

Florence County Economic Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats Workshops

Two separate Economic S.W.O.T. workshops were conducted for Florence County. The first Economic S.W.O.T. Workshop was conducted on January 21, 2009. The workshop consisted of a diverse group of 17 stakeholders representing local community and county officials, business leaders, and key civic and non-profit organizations in Florence County. This workshop was part of a larger economic study funded by a Regional Innovation Grant for the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Wisconsin Border. The second Economic S.W.O.T. Workshop was held with the Florence County Planning Advisory Committee at the March 10, 2009 meeting. The results for these two workshops were used to prepare development strategies to implement both the town and county comprehensive plans.

Florence County Focus Group, January 21, 2009

Participants:

Russell Tripp, Florence County Chamber of Commerce
 Meg Dallapiazza, UW Extention – 4-HYD
 Jim Horvatl, Florence Co Board
 Judy Gehlhoff, Town Board
 Dennis Christian
 Brent Dallagrana, Florence Abstract
 Keri Buffinton, Spread Eagle Garden Center
 Conrad Kohberg, Hooglands Woodshop
 Sue Hoogland, FL Cty School Board Business Owner
 Chuck Hoogland, Hoogland’s Wood Shop
 Roger Osterberg, 1247 Fischer Lake Pkwy
 Bill Dyer, Town of Auroa
 Don Gardner, County Board
 Clyde Nelson, State Bank of Florence
 Hank Murphy, Florence Mining News
 Jay Glime, G&G Lumber
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STRENGTHS

- Tourism – snowmobiles, woodlands, trails, lakes, fishing, hunting
- Close to suppliers for logging industry
- Iron Mountain/Kingsford is diversified – though Florence not diversified
- Regional economy, Kingsford and Florence
- Kingsford is hub of job opportunities
- Our area has entrepreneurs starting businesses
- People are best asset
- Many small businesses (diversified)
- Dedication of small business owners
- Natural resources – draw residents and tourists
- Education system – good schools, e.g. “Bay”
- Timber industry

- Hardworking workforce – good people, excellent work ethic
- Strong volunteerism
- Fuel prices an advantage – close to Fox Valley for tourism as compared to Vilas or Oneida counties
- Public land - ATV and snowmobile use
- Low cost of living
- History of conservatism good in tough economic times
- Great place to raise/start a family
- Region can meet all needs

WEAKNESSES

- Iron Mountain/Kingsford is diversified – though Florence not diversified
- Farming is tough
- No good economic base for jobs
- Money outflow to Iron Mountain for shopping and services
- Too few people (especially in winter, summer ok) – small customer base (this is why lost supermarket)
- Dilapidated structures = poor image
- Seasonality of tourism
- Youth leaving (14-20%?)
- Need jobs for young people (2)
- Reliance on tourism
- Lack of transportation – no rail, limited highways
- Lack of tech growth – infrastructure is small
- Education a “mess” – declining enrollment, closed a grade school
- Retirees and tourists don’t support schools
- Can’t compete with Dixon County Schools
- Need more promotion of tourism opportunities, especially trails
- Need a grocery store
- Gap in workforce between high schoolers and elderly – 20-40 age group too small
- Resistance to halfway house
- Not enough good jobs to support 20-40 age group, better jobs available in Green Bay
- Need businesses that keep professionals in area
- More industry needed not tied to timber – not diversified enough
- Location – far from raw materials
- Transportation
- Lack of EDC funds – small budgets, not enough resources
- Perception of education is problem, we have good schools and good results but news is about enrollment and closings and perception is reality
- Logistics of county for education – long bus rides
- Perception of community is poor – dilapidated structures and junked vehicles are embarrassing – need to enforce ordinances
- Funding system for schools a problem
- Need housing affordable to middle income level

- Have gotten too good at doing things with less – too conservative
- “Good enough” is prevailing attitude, not striving for excellences
- Personal property tax on business equipment – pay sales tax, then personal property tax
- Lack of positive press
- Young not as willing to work hard
- Cross state relationships don’t always work well.

THREATS

- Youth leaving – brain drain
- Aging population, aging workforce, retirements
- Economy is affecting tourism
- Less snow tourism when more snow in south
- Curriculum cuts
- Opposition to paper and mining industries
- Resistance to change
- County revenue through timber sales could change – decline in homebuilding will affect county revenues
- Mill closure due to changes in timber industry
- Attraction of Green Bay for shopping
- Declining school enrollments
- Environmentalism cuts down on ability to act locally
- Failure to cooperate
- State deficit – county relies on state grants
- Lack of funding for county promotion and investment capital
- Not enough money to go around
- Escalation of property taxes
- Invasive species in waterways and forests
- Increasing interest rates
- Globalization
- Regionalization (e.g. schools)
- Paying people to do nothing – social programs too strong, social assistance has lost stigma, people too willing to take food stamps and unemployment

OPPORTUNITIES

- Help ourselves – spend money to make money – promotion and cooperation efforts
- Promote startups
- Full time economic development coordinator (Wendy), and she needs a database of available land and space for interested businesses
- Get Fed govt to harvest timber
- Rail would allow for affordable transport
- Pay attention to bottom 85% of schoolkids – trades programs!
- More ED money under Wendy’s control
- More positive attitude
- County farm

- Promote what we've got (5)
- Family values here are strong
- Space to grow (2)
- Promote ATV accessibility – trails and town roads (legal to drive on)
- Develop and encourage INDUSTRY, and diversify
- Perception is reality – be positive!
- Entrepreneurship program in school district
- Cooperation – County Board and Town Board
- Grants for startup help
- Be welcoming to new people – DMV hours in town an asset – courthouse is not welcoming
- Focus on job creation
- Tourism Council and Chamber of Commerce
- Value-added wood products (skilled jobs)
- Downtown Florence could be very attractive with limited investment
- Lodging in Florence – we're turning people away
- Idle farmland could be used for biofuels – ethanol or rapeseed biodiesel
- Connect local producers to school to provide food (e.g Hilbert, WI)
- Investigate wind power
- Conservation funding
- Be welcoming to retirees and recruit their expertise

GAPS/DEFICITS

- Communications: eastern part of county good for phone and internet, western parts of county not as good.
 - Local area won't be covered by HD broadcast
 - No public radio
 - High speed internet penetration is getting better
- Full service grocery store
- Accountant
- Bus services
- Pharmacy
- Entertainment venue (outdoor)
- Multi-use racetrack facility
- Lodging
- Retail shopping
- Downtown planning/promotion funds
- Historic society
- IT help (web design, computer assistance)
- State and federal funding

Florence County Planning Advisory Committee , March 10, 2009

STRENGTHS

- Natural resources
- Water recreation
- Trail systems
- Public land
- Forestry
- Parks and recreation (trails...)
- Waterfalls
- Natural Resources (Timber restoration in the 1930's)
- Timber
- Forest land
- Rivers and lakes
- Timber industry – II
- Extensive timber resource to supply more value added woof businesses
- Large, beautiful tracts of public land for any type of outdoor recreation = tourism growth potential
- Big network of trails and roads for ATV's, snowmobile's, and silent sports
- Rural emphasis
- Affordable housing
- Low crime
- Good work ethic
- Hard working workforce and volunteers
- Low cost of living, safe, small community to raise a family
- Can draw our labor force from Michigan
- Good base of small business entrepreneurs o mentor new businesses
- Dedicated and organized EDC providing many new services and resources to small businesses
- Newly renamed, Chamber of Commerce with rising membership and new goals.
- Economic development coordinator
- Economic development area
- Industrial park
- Pine River Hydro Dam
- Florence utility and town of Florence equipment and crew
- Fire departments
- Rescue squad
- Schools finances have improved and image is slowly being addressed
- Nearby college system
- Regional economy fits almost all needs
- Florence downtown is much more attractive and walkable than it was
- St. Vincent DePaul store
- County HWY/State & Federal HWY, US 2, 70, 101
- County board willing to provide opportunities for new businesses

WEAKNESSES

- Transportation (long distance)
- Resistance to change
- High tax
- Reliance on state funded programs
- Declining family
- Limited customer base
- School maintenance, quality curriculum
- Maintaining volunteers (rescue squads, etc)
- Older housing
- Dilapidated commercial buildings
- Lack of industrial areas open to attract business
- Lack of hotel/motel to keep people here
- Inability to bring in outside labor
- Need to hire from outside the county
- Farming has been phased out
- Need more commercial development
- Not listening to the people when they vote No on referendums
- High taxes
- Residents use Iron Mountain/Kingsford for businesses (grocery stores, etc.)
- Many landowners are non-residents and do not use local businesses for half or more of the year.
- Need more small light industrial parks throughout the county
- Logging 95% of farms
- Expand sewer and water district
- Need year around class “A” roads in some areas
- No rail service
- Yeas of negative press from school issues (families won’t move here and some have left)
- Lack of business owner input on EDC, county and town boards
- Boards against change, won’t benchmark and learn from other areas
- Not enough funding for economic development and tourism efforts
- Too close to big box retailers in Iron Mountain, few people buy local
- Some business owners do poorly with customer service
- Young people have to mover away to find jobs and lifestyles they seek
- No more rail service, needed by some forest industry companies
- Tourism industry pay is low and seasonal
- Downtown Florence needs more buildings/retail – industrial park lots are not build ready
- Property taxes are very high
- “Good old boy”
- Diversity of industry
- Expanded grocery/retail
- Elderly services/housing
- Drug enforcement
- DA

- Sheriff
- Too much public land
- No rail system
- Too much dependency on wood industry
- Wilderness Area National Forest
- Distances from markets
- Shabby looking community
- Not all townships supportive of economic development

OPPORTUNITIES

- More natural resources exposure
- More healthcare facilities / nursing homes
- Need pharmacy
- Better communication throughout all towns to county
- Pellet plant or bio-diesel plants
- Availability of certified wood (SFI/FSC)
- Expanding recreation trails
- Hotels/motels to lodge tourists using recreation trails
- Change the perception of the school system
- Return of the small family farm
- Release run-of-river status on all rivers with hydro electric dams and operate plants at maximum until alternative energy is developed, except during spawning season
- Green energy must be supported
- A youth center ages 14 to 18
- A roller rink
- Winter skating rink with a warming house
- Keep up on our parks at the lakes
- Internet businesses
- Florence industrial park
- State/Federal assistance for green industries
- Natural resources
- Near medical facilities
- Via TIF district formation attract a chain hotel developer (current lack of lodging)
- Work to develop build ready sites (1 large, 2 small) in industrial park
- Find additional funding for EDC's growing programs, services and efforts
- Target top 3 regional industries to grow associated suppliers or spin-offs
- Promote benefits of "work where you play" to seasonal home homeowners
- Perform targeted attraction of alumni who have been gone 10-20 years
- Form informal network of retired transplants with variety of expertise
- Target biofuel/biomass emerging industries for new company
- Develop Hillcrest school as multipurpose voc school/incubation/4k-2
- Support "home producers" networking for joint selling and promoting
- Assisted living
- Hotel once economy turns around

- Invent county festival to attract people
- County administrator
- Wood resources for related businesses
- Natural resource center strengthening programs and advertisement of recreational opportunities
- Establishment of Chamber of Commerce

THREATS

- Invasive species
- Maintaining social programs (funding)
- Lack of timber harvesting on National Forests
- Invasive species on timber growth and recreational areas
- Too many hotels/motels in Iron Mountain (all recreation users stay there)
- Aging timber harvesting work force
- Lack of recreational coordinator in the county
- Too many retirement homes in the county
- Lack of stable school system (perception of school not good)
- Department of Natural Resources
- Removal of Pine River hydro dam
- Run-of-river on hydro dams throughout the region
- Drug problems
- School closing – maybe consolidate
- Aging population
- Deterioration of lakes
- Schools
- Young people moving out to get a job
- Local people not using local business
- Lost grocery store, so more people have to go to Iron Mountain. Cannot loose hardware store and other retail stores
- Many services to residents/businesses being “regionalized” out of the county
- Too few people with vision and skill to run for town/county boards
- Unfunded mandates from state put more burden on local taxes
- Small businesses struggling more and more with rising costs and government regulations
- Loss of young people hurts diversity in many areas
- Negative press campaigns by a few at school continue to hurt image
- Aging population equals fewer workers, larger demand on government and less tax money.
- Foreign dumping of paper and forest products hurting top industries
- Lack of any harvesting in National Forest has driven one sawmill and several loggers out of county
- Grocery store
- Declining school enrollment
- Negative image
- Aging street lights, Main Street appearance
- Loss of young people due to lack of employment opportunities
- Need to encourage locals to shop locally