



**MISSISSIPPI RIVER  
REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION**  
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**James Kuhn, Cashton, WI  
Chairman**  
**Margaret Baecker, Independence, WI  
Vice Chairman**  
**Vicki Burke, Onalaska, WI  
Secretary & Treasurer**  
**Greg Flogstad, Onalaska, WI  
Director**

**MINUTES**  
**MISSISSIPPI RIVER REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION (MRRPC)**  
**BIMONTHLY MEETING**

**10:00 a.m., October 12, 2016**

**Americinn (formerly Best Western Riverfront Hotel), 1835 Rose Street, La Crosse, Wisconsin**

**Call to Order**

Vice Chairman Baecker called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. and asked for the roll call. A quorum was present. The attendance roster is attached. There were several guests in attendance: James Hill, Director La Crosse Area Development Corporation, Carol Wetuski Area Director USDA Rural Development Administration, John Medinger Representing Senator Tammy Baldwin, Tony Kurtz Representing Senator Ron Johnson, Karrie Jackelen Representing Congressman Ron Kind, Jim Rosenberg Economic Development Consultant for SEH Inc., and Keely Vetter UW-La Crosse Intern

**Minutes of August, 10, 2016 Bimonthly Meeting**

Vice Chairman Baecker asked for a motion on the August 10, 2016 bimonthly minutes. Commissioner Twidt made a motion to approve the August 10, 2016 meeting minutes and the motion was seconded by Commissioner McMillan Urell. Vice Chairman Baecker asked if there were any questions or comments and hearing none, the minutes were unanimously approved.

**Treasurer's Report**

Secretary-Treasurer Burke gave the treasurers report. Ms. Burke said the July 31, 2016 balance in all MRRPC accounts was \$288,168.18 and the August 31, 2016 ending balance was \$280,013.61. She reported the beginning balance in September 2016 was \$280,013.61 and September 30, 2016 ending balance was \$276,731.91.

Ms. Burke said the Business Capital Fund (BCF) began with a July 31, 2016 balance of \$248,431.35. Activity from August 1, 2016 through September 30, 2016 included loan repayments of \$9,939.28 and interest earned of \$84.87 leaving a September 30, 2016 balance on hand of \$258,455.50. The BCF Sequester Account began with an August 1, 2016 balance of \$428,508.29. Activity in this account from August 1, 2016 to September 30, 2016 included interest earned of \$162.04 leaving a balance on hand of \$428,670.33.

Ms. Burke said the Business Capital Fund 2 began with a July 31, 2016 balance of \$33,331.31. Activity from August 1, 2016 through September 30, 2016 included loan repayments of \$1480.00 and interest earned of \$11.41 leaving a September 30, 2016 balance of \$34,822.72. Ms. Burke said the Business Capital Fund 2 Sequester Account began with an August 1, 2016 balance of \$160,582.32. Activity in this account from August 1, 2016 to September 30, 2016 included interest earned of \$60.72 leaving a balance on hand of \$160,643.04.

Ms. Burke said the CMV Growth Development Fund began with a July 31, 2016 balance of \$47,612.35. Activity from August 1, 2016 through September 30, 2016 included loan repayments of \$200.55 and interest earned of \$8.25 leaving a September 30, 2016 balance of \$47,821.15. Ms. Burke said the CMV Growth Development Fund Sequester Account began with an August 1, 2016 balance of \$104,063.06. Activity from August 1, 2016 through September 31, 2016 included interest earned of \$17.96 leaving a balance of \$104,081.02.

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***Providing Planning and Economic Development Services to Improve the Environment, Economy and Quality of Life!***

**•Land Use Planning and Zoning Assistance •Transportation Planning •Economic Development Planning •Recreation Planning •Business Lending  
•Grant Writing •Economic Data Dissemination •Assisting Local Interests in Responding to State, Federal and Private Programs •Advisory  
Services on Planning and Development Issues •Coordinator for Programs and Activities •Advocate on Issues Affecting the Region**

The La Crosse County Economic Development Fund began with a July 31, 2016 balance of \$49,296.17. Activity from August 1, 2016 through September 30, 2016 included loan repayments of \$1,065.42, interest earned of \$10.39, sequester account transfer of \$24,639.86, and a loan of \$75,000 to a local business leaving a September 30, 2016 balance of \$11.84. Ms. Burke said the La Crosse County Economic Development Fund Sequester Account began with an August 1, 2016 balance of \$24,639.86. Activity in this account from August 1, 2016 through September 30, 2016 included a transfer of \$24,639.86 to the regular account, interest earned of \$3.03, and a fee of \$15.00 charged to the account reflecting a -\$11.97 balance. The bank fee was waived leaving an actual balance of \$3.03.

Vice Chairman Baecker asked for a motion to approve the treasurer's report as presented. A motion was made to approve the treasurer's report. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Schlesselman. Vice Chairman Baecker asked if there were any questions or comments and hearing none, the treasurer's report was unanimously approved.

### **James Hill, Director La Crosse Area Development Corporation Presentation and Discussion**

Mr. Hill provided an overview of the economic development projects that the La Crosse Area Development Corporation (LADCO) is involved with in the area which include: the Coulee Region Business Center which was established in 1984 as an incubator for small businesses. It continues to expand with a commercial kitchen and EDA funding grants are being pursued to continue this expansion. LADCO is working to expand passenger train transportation opportunities by working towards have a second train per day on the Empire Builder Route traveling between the Twin Cities and Chicago. A feasibility study was conducted and the results were positive. Further research into the changes that must be made is being conducted. LADCO also continues to play a role in the Golden Shovel Project making industrial parks ready for industry by going through a 17-point checklist to make sure the site is ready.

Mr. Hill stated some area trends which include a construction boom from 2014-2015. There were \$1.2 billion of building permits in La Crosse County and 2016 is looking strong. Construction spending spans 18-24 months which helps the economy with wages, spending, and taxes. There is a new trend in workforce development which moves from a collection of data to being front and center to all our strategies to not only Western Wisconsin but to the upper Midwest. Employers say that recruitment and retention of skilled and semi-skilled workers is the number one issue facing them. He noted that demographics are changing and that there are not enough live births to keep ahead of the economy. The Workforce Innovation for a Strong Economy (WISE) initiative is part of the 7 Rivers Alliance 10-year initiative on recruitment and retention strategies for the workforce of the 7 rivers tri-state area. The Western Wisconsin side is the most dominant. He stated that retention programs are in practice but recruitment programs are nonexistent. This initiative looks at expanding recruitment efforts.

Mr. Hill stated that another trend that needs to be addressed is infrastructure. For a variety of reasons infrastructure has been neglected. For roads, bridges, and the upper Mississippi navigation system to be fishable, navigable, travelable requires cooperation between the various governments. There is a great need for expanded telecommunications as most everyone needs access to high speed internet and broadband. Airports/air transportation expansion is also a need. There is a shortage of pilots for commercial flights due to low pay and an increase from 200 to 1500 hours of training required to become a commercial pilot. Private aviation has higher wages and fewer hours of training required. Our electric power system is of extreme importance but there are troubling trends. A study was completed by the Public Service Commission that stated that for the first time in a decade Wisconsin had the highest electric rates in the Midwest. This has caused "retail wheeling" interests to surface that has been ineffective in the states that have tried it. In conclusion Mr. Hill encouraged the commission to take a health index of the region's infrastructure by infrastructure category and itemize the data by county and region. Once the data is collected, the results should be passed to legislators at the federal and state levels to give them a clearer picture of the region's needs.

### **Carol Wetuski, Area Director USDA Rural Development Administration Presentation and Discussion**

Ms. Wetuski provided an overview of the economic development services that are provided by the USDA Rural Development Administration. The USDA Rural Development Agency is a small agency of 78 people who travel the state delivering 40 programs. The focus is not on agricultural production but on rural communities. All programs are designated for rural areas. In this region, the only county with an ineligible area is La Crosse County due to the cities of La Crosse and Onalaska being considered a metropolitan area. Areas in La Crosse County such as Holman, Bangor, and West Salem would be considered rural and are eligible. The USDA Rural Development provides funding in three different ways: loan note guaranty with local lenders, the less risk the bank has the more favorable rates that they can then pass on to the borrower, direct loans, and grant programs. These programs for rural communities include grants opportunities for businesses to community facilities, such as water and sewer and housing.

Ms. Wetuski discussed the part of the 2014 Farm Bill which had a Strategic Economic and Community Development 6025 section. This allows communities in our region to tie their requests into the MRRPC's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy or the it

Regional Comprehensive Plan. This gives priority points to projects that fall within a regional plan. The MRRPC's Regional Comprehensive Plan was used to give priority points to communities of Viroqua and Viola which were awarded dollars for water and sewer projects. The priority points help to raise your applications to have a better opportunity for funding. Other projects in this part of the state included the Muscoda Library for equipment purchases and a Hydroponic Greenhouse facility. Another initiative Stronger Economies Together works with a smaller region and Monroe, Jackson and Juneau counties were selected in our region. This project will be tied to the CEDS and Regional Comprehensive Plan with the Mississippi River Planning Commission.

Ms. Wetuski discussed other available programs such as Economic Development Community Facilities. This program provides direct lending at historically low interest rates with a small amount of grant dollars too. Funds are given to help fund community facilities that provide services to a community which include libraries, police and fire departments, museums, hospitals, nursing homes, long term care facilities, senior centers, youth centers, continual care facilities. These funds are also available for equipment purchases. Examples of area projects include the hospital in Prairie du Chien and senior care and housing projects in Richland and Buffalo Counties.

Another program is the Business and Industry Guaranty Program. This program provides loans for business expansion, startups, and refinancing to grow jobs and to save jobs. The USDA works with local lenders to get the borrower better rates and terms. Some examples of area business startups that were assisted with these funds include Organic Valley, New Glarus Brewery, Potosi Brewery, and Ashley Furniture.

The Rural Business Development Grant provides business incubators, and small revolving loan funds. The Rural Micro Entrepreneur Assistance program (RMAP) assists with business startups, provides technical assistance to entrepreneurs, feasibility studies, business plan help for micro entrepreneurs which are businesses that have less than 10 employees. The micro loan has a \$50,000 cap.

The Rural Economic Development Across America Program is a program where the funds are distributed to area electric cooperatives and then they distribute the funds. The funds can go towards business parks, business expansions, etc. The funds are loaned out at 0% financing rate. Vernon Electric and Western Dairyland have used this program.

There is also a Know Your Farmer initiative. There are three programs that tie together for smaller and specialty agriculture. There is a Specialty Crop Block Grant that goes to the state. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture gets funds to lend to specialty growers. An example could be a grant to grow carrots. The Farm Micro loan program through farm service agencies came out of the 2014 Farm Bill to help new farmers get startup funds. The Value Added producer grants can be used when you take an agriculture product and make a secondary project such as taking blueberries and making blueberry jam. The farmer would be able to apply for a working capital grant to produce the blueberry jam.

Another program is the Equip Program which is a cost share program 50-50. An example of this is the Rural Energy Across America - Renewable energy initiative for farms and small businesses which provides funds for upgrading to more energy efficient equipment.

Mr. Bonifas asked about funding for areas that have suffered damages due to flooding and if they would be able to obtain funds for upgrades to replace damaged culverts for example in rural areas.

Ms. Wetuski responded that the priority ranked system does take into consideration communities that have included such things as building a fire station as part of a community need and have included it in their Multi Hazard Mitigation Plan. The grant scoring process would give them additional points to compete for the grant funds. The Emergency Community Water Assistance Grants are not eligible to apply for until there has been a Presidential Disaster Declaration. Communities would be able to apply for those grants while they are waiting for a Presidential Disaster Declaration to be made.

### **Commissioner input on economic development strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, threats, and strategies for inclusion in the 2017-2022 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy – CEDS**

Mr. Flogstad discussed the regional economic indicators in preparation for the 2017-2022 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The first handout described the Mississippi River Nine County Region's Job and Industry Strength Comparison. Manufacturing, Health Care and Social Assistance, Transportation and Warehousing, and Wholesale Trade were all strong areas. The second part of the handout discussed the Regional Economic Competitiveness Comparison of the Mississippi River nine county region

to the surrounding counties in Iowa and Minnesota and then comparing them to the state. The region's unemployment rates and job creation statistics were also discussed. The previous CEDS strategies were shared along with the year's activities in context with these

goals. Mr. Fletcher added that he has been in discussion with several area businesses, Organic Valley, Ashley Furniture, and Golden Plump, and he said some of the biggest workforce challenges they face are: childcare, transportation, and housing.

#### **Approval of 2017 Transportation Work Plan**

Mr. Fletcher said the Draft Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission Transportation Planning Annual Work Program for 2017 was completed and sent to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. He said this work program is required in order to receive Wisconsin (DOT) funding. He continued by reviewing the Work Program in detail. Upon completion of Mr. Fletcher's presentation of the Work Program Commissioner Burke made a motion to approve the MRRPC Transportation Planning Annual Work Program for 2017 pending final approval by WisDOT. Commissioner Twidt seconded the motion and it was approved unanimously.

#### **Status of Wisconsin's Federal Disaster Declaration Request to FEMA, Including 13 Counties, 7 in the Mississippi River Region**

Mr. Bonifas shared the preliminary incident report from the Wisconsin Emergency Management Department (WEM). The Governor is in the process of requesting the area as a Presidential Disaster. FEMA will inspect the damage to get an estimate. There is a threshold of per capita damage that needs to be met. Once the area has been declared a Presidential Disaster Area dollars will be available for public assistance repairs. In the rural areas if the repair is in your Hazard Mitigation Plan for example if a culvert needs to be replaced, the WEM advises to make the culvert bigger if it has the same footprint so it only needs to be replaced once. Once the Presidential Disaster has been declared 20% of the funds will come back to the state for Hazard Mitigation Planning. The funds will be available statewide and communities will be able to apply for the funds. The state has a priority list and communities will be able to begin applying next year.

#### **Old, Business, New Business and Adjourn**

Vice Chairman Baecker asked if there was any old business. Vice Chairman Baecker asked if there was any new business. Hearing none, a motion was made to adjourn by Commissioner Burke and seconded by Commissioner Ross and unanimously approved.

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Vicki Burke, Secretary-Treasurer