

ACTIONLINE

PROUDLY SERVING BERRIEN, CASS, AND VAN BUREN COUNTIES

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1—APRIL 2026



REGIONAL CHAMBER EARNS STATEWIDE IMPACT AWARD

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SIGN UP TODAY

Dear Members,

At the Regional Chamber, we have always believed that Southwest Michigan would not reach its full potential until it learned to think and act as a region. This quarter offered the clearest evidence yet that it is beginning to do exactly that.

From statewide recognition to historic local partnerships, the stories in this issue share a common thread: communities, institutions, and leaders recognizing they are stronger together than they are apart. Here are a few of the highlights shaping this edition:

- More than **600 leaders** gathered at the Annual Meeting and Business Recognition Breakfast to celebrate eight outstanding honorees and the momentum building across Southwest Michigan. (pg. 14)
- The Regional Chamber received the **MEDC's 2025 Make It in Michigan Impact Award**—one of just six organizations honored statewide for advancing Michigan's economic development strategy. (pg. 6)
- The **Buchanan Area Chamber of Commerce** joined our collaborative model, connecting north and south Berrien County under one regional vision for the first time. (pg. 16)
- **Jenni Leich** was named Director of the Central Berrien Chamber Growth Alliance, bringing deep relationships and proven leadership to one of our newest CGAs. (pg. 18)

Each of these stories reflects something larger than the moment itself. Together, they tell of a region that is finding its footing, aligning its priorities, and building the kind of partnerships that produce lasting results.

To every member, municipality, and partner who has helped carry this work forward—thank you. Your confidence is what makes this possible, and your participation is what makes it real.

You make it happen,



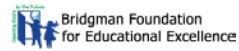
Arthur A. Havlicek

Arthur A. Havlicek
President & CEO



WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

We are thrilled to welcome our new members to the largest and most influential network of businesses and professionals in Southwest Michigan. We look forward to supporting their needs, amplifying their voices, and working on their behalf to drive economic growth throughout the region.



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GRANT STONE



BECOME A MEMBER TODAY!

Our Chamber is proud to offer its members an unmatched return on investment. Scan the QR code to explore our tiers and benefits and choose the level that's right for you.

WHO WE ARE

The Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber of Commerce is a 501c (6) non-profit organization and the largest chamber in Southwest Michigan. We are focused on growing existing industry and creating an economic ecosystem that prepares our region for future opportunities.

WHERE WE SERVE:

We proudly serve Berrien, Cass, & Van Buren Counties.

WHAT WE DO:

Policy Development, Leadership Development, Business Development, Community Development, and Economic Development.

OUR MISSION:

To leverage every available resource within our network for the advancement of our members and the betterment of all who live and work in our community.

OUR VISION:

To propel Southwest Michigan to national prominence as a vibrant, regional destination where business thrives, talent resides, and quality of life is second to none.

OUR STAFF:

Arthur Havlicek
President & CEO

Victoria Kostecki
Executive Assistant

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Jasmine Hansen
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Jenni Leich
Central Berrien CGA Director

Cassandra Adams
Finance & Administration Manager

Allison Hayes
Community Relations Manager

AFFILIATE ORGANIZATIONS:

Regional Chamber Foundation
Discover Southwest Michigan
Greater Bridgman CGA
Greater Niles Chamber
Buchanan Area Chamber

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CELEBRATORY EVENTS

Our Chamber is proud to offer members a complimentary, turn-key service for ribbon cutting events, grand openings, and ground breaking ceremonies throughout Southwest Michigan. Whether it's a new business opening, an anniversary, or a significant achievement, our team stands ready to help celebrate your accomplishment.



MidWest Family/106.1 & Visit SW Michigan



Gym Rat Physical Therapy Performance and Wellness



Biggy Coffee & Zoup! Eatery



Jason Stroud Team/Ellsbury Commercial Group



Mango Cannabis

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May 29, 2026 | Beginning 1:00 pm



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ANNUAL GOLF OUTING



Sponsorships Open April 27



July 13, 2026 | Beginning 9:00 am



Lake Michigan Hills Golf Club



REGIONAL CHAMBER EARNS STATEWIDE IMPACT AWARD

Why MEDC Honored SMRC's People-First Economic Development Strategy

Written by: Arthur Havlicek | Pictured: Representatives from the six 2025 Impact Award Recipients

In March, I stood on stage at MotorCity Casino's Sound Board in Detroit to accept a 2025 Make It in Michigan Impact Award from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) at their Annual Leadership Summit.

It was a proud moment—not just for our organization, but for the members, investors, and partners across Southwest Michigan who have aligned behind a regional economic development strategy that is starting to show real results.

A New Kind of Recognition

The MEDC created the Make It in Michigan Awards this year to spotlight organizations advancing the state's

economic development strategy across three pillars: People, Places, and Projects. Six organizations were selected statewide through a competitive review weighing innovation, regional impact, multi-partner collaboration, and alignment with Michigan's long-term growth priorities.

The Regional Chamber was one of just two organizations honored under the "People" pillar—recognized for confronting what has quietly become Michigan's defining economic challenge: population stagnation.

People

Several years ago, the Regional Chamber made a deliberate choice

to treat population growth as the central organizing principle of our economic development work. It was an unorthodox position at the time. Most economic development organizations treated population as a downstream effect of business attraction—land the employer, and the people would follow. We argued the opposite: in today's economy, people come first, and investment follows them.

The clearest expression of that conviction is Discover Southwest Michigan, our regional talent attraction initiative. Discover treats population growth the way the state treats business attraction: as a pipeline that requires marketing, incentives, and coordinated partners to close the deal.

Through targeted outreach, relocation support, and direct connections to employers, it gives people outside our region a clear pathway into Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties.

Michigan's Population Growth Office selected Discover as a pilot for the Make MI Home Grant Program, and the response exceeded every expectation.

"The Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber has worked diligently through the Make MI Home grant to ramp up their population growth initiative, Discover Southwest Michigan," said MEDC CEO Quentin L. Messer, Jr. "The response to this program was so successful that it was oversubscribed, fielding 1,175 applicants since its launch in May. We applaud their creativity and resilience, and we look forward to celebrating the continued success of the People, Places, and Projects in Southwest Michigan and beyond for years to come."

The success of this program confirms what we have long believed: people are open to making Southwest Michigan their home. The pathway just has to be clear, coordinated, and compelling.

Places

But a pathway is only as valuable as the destination it leads to. The second half of our strategy—and the second of the state's pillars—is building a place that people want to call home.

That work begins at the community level. Rather than chase the single big project, we reoriented our approach around locally led, place-based economic development—the kind that invests in main streets, supports small and mid-sized businesses, and confronts the real barriers to livability in any region: the cost and availability of housing, the childcare gap that sidelines working parents, and the

quality-of-life investments that decide whether a community feels worth staying in.

The vehicle for that work is our Chamber Growth Alliance (CGA) model. Each CGA unites a cluster of municipalities under the Regional Chamber, led by dedicated local staff and governed by a board of elected officials, business owners, and civic leaders. The result is economic development rooted in place and driven by the people who live and work there—tailored to each community's priorities, but aligned around a shared regional strategy. What began with the Bridgman CGA has grown to include Central Berrien, launched in 2025, and Southwest Berrien, launching in 2026.

Make no mistake—this was not an easy case to make. It asked our members, our funders, and our own board to back an approach the field had not yet embraced, and to stay the course even when results would take years to surface. I am grateful they did. Their confidence is what made this recognition possible.

Projects

Thankfully, those who took the initial leap with us did not have to wait long to see it pay off.

In 2025 alone, the Greater Bridgman CGA catalyzed more than \$3 million in private investment and secured over \$2 million in grants and capital. It completed seven business attraction, retention, and expansion projects—anchored by new arrivals like Beachside Salt and Soul and Ace Hardware, alongside expansions from local operators including Petals by Classic, Lake Side Fit, and Corewell Health. The Central Berrien CGA is building similar momentum in its first year, and Southwest Berrien is positioned to do the same.

This is the natural result of investing in People and Places first, and letting Projects take shape where the conditions have been built for them. MEDC recognized the same logic—and built the state's economic development strategy to match. That alignment between our work and the state's is why we were one of just six organizations selected.

Looking Ahead

Let me be clear, this recognition may validate our strategy, but it does not resolve our challenges. Our population is not yet growing. Our housing gap is not closed. Our childcare crisis is not solved. What it does mean is that we have built a credible plan, the state has taken notice, and the early results are pointing the right way.

The real test is whether we can sustain it—across sectors, across jurisdictions, over the long horizon that population growth demands. That answer will not be decided on a stage in Detroit. It will be decided by the work that follows.

Shared Accomplishment

In the meantime, I'd be remiss to not acknowledge that this work does not happen alone.

To every partner, member, and team member who has carried us this far—thank you. To our Board of Directors, who had the foresight to embrace a new direction. To the municipalities that invested in our CGAs while the model was still unproven. To the funders who supported a strategy with a long horizon for impact. And to our partners at MEDC and the Population Growth Office, who provided Discover the runway it needed to succeed.

This progress belongs to all of you—and so will what comes next. ■



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MEDC SUPPORTED.**



HELPING HARVESTERS GROW IN MICHIGAN

From an autumn afternoon spent apple picking at The Fruitful Orchard to a summer sunset at a Leelanau Peninsula vineyard, Michigan farms supply more than just essential nutrition; they create iconic Michigan moments. The Michigan Economic Development Corporation is dedicated to supporting our farms with the resources they need to grow, making our state a more fulfilling place.

Learn more about how the MEDC is helping farms thrive at **[MICHIGANBUSINESS.ORG](https://michiganbusiness.org)**



**MICHIGAN ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

THE FRUITFUL ORCHARD AND CIDER MILL

MICHIGAN CELEBRATES MEDC-SUPPORTED SMALL BUSINESS AWARD WINNERS

Courtesy of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation



Since 2004, Michigan Celebrates Small Business (MCSB) has put a spotlight on small businesses across Michigan, aiming to make Michigan the “State of Entrepreneurship.” The organization not only brings much-deserved attention to small businesses but also creates a sense of connection throughout the state’s small business community. The organization’s roots lay in collaboration, beginning when the Michigan Small Business Development Center (SBDC), the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), the Small Business Association of Michigan (SBAM), the Small Business Advocate, and the Edward Lowe Foundation merged their individual small business awards into one statewide program.

As part of its efforts, MCSB releases an annual 50 Companies to Watch list that recognizes high-potential second-stage

businesses. This year’s winners include companies from Benton Harbor to Marquette that operate across a wide variety of industries, including ironworks, wineries, and cybersecurity.

The breadth of Michigan’s small business ecosystem, the foundation of our economy, is truly impressive. Ninety-nine percent of Michigan businesses have fewer than 500 employees. 50 Companies to Watch focuses on businesses with fewer than 100 employees, which are major drivers of economic growth.

Southwest Michigan MCSB Award Winners

As a founding partner of MCSB, the MEDC is committed to helping Michigan and our small businesses grow. Several of the businesses named a Company to Watch received MEDC support, including a pair in Southwest Michigan.

Comstock Park’s Great Lakes Label, a veteran-owned company that produces custom labels and label applicators, received a grant from Michigan’s State Trade Expansion Program (MI-STEP), which helps Michigan small businesses export their products. Since 2011, Michigan companies have leveraged MI-STEP funding to generate over \$6 billion in new export sales. According to the U.S. International Trade Administration, businesses that export pay 18% higher wages than non-exporting businesses and are less vulnerable to economic downturns, thanks to a more diverse customer base.

A business can only win a Company to Watch award once, but is then eligible for a Distinguished Alumni Award. Grand Rapids’ Symplicity Communications earned the Strategically Focused Award, which recognizes a business previously

named a Company to Watch that has shown growth in sales and employees.

“I’ve talked to some companies who say they’re not going to apply for the MCSB,” said Catherine Ripley, Symplicity president and CEO. “I’m like, ‘Are you kidding me?’ It’s such a great feather in your cap to know your business met the criteria alongside other amazing businesses. It’s such a pivotal moment. And here we are, eight years into winning the 50 Companies award, and it’s still affecting my business and giving us a huge sense of pride.”

Symplicity Communications helps companies choose technology to do better business, guiding them through complexities and creating more efficient, holistic systems. The company’s MEDC support came in the form of a partnership with the Michigan Alliance of APEX Accelerators, a statewide network that helps businesses secure federal, state, and local contracts.

“The APEX Accelerator, they were our coach,” Ripley explained. “They said, ‘Let me show you what NAICS codes are, here’s what you have on your state capabilities statement.’ They were there to guide us. That was pretty valuable.”

In 2024, the APEX Accelerator supported 3,420 businesses, helping to create 24,180 jobs and assist with securing \$2.23 billion in prime and subcontract awards, simultaneously finding Michigan companies new business and strengthening our defense industry.

“What a lot of companies don’t understand is the impact of working with organizations like the MEDC,” said Ripley. “You have to be connected and plugged in to run a business, and there’s no better way to do that than with organizations like the MEDC

and Edward Lowe. We have a gem of programs in Michigan, and I’m probably not even scratching the surface.”

MEDC Support for Companies to Watch Across the State

Beyond Southwest Michigan, MEDC-supported businesses made waves up and down the Companies to Watch list. Ann Arbor-based Backyard Brains makes neuroscience more accessible with experiments that teachers, students, and amateur scientists can take home. Backyard Brains leveraged the MI-STEP grant, helping to attract a wider audience and further their mission of bringing the wonders of neuroscience to more people.

Meanwhile, Block House in Alma blends two industries not typically associated with one another, restaurant and esports, into a one-of-a-kind experience in a renovated opera house. While Block House occupies the space today, the vacant Wright Opera Block was severely damaged by a fire in 2010. In 2014, the Michigan Strategic Fund approved funding, as part of the Michigan Community Revitalization Program, to renovate the historic Wright Opera House, which had been a cornerstone of downtown Alma since 1880.

Madison Heights’ Mettle Ops, a woman- and veteran-owned defense solutions company, received the Mobility Prototyping Grant. The company leveraged the grant to develop an automated stator-winding system, which helps power unmanned aerial system motors.

And would it really be a Michigan small business list without a brewery? Irish Kilt Brewing Company in Roscommon has become an attraction for the rising vacation destination. Roscommon is a part of the Redevelopment Ready Community (RRC) program, which assists communities in becoming

more attractive to businesses and new residents through planning, zoning, and economic development best practices. Jim Perialas, owner of Irish Kilt and Roscommon’s economic developer, has been a driver of the RRC in Roscommon.

“Roscommon County is known for its three big vacation lakes, all with a very distinct identity,” Perialas told the MEDC. “My vision was to see Roscommon become more like Torch Lake’s Bellaire, a support community that has a brewery, restaurants, and walkable shops. When we moved to the area in the early 90s, the storefronts were empty downtown, but now we’re seeing kids on bikes riding through town, kids in the neighborhood, going to the parks.”

Michigan communities like Roscommon are thriving all over the state thanks to small businesses. In 2025, the MEDC helped small businesses over 24,000 times, from providing owners with access to capital and international trade support to matchmaking opportunities. The MEDC also helped over 2,000 new businesses get started through direct or contracted partner support, helping a new generation of businesses that might just be future MCSB Companies to Watch. ■

To learn more about how the MEDC can help you start or grow a small business, visit michiganbusiness.org



NEW SEATS AT THE TABLE

The Regional Chamber's Board Expands to Match Its Growing Footprint

Written by: Alain Pichot | Pictured: Olivia Starks, Regional Chamber Board Chair

As the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber's footprint has expanded, Chamber leadership made a deliberate decision to expand its Board of Directors to reflect the full range of industries, institutions, and communities the Chamber now serves.

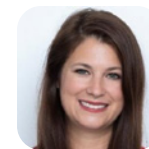
This expansion was intentional, not incidental. Each new seat was added with regional representation in mind—ensuring that healthcare, manufacturing, energy, higher education, K-12, county government, tourism, and affiliated chambers all have a voice in shaping the Chamber's shared priorities.



Pictured: Olivia Starks announcing new board members at 2026 Annual Meeting

Who's Joining the Board

The new directors bring cross-sector experience from some of the region's largest employers and most influential institutions:



Natalie Baggio
Corewell Health



Jennifer Cowan
Griffin Tool and Die



Nicholas Culp
Holtec International



Cheri Heward
Bridgman CGA



Eric Hopstock
Berrien RESA



Chana Kniebes
Coloma-Watervliet Chamber of Commerce



Dr. Kimberly Pichot
Andrews University



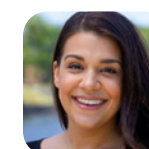
Mike Sepic
Berrien County



Nick Shelton
Abonmarche



Marcy Simpson
Visit Southwest Michigan



Annie Smith
Indiana Michigan Power



Bryan Van Itallie
Greater Niles Chamber



Kyle Zelmer
Buchanan Area Chamber

Their inclusion ensures that conversations about workforce, local government, affiliated chambers, tourism, and private-sector growth happen around the same table—not in parallel.

"The strength of this Chamber has always come from the people willing to sit at the table and do the work together," said Olivia Starks, Board Chair of the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber. "As our region grows and our partnerships deepen, our Board has to grow with it. These new directors bring the experience, the relationships, and the regional perspective we need to keep moving Southwest Michigan forward—together."

A Board That Matches the Moment

The Chamber's ecosystem approach has always hinged on a simple premise: the region moves faster when it moves together.

A board that reflects every industry, every county, and every size of community is how that premise becomes practice—and its newest directors arrive at exactly the right moment to help guide what comes next. ■



FULL ROOM, FORWARD MOTION

600+ Celebrate Success and Momentum at the 2026 Business Recognition Breakfast

Written by: Victoria KostECKi | Pictured: 2026 Business Recognition Award Nominees

“Growth is no longer automatic,” Arthur Havlicek told a packed Grand Upton Hall on February 20. “It is earned.”

That line set the tone for the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber’s 2026 Annual Meeting and Business Recognition Breakfast, where more than 600 business leaders, elected officials, and community builders gathered not just to celebrate—but to take stock.

Presented by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, Corewell Health, Honor Credit Union, and The Batalis Agency—Farm Bureau Insurance, the event has grown into the region’s largest and most anticipated business gathering—

and a barometer for the momentum building across Southwest Michigan.

A Region Aligned

In his keynote, Havlicek didn’t shy away from the headwinds. Michigan has recorded more deaths than births for five consecutive years. Young adults ages 25–34 have declined across all three counties in the tri-county region since 2000. His message: talent must choose to live here—and the regions that are most aligned are having the most success attracting it.

But the president and CEO had more than a diagnosis. He had evidence of momentum. A \$300 million housing pipeline taking shape

across Berrien County. The success of Discover Southwest Michigan, the region’s first 501(c)(3) dedicated exclusively to population growth. Historic partnerships with the Greater Niles Chamber and Buchanan Area Chamber—formally uniting north and south Berrien County under a shared vision for the first time. And the expansion of Chamber Growth Alliances into Central Berrien and Southwest Berrien, bringing dedicated, on-the-ground economic development capacity where it has never existed before.

“Southwest Michigan is beginning to think like a region,” Havlicek said. “And the Regional Chamber is making it happen.”

The Awards

The program concluded with the Business Recognition Awards, where live audience voting gave the room a direct hand in choosing this year’s honorees—eight businesses, organizations, and individuals whose work reflects a region building on all fronts.

Best New Business Award: *McCollum’s at the Grant Hotel*

Co-owners Cami Bowling and Michael Reed transformed the 1800s-era McCollum Building on Days Avenue into a 10-room boutique hotel and full-service restaurant overlooking McCoy Creek—a \$3 million project supported in part by a \$1.25 million MEDC grant. With a menu built around bold, seasonal flavors and a bar stocked with craft cocktails and deep bourbon selections, McCollum’s has become both a community gathering spot and a draw for visitors discovering downtown Buchanan.

Small Business of the Year Award: *Zo’s Mini Donuts*

What started in 2023 as a single food truck near Warren Dunes has grown into a regional favorite with five pink mobile kitchens, 22 seasonal employees, and locations in Sawyer, New Buffalo, and St. Joseph. Sisters Zoey and Lydia Heyn—a Bridgman High School DECA international champion and an MSU marketing grad—have won the Chamber’s HYPE Pitch Competition, earned first place at the DECA International Career Development Conference, and are now finalists in the statewide Michigan’s Next Big Idea Pitch Competition.

Economic Impact Award: *Corewell Health*

Corewell Health, as one of the region’s largest employers, has invested \$55 million in Southwest Michigan’s economic vitality—from a new cardiology clinic in Watervliet and mobile health

services reaching rural communities to \$1 million in talent initiatives that include nurse apprenticeships and youth internship programs. The Corewell Health Foundation has directed nearly half a million dollars more to community-based resources in mental health, food access, and transportation, reinforcing Corewell’s role as an anchor institution in the region’s growth.

Non-Profit Excellence Award: *Meals on Wheels of Southwest Michigan*

Meals on Wheels delivers to 250–300 homebound seniors daily and serves another 300-plus meals across 13 senior center sites in Berrien and Van Buren counties—more than 11,000 meals each month. The organization’s newest initiative, medically appropriate meals tailored to seniors managing chronic health conditions, reflects a commitment to evolving alongside the community’s changing needs.

Community Impact Award: *City of Buchanan Downtown Infrastructure*

Buchanan completed its landmark downtown reconstruction in November 2025, replacing century-old water mains, storm sewers, and sanitary infrastructure across two blocks of Front Street while introducing a new tabletop street design, wider sidewalks, and a flexible multi-use plaza. Funded primarily through a 40-year, \$16.2 million low-interest USDA Rural Development loan and MDOT support, the project positions Buchanan’s downtown for a new generation of investment and community life.

Rising Star Award: *Chris Britton New Heights CCDA*

Since founding New Heights CCDA in 2017, Chris Britton has built a multi-program nonprofit serving Benton Heights through an Auto Ministry, a Community Food Network reaching

more than 90 households, and the \$1.3 million Laundry Hub—a community resource center offering wraparound services from financial coaching to career development. His work extends across the region as a member of the United Way Impact Cabinet, Vice Chair of the Mosaic CCDA Board, and Chair of Children of Promise.

The Pat Moody Award: *Dr. Megan Yore, Sturgis Bank & Trust*

Before joining Sturgis Bank as Chief Marketing Officer, Dr. Yore led marketing and communications at Spectrum Health Lakeland, earning national recognition as a top hospital marketer. She holds degrees from the University of Michigan and Western Michigan University, along with a Doctorate of Education in Ethical Leadership from Olivet Nazarene University—and she has channeled that experience into pro bono marketing strategies for more than 20 organizations across Southwest Michigan.

Ambassador of the Year: *Dr. Kimberly Pichot, Andrews University*

As Dean of the College of Professions at Andrews University, Dr. Pichot has spent more than 20 years helping over 300 organizations grow through consulting in strategic planning, organizational development, and marketing. A business coach, educator, and Enactus faculty advisor, she has dedicated her career to mentoring aspiring leaders—particularly women in academia and entrepreneurship—while connecting Andrews University students to the broader Southwest Michigan community through service initiatives.

For the full list of this year’s nominees, visit www.smrchamber.com

ALL IN ON BUCHANAN

How a Formal Partnership Positions Greater Buchanan for What's Next

Written by: Alain Pichot

Pictured: Downtown Buchanan Infrastructure Project Ribbon Cutting

Over the past eighteen months, few communities in Southwest Michigan have moved faster than Greater Buchanan. Public and private dollars have poured into infrastructure, placemaking, and redevelopment. The Grant Hotel and McCollum's Restaurant & Bar brought life back to a long-dormant downtown

landmark. The Buchanan Social District opened new doors for foot traffic and local business. And the momentum has continued to build—one project, one reinvestment, one ribbon cutting at a time.

Now, that momentum has a new engine behind it.



A Formal Partnership

The Buchanan Area Chamber of Commerce and the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber have entered into a formal partnership designed to strengthen business support, expand local capacity, and position Greater Buchanan for its next phase of economic growth. The agreement marks the latest adoption of the Regional Chamber's collaborative model, with Buchanan joining Niles and Bridgman in a coordinated, county-wide approach to economic development.

Under the new structure, the Buchanan Area Chamber will maintain its local identity, governance, and membership while integrating into the Regional Chamber's operational infrastructure—preserving local leadership and focus while unlocking enhanced advocacy, expanded programming, broader regional visibility, and a renewed focus on business retention, expansion, and attraction.

"The City of Buchanan has long valued the support the Regional Chamber has given to our community, and a formal partnership with our local chamber will only multiply that impact," said Mark Weedon, Mayor of Buchanan. "It strengthens our ability to serve local businesses and positions Greater Buchanan for long-term growth and economic vitality."

Building on a Longstanding Relationship

The agreement formalizes a working relationship that has quietly been building for years. The two organizations previously collaborated on the Buchanan Social District and key downtown redevelopment projects, including The Grant Hotel and McCollum's Restaurant & Bar. The Regional Chamber has also



Pictured: 2026 Business Recognition Award Recipients from Buchanan

provided steadfast support to the City of Buchanan and Buchanan Charter Township on various economic development priorities.

"We are thankful for the opportunity to more closely partner with the Buchanan Area Chamber and the Greater Buchanan community," said Arthur Havlicek, President & CEO of the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber. "There's tremendous momentum in Buchanan, and we look forward to helping this community reach its full potential."

Havlicek credited the Buchanan Chamber Board of Directors for embracing a forward-looking approach that positions both the organization and the community for continued growth.

A Fresh Start

For the Buchanan Chamber board, the partnership represents more than an operational alignment. It's a reset—a deliberate move to rebuild confidence among area businesses through consistent leadership, transparency, and expanded resources.

"This partnership with the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber represents a fresh start and an opportunity to reset and refocus on the mission of the chamber," said Kyle Zelmer, Buchanan Area Chamber Board Chair. "Our business community deserves strong support, collaboration, and a shared vision for growth. We recognize that

trust has been strained in recent years, and rebuilding those relationships is essential moving forward."

Zelmer emphasized that the partnership will prioritize collaboration with key local partners, including the Buchanan Downtown Development Authority and the Buchanan Business Boosters, as the community continues to grow.

"By getting back to our roots and working alongside the Regional Chamber, Buchanan DDA, the Business Boosters, and our local business owners, we can work together to bring renewed energy, collaboration, and growth to Buchanan," Zelmer added.

The Way Forward

Buchanan's decision to align with the Regional Chamber continues a pattern that has reshaped how Southwest Michigan approaches economic development. With Bridgman, Niles, and now Buchanan operating under the same collaborative framework, the Regional Chamber is building the kind of coordinated ecosystem that successful communities across the country rely on to compete for talent, investment, and opportunity.

Additional details regarding new programming, events, and initiatives for Buchanan will be shared in the coming weeks. For a community that has spent the last eighteen months betting on itself, the next chapter is just beginning. ■

LEADING WITH INTENTION

Meet Jenni Leich, Central Berrien's New CGA Director

Written by: Alain Pichot

Central Berrien does not lack for assets. It has manufacturing muscle, working farmland, world-class educational institutions, and a riverfront that attracts residents from all walks of life. What it has needed is someone to help six communities point all of that in the same direction.

That someone is Jenni Leich, the new Director of the Central Berrien Chamber

Growth Alliance (CGA) with the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber.

A Background Built for the Role

Leich steps into the role from Michigan Works! Berrien, Cass, Van Buren, where she spent years working directly with employers on workforce needs, talent pipelines, and long-term growth.

Earlier work with the State of Michigan gave her a working knowledge of the programs, funding streams, and economic development tools that too often sit unused at the local level. Her real calling card, though, is her network. Leich has spent a career connecting people—employers to training partners, municipalities to state resources, ideas to the funding that moves them forward.

“What drew me to this role is the opportunity,” said Jenni Leich, Director of the Central Berrien CGA. “You have six communities that have always worked hard for their residents, and now they have a shared platform to do even more together. I can’t wait to help tell that story and move real projects forward.”

Leading with Intention

In her first weeks, Leich has spent more time taking notes than giving direction. She’s met with officials, business owners, and community leaders across the Village of Baroda, Baroda Township, the Village of Berrien Springs, Oronoko Township, the Village of Eau Claire, and Berrien Township—asking what’s working, what isn’t, and where the CGA can add real capacity.

It’s an approach that fits the region. Central Berrien’s strength isn’t any single industry or downtown; it’s the mix. Manufacturing continues to anchor the economy. Agriculture remains a defining part of local identity. And Andrews University’s international community brings entrepreneurial energy and cultural depth that set the area apart.

A Strategy of Intentional Growth

For rural and small-town communities, Leich believes success isn’t measured in square footage or ribbon cuttings alone. It’s measured in whether growth reflects the community doing the growing. That means retaining and expanding the businesses already here, encouraging new entrepreneurs, and attracting investment that complements—rather than overwrites—the character of each village and township.

Community development runs on the same track. Vibrant downtowns, attainable housing, reliable



Pictured: Jenni Leich

infrastructure, and welcoming public spaces are what make a place worth staying in and worth moving to. In Leich’s view, economic and community development aren’t separate conversations.

“Jenni has everything it takes to be successful in this role,” said Arthur Havlicek, President & CEO of the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber. “She understands these communities, she understands our community-led approach, and she has the relationships and the drive to make things happen. We’re fortunate to have her leading Central Berrien forward.”

Looking Ahead

Leich’s early priorities are clear: business retention and expansion, stronger partnerships across the six municipalities, and telling Central Berrien’s story to the rest of Southwest Michigan. The work ahead is substantial. But with a proven connector at the helm and the Regional Chamber powering the effort, Central Berrien’s next chapter is being written with intention—and with the communities themselves holding the pen. ■

Upcoming Chamber Events

- Apr 23** ● **Ground Breaking**
Euclid Adventure Park
- Apr 24** ● **Ribbon Cutting**
Epoxy Plus Flooring Solutions
- May 5** ● **Capital Access Workshop**
Bertrand Innovation Center
- May 14** ● **Business After Hours**
Krasl Art Center
- May 15** ● **Business After Hours**
John Gast Memorial Trail
- May 16** ● **Ribbon Cutting**
Great Lakes Wrestling and Training Center
- May 19** ● **Ribbon Cutting/25th Anniversary**
Fresh Decor
- May 27** ● **Ribbon Cutting**
Johnny's Mediterranean
- May 29** ● **4th Annual Wine & Nine Golf Outing**
Pipestone Creek
- Jun 4** ● **Ribbon Cutting**
St. Joe River Lodge
- Jun 11** ● **Business After Hours**
New Heights CCDA
- Jun 23** ● **Ribbon Cutting**
Harbor Woods Townhomes
- Jun 25** ● **Ribbon Cutting**
PACE of Niles
- Jul 9** ● **Business After Hours**
Four Winds Casino-Pool Area, New Buffalo
- Jul 13** ● **66th SMRC Annual Golf Outing**
Lake Michigan Hills

Check Out All of Our Events

Our Chamber hosts multiple events and networking opportunities each month to keep our members informed, engaged, and in front of the community. Check out what is next on the agenda.



SCAN FOR ALL CHAMBER EVENTS



SCAN FOR REGIONAL CHAMBER EVENTS



SCAN FOR REGIONAL CHAMBER MEMBER EVENTS



SCAN FOR GREATER NILES CHAMBER EVENTS



SCAN FOR BUCHANAN AREA CHAMBER EVENTS

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