

Rifle River Prosperity Network Concept Paper

CONNECTING ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT FOR COMMUNITY SUCCESS

Huron Pines
4241 OLD US 27 SOUTH, SUITE 2, GAYLORD, MI 49735 | (989) 448-2293

THE RIFLE RIVER WATERSHED is rich in defining natural resources that knit together a unique and desirable landscape. Lifelong and year round residents share with thousands of annual visitors, a deep connection to the high quality waters of the Rifle River, the iconic centennial farms that dot the uplands and the diverse cultural and recreational experiences that define local communities. As the highest-quality tributary to Saginaw Bay, an EPA Area of Concern, it is widely recognized that the protection of the watershed's natural resources plays a significant role in long-term protection of the Bay as well as Lake Huron and the Great Lakes Watershed. Over a decade of planning and habitat restoration work has been completed in the watershed combining investment from conservation groups, community members, local decision makers, recreation enthusiasts and local landowners. This work has culminated in a comprehensive Rifle River Watershed Management Plan that will guide years of future on-the-ground stewardship activities.

Despite this level of involvement and stakeholder buy-in, one challenge continues to be identified; how do the communities of the Rifle River Watershed fully realize the economic potential of the area's quality of life in a way that balances economic growth for residents with sound environmental stewardship? The "Rifle River Prosperity Network" project developed by Huron Pines will establish a framework for partners and stakeholders in the watershed to meet this challenge head on, using the momentum generated by current conservation activities to unify their communities' vision for development of a gateway region for the Rifle River and northern Michigan.

To achieve project goals and long-term success for the region the following outcomes are expected;

- 1. 1 Memorandum of Understanding:** A document to be developed by the Prosperity Network outlining goals and responsibilities of each partner and signed by membership to demonstrate unified commitment to the effort.
- 2. 1 Mechanism for determining the economic value of unique natural assets:** The Prosperity Network partners will develop the protocol and tools needed to gain a better understanding of the economic value of natural assets like forested land and high water quality – data that does not currently exist. The mechanism will include agreed upon benchmarks for gathering information to drive progress, schedule analysis and allow for evaluation of data collected throughout the process.
- 3. \$15,000 invested in innovative, community-based ideas:** Through a mini-grant program the Prosperity Network will motivate progress by community partners to foster economic growth and sense of place for the Rifle River region. This tool provides a critical mechanism for establishing strong engagement by members of the community early in the process and creates a sense of ownership by local stakeholders in the future success of their region.
- 4. 4 Case studies to be shared statewide:** Community projects resulting from the mini-grant program and/or significant milestones of the Prosperity Network will be selected and developed as shareable case studies for other communities and organizations looking for leadership in developing gateway regions. Successes as well as lessons learned will be shared.
- 5. 1 "Community Connection" program developed:** The accomplishments of community partners and the Prosperity Network will be captured and displayed prominently throughout the region. Projects will be highlighted in a regional publication developed by the Prosperity Network to keep communities informed of progress. Signage will be placed at prominent points throughout the watershed to communicate "quality of life" messaging to visitors and residents of the area.

Rifle River Prosperity Network: Project Description

AS PART OF THE RECENT WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLANNING PROCESS input was received from hundreds of stakeholders representing a broad array of community interests to identifying and articulate how the natural features found around the region positively impact day-to-day life. Awareness of the distinctive “Rifle River” quality of life has never been stronger and broad consensus for the need to connect these values to economic prosperity has been widely vocalized.

Huron Pines and our partners see this as the perfect time to establish the Rifle River Watershed as an important gateway region in the state of Michigan. This will be accomplished through coordinated action by stakeholders from the business and environmental communities to develop the following;

1. Support Services:

- a. “Rifle River Prosperity Network (Prosperity Network)” - A formal partnership of local economic and conservation partners that will develop a unified vision and marketing plan for the region that balances economic growth with environmental stewardship. The Prosperity Network will be a forum for all interests in the watershed to share ideas, thoughts and lessons in order to ensure growth correlates with local wishes.
- b. Intensive Workshops – With support from The Conservation Fund – a national leader in working with stakeholders to balance economic and environmental goals – two meetings of the Prosperity Network will be dedicated to increasing understanding of the value of marketing quality of life to economic development. Professional facilitators will direct these workshops to help the Prosperity Network identify tangible action steps.

2. Funding Investment:

- a. Funders Meeting – With assistance from the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN) and The Conservation Fund, a meeting of funders who have made significant investments in the region will be convened. This forum will allow sharing of first-hand information on sustainable funding and investment strategies and highlight where funders see individual priorities aligning with the Rifle efforts.

3. Tools:

- a. Mini-Grants – In partnership with WIN, the Prosperity Network will make available mini-grants to community partners to develop and put into action ideas that align with the goals of the Prosperity Network. This allows for short-term success and tangible progress that will in turn maintain enthusiasm in the effort by partners and the local population. The success shown from the mini-grants program will also serve as a powerful mechanism for generating future financial investment in the program itself.

In order for the Prosperity Network to feel ownership of successful project outcomes and future growth of the region, they must be heavily involved in development and implementation of all aspects of the proposed work. Each member of the Prosperity Network will bring with them a unique skill set and perspective that must be incorporated into the creation of a unified vision for the region and administration of the mini-grants program. Recognizing the value of this leadership and providing an avenue for leveraging these qualities will make the mini-grants program – a critical tool for progress - stronger and more relatable to the community members who stand to benefit. To serve as a starting point for moving through the process of development a general concept of the mini-grants program has been developed.

Local Investment. Regional Impact: Rifle Prosperity Network Mini-Grants Program

ONE OF THE FIRST MILESTONES FOR THE PROSPERITY NETWORK will be to identify a unified vision for the region and establish action-oriented goals for achieving success. The vision, goals and commitments of Prosperity Network membership will be outlined in a signed Memorandum of Understanding which will serve as a guiding document for all group efforts, including administrating the mini-grants program.

Huron Pines views area Community Foundations as key partners in all project work, with a particular ability to guide development of the mini-grants program. The Prosperity Network will look to discuss the idea of establishing a fund for the initial \$15,000 with this entity, to be used for mini-grants with the goal of creating a permanent fund dedicated to projects in the Rifle River Watershed that advance the regional vision. It will be the responsibility of Prosperity Network membership to develop an investment strategy for this fund and to work closely with the Community Foundation for guidance and oversight.

With any granting program there must be a framework for deciding awards and ensuring funds are dedicated to those projects that will have the greatest impact. For the Prosperity Network, as they start out, the group will need significant guidance to establish a prioritization process and Huron Pines sees the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN) playing an important role in this element of the program. As the lead investor in the project WIN will have shown that the work fits with their funding priorities and therefore the Prosperity Network must commit to uphold these criteria through their own funding structure. The Rifle Prosperity Network will fund projects that advance local priorities but impact the Rifle River region. Grants must show effective communication between existing efforts and demonstrate sustainability. Projects could be on-the-ground work, volunteer opportunities, and marketing and outreach projects for example, but all must show both long and short-term accomplishments, build a sense of pride and identity in the region and integrate economic, community and environmental outcomes.

It is important that the mini-grants leverage and strengthen community investment and ownership in success of the region. As a result a matching requirement will be built into the parameters of the program. This element not only ensures that the applicant has a strong stake in the success of their project but also provides sustainability for the effort. When looking to establish a permanent fund for this program and working with additional investors beyond the initial \$15,000 the Prosperity Network will have to show that their communities support their actions with dollars in addition to personal effort. The initial funding from WIN to establish a mechanism to encourage local buy-in, garner community support and develop successful stories is vital in creating confidence in future funders for the program and allow the Prosperity Network to increase dollars invested and leveraged for their communities beyond the initial \$15,000 and WIN's support.

Cooperation and collaboration lead to sustainable efforts and stronger results on the ground. As a result the program will seek applicants that can demonstrate working partnership across conservation, economic and community development sectors. Eligible applicants will be nonprofit organizations, and municipal and government agencies that can demonstrate that a proposed project aligns with the goals and priorities established by the Prosperity Network. Grants will be awarded over 1 grant cycle (Fall 2015) and projects must be completed within one (1) year of award.

Huron Pines has developed the Rifle River Prosperity Network Project with long-term sustainability as the number one priority. Our organization recognizes that questioning how to make a venture sustainable must enter into every decision or action step in the process and has developed project components that will guide the Prosperity Network in addressing this critical element. The mini-grants program with its structure of oversight and development of a long-term funding strategy for local projects by the Prosperity Network with a Community Foundation partner is one example in the overall strategy.

Success for the Future: Rifle River Prosperity Network Sustainability Strategies

IN THE CASE OF THE RIFLE PROSPERITY NETWORK, partners are coming from a legacy of proactive conservation planning. As a result it has been identified as important to build into the project strategies that ensure growth and economic development enhances quality of life, meets local wishes and compliments the characteristic natural resources of the area from the outset. This will be achieved by;

1. **Starting Focused:** The idea of creating a stronger connection between the economic development and conservation sectors is relatively new. As a result all partners understand that a great deal of learning and evolving will happen throughout the process. Thus the Prosperity Network will begin the effort working directly with the communities of Rose City and West Branch to establish a strong model for success before expanding to other areas of the watershed. These communities are well-positioned to take leadership roles in the Prosperity Network, have a clear understanding of their existing natural resource base and have had consistent stakeholder involvement in development of the watershed management plan.
2. **Identifying Existing Connections Early:** Organizations and partners involved in the Prosperity Network will undoubtedly bring knowledge of strategic and resource planning happening either elsewhere in the community or within their own entities. It will be important to work with each individual member of the Prosperity Network to determine early on how best to connect the goals and ideas generated through this project with existing plans. This is not to duplicate efforts but rather to make realistic connections that strengthen all community work and ensure the efforts of the Prosperity Network gain a mechanism for continued implementation and growth.
3. **Planning for Succession:** Working with community partners to identify and formalize a unified vision for marketing a region's quality of life in a way that ensures economic stability for residents and stewardship of natural resources is a time intensive process. To be successful this process will require broad buy-in and understanding from a variety of interests, including local decision makers and prominent leaders. The Prosperity Network will develop a clear plan for maintaining a relationship with, and informative program for, new elected officials and local governing bodies. This plan will ensure a working relationship with policy creators allowing community identified economic and ecological goals to be reflected in planning decisions.
4. **Dedicated Leadership Organization:** Collaborative efforts bring together a variety of backgrounds and perspectives in order to address challenges in a balanced way and the Rifle Prosperity Network will be no different. However, despite the broad array of skills and expertise that will be represented by participants, success will not occur unless there is one organization to play a clear leadership role in development and progress of the group. A high degree of coordination, communication – internal and external - and motivation must be constant particularly in the initial stages. Huron Pines is able to fill this leadership role as a result of experience in leading collaborative processes throughout Northeast Michigan and having the ability to draw upon staff with the skill set needed to coordinate multiple partners on a regional scale. In planning this project Huron Pines has drawn upon past experiences to determine realistic and achievable outcomes and the appropriate level of staff time necessary to achieve these goals. Our organization also understands that sustainability for the Prosperity Network can only be achieved when local leaders assume responsibility for the group's direction and decisions. Huron Pines will facilitate this transition as timing and the group's development dictate resulting in a reduction of time to coordinate by our staff over time.

Huron Pines: Leading Regional Collaboration

HURON PINES HAS WORKED FOR OVER 40 YEARS to conserve the forests, lakes and streams of Northeast Michigan. Our projects are designed to achieve success for our communities and our region. To effectively implement on-the-ground restoration work, watershed-level planning and sustainable conservation programs Huron Pines facilitates collaborative partnerships. Bringing together the public and private sectors to work for, and invest in, our region's natural resources ensures the right balance of technical expertise and stakeholder perspective are represented from project design to project completion.

To that end the goals and outcomes set forth in our organization's strategic plan for the next 40 years see Huron Pines working to;

1. Provide leadership necessary to identify natural resource enhancement opportunities and coordinate those programs to have the greatest impact in restoring, enhancing or sustaining the region's natural resources.
 - 1a. There is a well-connected conservation partner network in place for the region with the capacity to implement projects and balance ecological and economic needs.
 - 1b. A model of funding is in place that focuses on regional self-reliance and provides a stable, sustainable source for project needs
2. Integrate a conservation ethic into all aspects of our communities, including their local decision making, land use, schools, business and households
 - 4a. Economic and community development projects recognize connections between natural assets and sense of place.
 - 4c. Individuals and units of government understand their responsibility and make informed decisions regarding conservation of our natural resources.

Providing leadership to groups looking to develop a network to increase the impact of their work is a critically important role to fill but coordination takes time making financial support for a dedicated staff person necessary. Huron Pines can draw on a variety of examples in our current work that underscore how our projects integrate conservation, community and economic success.

1. **Nonprofit Leadership Series:** A partnership with Otsego County Community Foundation to provide support for nonprofit leaders in Northeast Michigan through training, networking and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Facilitating a stronger, more coordinated nonprofit sector for the region ensures programming and community offerings achieve long-term sustainability.
2. **Kirtland's Warbler Initiative:** The Kirtland's Warbler is a rare and unique Northeast Michigan natural asset and one that presents strong economic opportunity for the region. The species also relies on long-term conservation programs for survival. Huron Pines is leading a broad public-private partnership to secure conservation commitments, private sector funding and broad community support programs. Work includes developing an independent group to oversee the future of the effort and coordinating partners through communication, celebrating project momentum and continued facilitation of tasks.
3. **Atlanta Stewardship Center** – Atlanta, MI is a small, rural town with vast public land at its doorstep. A designated "Trail Town" the community and economic leadership desire a way forward for promoting these assets. Huron Pines is overseeing the process to develop a partnership agreement and business plan for a Stewardship Center and the community's Trail Town vision – focusing on balancing partner/community input for sustainable growth.

Existing Examples of Success: Engage Business. Invest Locally. Work Together.

ALTHOUGH A PARTNERSHIP LIKE THE PROPOSED RIFLE RIVER PROSPERITY NETWORK is a new framework for growing and sustaining our region's communities there are many examples of this concept achieving success in Michigan, across the country and internationally.

The Big 400 (Michigan): Started by the Chelsea Area Chamber of Commerce (Chelsea, MI) The Big 400 developed out of a desire to jump start commerce in the area's communities in a way that was linked to the benefits of public land – a defining and unifying feature for municipalities served by the Chamber. Early on, goals encompassed the desire not only to plan and execute coordinated economic strategies but to ensure partnerships included managers and stewards of the public lands – government agencies, land conservancies, conservation organizations - providing an avenue to both promote use and preservation of these areas. After receiving initial training and guidance from The Conservation Fund the original team felt it necessary to expand the partnership to cities and towns outside of the Chelsea Area Chamber service area. In doing so the Big 400 was born – geographically the area of participation is 20 miles by 20 miles bookended on either side by large recreation areas. Today the Big 400 is experiencing a high degree of local business participation and this buy-in is driving the vision. Understanding of the value of local natural resources to economic success is demonstrated through annual region-wide festivals celebrating Sandhill crane migration and the local maple syrup industry. Trail races and trail stewardship events rival each other in popularity and bring in visitors to eat, play and stay.

Susquehanna Greenways Partnership (Pennsylvania): The Susquehanna River travels 500 miles through Pennsylvania and is the largest tributary to the Chesapeake Bay – an EPA Area of Concern. The Susquehanna Greenways Partnership is a watershed-wide effort to link natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources along the river corridor and provide support services to local “river communities.” The Partnership and its mini-grants program operates according to five (5) strategic initiatives that lend importance to conservation, distinctive local identity and marketing. Municipalities participating in the partnership's programs are provided support in the form of trainings as well as exposure on the Partnership's regional website and in publications but are required to develop at least two independent and unique mechanisms for promoting the river. The Partnership makes it a priority to celebrate local business success and to elevate individual stories of connection to the Susquehanna River. Through cultivation of strong public-private partnerships and funding strategies the Partnership awarded \$50,000 to advance local community ideas in 2014.

Fogo Island Cooperation Initiative (Newfoundland, Canada): Experiencing a falling birthrate, aging population and outmigration of young people – in addition to extreme isolation on Canada's easternmost boundary – Newfoundland's five (5) Fogo Island communities looked to amalgamation of municipal governments as way to secure a brighter future. Through the use of a consulting firm the Cooperation Initiative learned that despite intense fears from residents that individual community identity could be lost, unifying support for a regional system of governance was stronger. Residents felt that amalgamation would decrease harmful competition between municipalities and lead to strategic economic development, cultural heritage and environmental protection programs. Using a collaborative process Fogo Island has created a strong connection to art and heritage based tourism. World renowned architects have been drawn to the area to design and build modern studio spaces inspired by the unique landscape and art-in-residence programs have followed. Regional marketing programs center on a “Fogo Island ideal” that entices a visitor with culinary, photographic, wildlife viewing and historic experiences that could only happen at the “edge of the earth.”

Local Readiness: Rose City and West Branch

AS THE RATE OF PEOPLE MOVING OUT OF THE SUBURBS into more rural areas continues to increase and technological advances allow people to work greater distances from the physical location of their employer, the economic value of “quality of life” will play a more central role in how communities market themselves. Places like Rose City, neighbor to the 4,500 acre Rifle River Rec Area, and West Branch, a burgeoning rural community with a vibrant downtown and renowned fishery only steps away, are legitimate contenders in the market to attract new talent and investment. The legacy of conservation planning in the region also sets these communities apart in that they already understand the importance of proactive, sustainable planning to protect the characteristics they love.

Looking at these examples, one can see how conservation and community projects align for the betterment of ecologic and human resources. Houghton Creek - a high quality tributary to the Rifle River - flows through the small, close-knit town of Rose City. Recognizing the value that the waterway brings to the city’s landscape and its residents, a public green space was dedicated for access and enjoyment along the creek’s southern bank. Offering viewing platforms, a riverside pathway, covered picnic area and playground equipment the park is often selected as the site of wedding and birthday celebrations as well as a daily stop for people wanting to quietly relax and recharge. The city celebrates its connection to the rivers and resources of the area with an annual fishing derby for children in the park. All of these uses – and the city’s investment in providing meaningful experiences – generate lasting memories, high quality of life and a natural inclination towards environmental stewardship.

In 2012 Rose City invested in a 480’ streambank restoration project in the park. Working with conservation professionals City Council developed a plan that balanced restoration of the banks in a way that would protect and enhance water quality and fish habitat of the creek with the wishes of the community for enjoyment. Native plantings and natural erosion control measures were installed along the river to blend in with the natural setting while limestone steps were placed at high traffic areas to ensure that access was maintained. Capitalizing on the expanded support built by the streambank project, Rose City pursued an assessment of stormwater runoff and its impacts on local water resources. This proactive planning allowed officials to determine how best to protect water quality by prioritizing treatment of sites. In October 2014 a ribbon cutting was held to celebrate the installation of a stormwater treatment unit. This event - part of a day-long program highlighting the diversity of Rose City amenities - allowed partners to share with the community their motivation for investing in this type of project.

Irons Park, an equally important location for West Branch, offers recreational amenities and a serene spot on the West Branch of the Rifle River for families, downtown employees and visitors to enjoy. Throughout the year the park provides a beautiful spot for festivals and community events as well as a close stop for people participating in the West Branch Area Chamber’s successful Fabulous Fridays business partnership program. In 2012 the first of five rain gardens were installed in this popular public space all with an eye to enhancing a user’s experience and protecting the resource for environmental and community health. By the end of 2013 all of the gardens and a stormwater treatment unit had been installed – the former through the efforts of community volunteers and local school children and the latter through balanced design by city officials and conservation professionals.

In Rose City and West Branch the time and resources provided by city employees leveraged more conservation dollars to accomplish more work for the community. Currently leadership in both cities is working to address the challenge of balancing economic investment and environmental stewardship by tying policy decisions directly to smart, partner supported projects. It is a priority to showcase accomplishments in a way that connects to residents and visitors making a clear statement that the city is committed to linking business, cultural and natural resource goals to help the region prosper. These communities must now think about how to sustain their efforts.

Developing a partnership of watershed communities to learn from and lean on, develop ideas with unified goals and encourage real results that uphold a regional vision of economic prosperity is the solution for Rose City and West Branch to steward their efforts and for the Rifle River Watershed to leverage investment for conservation.

Appendix A
Project Letters of Support