

# Sustainable business forums merge

By HP STAFF

ST. JOSEPH — Michigan's Great Southwest Sustainable Business Forum completed a merger with West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum to create a regional organization for business owners in the Midwest, the organization announced.

The combined organization, based in Grand Rapids, will serve the 220-member organizations and the general community in a 10-county territory that stretches from Muskegon County to the Indiana border. The combined effort will continue to promote business practices that demonstrate environmental stewardship, economic vitality and social responsibility, according to a state from the joint organization.

The merger allows MGSSBF to share administrative costs with the larger program and invest more resources to its mission. It is already bringing new programs to Southwest Michigan — including a recycling group based on a program in the Grand Rapids area, an initiative to help local events and fairs implement sustainability programs, and a program to capture unique waste materials for use by artists.

Founding President Becky Kliss — also president of Green Connection Inc. in St. Joseph — organized the initiative in 2010 to provide a local resource for organizations in Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties after participating in WMSBF and similar programs in Kalamazoo and South Bend.

"Southwest Michigan had fallen behind on sustainable business issues," Kliss said in a news release. "We wanted to build a vehicle to educate local businesses on sustainability matters, and to provide a place to collaborate on efforts to improve environmental and social outcomes in our community."

Led by a 12-member board of sustainability and business leaders, the organization has grown from 10 founding members to nearly 100. As this happened, its leadership realized the needs of the organization were surpassing the capacity of its volunteers and contract administrative support.

West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, meanwhile, was in the midst of a three-year growth period.

The organization doubled its program participation, membership and revenue, while developing new research and educa-

tion roles in partnership with state universities and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. It was outgrowing its available capacity and had identified a strategic need for regional partnerships that would allow it to be competitive with statewide and national organizations for project funding.

Last year, the two organizations agreed to a strategic alliance that would allow WMSBF to perform administrative and development functions for MGSSBF.

Pooling resources allowed for the hiring of a project manager and reduced the administrative costs of MGSSBF, moving more resources to program development and member resources.

After the conclusion of a six-month pilot program, the respective boards of the two organizations began merger negotiations.

"We are excited for this opportunity to expand our network and link the great work of businesses in Michigan's Great Southwest to the sustainable business community of West Michigan," Alison Waske Sutter, WMSBF board president and manager of corporate responsibility for SpartanNash, said in the release. "Over the past year we've been very impressed with the passion and expertise we've found in our sister community, and our honored to be a part of efforts to help promote sustainable business practices there."

West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum will continue to do business as Michigan's Great Southwest Sustainable Business Forum in Southwest Michigan for the foreseeable future.

The board of directors have combined, with current board secretary Lyn Wolf, of Lake Michigan College, and Wightman & Associates' Anna Keehn, assuming positions on the WMSBF board. Wolf will also chair a new leadership committee.

Existing members of both organizations will now receive reciprocal benefits.

WMSBF Executive Director Daniel Schoonmaker has led the organization since 2013. He said MGSSBF already has big plans for 2017 with educational events planned for the next three months.

"This is an important step for the sustainable business community in western Michigan," Schoonmaker said in the release. "We can accomplish more together than we ever could separately."