

Meeting Four Summary

October 23, 2024 | 9:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.

Big Creek Township Hall
1175 Ryno Rd.
Luzerne, MI 48636

Attendee Organizations

- Big Creek Township
 - Consumers Energy
 - Huron Pines
 - Save the Dams
 - Office of State Senator Hoitenga
 - Trout Unlimited
 - Oscoda County Chamber of Commerce
 - Oscoda County Economic Development Corporation
 - Anglers of the Au Sable
 - Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
 - United States Forest Service
 - Public Sector Consultants (PSC)
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Welcome and Introductions

Participants shared their names, affiliations, and roles. Facilitators reviewed the agenda and shared the meeting objective: to deliver the group's top priorities for community prosperity under each of the three scenarios for the river hydro facilities.

Review Vision for the Community's Prosperity

Maggie Pallone from PSC reviewed the following vision statement for the community's prosperity with the group: "Transforming the community and local economy through intentional investments and a well-designed marketing campaign to develop the region as a

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four-season recreation destination.” The group agreed that the vision aligned with what they want to see in their community.

Review Status of Scenario Planning

The group reviewed the key actions they identified in meeting three to ensure that they were complete and aligned with the community prosperity vision. They also identified what people or organizations would be needed to move those actions forward.

Scenario One: Consumers Continues Operating the Dams

Priority One: Expand on Current Recreational Opportunities

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Build more access points to the river and lake and improve existing access points.	Approval from Manistee-Muskegon-Au Sable Coordination (MMAC) Team and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). Investment from Consumers. Addition of the new sites to the recreational part of the land management plan.
2. Build more trails, especially those accessible to ORVs (a trail network, linking to other systems). Build an ORV-accessible route to Mio from the west. Biking/hiking trails on the north side of the pond, town-to-town systems.	Change the land management plan to allow ORVs (limited to specific use areas). Investment from Consumers outside of the traditional recreational plan.
3. Build a new boat launch downstream of Camp 10 Bridge (tall boats can't pass under the bridge) and/or add parking to the existing boat launch.	Approval from MMAC and FERC.

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Priority Two: Ensure Dam Safety

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Continue to maintain the dam and surrounding lands with sufficient funding for safety.	Continue to apply for safety grants and loans.

Priority Three: Develop Additional Parks

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Use FERC land that Consumers owns to build a new park on the north side of the pond, with a preference for designation as a state park. Center park around the lake and river, build a multiuse trail system within it.	MMAC and FERC approval. Develop a plan; negotiate with the DNR or county.

Priority Four: Market the Region as a Recreational Destination

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Develop a marketing plan involving Consumers, DNR, and the U.S. Forest Service.	Community committee: Oscoda County Chamber and Economic Development Corporation, DNR, Forest Service, and Consumers. Funding from Consumers.

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Priority Five: Protect the Fisheries

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Explore ways to lower the water temperature in and downstream of the impoundments.	Consultants and experts in the field, approval from MMAC and FERC, funding from Consumers.
2. Continue run of river operations under the Clean Water Act.	
3. Invest in research to understand wild brown trout populations below the dam.	Habitat improvement account or direct funding for the study, NGOs.
4. Build fish ladders on every dam up to Mio.	Conduct a feasibility study including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, and other NGOs.

Scenario Two: The Dams Are Sold to a New Owner

Participants noted that scenario one priorities are also priorities under this scenario.

Additional Priority One: Protect Leaseholders

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Transfer land licenses and leases (e.g., Oscoda County Park) from Consumers to the new owner.	Negotiated as part of the sale agreement between Consumers and the new buyer.
2. Require new owner to extend current licenses and leases through the next relicensing period.	Negotiated as part of the sale agreement between Consumers and the new buyer.

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Additional Priority Two: Plan for the Next 50–100 Years of Dam Operation

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Implement a bond or other surety for the new owner's responsibility for safe operation and eventual dam removal.	Requirement of the sale agreement.
2. Delineate the responsibilities of the new owner.	Consumers should create a public-facing document summarizing responsibilities.
3. Build funding for dam maintenance and upgrades into the power purchase agreement.	Requirement of the sale agreement.

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Scenario Three: Dams Are Removed and the River Restored

Priority One: Plan for the Transition and New State

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Develop a land management plan that includes both bottomlands and surrounding lands and prioritizes keeping land in public ownership.	Consumers convene a group to develop a land management plan; clarify and amend state Natural Rivers requirement to include FERC lands.
2. Ensure community involvement in feasibility study; communicate results to understand the impact of removal.	Have public meetings, continue prosperity group; include artistic renderings of river restoration and community after removal; consider creative uses for existing infrastructure.
3. Compensate local business owners for lost revenue and value through the transition period.	Consumers create a community fund.

Priority Two: Expand Recreational Opportunities

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Build nonmotorized trails on the exposed bottomlands with access points, connect to larger trail system.	Convene community to create a plan, which should be incorporated into township recreation plan and county master plan. Ensure coordination so lands aren't committed twice.
2. Keep the land public and undeveloped.	Meet with local, state, and Forest Service officials to figure out how to transition the land.

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Priority Three: Protect Property Owners

Prioritized key actions or activities that support this opportunity	What would it take to make it happen? Is there a role Consumers Energy could play? What is the role? If not, who are the main actors needed to move forward?
1. Mitigate the effects of removal on wells.	Inventory wells, conduct an impact study, create a mitigation fund.
2. Ensure that those who have river access now still have it after removal.	Offer portions of bottomlands to owners for access, determine how to offset initial cost and tax increases.
3. Compensate lakefront property owners for any lost property value, protect from unexpected tax increases due to increased acreage.	Study to determine property values before and after removal, develop community fund.

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Update from Consumers Energy

Angela Thompkins from Consumers Energy shared updates about the dams. Consumers has narrowed the list of potential buyers to a handful of viable entities and continues to exchange information with viable buyers on finances, history of safe dam operation, personnel training, and similar topics. They hope to finish these conversations by the end of 2024 and make a final decision in the first quarter of 2025. Consumers has been raising community concerns with potential buyers; PSC provided a summary of the community engagement work so far with known concerns. Angela thanked the prosperity group members for their work.

Next Steps and Q&A

Angela stated that Consumers plans a second phase for the prosperity groups, so while this is the last meeting of 2024, it's not the final meeting. Phase two will flesh out the plan once Consumers has decided how to move forward.

Angela answered questions from the group. She shared that Consumers will continue to pursue loans to invest in infrastructure as long as they are the license holder, but that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has not made a decision about loaning funds to Consumers yet. The group discussed their concerns about selling the dams, and Angela and Maggie both confirmed that these concerns have been reflected to Consumers and to the potential buyers. The group also had questions about the use of eminent domain to build the dams, and whether former property owners will have any recourse. Randy stated that they have had some questions posed about this issue, and that more research will need to be done in the property records.

Maggie outlined next steps for the group. PSC will share the final notes with the group and give them time to make sure their priorities are reflected. Consumers is working to develop a plan to ensure that the prosperity groups are informed of the decision before the general public, and to inform all communities at the same time. Once a decision is made, the group will reconvene to determine a way forward. PSC and Consumers shared they appreciate the group's work and hope everyone continues to be involved.