was that every community in St. Clair County benefits from the county parks millage.
4. Participated in the two largest summer parades—the Port Huron Rotary Parade and the Yale Bologna Festival Parade.
5. Encouraged citizens to write support letters to local newspapers.

Previously, funds were used to purchase newspaper ads. Since the daily and weekly papers supported the renewal, staff decided to forgo spending money on ad space.

"We believe that due to the poor economy, many of our supporters truly believed that our millage might not be renewed and that the county board, which does not contribute to the parks and recreation budget, could not give any money to parks. Those supporters made extra efforts to make sure that they voted," Brochu said.

ST. CLAIR COUNTY parks
pop. 210,000
saginawcounty.com/parks

Facilities: Six parks with 683 acres featuring a lake, two nature preserves, one rail trail and two passive recreation parks (pavilions, fishing, etc.)

Annual cost: 16 for a home with a market value of $100,000 (16/15 mil)

The Saginaw County Parks and Recreation Commission was formed in 1979 and currently manages six regional parks including the Saginaw Valley Rail Trail. The system has had a millage in place since 1990, it has passed three times—November 1990, August 2000, and August 2010.

In August 2010, voters approved the Saginaw County park millage by 68 percent. The campaign committee’s most creative idea was forming an impromptu "Moms for Parks" press conference.
Conference Sessions

Personal Property Tax and Much More
Are state lawmakers really going to cut another huge chunk of the tax revenues to Michigan’s cities, villages and urban townships? Will decisions in Lansing and Washington result in more roadblocks or resources for local initiatives? How will the next state budget affect your community’s bottom line?

From EVIP to the personal property tax on business, the legislative arena can be the birthplace of bold new ideas and initiatives... and a battlefield for issues that impact the fate and future of every municipality in the state.

The big question is; What happens next? And what can you do to be a part of it?

REGISTER NOW and take your place in Lansing at the League’s 2012 Capital Conference!

Regional Roundtables

On March 20, 2012, the League is again offering the Regional Roundtables, a free opportunity to get together with other members from your region. These sessions will take place immediately following the Welcoming General Session at Capital Conference, from 3:45-5:15 pm, in Lansing. Don’t miss this chance to participate in community updates, hear hot legislative issues, enter your community’s project in the Community Excellence Awards, and more!

To find out more about your region or the League’s upcoming Region Meet Ups, visit mml.org.

Conference Sessions

Brownfield Tax Credits: Now What?
The year 2011 was a bumpy one for tax credits in Michigan as lawmakers at one point cut them out and then took action to restore them—well at least, partly. Get the latest on Brownfield Tax Credits, Historic Tax Credits, and other tax credits and what’s in store for these in the future.

Legislative Ins and Outs
Are you sometimes confused by what’s happening in Lansing or how it all works? Don’t worry, you’re not alone. The League’s Lansing staff will help clear the air by explaining the basics of our most common battles. We’ll explain all about revenue sharing and its successor—EVIP (Economic Vitality Incentive Program). This session is for members who are just diving into the Lansing arena, as well as veterans seeking a refresher.

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Community Excellence Awards

Enter on March 20, 2012, at your Regional Roundtable!
We’ve simplified the presentation process to keep this program accessible, as well as relocated the first round to your Regional Roundtable at Capital Conference. All Community Excellence Award (CEA) presentations will be limited to an “elevator pitch” format and will be presented at their Roundtable on March 20, 2012. Communities entering will have five minutes to passionately present their project—no videos, no PowerPoints, nothing but your project and power of persuasion!

Regional winners, who will be voted on by their peers on March 20, will compete at our Annual Convention and typically prepare more spectacular videos and/or PowerPoint presentations for that venue.

Legislative Reception

Wednesday, March 21, 4:30-6:30 pm
This reception is an exceptional opportunity to network with senators, representatives, key legislative staff members, and other top state officials and hear their perspectives on state issues in a relaxed setting.

Register at CC.MML.ORG
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voted on by their local government peers.
The winner’s name will be engraved on the Cup and that community will have it
for one year to showcase.

Enter the 2012 CEAs by attending your
Regional Roundtable at the Capital Confer-
ence on March 20 in Lansing. Be prepared
to give a five minute “elevator pitch” style
presentation to your peers in our region. Voting takes place on-site—the Regional winner
will be announced on the 20th.

The seven Regional winners
will compete for the Cup at
the Annual Convention in
October on Mackinac Island.

Go to mml.org to enter

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For more information, contact Terri Murphy
at 800-653-2483 or tmurphy@mml.org

CEA VITALS

- Regional Roundtable
- March 20
- Lansing
- 5 minute elevator pitch
League Annual Convention
October 3-5, 2012, Mackinac Island
7 Winners Vie for the Cup

2012 Community
Excellence Awards

Elevator
Pitch
How to Enter

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St. Clair, pop. 5,485

By Trice Hawkins

St. Clair was faced with a problem—the popularity of non-traditional risk-taking sports and the lack of a gathering place for these activities to take place. The result was the unwelcome presence of skateboarders on our sidewalks and school properties and in our driveways and parking lots. Without a facility, where were the skateboarders to go?

The Park and Recreation Department, members of the community, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Rotary Club requested our city council address the situation. They suggested a skate park, which would provide a safer environment than sidewalks, driveways, parking lots, and streets. City council approved a Skatepark Committee in 2007, whose mission was to plan a park that was safe for skateboarding and biking, but that also had a community atmosphere.

The decision to design for both skateboards and bikes was based on the fact that most kids own a bike, trends are always changing, and other area skateparks did not allow bikes.

The Committee researched community need, site locations, existing skateparks, safety, liability, maintenance, and funding. They conducted site visits, met with vendors, and solicited design ideas from local skateboarders. In September 2008 city council approved the location for the future skate park, site plan preparation, and the pursuing of funds.

Because of skateboarding’s unwelcome history in our city, we needed to promote this as an intergenerational project to dispel inaccurate stereotypes, share talents and resources, and provide unified community support. Student involvement and ownership in the park was needed. Two learning labs involving students, civic leaders, and American Ramp Company (ARC) designers resulted in our park layout. Students learned fiscal responsibility and were selective about what components to include. Students also attended council meetings, participated in civic fundraisers, and made presentations to foundations and school organizations.

**DESIGN**

Student involvement in the design, planning, and construction helped ensure proper use and the greatest impact on our community. Our community skate-bike park design criteria included: multi-use, both skate and bike; a 20’ x 80’ concrete surface; modular ramps/components; fencing enclosure; landscaping; drinking fountain; seating, parking, security lighting, and option for a dirt pump track. The concrete and fencing was installed in 2009, and skatepark components in 2010. The decision for a concrete or modular skatepark is a community decision—all options should be considered. We contracted the Michigan-based action sport design team Creative Consulting Services (CCS) to provide our pump track design in spring 2011.

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Partnerships dedicated to improving the quality of life and providing new recreational opportunities were pursued. The Rotary of St. Clair committed to this project by establishing a Fundraising Steering Committee and designating their funds. It truly made this project possible. With the help of the Rotary Club and Steering Committee Chairperson Douglas Murphy, year-to-date we have received over $180,000 in donations. The largest portion of funds was received from local and county foundations. Local distribution of the St. Clair County parks and recreation millage and skate park grant funds ($90,000) were also used.

Student and parent organizations conducted fundraisers. The school donations were combined to purchase the drinking fountain at the park. Our project also included a Home Depot Foundation community build which included a one-day beautification project. Home Depot provided the funding and employees to plant trees, bushes, and flowers; and to construct flower boxes and benches. Community volunteers were also recruited.

**CULTURAL ARTS**

Incorporating student public art provided an opportunity for individuality and creative expression. It also deters graffiti and other forms of vandalism. Local artist, art teacher, and skateboarder Jason Stier served on our Skate-Bike Park Committee and encouraged student public artwork to enhance our park design. Students painted murals and trash cans for the park. The city recreation department and St. Clair Art Association co-sponsored a skateboard design contest for park benches. We also co-sponsored a skate-bike park video contest with the St. Clair Chamber of Commerce.
The skatepark provides a great place to ride. For non-skaters, it’s a place to go and watch the action. A skatepark often provides the first opportunity most people have to see skateboarding live. It makes skateboarding much more real and fosters a greater appreciation for it.

RECOGNITIONS

Our Skate-Bike Park won the 2011 Facility Design award from the Michigan Recreation and Park Association (MRPA). This award is presented to MRPA agency members in honor of outstanding landscape, facility/architectural and park design. In addition, the Rotary Club of St. Clair awarded St. Clair Recreation Director, Trice Hawkins, and students Jordan Huffman and Walker Child with its 2011 Merit Award, and Rotarian Douglas Murphy received the Citizen/Rotarian of the Year. Community, design, and incorporating cultural arts made our park a success.

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On June 18, 2011, with the help of local sponsors, we were included on the Adrenaline Game Alliance Nation Summer Tour. Our Summer Jam Event was a state qualifier for the Meijer State Games and allowed us to showcase our park and local talent.


The lawsuit was based on the assertion that the Gator utility tractor was a motor vehicle under the motor vehicle exception to governmental immunity. MCL 691.1405. The city argued that the utility tractor was not a motor vehicle and that governmental immunity should apply.

The statute upon which liability for a municipality is based states:

Governmental agencies shall be liable for bodily injury and property damage resulting from the negligent operation by any officer, agent, or employee of the governmental agency, of a motor vehicle of which the governmental agency is owner...

There have been previous Michigan court cases which have defined what is and what is not a motor vehicle. In Stanton v Battle Creek, the Michigan Supreme Court held that a forklift was not a motor vehicle primary because it was a piece of industrial equipment and was "not similar to an automobile, truck, or bus."

After Stanton, subsequent court of appeals' decisions held that a broom tractor, a tractor mower, and a hydraulic grader were all motor vehicles, resulting in liability for the governmental agency.

But, in Overall v Howard, the Michigan Supreme Court reversed a decision of the court of appeals which had held that a golf cart was a motor vehicle. The Supreme Court held that a golf cart driven by an athletic trainer at a football game was not a motor vehicle for reasons stated by the dissenting opinion in the court of appeals’ decision. The dissent had claimed that the golf cart more clearly resembled the Stanton forklift which was determined not to be a motor vehicle than other types of conveyances which had been determined to be motor vehicles.

Sterling Heights used a Gator utility tractor as a trailer shuttle to transport festivalgoers visiting the city’s festival in its downtown. The streets were closed off, and people would use the shuttle to get from the parking area to the festival area via public roads that had been closed to public traffic for the festival.

Richard Yousif, a minor, fell off the passenger trailer and was injured when the driver allegedly turned too sharply. The city was sued for the injuries sustained by Yousif.

The lawsuit was based on the assertion that the Gator utility tractor was a motor vehicle under the motor vehicle exception to governmental immunity, MCL 691.1405. The city argued that the utility tractor was not a motor vehicle and that governmental immunity should apply.

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The trial court found that a utility tractor used as a festival shuttle was a motor vehicle.

Answer according to the trial court:

Yes. The utility tractor is a motor vehicle.

Answer according to the court of appeals:

Yes. The utility tractor is a motor vehicle primarily because it was being used as a means of transportation. “It was transporting passengers from one location to another, just like a shuttle bus.” Although the utility tractor was not designed for use on public roadways and cannot travel at speeds comparable to other vehicles, the court noted that it was being driven and operated in a way identical to that of a car, bus, or truck and not that of a piece of equipment.


This column highlights a recent judicial decision or Michigan Municipal League Legal Defense Fund case that impacts municipalities. The information in this column should not be considered a legal opinion or to constitute legal advice.

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Like many communities in Michigan, Ypsilanti is working to build a new story. This small, dense, urban community is 15 miles from Detroit Metro airport, 10 miles from Ann Arbor, and home to Eastern Michigan University. Located within a stone’s throw of the Willow Run factory, it is also home to at least two shuttered manufacturing plants. Historically, Ypsilanti was a blue-collar working town. But, like many Michigan communities, the dominance of the automotive industry as the economic center of a community is fading. Local health care systems and universities are the major employers. Since 2001, Ypsilanti lost close to 1,600 manufacturing jobs; considering the city’s population at that time was 22,362, it represented 7 percent of the total population. Through the Michigan Municipal League’s Center for 21st Century Communities (21c3) pilot project, Ypsilanti chose to pursue an entrepreneurship focus—further exploring how to nurture the seeds of entrepreneurship and move Ypsilanti into the new economy.

As part of the 21c3 pilot project, the city worked with the League and Michigan State University Extension (MSU-Extension) to assess existing entrepreneurial resources and efforts, identifying possible gaps. The Ypsilanti business community benefits from such institutional supports as the SPARK East business incubator, EMU College of Business Entrepreneurship program, Ypsilanti/Ann Arbor Chamber of Commerce, and the Small Business Technology Development Center (SBTDC)—all located in Ypsilanti’s Historic Downtown.

Sometimes a Supporting Role Is More Important Than the Lead

In 2009, Spur Studios popped up in Ypsilanti, providing affordable studio and work space to bands, graphic artists, painters, and others, without public funding. The city considered finding ways to further support arts entrepreneurship, but felt an opportunity for this pilot project was to support the burgeoning agriculture/food business entrepreneurship that has been growing through the efforts of local, grassroots nonprofit Growing Hope.

A food- and garden-based nonprofit who founded and manages the Downtown Ypsilanti Farmers’ Market (DYFM), supports local community and school gardens, educates young people about healthy food, and helps low-income families grow food at home in raised bed gardens. Growing Hope has been rooted in Ypsilanti since 2003. Growing Hope realized that the DYFM was not only a source for healthy food, but also a business incubator, and its vendors represent a socio-economically diverse mix of growers, bakers, crafters, and other food-based entrepreneurs, many of whom are very small in scale. By partnering with the city through the League’s 21c3 program, and leveraging support through a grant from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), Growing Hope was able to expand its business development and marketing support for these vendors.
The 21c3 pilot project funds also supported a feasibility study for a Market Gardener Cooperative program, now known as Ypsilanti Growers Cooperative. This model provides new market opportunities for small-scale and part-time growers (mostly at the scale of home and community gardeners). Similar efforts in Flint and Detroit, as well as community input, helped shape the current effort. A core group of growers has been meeting to develop a co-op structure, membership guidelines, branding, and marketing as well as identity training needs. The new cooperative will be up and running in 2012.

For many who don’t even have business cards, let alone (often very small) businesses would gain some further legitimacy between vendors and other businesses, in hopes that their products visiting the market, consistently bringing more than 800 percent of total sales. And, 2011 saw record numbers of customers with food assistance programs (EBT/SNAP/food stamps, Project FRESH, Double Up Food Bucks, et al) made up nearly 28 percent compared to 11 percent and 13 percent, respectively, at the state level. Nineteen percent of Ypsilanti residents participated in food assistance programs last year. For those in need of food, the sales price is often lower than the amount they pay for the food. To prove it, we began our pilot project series. Five pilot communities—Alpena, Lapeer, Lathrup Village, Sault Ste. Marie, and Ypsilanti—have put theory into action to demonstrate the impact of these principals and their applicability regardless of size or location. Through their demonstration projects, communities across the state will better understand how to leverage a unique sense of place in a community to enhance quality of life and attract the people and businesses that will fuel the 21st century economy.

The Downtown Ypsilanti Farmers’ Market was established in 2006 to increase healthy food access while helping to revitalize our downtown and support our local food and agricultural economy. Nineteen percent of Ypsilanti residents participated in food assistance programs and 24 percent lived below poverty level compared to 17 percent and 13 percent, respectively, at the state level (U.S. Census 2006-08).

Half of DYFM vendors make less than $25,000 a year; and 80 percent make less than $50,000 a year.

Teaching Business Practices to Market Vendors
In 2010-2011, Growing Hope partnered with the SBTD and MSU-Extension to facilitate 11 workshops for current and prospective market vendors. Topics were chosen based on feedback from an annual vendor survey. Workshops included Business Plan 101, Writing a Business Plan Part I and II, Business Finances and Accounting, Financing Your Business, Cottage Food Law, and Web Marketing and Social Media. Eighty-seven percent of participants agreed that the workshop allowed them to acquire practical skills and knowledge to manage their business more effectively and efficiently. At least three new businesses were launched by attendees in 2011, and many more expanded.

Vendor Directory
Funds from 21c3 were also used to create a vendor directory. The colorful, professional directory highlights growers, bakers, and other vendors, and provides an introduction for a variety of services can be the answer to dwindling city resources. Both their parks and recreation function and the farmers market are powered through volunteers and nonprofit organizations with their demonstration projects, communities across the state will better understand how to leverage a unique sense of place in a community to enhance quality of life and attract the people and businesses that will fuel the 21st century economy.

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People into downtown Ypsilanti on any given Tuesday between May and October. That’s the size of a festival, once a week. Building on existing entrepreneurial activity, the seed money utilized through the 21c3 pilot project continues to grow as Growing Hope and its partners provide a variety of supports to the startup food-based entrepreneurs. Beyond individual successes, expanding and diversifying the farmers market, connecting vendors to larger markets, and providing vibrant events for the downtown—food business entrepreneurship is a sector that continues to flower in Ypsilanti. This grant opportunity solidified what these networks of engaged citizens could accomplish.

Ypsilanti has found, through necessity, that volunteer-driven services can be the answer to dwindling city resources. Both parks and recreation function and the farmers market are powered through volunteers and nonprofit organizations with great success. The city’s role is to enable these groups and support their endeavors. The city is no longer the leader—it acts as a facilitator and supportive partner.

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The Michigan Municipal League identified eight essential assets that make communities vibrant places in the 21st century. Research shows that physical design & walkability, green initiatives, cultural economic development, entrepreneurship, multiculturalism, messaging & technology, transit, and education are essential to a community’s livelihood.

Pilot Projects
Experts agree that investing in communities is one of the most critical elements of any long-term economic development strategy. We believe this is especially true in Michigan, and that “place” matters more than ever. To prove it, we began our pilot project series. Five pilot communities—Alpena, Lapeer, Lathrup Village, Sault Ste. Marie, and Ypsilanti—have put theory into action to demonstrate the impact of these principals and their applicability regardless of size or location. Through their demonstration projects, communities across the state will better understand how to leverage a unique sense of place in a community to enhance quality of life and attract the people and businesses that will fuel the 21st century economy.

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Recreation Authorities: Intergovernmental Option for Recreation in Michigan’s New Economy

By Harry Burkholder

I

n past years, local governments have used a number of strategies to provide for and fund park and recreation services, including contracting with the private sector, applying for local, state, and federal grants, and mobilizing community volunteers. To obtain greater efficiencies, municipalities are working across jurisdictional boundaries to provide for and finance community parks and recreation. Parks and recreation facilities tend to serve people across large geographical areas and contribute to the community’s overall sense of place. Additionally, recreation infrastructure extends well beyond municipal boundaries, especially for trail systems that often traverse multiple jurisdictions.

On the other hand, local governments are reluctant to give up autonomy in the management and development of parks and recreation facilities. Some local leaders may feel special ownership of the parks in which governments have invested. Such feelings can make it difficult to discuss shared control or joint operation options. Either way, inter-jurisdictional cooperation requires work.

Legal Tools and Levels of Cooperation

State enabling legislation (see chart on next page) allows local governments to work across jurisdictional boundaries to provide for and recreation services. Two or more units can develop and adopt a joint recreation plan or establish a recreation authority, seek a millage, and oversee the development and operation of municipal recreation facilities. The unique provisions of various state statutes allow local governments to establish a cooperative arrangement that best fits the specific needs and desires of their community. Taking a non-legislative approach to cooperation, local jurisdictions can share equipment and services to provide for park maintenance and support recreational programs. Recreational authorities are the focus of this article.

Recreational Authorities Act: PA 321 of 2000

The Recreational Authority Act allows two or more villages, cities, townships, or counties to establish a recreation authority for the acquisition, construction, operation, maintenance, or improvement of one or more of the following:

- public swimming pool
- public recreation center
- public auditorium
- public conference center
- public park (see definition of “public park”)
- public museum
- public historical farm

The Act also allows the Recreational Authority to acquire and hold real and personal property inside or outside the territory of the Authority through purchase, lease, land contract, installment contracts, bequest, and other means.

To establish a recreation authority, each of the participating municipalities must first prepare and adopt Articles of Incorporation—the formal document that is filed with the state.

The Recreational Authorities Act provides a number of ways in which the Authority can be funded, including grants, fees, and revenue as appropriated by the Michigan Legislature or participating municipalities. The recreation authority may also borrow money and issue bonds to finance the acquisition, construction, and improvement of recreation facilities.

The Recreational Authority may also levy a tax of up to 1-mill for no more than 20 years. The Authority may levy the tax only upon the approval of a majority of the voters in each participating municipality, voting during a statewide or primary election.

To date, citizens have supported millages for six Recreational Authorities established under Act 321. Due to the current economic and political environment in many Michigan communities, most citizens believe it can be very difficult for a local entity to get a new millage approved. However, recent election trends demonstrate voters in many Michigan communities are willing to support and pay for important parks and recreation facilities. That said, it can be especially difficult for a Recreational Authority under Act 321 to get a millage passed because it requires the approval of voters in each participating municipality.

In 2008, the Iron Ore Heritage Recreation Authority put forward a .20 millage proposal to improve the 48-mile Iron Ore Heritage Trail in the greater Marquette region. Unfortunately, the majority of voters in two of the ten participating jurisdictions disapproved, killing the millage. Despite overwhelming support in eight of the participating jurisdictions, the proposal was defeated in two of the least populated jurisdictions by a total of just 38 votes. In 2010, a reconstituted Iron Ore Heritage Recreation Authority was able to get a millage proposal adopted by each of the eight participating units of government. According to Carol Fulsher, the executive director of the Iron Ore Heritage Recreation Authority, the flexibility of the Recreational Authority Act “allowed us to re-create a multi-jurisdictional authority that was better equipped to secure millage funding for future trail developments. The Act allows other local jurisdictions to join us if their voters also approve the millage.”

DEFINITION OF “PUBLIC PARK”

An area of land or water dedicated to one or more of the following uses:

1. Recreational Purposes— including, but not limited to, landscaped tracts, picnic grounds, playgrounds, athletic fields, camps, campgrounds, zoological and botanical gardens, living historical farms, boating, hunting, fishing and birding areas, swimming areas, and foot, bicycle and bridle paths.

2. Open or scenic space.

3. Environmental, conservation, nature or wildlife areas.
Recreation Authorities are just one of many intergovernmental arrangements for cooperation on parks and recreation services. The unique provisions defined in the Act. We recommend consulting with a municipal administrative tools, services. It includes understanding of the goals of the new inter-jurisdictional body. The four jurisdictions determined that establishing a Recreation Authority would provide the most flexibility in addition, neighboring Croton Township agreed to join the Recreation Authority in 2011. Due to these positive developments, the Authority amended the park updates, maintenance, improvements, development, which park updates, maintenance, improvements, development, and helping draft the inter-jurisdictional agreement. In June of 2007, Everett Township withdrew from the Department of Natural Resources for approval and certification, which made the authority eligible for state grant funding. In November 2007, the Authority amended the Articles of Incorporation and adopted a master plan that included theatam for a primary trail head. As a result, the Authority has added revised Articles of Incorporation and pursued grant opportuni- ties for park improvements and the development of innovative non-motorized trails. As a result, the Authority has leveraged over $300,000 in additional grant funding to improve a number of facilities (e.g., tennis courts, swimming pool, soccer fields, and skate park) and the renovation of the lodge at the Winter Sports Park into a primary trail head. Due to these positive developments, the Authority amended the plan to include improved recreational facilities, greater access to nature-based recreation, and more effective pro- gramming for the citizens of the Newaygo community. In addition, neighboring Croton Township agreed to join the authority in 2011.

Conclusion
Community parks and recreation programs are extremely important public services, contributing to our quality of life as well as our attachment to a place. One of the most important and effective strategies for maintaining community parks and recreation services in this difficult economy is inter-jurisdictional cooperation. This gives local governments a wide variety of ways to pool their resources and share the benefits of community-wide park and recreation services.

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Pause a moment and ask yourself, “What do I love most about my community?” “What do I love most about my other favorite places?” I live “up north,” so most of you would wager that what I love is the great outdoors, and you’d be right. I’m able to enjoy it daily because my city is the link between the necessities of my daily family life and daily fulfillment. Everything we need is close at hand, providing me with leisure time! And they’ve made leisure activities easy to access, too. In 2004, an alternative band topped the charts with a lyric: “When you only got 100 years to live.” This is my panic button. I’ve got places to go, things to do, and time flies—whether I’m having fun or not. I need the ability to accomplish what needs to be done and to enjoy life—daily. So, Gladstone, Michigan, population 5,032 in the wild U.P. gives me the most bang for my buck when it comes to how I’m going to spend my 100 years. Whether my elected officials realize it or not, I moved here for location, parks, and recreation. And in these difficult economic times, this makes total sense—dollars and sense. According to Dr. John Crompton of Texas A&M University, parks can increase proximate property values by up to 15 percent.

Quality of Life Is the Currency I Value

Out my front door 100 feet straight ahead is the city boardwalk, extending along scenic Little Bay de Noc nearly from one end of town to the other. You can walk, run, bike, rollerblade, or skateboard it. It traverses wetlands supporting abundant wildlife—featuring morning birdsong, and evening frog concerts with an occasional loon on open mic night (like most places). Michigan’s adult obesity rate has increased 77 percent since 1995. However, access to places for physical activity has shown a 25.6 percent increase in the number of people exercising three or more days per week.

A few steps off the boardwalk and you’re on the beach. We jet ski and putter the pontoon to Escanaba or up the Whitefish River. More ambitious athletes kayak, paddleboard, wind- and ice-surf. But the point is, the city is the connection between my daily necessities and fulfillment. They provide and maintain the boardwalk, parking, beaches, boat launches, a yacht harbor, a fishing pier, ball fields, playground, skate park, and tubing and ski hill. The city functions as facilitator between its best assets and its residents. This is government at its best—using my tax dollars in a currency I love—improving my quality of life. And I am not alone; check successful recent millage campaigns for parks and recreation, (p. 12-15).

Host the Party

Paraphrasing Sean Stafford, assistant professor of Organizations and Strategy at University of Chicago School of Business, the role of government is not to be the life of the party, but to host the party. Stafford’s reference was to economic revitalization—bringing the right people together; helping make the right connections. This can be applied for every community asset. How do we capitalize on what we have? Park systems and recreation programs provide a wider range of benefits than we typically acknowledge. This city function is often the catalyst for greater things—utilizing small projects to institute big change. Parks, trail systems, recreation and events connect the other necessary pieces of our lives to make our days complete.

Above: Gladstone city ski hill has three tube runs, a lift, and a snowboard terrain park in addition to skiing.

Left: The scenic city boardwalk in Gladstone runs from nearly one end of Little Bay de Noc to the other.
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Emotions = Economics
After my 6,205 days of captivity elsewhere, I moved back to this area because I had great memories. Research shows our brain’s amygdala and hippocampus successfully encode emotional material for memory. If we have a great time somewhere, we’ll remember and want to return. That’s why events and community branding are so important—especially economically. I recall Fourth of July celebrations with lumberjack and log-rolling contests in the lagoon. It’s this great combination of patriotism, heritage, skills, and fun. We came back again and again (spending money). The city is the host, highlighting its history and heritage in its most enjoyable venue, creating a memorable experience by teaching and touching our emotions. Quality of life is key when we’ve only got 100 years to live. Decision makers statewide often undervalue these commodities.

Kids Learn Healthy Lifestyles Through Recreation
My kids ride their bikes to our city rec programs and reach the skate park, fishing pier, and public beach the same way. They’re learning competitive skills, teamwork, discipline, sportsmanship and confidence. They develop alternative interests to “hanging out” and are empowered to try new things. They’re growing healthy and learning life lessons. And every community can do this—better connect their residents with their assets, bit by bit, and create events to promote them. We have even greater economic potential for downtown via running and biking events, a farmers market, and summer concert series—all run by the parks and rec department. Gladstone has an entire fascinating history that’s linked to our rail yards, but we still need to tell the story. These are all commodities to be nurtured. They create emotional memories, and that’s as good as money in the bank.

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Increase Your Word-of-Mouth: Strategies to Market Local Events

By Rebecca Kotz

Are you looking for ways to boost the "buzz" and attendance of your community events in 2012? Fun local events such as "Chill on the Hill" and the "Taste of Downtown" endear citizens and vacationers to your community, and bring in dollars to your businesses and families to your neighborhoods. If your budget is tight this year, you may be squeezed for the resources to properly promote your local events and festivals. Before you risk weakening your community brand by cutting your marketing budget or cancelling your next event, reinvent your marketing plan and focus on "word-of-mouth" strategies.

Develop a Three-Stage Event Marketing Plan

Develop a marketing plan that encompasses all three stages of event marketing to create a cycle of awareness, anticipation, engagement, and re-engagement that increases attendance and further promotes your event for years to come.

Stage 1: Pre-Event Marketing

The purpose of the pre-event marketing is to build awareness, buzz, excitement, and anticipation prior to the event to increase positive word-of-mouth marketing and attendance. You can use tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, email campaigns, radio ads, newspaper advertising, and other media.

Stage 2: During Event Marketing

A positive event experience is greatly influenced by how attendees interact with each other during the event. Marketing during an event allows attendees (as well as non-attendees) to interact with each other and discuss what’s happening. You may be thinking "why should we market to people who aren’t attending?" It’s the best way to engage non-attendees in the fun they missed and show them why they want to attend next time! You can use text messaging, live Tweeting, Facebook, and other media.

Stage 3: Post-Event Marketing

Many event marketers think about pre-event marketing and plan to engage people during the event, but completely ignore the possibilities of post-event marketing. The first few days and weeks after an event is a critical time to remind people about what they experienced and to re-engage them. You can create a Facebook photo contest, a Twitter eBook, Facebook “like” campaign, and other creative strategies.

Use Word-of-Mouth Strategies

To effectively execute a three-stage event marketing plan, creatively utilize the marketing tools and technologies that will best captivate your specific target audience. While each event and community is different, and your specific strategies may vary, here are six must-have social media and marketing tactics to encourage word-of-mouth and promote your next event.

1. Design a comprehensive website or landing page dedicated to this event that includes event information and activities, registration, video, Twitter stream, Facebook activity and more. Include social media sharing buttons for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google, and more to encourage additional sharing.

2. Post short, fun videos on YouTube before an event to increase awareness and hype-up the event, during an event to showcase what’s happening as it happens, and after an event to show highlights or reengage with a thank-you message to attendees, volunteers and sponsors.

3. Use a Twitter hashtag for your event and promote it in all your online and print marketing. Ask sponsors, volunteers, and attendees to use the event hashtag in their tweets when promoting and discussing the event. Pull these tweets to display on your website or landing page. Then print posters with the hashtag to display during the event to encourage attendees to tweet about the event throughout. If possible, broadcast or display those tweets in real-time for attendees to read at the event.
4. Promote on Facebook with a Facebook Event and Facebook Advertising that targets your specific demographics for location, age, gender, interests, etc. (If your event is large enough, also create a separate Facebook Page just for the event.) Encourage participation such as posting comments, photos, videos, and questions on the Facebook event page. Be creative with your Facebook Advertising to encourage “likes” which will help increase your reach.

5. Publish a blog for the event and invite sponsors, volunteers, and others to create blog posts. Encourage attendees and the community to read and actively comment on your blog posts.

6. Create a QR Code that when scanned (on an iPhone, Android phone, or other smartphone), your website, landing page, or an event page appears. Include this QR code in all print marketing and advertising, including posters displayed in the storefronts of local businesses. There are numerous websites that provide QR codes for free or at a monthly rate, depending on what you need to do with it. A few sources include Kaywa, Google, Qrify, Deliver, and numerous others. To scan on your phone, download apps such as RedLaser, ScanLife, Barcode Scanner, Shop Savvy or i-Nigma. To try scanning a QR code, if you scan the one in this article you’ll be directed to a page on our website with a special discount.

Event Marketing: YMCA Camp Copneconic
YMCA Camp Copneconic in Fenton, Michigan has numerous camps throughout the year, but focuses mainly on their summer camps. In 2011, GEMS Solutions provided event marketing services to help build their attendance for their “open houses” and therefore increase registration for their summer camps. To learn about what we did, visit www.gems-solutions.com/resources.

For more ideas, download our free electronic book Event Marketing Through Social Media, the Web, and Beyond at gems-solutions.com/resources. GEMS Solutions LLC is a Michigan website design, social media, and marketing company. Our philosophy “empowering you to harness the power of the web” is based on our belief that marketing must focus on driving web traffic, capturing leads, and increasing results. To learn more about GEMS Solutions and request a marketing consultation at a special discount rate exclusive to League members, go to gems-solutions.com/municipal or scan the QR code on your smartphone.

Rebecca Kotz is president of GEMS Solutions, LLC. You may contact her at 810-820-0740 or rkotz@gems-solutions.com.
By Mark Ouimet

Giving Local Governments the Tools They Need to be Successful

As chair of the House Local Governmental and Regional Affairs Committee, one of my main priorities at the Capitol is to give local governments the tools they need in order to be successful. But here’s the challenge: Michigan’s local governments are facing the same budget difficulties the state has been experiencing. Retirement costs for employees, declining property tax revenues, and population loss are making it difficult for all governments.

I want everyone in the Michigan Municipal League family to know that we’re doing everything we can, both in the committee and the House, to partner with cities to help them manage the immense challenges they face. We’d also like to present our cities with new opportunities for growth.

Consolidating Services

One issue that has been on our docket over the last year is urban cooperation. A set of bills that passed through the legislative process. For example, the range of emergency dispatch centers used to overlap, but now they can become highly efficient partnerships. Smaller townships with their own fire departments used to have to purchase expensive ladder trucks designed to serve small and medium-sized cities, but now they can split the cost with their neighbors without service interruptions. These are common-sense changes that help people work together and save taxpayer money. We need more of this in Michigan.

PA 312 Reform

The House also tackled reforms to PA 312 last year. PA 312 put too much power in the hands of an arbitrator who may or may not have considered what the municipality could afford. Our reform, PA 116 of 2011, puts the interests of the resident back at the forefront of these important negotiations.

As costs continue to skyrocket, local governments need every available option to stay fiscally sound and keep essential services, such as public safety, available. Our first responders are still allowed to collectively bargain like all other public employees, including teachers, under the new law passed last year.

Our local municipalities were facing an impossible choice—either lay off police and firefighters or increase taxes on struggling Michigan families. Making these changes to PA 312 was the right thing to do.

In 2012, we’ll continue to look at ways to give local governments the tools necessary to be more successful. As with the 2011 legislative session, I’ll seek bipartisan solutions to our challenges. Having been in the minority party during my entire tenure at the local level, I make sure to always allow debate and input from both sides of the aisle and will continue to do so this year. We need all hands on deck to solve our state’s challenges, and that means bringing every-one to the table.

Personal Property Tax Reform

Many of you have heard the Legislature may consider personal property tax reforms this year. It has always been my intention to find some type of replacement revenue if, in fact, the Legislature votes to reform the personal property tax. This is a huge issue for Michigan local governments and I will continue to seek input from my local elected officials if this issue moves through the legislative process.

Our first priority is to make Michigan more conducive for job creation. To help in this process, we must end the double taxation of local job creators. Michigan should never punish small businesses for making long-term investments in our communities.

I’ll work to make sure local governments are not undermined in any way. If PPT reforms take place, we will make them in a way that works for everyone.

In the meantime, please feel free to contact me with any thoughts as we enter the 2012 legislative session. As a former city councilmember and county commissioner, I know the struggles local municipalities face and am always willing to work together with all stakeholders to find creative solutions.

Rep. Mark Ouimet, R-Scio Township, served as a member of the Ann Arbor City Council from 1988-1992 and was a member of the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners from 2004-2010. He can be reached toll free at 855-627-5052 (855-MARKO52) or markouimet@house.mi.gov.

We need all hands on deck to solve our state’s challenges, and that means bringing every-one to the table.
You expect your plumber to know how to fix a leak.

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Events and Seasonal Employees

Q: We have employees who only work during the summer. Do we qualify as a seasonal employer?
A: Experts with the League’s Unemployment Compensation Fund provided an answer to this and the following question. The law recently changed in regard to being designated as a seasonal employer. Previously, the industry in which the employer operated had to be seasonal to qualify. However, this is no longer a requirement. You should complete an “Application for Designation as Seasonal Employer” not less than 20 days before the beginning of your season with the state of Michigan Licensing and Regulatory Affairs: michigan.gov/documents/uia_UC1155_76087_7.pdf. You must also post a notice to workers at the time of application that you have applied for seasonal designation; post a notice to workers once the seasonal designation has been granted with the beginning and ending dates of the season; that benefits may be paid if the work for next season does not become available, and notify a worker in writing at the time of hire that they are a seasonal employee. Finally, you must also provide “reasonable assurance” that the employee will return to work in the next season. Members of the League’s Unemployment Fund should address issues such as this to the third-party administrator TALX Corporation. Contact Mike Pennanen at 800-510-6160 x2950 or mpennanen@talx.com.

Q: The state recently changed the taxable wage base from $9,000 to $9,500. Does this change apply to members of the Unemployment Fund as well?
A: Yes, all members should start using $9,500 as the taxable wage to calculate their contribution payments starting with the first quarter of 2012.

Q: When we hold special events, there is a drain on tax-supported services such as police and DPW. How do we qualify as a seasonal employer?
A: Experts with the League’s Property & Liability Pool provided an answer to this and the following question. The law recently changed in regard to being designated as a seasonal employer. Previously, the industry in which the employer operated had to be seasonal to qualify. However, this is no longer a requirement. You should complete an “Application for Designation as Seasonal Employer” not less than 20 days before the beginning of your season with the state of Michigan Licensing and Regulatory Affairs: michigan.gov/documents/uia_UC1155_76087_7.pdf. You must also post a notice to workers at the time of application that you have applied for seasonal designation; post a notice to workers once the seasonal designation has been granted with the beginning and ending dates of the season; that benefits may be paid if the work for next season does not become available, and notify a worker in writing at the time of hire that they are a seasonal employee. Finally, you must also provide “reasonable assurance” that the employee will return to work in the next season. Members of the League’s Unemployment Fund should address issues such as this to the third-party administrator TALX Corporation. Contact Mike Pennanen at 800-510-6160 x2950 or mpennanen@talx.com.

Q: Can we make a donation to our local Little League team?
A: It is quite difficult to meet the standard of “public purpose” for this expenditure. The Michigan Supreme Court has held that an improper “lending of credit” occurs when a municipality gives something of value without getting something of specific value in return. See the League’s One-Pager Plus Fact Sheet on municipal expenditures at mml.org.

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Vassar

The community of Vassar, the Cork Pine City, became a city on September 28, 1944, and has a rich history of logging on the Cass River, which flows through the city's historic downtown. When traveling through Vassar along the M-15 Heritage Route, the hill, which is lined with petunias in the spring and summer, has become an identifiable landmark for the community. In October of 1994, the M-15 hill gave way for the first Pumpkin Roll. Thousands of people, both young and old, continue to come to Vassar each year in October to roll pumpkins down the hill for a chance at winning a prize.

In 2011, another community event vision became a reality—incorporating the use of the hill into a new winter event. Chill on the Hill was born, allowing community members and visitors a great day of sledding on M-15. Community organizations, volunteers, and businesses came together to solidify plans to engineer one great snow hill for a fun-filled, memorable day of sledding for kids of all ages. Snow was collected from city streets, then stored and piled for use in creating a grand snow hill. Our very first Chill on the Hill was a success, with thousands of individuals sliding down the hill!

The 2nd Annual Chill on the Hill was scheduled for February 4. Due to the fickleness of Mother Nature, the event had to be canceled. The city had planned to improve the snow hill (making it faster), use commercial grade tubes, and erect a larger warming tent. The one-time charge for sliding down the hill was to be only $1.00, the same as last year, allowing everyone to join in the fun. Plans also included accommodations for our younger participants with the creation of a bunny hill and activities for the little ones, such as a snowman building contest. Next year’s event will be bigger and better.

The use of the hill on M-15 Heritage Route in Vassar for these public events has enabled the community to turn the highway that runs through its downtown into an asset. Come visit Vassar and enjoy its family-oriented atmosphere, friendly people, and community pride. Check them out at www.cityofvassar.org/.

Want to see your community featured here? Go to mml.org to find out more about the Community Excellence Awards.