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Kent County Agribusiness Community Work Group Issues Final Report to Board of Commissioners

GRAND RAPIDS – The Kent County Board of Commissioners adopted the final report by the Agribusiness Community Work Group (ACWG) during their meeting this morning. The ACWG included 14 leaders and stakeholders from local units of government, the private sector, and the community. Their task was to identify, evaluate, and recommend opportunities to support, expand and attract agribusiness in Kent County and West Michigan. The agribusiness sector of West Michigan produces one-third of Michigan’s total agricultural sales. In 2012, Kent County alone contributed over \$231 million of agricultural products sold from Michigan.

In May 2014, then-Board Chair Dan Koorndyk created the Work Group, and asked current Chair Jim Saalfeld to oversee the ACWG. The Work Group started meeting in June 2014 and issued the report in November 2015. The Work Group heard from numerous agribusiness practitioners and experts regarding industry best practices for a successful agribusiness economy. They developed a comprehensive report that highlighted the importance of agribusiness locally and statewide. Members were asked to consider the limited resources of local governments when creating their report.

“This report demonstrates how important agribusiness is to the West Michigan economy. Much is already being done by stakeholders within the County to support agriculture, but the group found additional key areas where a stronger focus would be beneficial,” said ACWG and Kent County Board Chair Jim Saalfeld. “My hope is that by adopting the report, various organizations in West Michigan will recognize the substantive effect of the findings and use the report as support for grant applications and other activities to enhance and promote agribusiness in the region.”

The Group says collaboration and cooperation can help the industry throughout our entire region. “If we want to experience continued growth in West Michigan’s agribusiness industry, it is going to require continuous and collaborative cooperation on both the public and private side of the table,” said Rick Chapla, Vice President, Strategic Initiatives, The Right Place, Inc. “Working together, these voices will produce the innovative ideas and plans our agribusiness industry needs to thrive in the coming decades.”

The Work Group looked at a variety of issues related to agribusiness, including jobs, technology, transportation, education, and land and water use. “All of these issues are critical pieces of our West Michigan

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economy and are intertwined and interrelated,” said Patty Birkholz, West Michigan Director of the Michigan League of Conservation Voters. “Finding the balance of the relationships is an important element of successful economic growth in Michigan. And balancing the wise use of our Great Lakes waters, waterways, and land resources without abusing them, is an absolute priority to the future economy of our State.”

Among the work group’s specific recommendations:

- Agribusiness is very important to Kent County and should be a key focus of our business leaders, political leaders, and citizens. Education and awareness are key to keeping agribusiness in the forefront of all stakeholders.
- All segments and components of the agribusiness industry are equally important and needed to establish and maintain a successful agribusiness industry in Kent County. No one area should be a singular – or even primary – focus.
- Government at all levels should actively seek to engage agribusiness leaders and industry representatives in forming, evaluating and developing public policy.
- Government at all levels should help in areas identified in this report where it currently has control (e.g., land use and tax policy, fostering collaboration, etc.). At the same time, government should also be mindful to “get out of the way” in areas where it might be a hindrance to agribusiness, (e.g., over regulation, burdensome permitting and reporting requirements, road restrictions and weight limits, and uncoordinated or inconsistent land use and development policies).
- Government can work with other local agencies to improve awareness of and access to information regarding agribusiness development programs and resources.

[The entire Agribusiness Community Work Group Report can be found here.](#)

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