

## Bipartisan caucus hopes to grow area

### Legislators seek resources to aid Greater Lansing

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A small but booming Delta Township Web services firm wants to expand, potentially adding 600 new high-tech jobs.

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Trouble is, Liquid Web Inc. needs help to clear the obstacles blocking whichever tax abatements, grants and loans it might need to grow, according to Rep. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge.

"These are exactly the sort of jobs we need in mid-Michigan," Jones said. "This is what we have to do; we have to work together for Greater Lansing."

Enter the Capital Caucus, a group of mid-Michigan lawmakers whose districts include or touch parts of Ingham, Eaton and Clinton counties with the goal of securing state resources to grow the Lansing area.

Jones said he plans to bring Liquid Web's case before the caucus. Other projects currently under consideration include allowing community colleges to ask voters for bond money to fund educational programs, helping grow local alternative energy companies and securing money for every high school student in the tri-county area to take a work-readiness certification exam.

The caucus was formed in early 2007 but, so far, has yet to see many tangible results.

The group's first actions were to include matching grants in a capital outlay bill that would partially fund a new runway at Capital City Airport and help renovate part of Lansing Community College.

That bill has stalled because of disagreements between the House and Senate on the cost of the legislation.

#### a role model

The Capital Caucus is formed in the mold of the Lansing Caucus, a group of local lawmakers during the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s.

Former state Rep. David Hollister said the group was instrumental in getting many projects approved, including the building of the Hall of Justice and Anderson House Office Building, as well as keeping General Motors in the Lansing area.

"There were a lot of things we needed to do legislatively to keep GM, and they were able to ensure that every single vote that was taken on the state and local level passed unanimously," he said.

Hollister left the state House to become Lansing's mayor in 1994, an office he held until 2002.

During that time, he said, he called a few meetings - most regarding the Keep GM campaign - but the group eventually fizzled out of existence.

Kelly Rossman-McKinney, president of the public relations firm The Rossman Group, said she foresees the Capital Caucus driving more and more projects and funding to the Lansing area than legislators acting independently ever could.

"What a caucus does is really bring together a sometimes disparate group of lawmakers together for a common goal," Rossman-McKinney said.

"You don't have to build a new coalition over every issue, you already have one in place."

#### the dutch mafia

Arguably the most famous example is the Dutch Mafia, a group of West Michigan lawmakers, many of Dutch ancestry, who for years have wielded considerable power in state politics.

Examples of their success are legion, analysts said, including such development projects as Michigan State University's new medical college, the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum and the expansion of Grand Valley State University.

"The fact that Grand Valley was started is because the West Michigan delegation thought it was important to have a four-year institution over there," said Bill Rustem, president of the policy research firm Public Sector Consulting.

Copying the Dutch Mafia's success is "exactly the point," said Rep. Barb Byrum, D-Onondaga.

The makeup of the Capital Caucus is crucial, legislators and analysts said, because having members in both parties will help the group navigate legislation through the Democratic-led House and Republican-led Senate.

"I think it's extra important to have sponsors from both parties," said Rep. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, because the legislature is an extremely partisan place.

"We may not always agree on all issues, but we can work together on many."

Rep. Mark Meadows, D-East Lansing, whose office is coordinating the group, agreed.

"I think there's a recognition that there are issues that are bipartisan and bicameral that we can work on," Meadows said.

#### return of hollister

Hollister, now president of the Prima Civitas Foundation, a mid-Michigan community and economic development group, has returned to the group by facilitating meetings with local business and community leaders and the group.

It's the same blueprint the Dutch Mafia has used for years.

"We would say to local leaders, 'Give me your top three priorities,' so we would have in hand a list of 'to do's' that we could work on at opportune times," said former Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming.

Travis Stoliker, spokesman for Liquid Web, said he couldn't discuss the details of the company's planned expansion because of state grant regulations prohibiting it, but said "it's going to be huge."

Stoliker said he thinks the caucus will be able to help local businesses get tax abatements, grants and low-interest loans so they can grow.

"I think it's very helpful, especially for smaller companies looking to expand. That's when it's really needed," he said.

Lawmakers said the group is open to any ideas the community can throw its way.

#### OTHER NOTABLE REGIONAL CAUCUSES

The Dutch Mafia  
• Region: West Michigan, particularly surrounding Grand Rapids

• Key projects: The Secchia Center (Michigan State University's new medical college), Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, expansion of Grand Valley State University

• Fun fact: Former Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming, said the name Dutch Mafia was not one lawmakers picked, rather one given by their detractors. Sikkema said the group preferred the Tulp Caucus, after the tulips prevalent in the area.

U.P. Caucus  
• Region: Michigan's Upper Peninsula, particularly surrounding Marquette

• Key projects: Superior Dome, expansion of Northern Michigan University, road funding in the U.P.

• Fun fact: Many of the U.P. Caucus' projects were shepherded by former House Appropriations Chair Dominic Jacobetti, D-Negaunee. However, his most ambitious project, having the U.P. secede from Michigan into its own state of Superior, never materialized.

Sources: Ken Sikkema and Northern Michigan University

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"The question is: If you would have an agenda, what would it be?" Hollister said. "We're still working on that."

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