

## Community Visioning Report Summary

As part of extensive efforts to gauge local attitudes toward economic development in Hillsdale County, the consultants conducted four public visioning sessions. The location and times of these events included:

1. Reading Elementary School Board Meeting. Room - January 20, 2005
2. Hillsdale County Senior Service Center - January 25, 2005
3. Somerset Township Offices - January 25, 2005
4. Pittsford Area Schools Cafeteria - January 26, 2005

Appendix D includes the full Visioning Report that documents all comments and findings from these four sessions.

These forums were organized by the Economic Growth Group (EGG), after considerable discussion about locations, times and other organizational issues. A key consideration was that these forums should be held at convenient locations throughout Hillsdale County to encourage participation. Similarly, one day time and three evening times were selected to provide greater options for attendance.

Advance publicity for each of the four forums was extensive. Prominent newspaper articles appeared before and after each of the sessions and captured many of the key discussion points that took place. In all, more than one hundred people attended these forums which meet or exceeded many prior expectations. Those who participated also gave positive feedback to the consultants and EGG members. Most often, participants were pleased to have had the chance to attend such an event and voice their concerns and thoughts about economic development in Hillsdale County.

It is important to note that these events are considered to be one part of the larger effort to understand local attitudes, needs and desires with respect to economic development in Hillsdale County. The results of these visioning sessions are to be combined with interviews, focus group discussions and impartial analysis to form the basis for a sound economic development strategy for Hillsdale County.

### Session Format

The forums typically lasted between an hour and a half, and two hours. In general, they were conducted in a rather informal way, and all participants were encouraged to speak and collectively share their thoughts. The format for these sessions was oriented toward seeking responses to six specific questions. These questions included:



## Community Visioning Report Summary

1. What are the problems or issues we must address in Hillsdale County to ensure that the community reaches its full economic development potential?
2. For you to consider those efforts a success – what types of jobs and businesses would exist in 2010?
3. What should the downtowns and business districts look like in 2010? What types of goods and services would you like to find in the business districts?
4. What is the image you want Hillsdale County to have in the year 2010?
5. If the citizens, business community and government work together over the next 5 years to make Hillsdale County the very best it could be, what would you like to see result from that effort?
6. Among the possible results from number 5 above, vote on one thing would you like accomplished to improve the County's economic future?

The ideas generated from the group discussion were written down on large posters and taped to the walls to provide visual reference. The last question was addressed by allowing the participants to vote using stickers. Each participant was given two stickers, each representing a "vote" that could be cast for a particular idea generated from the discussion regarding question number 5. These votes were then placed next to the ideas generated from the discussion that took place on question 5. While the participants at each of the four vision sessions arrived at different priorities, there were several clear themes that were viewed as important results in several or all of these meetings which are presented below:

- All sectors of the community in Hillsdale County working together.
- All business districts improved through more businesses and renovation of buildings as part of an improvement to the entire community.
- Entrepreneurship and support programs to support new jobs and businesses are increased.
- Economy is more diversified.
- Higher paying jobs.



## Community Visioning Report Summary

- More proactive leadership.
- Hillsdale County becomes a regionally known destination.
- Unified marketing of the County.
- Improved transportation system and better roads.
- Farmland preservation and related industries prosper.

### Overall Vision

Based upon the priorities at the visioning sessions, discussions at the focus groups and with the Economic Growth Group, a preliminary long-term vision for Hillsdale County emerged. Before expressing this vision in a more focused and familiar manner, it was expressed by imagining a resident in the future looking back over the last 10 years. The community leaders of today would hope that such an individual would be able to say the following things:

*In the last 10 years, Hillsdale County has become an even greater place to live. We have a diverse local economy with low unemployment and we are known for a high quality of life. It has not always been like this. The first few years following the new millennium were tough. Like many Midwestern communities, we lost good paying jobs from plant closures, downsizing and overseas competition. We rebounded however, in a dramatic way thanks to community leaders really pulling together with a common vision.*

*From the meetings we held and collaborative efforts in 2004 and 2005, we came to discover that we as communities or individuals really weren't so isolated, and we found ways to build on our collective strengths. We realized that if we were going to build a strong local economy, we needed to continue doing everything possible to lure new companies to the area, and we needed to take matters into our own hands and help build a local economy around what is uniquely our own. We saw that we needed to help people start their own businesses, whether it be a small endeavor based on a hobby, an artistic expression, a restaurant, or a larger, more aggressive venture involving new technologies. We created a home for entrepreneurship and we are now reaping the benefits. Those new start-ups have strong ties to the area since many were born here. Along with new business start-ups, we also saw employ-*



## Community Visioning Report Summary

ment growth from a generally rebounding economy, and saw employment opportunities develop from tourism and hospitality-related industries. This came about because we were better able to promote and develop our various attractions, historical features and quality natural environment.

It wasn't easy, but once we all bought in to the overall vision, we got busy with key projects that made this all possible. We developed partnerships with institutions, we aggressively sought grants and we developed a "to do" list of key things that needed to be done. We still work on this list, getting some things done, adding other things, putting things on hold, but always moving forward. We communicate better with each other than ever before, and we have a shared sense of purpose, as all sectors of the Hillsdale County community work together. Our economy is thankfully much more diversified than it was 10 years ago, and we are creating real wealth as our local businesses grow and thrive. All business districts in the County are undergoing revitalization as a result of a better economy and increased tourist activity. There is no doubt that we are a significant weekend or summer destination. Thankfully, we have managed to grow our local economy without forgetting to protect our scenic landscapes and natural environment, which keeps visitors coming back.

In a more formal and more concise sense, the vision for Hillsdale County might also be expressed as follows:

All sectors of the Hillsdale County community will work together to grow and diversify the economy with higher paying quality jobs. The formation of new small businesses will be encouraged and they will thrive as the result of new initiatives for entrepreneurship. All business districts will be enhanced as part of a revitalization of the entire community. Through it all, Hillsdale County will become a regional destination with improved transportation, services and quality of life. Farmlands and related industries will prosper, and natural landscapes will be preserved.

