

**Benton Harbor, A Plan for Positive Change:  
*Final Report of the*  
*Governor's Benton Harbor Task Force***

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Prepared for:  
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and the Benton Harbor Community

Submitted by:  
Governor's Benton Harbor Task Force

# Executive Summary

## Background

Following civil unrest in Benton Harbor, Governor Granholm, after listening closely to Benton Harbor residents, named a 22 member Task Force charged with probing further and getting the community's priorities for improving the quality of life in this struggling city in Southwest Michigan. The Task Force was represented by community residents, civic, business, faith, and government leaders.

Benton Harbor has historically been the subject of numerous studies and notable community-wide initiatives that have promised wide ranging systemic change, but have yielded limited results. A number of community members have become cynical and distrustful of the "real intentions" behind entities that have come to "help" the Benton Harbor community.

In order to broaden the range of voices at the table, the Citizens for Progressive Change (CPC) was formed and designed to elicit input from a varied cross section of the community. Membership was open to anyone that wanted to participate. CPC workgroups identified their desired vision for the community, challenges, opportunities, recommendations, and stakeholders that must be engaged for success. Given the condition of our national economy and its impact on our State, workgroups and Task Force members were to search for solutions and partnerships that involved leveraging existing public resources with private corporation, foundation, and charitable resources.

## The Process: Planning and Recommendations

The Task Force recognized the critical need to be inclusive, not only during the information gathering process, but also in articulating the vision and defining goals in the planning and recommendation process.

The Task Force directed the CPC to establish eight workgroups with the task of identifying issues and developing recommendations for submission to the Task Force. The workgroups established were: Recreation, Arts and Culture, Health Awareness and Improvement, Police Community Relations, Education, Diversity with Inclusion, Criminal Justice, Communications, and Economic Development, Housing and Job Training. The CPC suggested adding two additional workgroups, Parenting and Family and Faith Based Community for a total of ten workgroups.

Biweekly meetings were held for the Task Force and CPC. CPC workgroups, which also included Task Force members, met to recommend and explore possible solutions. Each workgroup developed a process that allowed community partners and stakeholders the opportunity to present proposals that would help achieve the community's desired vision.

Each workgroup was tasked with prioritizing and narrowing their list of recommendations to five for submission to the Task Force. This process was not without conflict, frustration, and pain, but this exercise yielded growth, compromise, and change.

A primary objective of the Task Force was to maximize the active involvement of residents within the City of Benton Harbor. The report contains voices from a significant number of Benton Harbor residents who met regularly to establish a vision for their community over the short and long term.

Some activities offered to improve communication and engage community members include:

- The CPC sponsored an adult-oriented community forum, along with a youth forum, held at Benton Harbor High School. The CPC also held several meetings, at different venues in the community, including the Benton Harbor/Benton Township Senior Citizen Center, and an outdoor forum, located in the area where the civil unrest occurred.
- The CPC and Task Force visited seven community organizations in the Detroit area to learn about best practices within nonprofit, community based human service organizations. The group visited Operation Get Down, Alkebu-lan Village, Black Family Development, Inc., Focus Hope, Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, ACCESS, and the International Gospel Center.
- In an effort to focus stakeholders on working together, a "Lay it on the Line" discussion was held for Task Force and CPC membership. The goal of the meeting was to address deep seated distrust and ill feelings against individual stakeholders or stakeholder groups that were long standing barriers preventing collaboration. This seven-hour meeting allowed stakeholders to voice their opinions, and share their thoughts with the limitation that they respect one another. An agreement was made to work together collaboratively to develop recommendations going forward.
- Governor Granholm came to Benton Harbor for "Governor Granholm Day." The day included a luncheon with civic, faith, business, and community leaders that emphasized "One Michigan." Governor Granholm challenged the faith based community to take on leadership roles in youth mentoring and volunteerism, specifically with Harbor Habitat. She visited Benton Harbor High School and talked to an assembly of students. During the assembly, youth who participated in the Summer Youth Employment program, with funds allocated by the Governor through Michigan Works!, were recognized.
- The Police Community Relations workgroup sponsored a policy community relations "Day of Dialogue." Over 300 people attended, including many

students. During this session, community and law enforcement leadership engaged in serious dialogue to develop proactive strategies to inform and address issues of policy community relations in Benton Harbor. The dialogue facilitators included Dr. Ken Brown, Consultant, of the University of Michigan, and Barnett Jones, Chief, Sterling Heights Police Department, and former Oakland County Sheriff's Department. The keynote address was delivered by the first African American to hold the post of Director with the Michigan State Police, Col. Tadarial Sturdivant.

- Additionally, facilitation training was held to support workgroup co-chairpersons. A community celebration was held at Second Baptist Church with area faith leaders. Rev. Tyrone Crider delivered the sermon and incorporated the value of economic development in any thriving community.

**In reviewing the report, the Task Force encourages the reader to recognize the significance of allowing a structured process to encourage such open and candid involvement of residents.**

As an example, it may not be realistic to expect a new credit union or a multi-million dollar loan pool from area corporations to be established for, and run by, community residents in the short-term, but rather it is important to understand the reasons for such an aggressive goal. The key is not the amount of funding sought, but rather the consensus that access to capital is a difficult challenge, but important goal, for Benton Harbor residents and small businesses.

Other goals, such as those established under the housing initiative, do not require new funding. Rather, they create an integrated process by which access to existing programs can ultimately lead to a balanced mix of public, private, and federal investments. While a goal of \$45 million in new housing development and increased home ownership by five percent may seem ambitious over five years, it is through a structural change of existing programs grounded in collaboration of multi-disciplined stakeholders that these goals can become reality.

Some of the recommendations point to a process change. The Recreation, Arts and Culture Committee believes a community-wide recreation board to leverage all state, federal, and local resources will create comprehensive, structured, and quality programming for youth. The recommendation itself points to a need for the county and local government to help channel resources toward youth recreation. This process change and requisite resource leveraging, in and of itself, demonstrates the need for collaboration and support among units of government – sharing resources to achieve the desired community vision.

Throughout this process, the following community messages were clear:

- All community and established stakeholder groups must find ways to actively enhance citizen participation, oversight, and ultimately see real results and benefits from the dollars spent in this community.
- The community recognizes it must implement programs and create change where community safety and security become reality. Efforts for safety and security must be equally matched by improvements in the education system.

The focus on safety and education allows other initiatives, i.e., economic development, to ultimately be incubated in an environment where success can be achieved. Because this must be achieved with limited resources, stakeholder partnerships, resource leveraging, and active involvement are key.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations in this report are meant to address some of the most persistent challenges facing the Benton Harbor area community. These proposals reflect the input of area residents, suggestions from key stakeholders, and the advice of public officials. Some of the recommendations in this report can be accomplished in the short-term. Most of the proposals will require long-term strategies for implementation. This important work requires the involvement of local residents and creative partnerships among various community organizations. Members of the community need to develop sustainable strategies for implementing these recommendations, and identify the public and private resources necessary to achieve these goals.

The Governor's Benton Harbor Task Force worked closely with the Citizens for Progressive Change (CPC) work groups to develop the recommendations in this report. These work groups identified the long-term challenges facing the community and sought public input on potential solutions. The report contains many key findings:

#### ***Economic Development***

- Comprehensive job development strategies must be implemented in the Benton Harbor area
- The Benton Harbor community should take advantage of its unique natural features to develop a comprehensive tourism plan for the area
- Coordinated workforce development strategies must be identified and implemented, including a summer youth work program
- Establish greater access to capital through the possible creation of a revolving loan fund
- Eradicate substandard housing in Benton Harbor by 2025 through various community and governmental efforts

### *Education*

- Reducing the high school drop-out rate in Benton Harbor is central to improving the life chances of area youth
- The Benton Harbor community must focus attention on early childhood care and education and develop effective programs through partnerships with the State and educational organizations
- Transportation barriers need to be eliminated in order to maximize the ability of students to participate in after-school programs
- Benton Harbor Area Schools should examine the physical infrastructure of school buildings and direct the recently passed millage to those schools in the most need
- Benton Harbor Area Schools should examine the technology needs of the schools and develop solid technology plans that will allow the district to participate in programs such as the statewide Freedom to Learn initiative

### *Health Awareness and Improvement*

- Health care professionals and local leaders must work on increasing Benton Harbor area residents' access to quality affordable health care
- Educational efforts must be undertaken with parents in Benton Harbor to reduce infant mortality
- Educational efforts must be undertaken in the community to educate the public about lead poisoning and ways to protect families against its dangerous effects

### *Police Community Relations*

- Staffing and retention must be improved in the Benton Harbor Police Department
- The Policy Community Relations coalition must be sustained through local collaboration in the Benton Harbor area
- Community policing should be instituted in Benton Harbor with a focus on awareness of problems in the community

### *Diversity with Inclusion*

- Communitywide diversity training must be provided in the Benton Harbor area to teach everyone in the community about the importance of understanding and respecting each other's differences
- Law enforcement diversity training must be provided to Benton Harbor area police agencies to increase law enforcement awareness and sensitivity to differences within the community
- The Civil Rights Health Assessment developed by the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, should be conducted in the Benton Harbor area community to provide a meaningful non-judgmental assessment of the state of civil rights in the community and on-going challenges

### *Parenting and Family*

- The community must support and expand parenting classes and support services
- Leaders in the community must increase high-risk families' knowledge of and access to vital community services
- Parental access to child care must be expanded

### *Criminal Justice*

- The Benton Harbor Community will work with local officials and the Michigan Supreme Court toward the establishment of a Magistrate and possible future District Court in Benton Harbor to respond to citizen perceptions about the current Criminal Justice System
- The Benton Harbor Community will work toward reform in their indigent defense system including creation of a pilot indigent defender's office
- The Benton Harbor Community will work toward the creation of a Citizens' Complaint Review and Oversight Board modeled after the Kalamazoo Oversight Board which allows citizen input on handling of complaints related to criminal justice system
- The Benton Harbor Community must work internally to increase community response to jury duty notification, and thus allow for greater diversity in the jury selection of Berrien County juries
- The Benton Harbor Community should explore the feasibility of adopting a juvenile justice system that encourages community-based care management for adjudicated youth

### *Recreation, Arts and Culture*

- Create a Recreation, Arts and Culture After-school Programs committee in Benton Harbor to focus on developing viable recreation programs in the area
- Identify existing recreation, arts and cultural programs which serve the citizens of Benton Harbor, and create a database of these activities to make accessible to the community

### *Communications*

- Increase the capacity of the community access channel in Benton Harbor
- Connect the Benton Harbor Community to the Internet to bridge the existing digital divide
- Take advantage of community publications to increase awareness of positive news and events in Benton Harbor

### *Faith Based Community*

- Faith leaders in Benton Harbor should develop a housing construction/rehabilitation program

- The Faith Consortium in Benton Harbor should meet with area lending institutes and discuss ways in which they can work with conventional lenders to increase access to affordable mortgage financing.
- Faith leaders in Benton Harbor should create an outreach ministry that focuses on, but is not limited to, mentoring and volunteerism in cooperation with Harbor Habitat for Humanity

### **Purpose of the Report**

The purpose of this report is to provide a set of recommendations to address issues in the following areas:

- Economic Development, Housing and Job Training
- Education
- Health Awareness and Improvement
- Police Community Relations
- Diversity with Inclusion
- Parenting and Family
- Criminal Justice
- Recreation, Arts and Culture
- Communications
- Faith Based Community

The report is organized by the above listed categories and includes the desired vision of the community, challenges, opportunities, recommendations and stakeholders needed for success.

The Task Force's vision for Benton Harbor is a city with strong community and governmental leadership focused on collaboration, leading to continuous quality of life improvements. Benton Harbor should have safe neighborhoods, affordable housing, and a strong education system with an emphasis on early childhood development. The city should have adequate, positive recreation outlets for children/youth, with no barriers to transportation. There should be a thriving downtown, with a blossoming arts district, restaurants, entertainment venues, and a bustling waterway, with commercial and residential development, which will spur further economic development in Benton Harbor. Finally, Southwest Michigan should be a region in which the Twin Cities, Benton Harbor, and St. Joseph, along with its surrounding communities, work in harmony to build a world class community that will be a model for the entire State.

### **Next Steps**

Proposals made are wide ranging, from public safety, health and well-being, and economic development, to recreation and parenting. Given the short time frame in which these reports were developed, it is an outstanding compilation of a multitude of voices seeking a common goal to create a community of choice in the City of Benton Harbor and enhancing the southwest region of Michigan.



The Task Force and CPC agreed that in order to implement and sustain the recommendations contained in this report, the CPC must continue.

The Task Force strongly recommends the permanent CPC Committee establish a mandate to create collaboration and cooperation with established organizations including, but not limited to, the Council for World Class Communities (CWCC), United Way, City of Benton Harbor, Berrien County, Lake Michigan College, the Family Independence Agency (FIA), Southwest Michigan Ministerial Alliance, Cornerstone Alliance, The Neighborhood Information and Sharing Exchange (NISE), and a multitude of various state and federal entities.

The CPC Committee will further prioritize the recommendations and themes identified in this report. The CPC will actively seek implementation of the prioritized recommendations in a methodical and structured manner.

At the heart of implementation must be a structured process in which the active involvement of community members is incorporated into the work of the community-at-large. The Neighborhood Information and Sharing Exchange (NISE) will provide organizational support to the CPC. Finally, the recommendations submitted will be made available at area websites, and public access locations.