

**2017 Great Lakes Islands Summit:**  
**“Laying the Foundation for a Great Lakes Islands Coalition”**

September 25-26, 2017  
Beaver Island, Michigan

## **Background**

There are approximately 30 islands in the Great Lakes with sizeable year-round communities, plus others with smaller seasonal populations. They vary greatly in terms of geography, size, population, distance off-shore, economies, and other factors that influence island character. The majority lack a permanent bridge or tunnel to the mainland.

Though each island community is unique, many share in common some challenges that span the economic, social, and environmental spectrum. These challenges are driven, in large part, by the effects of distance and/or isolation. Other contributing factors include: limited local capacity; extremely poor awareness about island living among mainland decision-makers and the general public; and a lack of clear, accurate demographic and other data about island communities through which conditions and trends can be assessed.

There is growing evidence that island communities may have more in common than was once thought. In fact, some islands have already developed best practices and solutions which may be transferrable to other islands. Presently, there appears to be little regular communication and collaboration between Great Lakes island communities. In other regions, island communities are reaping the benefits of working together to share information, collaborating on mutual needs, and in some cases, amplifying their voices to the mainland.

## **2017 Islands Summit**

To remedy this apparent gap, a kick-off meeting of islanders was convened on Beaver Island. To our knowledge, this was the first event dedicated to the multi-disciplinary needs of Great Lakes island communities.

The goals of the 2017 Island Summit were to have islanders:

1. Gain familiarity with the other year-round island communities in the Great Lakes region;
2. Brainstorm the primary challenges unique to living or working on islands,
3. Compare solutions or best practices that have been developed and enacted on individual islands; and
4. Determine if there is critical mass to form a peer-to-peer network of Great Lakes island communities and if so, how could it function and what would it seek to achieve.

Approximately 72 individuals attended the event, from the following islands and partner organizations:

- Islands
  - Michigan: Beaver, Drummond, Harsens, Les Cheneaux, Mackinac, Neebish
  - Ohio: Middle Bass, South Bass
  - Ontario: Manitoulin, Pelee
  - Wisconsin: Madeline, Washington
- Partners:
  - Island Institute (Rockland, Maine)
  - Michigan Office of the Great Lakes (Lansing, Michigan)
  - Northland College (Ashland, Wisconsin)



*Photo Credit: Mackinac Island Town Crier*

Small and large group discussions navigated a variety of topic areas, including: conservation/ environment, infrastructure, broadband, transportation, education, energy, governance, small business development, housing, medical care (including eldercare and EMS), and tourism.

Staff from the Island Institute shared examples of successes and tools already in place in Maine. Their description of the Maine Islands Coalition, a collaborative relationship between the 15 Maine islands, struck a chord as a potential network model that could be adapted for the Great Lakes.

## Outcomes

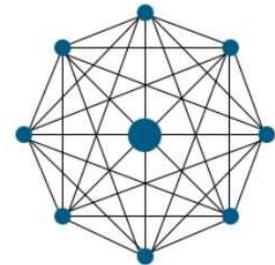
The 2017 Summit spurred a new sense of community among Great Lakes islands. Participants agreed that forming an inter-islands network, or “Great Lakes Islands Coalition,” held great promise, both for individual islands and for the community of islands as a whole. By working together, island communities could learn from one another and leverage resources to exploit new opportunities. Participation would be voluntary and execution of any ideas could be left to individual islands.

Buoyed by the positive energy and interest, the Madeline Island community suggested face-to-face gatherings should be an annual occurrence, and offered to host a second Great Lakes Islands Summit in fall 2018.

The partner organizations offered capacity and guidance to support the needs identified by the islands.

## Next Steps

The 2017 Summit successfully established regional interest in forming a Great Lakes Islands Coalition. Over the next year, the foundation for this new peer network will be laid. How individual island communities can best contribute to, and benefit from, the Coalition will be an evolving, on-going conversation.



Among the major next steps:

- Islander participants will report back to others in their community and decide who from their island may want to be at the table, going forward.
- A charter will be developed for the Great Lakes Islands Coalition which will define its mission and organizational structure, including member roles, objectives, tasks, and focus areas.
- The partner organizations will begin working on specific tasks related to the new coalition, including establishing a plan for communications and beginning work on key programmatic focus areas.
- Efforts to reach other island communities (who did not attend) will continue.
- Planning will commence for the 2018 Great Lakes Islands Summit on Madeline Island.

Additionally, some islanders stated that they would immediately begin pursuing ideas they learned at the inaugural Summit.

For a more detailed accounting of the 2017 Islands Summit, please see the accompanying full report.

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