

Tourism Council gains focus



By Jon Szerlag

Bertha Brock Park Manager Loren Gage and Ionia State Recreation Area (ISRA) Manager Ted Kessler are at ISRA discussing ways increased tourism will benefit local parks and the surrounding communities.

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IONIA, Mich. -

Representatives from different areas in Ionia County attended the Tourism Council's first meeting on Thursday and selected goals for the council to focus on.

Two priorities came out of the meeting. The first was a long-term focus on ways to market the county as a whole, and the second was a survey to help find out what residents thoughts are on tourism.

"(The survey) would go out to residents of the county, asking what they identify as the tourism assets," said Ionia County Economic Alliance Executive Director Diane Smith, who is spearheading the council. "The other facets of the survey are what do they want here, where do they travel for other tourism needs and also inform us of desires from people that live here for recreation and tourism."

Members at the meeting left with a homework assignment of developing three questions for the survey, and during the second meeting they will discuss what are the best questions to ask the residents.

"They are trying to put together a survey: How to draw people to the county, what our focus is to make this a destination as opposed to a drive through," said Bertha Brock Park Manager Loren Gage. "The survey will consist of a few question and be very simple; why do you travel to a point for vacation, what needs to be added to Ionia County to make this a destination."

The survey will lead up to determining ways to market the county and determine what group they should market to based on resources already located in the county.

"Everyone thought that the survey is a much needed first step to determine what the needs are, and what the people want," said Ionia State Recreation Area Manager Ted Kessler. "Everyone agreed that before you market you need to know who to market to, and what to emphasize."

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With the parks being “hidden gems” in the county, the council also focused on the different downtowns, businesses, waterways, Rails to Trails and the historical buildings which are sprinkled throughout the county.

“We will be able to market to a broader audience, and with that we will be able to market Ionia County as a whole, not just pinpoint specific sources,” said Ionia Downtown Development Authority Director Linda Curtis. “It will be a wonderful opportunity for residents to showcase our beautiful county and make it as a destination for tourists.”

At the next meeting, which is scheduled at 8:30 a.m. May 6, members will form the board, discuss membership, select what areas should be represented on the board, and different ways to support the tourism council.

“We will actually form the council at the next meeting — how many people can be on the board, what types of people should be represented,” said Smith. “We are also going to look at what resources we have that the council could use: money, support from institutions, volunteers.”

The members present at the meeting hope business owners will come to the next meeting and residents from the community to get involved in forming the committee.

“I am looking forward to where we go with this, and I am happy to be involved with anything getting the name Ionia County out,” said Portland Main Street Manager and Downtown Development Authority Director Patrick Reagan. “Making a name for Ionia County helps Downtown Portland just as much as it helps the surrounding area.”

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