

# Voice your opinion on the future of the West Branch 'Loop'

Residents invited to Monday meeting on development of I-75 business corridor

By **HELEN LOUNSBURY**

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**WEST BRANCH** - The 5.5-mile stretch is Ogemaw County's highest profile corridor, winding through the county seat, across four government jurisdictions and featuring Ogemaw's retail epicenter.

Locals call it The Loop.

On Monday, West Branch area planners unite to ask residents to sculpt, with them, a development plan for the I-75 Business Loop.

"We're not just gathering information," said Bonnie Wichtner-Zoia, county Economic Development Corp. director. "At the end, we'll put a corridor plan in place that spells out what to do next, next and next after that. But we want the community to tell us what it wants the Loop to look like in 20 years."

What sort of growth, for example, should planners encourage? Where? What

should they discourage? How should they protect natural resources? What does The Loop lack?

The plan must address City of West Branch, Ogemaw and West Branch township concerns because the three have agreed to create a unified plan.

"That's one reason the meeting is important, because development is rarely coordinated between jurisdictions," said Harry Burkholder, community planner for the Traverse City-based Land Information Access Association.

"There are always turf battles between governing units," Burkholder continued. "This is fairly new for jurisdictions to do coordinated planning like this."

It's taken West Branch and its two surrounding townships three years to get here, planners say. Their integrated approach is why the three-some landed a \$50,000 grant

recently to evaluate and plan its growth. The community partnership is one among just eight statewide to land such a grant, Burkholder said.

Land Information Access will facilitate the planning process, including Monday's meeting, a Loop marketing plan and other services.

"The city has less open space for development than the townships," said Bill Gascoigne, West Branch city manager. "But we all have development issues."

One such issue is fostering tourism and recreation growth, Gascoigne added. West Branch's two Interstate 75 exits, for example, especially exit 212, where Tanger Outlet Center lies, see significant traffic. But the city and townships want more people to venture in from the exits, to funnel through downtown to the Loop's opposite exit.

"Do the Loop" is a theme we're pursuing," Gascoigne

## BE HEARD

**WHAT:** First public planning meeting for I-75 Business Loop growth through the West Branch area

**WHEN:** 6:30-8:30 p.m. Monday

**WHERE:** Forwards Conference Center in the Quality Inn, on the I-75 Loop, West Branch.

**INFO:** Bonnie Wichtner-Zoia, (989) 345-0692

said. "We want to show people what else is here. That way, the whole county has potential to benefit. They may discover great lodging in Rose City rather than going all the way up 75 to Gaylord."

On Monday, moderators plan to focus on ideas for attracting more people to West Branch's Business Loop. They'll discuss, too, expand-

ing the city's Victorian theme to create a more unified appearance up and down The Loop. Finally, they'll address community concerns such as storm water run-off, to protect Ogemaw's lakes and rivers.

"The bottom line is that our citizens want controlled growth on the Business Loop," said Steve Steinhauser, West Branch Township supervisor. "They don't want a city atmosphere. They don't want another Birch Run with wall-to-wall commercial development.

"Our citizens want this to remain the 'true north' of Michigan," Steinhauser added. "We want to be ready to control the growth that's coming."

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