



Everything Michigan

## Muskegon Chronicle

### Muskegon group aims to help municipalities work together as one

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By Dave Alexander

CHRONICLE BUSINESS EDITOR

One Muskegon is not trying to live up to its name.

The coalition of business, government and institutional leaders looking at government consolidation and cooperation here does not have the goal of creating one governmental entity in Muskegon, its leaders say with emphasis.

The premise is that the seven cities, 16 townships and four villages in Muskegon County are inefficient and redundant local governments for a community of 170,000 people, hurting economic development and job-creation efforts. Community life would be better if those governments acted as one, One Muskegon supporters claim.

Instead of facing down the difficult issue of political consolidation and governmental mergers like has been accomplished in some communities – most recently Louisville – One Muskegon aims to work on areas of collaboration in hopes of accomplishing some consolidation of certain government functions.

"The goal of One Muskegon is not political consolidation," said the task force's co-chairman Gary Ostrom, publisher of The Muskegon Chronicle. "However, we need to act as if we are one municipality and one community."

Not everyone involved with One Muskegon is willing to give up on an ultimate goal of unified local government through a consolidation or merger.

One Muskegon key supporter Chris McGuigan – president of the Community Foundation for Muskegon County – has a different point of view. The foundation is funding the initial One Muskegon efforts.

"I think saying over and over we are not ever going to merge makes it more likely," McGuigan said. "It makes no sense to me that we would work toward cooperation but draw the line at the ultimate cooperation – consolidation."

The strategy of acting as one is being played out in One Muskegon's two working groups.

A "Tier I Committee" is looking at ways Muskegon County cities, townships and villages can better cooperate and consolidate certain governmental functions. Muskegon City Manager Bryon Mazade is heading up that effort to identify issues that make financial, operational and political sense.

One Muskegon – through the economic development agency Muskegon Area First – has applied for a special state grant for Centers of Regional Excellence that would be put toward an initiative to better coordinate and cooperate in the areas of police and fire services.

"As we put (the grant application) together, we also have to look at smaller items," said Muskegon Township Supervisor Pat Jordan. "This is just a good first step."

The Tier I Committee also will look at a combined countywide water system and coordinated purchasing, among other items.

"This is a great first step, just like dating is before marriage," said Muskegon businessman Jim Fisher, a member of the One Muskegon Task Force. "As we walk before we run, we need to take our first steps together.

"This (public safety) area creates the momentum. That's the direction we need to keep pointing."

Fisher praised the group for tackling the politically tricky police and fire issues. "Taking on the one we could be side-stepping says a lot about this group," Fisher concluded.

One Muskegon also has a Tier II Committee -- chaired by Fisher, who is president of Shoreline Recycling & Supply -- that will begin looking at longer-term issues after the first of the year. Although that committee has not yet met, Fisher hopes it will delve into issues of Muskegon's economic viability over the next 20 years.

Muskegon's history of moving from a fur-trading economy to lumber and then manufacturing is still being written, Fisher said. What actually comes after the post-industrial era is not yet clear.

Fisher said he suspects the future-directed agenda of the Tier II group will have to revolve around the educational system that needs to train young people for the high-technology jobs of the future and retrain workers displaced by those technologies.

"Once we have that kind of training, then we can help Muskegon Area First go out and get the companies that make sense for us," Fisher said. "The sky's the limit. We as a community need to create and invent the possibilities of what comes next."

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