
On the Road . . . Less Traveled

with the

Rural Development Council of Michigan

John Steinbeck took his *Travels with Charlie*. Robert Frost walked *The Road Not Taken*. Scott Peck invited us on *The Road Less Traveled* and Charles Karault taught many homebound citizens about America while he was *On the Road*. In Michigan, we have done a little bit of traveling, on the roads often *less traveled* by many Michigianians. Membership on the Rural Development Council of Michigan fosters *On the Road* experiences. In an atmosphere designed to inform and enlighten, road trips take the Council membership throughout the state to remote rural communities. The struggles, problems, plans, and successes of rural communities “come alive” as Council members engage rural folks in discussions about their personal and community projects. Additionally, *On the Road* interactions encourage participation by Council members and community folks in the joint planning and implementation of projects. Council members return to their jobs better informed and more knowledgeable about the vital importance of diverse partnerships in solving problems and advancing rural development. One very positive result of the *On the Road* approach taken by the Rural Development Council of Michigan is a greater awareness of the Council by rural citizens and a greater awareness by Council members of the multiple and unique challenges facing rural Michigianians.

One of the most successful *On the Road* adventures organized by the Rural Development Council of Michigan included a multi-state ***Ultimate Farmland Preservation Tour***. The most recent tour, the fourth of its kind within two years, included 173 people who adventured on four buses over roads less traveled through Maryland, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Our passengers learned how communities are implementing innovative approaches to farmland preservation and responding to land use issues. In Michigan, over 10% of the members of the House of Representatives took time over the last two years from their busy schedules to participate in the five-day *On the Road* adventure. One State Senator from Indiana so enjoyed his inaugural tour, he personally recruited a full bus load of fellow Indiana Hoosiers for an *On the Road* experience. During his second ***Ultimate Farmland Preservation Tour***, on roads less traveled, he served as a tour host, and that made all the difference. Senator David Ford reflected, “Learning how to preserve our farms and save our farmland is probably the most important thing we can do for agriculture this generation. This tour is so important I am willing to go a third time to bring others along to see how they can make a difference in their community.” A result of the ***Ultimate Farmland Preservation Tours***, numerous community leaders in Michigan are getting involved to establish local programs and several legislative initiatives have been introduced and are *On the Road* to passage.

This year, our first *On the Road* trip took us to Traverse City. Our initial stop afforded us a “free lunch” and a live, very impressive neonatal telemedicine demonstration. Council members toured the Grand Traverse Pavilions (a multifaceted long term care facility owned by the county) and experienced first-hand an Eden Alternative elder adult and child day care program. We learned a great deal about the challenges facing rural communities as they learn to create affordable, dignified living arrangements for the elderly across a spectrum of age, race, ethnicity, and income levels. On our second day we traveled the Old Mission Peninsula and learned with our eyes, ears, and feet about Purchase of Development Rights and farmland preservation. We concluded our visit with a tour of Rob Manigold’s vineyard (he sells his grapes to the Chateau Chantal Winery). We met many wonderful people and learned a great deal about one of Michigan’s premier vacation sites, noted for water, wine, and cherries. Local developers and planners shared the challenges and opportunities associated with preserving land and simultaneously encouraging economic development. Walking through

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a vineyard on a crisp, sun-filled autumn afternoon was more effective than any article or workshop in helping us appreciate the value of saving land for our farmers and for the future. The folks in Traverse City learned who the members of the Council were and how to contact us, if needed, for help. Several Council members have become involved in projects in the Traverse City area and several folks from Traverse City have forged bonds with the Council. The road to Traverse City, often less traveled, made all the difference.



Our second *On the Road* trip took us to Owosso, Ovid, and Elsie, Michigan. The trip was one very powerful experience. We convened the meeting at a hotel in Owosso, the site of a brown field redevelopment project. Members of the city government and local planners described the redevelopment process and discussed, in detail, plans for further economic development. Owosso is a small town, bedroom community for the state capitol and has the look and feel of a farm community with the needs of a more suburban community. Council members learned, several for the first time, about the struggles of a growing community where the notion of community means different things to different groups within the aggregate population. There are real, everyday challenges to preserving the rural flavor of a community while offering the amenities necessary to a population demanding high-speed communication technologies. Many “city folk” do not appreciate the smells often associated with country living and many “rural folks” do not appreciate the fast-paced lives of their urban transplanted neighbors. Owosso’s community leaders seem, for the time being, to have the proper mix and their community is thriving. Again, the experience was eye-opening but in no way did day one prepare us for day two.

We began our second day *On the Road* at the Great Lakes Hybrid Seed Company. Wow! We saw genetic modification at the beginning of the process. We learned about how they test seeds, how they distribute them, and how they regulate them in national and international markets. We learned about the different sizes of the seed pallets required in Europe, in Asia, in South America, and in the United States. We learned what countries allow genetically modified seeds and which do not. We actually learned what genetic modification is and what it is not. The laboratories are very removed from farmers’ fields, yet essential to contemporary farming. For many Council members, the seed company visit seemed like a mission to Mars and we left greatly enlightened.



Our second stop took us to the Ovid-Elsie Consolidated Schools. A cleaner, more orderly school does not exist. The pride the community feels for the schools reaches out from the immaculate walls and embraces a visitor with a strong sense of well-being. The folks in the Ovid-Elsie School District created an oasis for learning and growing that is an example for any community, anywhere. The school is a technological marvel, complete with a cyber cafe, radio station, and telebroadcasting center. Beyond the whistles and bells of Pentium computers is a commitment by the community to provide a place and tools for the children in this rural community to reach and interact with people all over the world. Council members listened to a presentation about the vision and planning that created such a wonderful learning environment. For many Council

members, the visit to the Ovid-Elsie school was their first visit to a school in a generation. No speaker could tell the story of the Ovid-Elsie school the way the actual building and the students tell their stories. The world will be secure, indeed, with a few schools like the Ovid-Elsie school.



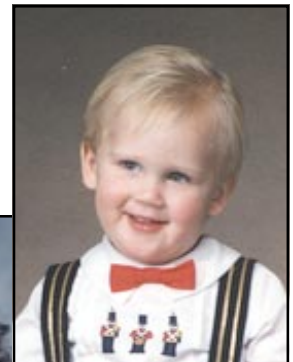
After lunch we visited the Green Meadows Dairy Farm, a family business including four generations of dairy farmers. The actual operation is a wonder. They milk the cows three times a day, seven days a week. On average, thirty calves a day are born. The amount of milk produced, which is shipped to a local cooperative, is staggering. And the smell did not overpower any Council member. An actual visit to a dairy farm provided a balanced perspective about large animal operations. Walking through the dairy farm gave Council members an eye witness view of modern dairy farming. In

two short days Council members experienced a vast array of issues and people striving to preserve the sights, sounds, and values of rural Michigan as they struggle to fit into an ever-changing world. Our horizons certainly opened because of our road less traveled and that made all the difference.

In February 2000, the Rural Development Council of Michigan, joined by 23 other partners, invited folks from all over Michigan to take a road less traveled and attend the ***Ultimate Land Use Conference*** in East Lansing. The conference highlighted urban redevelopment efforts, unique suburban development, designs and strategies to preserve farmland in order to create a business environment for agriculture, Michigan's second largest industry. To our utter amazement, more than 500 people, including members of the State Legislature, local officials, farmers, and concerned citizens attended. As a result of our travels and conference, the Rural Development Council of Michigan is recognized for its role in building partnerships and educational efforts on the land use issue.

During 1999-2000, members of the Rural Development Council of Michigan, committed to the health and well-being of children and families, dedicated considerable effort to understanding and informing rural communities about the importance of children's health insurance. In our now familiar *On the Road* style we decided our best efforts would be spent traveling to individual rural communities to engage folks in their own space. Using lessons learned throughout the United States, we decided to engage a wide-variety of local partners in our activities. Actually, the local activities, designed to assist communities come to understand Michigan's Children's Health Insurance Programs, took and will continue to take a local turn.

After contacting key community leaders, an initial meeting is held and the services of the Council are offered in assisting communities with the complexities of Michigan's MICHild and Healthy Kids program. Additionally, information on several other children/family programs are discussed. Local community leaders, often those outside the traditional human service community including Farm Bureau, business leaders, and faith-based organizations, suggest possible venues for a community informational forum. The Council launched their initial effort in Clare County. Folks from Clare County invited the Council and representatives from the state's Children's Health Insurance Pro-



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grams, WIC, and Extension to “KIDS Day” at the Clare County Fair. More than forty local citizens participated in the effort. Those in attendance contributed their ideas and ongoing support to finding and enrolling children in a health insurance program. Enrollment of children in these programs has increased as community citizens personally get involved to reach out to families.

Our second “road trip” for Children’s Health Insurance was to Roscommon County. Again, we met with a few community members, who generated an invitation list and a meeting location. In Roscommon, we met at a restaurant famous for its generous and delicious buffet. Again, we learned a great deal about the local community. We were humbled and impressed by the local creativity and dedication to making life better for the children and families in Roscommon County. Rather than taking the typical approach to promotion of government programs, the Council decided to take the *road less traveled* and ask communities how they think the families in their town can be reached. As a result, the community took ownership and gained a vision for helping children in their own community.

We will soon set our agenda for the coming year with two or three *On the Road* trips planned and another **Ultimate Farmland Preservation Tour** scheduled to include four more busloads of community leaders, this one co-sponsored by three state rural development councils and 10 other organizations. We believe our efforts to reach out, traveling the roads less traveled to our rural communities, is making all the difference.

*Travel diary and observations submitted by Jody Ross, Health Care Consultant, and Executive Committee Member - Rural Development Council of Michigan. Prior to joining the Rural Development Council of Michigan, Jody had very little knowledge or exposure to agricultural issues. The Rural Development Council of Michigan’s **On the Road** experiences allow members to learn about diverse issues facing rural communities regardless of their background and field of expertise.*



Rural Development Council of Michigan

Building Partnerships to Create Rural Opportunities



The Rural Development Council of Michigan (RDCM) is a public/private partnership whose charge is to develop new, collaborative approaches to enhance the future of rural Michigianians. RDCM is an umbrella organization which continually promotes the membership and active participation of six partner groups: private for-profit and non-profit interests, local, federal and state governments, and Native American tribes.

The emphasis of the Council's work is on innovation and collaboration: finding new, non-traditional, non-structural ways to address issues, problems and needs of rural Michigan. The Council identifies barriers to rural development, brings together resources, and coordinates issue resolution.

The RDCM Governing Board has identified five primary issues facing rural Michigan to focus Council energies toward. These issues include: land use, health and human services, economic development (including value-added agriculture and forestry), infrastructure and community facilities, and leadership development (including youth involvement).

Any organization or individual who is interested in rural Michigan and able to contribute time, ideas and effort to the work of the Council is encouraged to participate as a RDCM member. Our goal is to empower people to make a lasting difference in communities and to create a rural legacy for generations to come.

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