

GREATER NILES  
Chamber of Commerce

# CHAMBER CURRENTS

A monthly newsletter from the Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce

## Garrett accepts post with Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama

Barkley Garrett, the former Executive Director of the Southwest Michigan Economic Growth Alliance and current Director of Economic Development for the Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce has announced his departure. Garrett has accepted a new position and will be leaving the Greater Niles area. A search is currently underway for his replacement.

Beginning in April, Garrett will become the Vice President of Economic Development for the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama (located in Tuscaloosa, Alabama). He will be leading the Chamber's efforts in recruiting knowledge-based employers to the Greater Tuscaloosa / West Alabama region. Garrett is a native of South-Central Alabama and received his B.S. in Corporate Finance and Investment Management from the University of Alabama.

Garrett commented, "I can't thank the former Board of Directors (and Operations Committee) of the Southwestern Michigan Economic Growth Alliance (SMEGA) and now the Board of the Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce enough for their vote of confidence in me to lead economic development efforts for the last three years. I have truly enjoyed my time with SMEGA and the Chamber and serving the economic development needs of Southern Berrien County and Cass County."

Garrett has spent the past 17 years doing economic development at the state, regional, and local level in Indiana and Michigan. Over the last three years, Garrett's focus has been on business retention and expansion (BR&E), business attraction, and small business development. One of the larger projects involved a \$16 M (over 100K sf) expansion of the AACOA plant on Mayflower Road which added 50 jobs.

Garrett also led the community's effort to extend broadband fiber to rural parts of the region including the Bertrand Crossing Industrial Park. In Cass County, Garrett helped to lead the Imagine Cass visioning project to reimagine what a thriving downtown Cassopolis might look like in the future. Plans are underway to bring those ideas to reality.

Chamber President & CEO Jeff Rea added, "This announcement is bittersweet for the Greater Niles area. We're excited that Barkley has an opportunity to return "home" to serve a part of the country that he has a deep affection for. At the same time, this is a difficult loss, Barkley has been a key driver of economic development efforts in the Greater Niles area and his skills and talents will be missed. We'll move quickly to find his replacement, we know there is a skilled economic development professional looking for a new opportunity to come help our area grow."

## Governor proposes Gas Tax Increase

The Greater Niles Chamber is the voice of the business community in our area. As such, it will communicate with local, state, and federal officials on the issues that matter most to you and your business and the greater community. One of those issues we're keeping a close eye on is Governor Whitmer's new road funding plan released last week. We'd love to hear more about your thoughts.

The Governor's 2020 budget included a proposal for a gas tax increase of \$0.45/gallon. This increase would raise the tax rate to \$0.71/gallon from the current rate of \$0.26/gallon, making Michigan the state with the highest gas tax rate in the country by about \$0.20/gallon.

In addition, conversations last week in Washington, D.C. about a long-term infrastructure plan hinted

that adjustments in the federal gas tax could soon follow to help fund national infrastructure needs. The federal gas excise tax is \$0.184/gallon on unleaded, \$0.244/gallon on diesel. The federal tax was last raised in 1993 and is not indexed to inflation, which increased by a total of 64.6 percent from 1993 until 2015.

The Michigan increase is intended to provide funds to improve Michigan's deteriorating roads and bridges. Under the proposal, increases would happen in three \$0.15 increments over one year with the first increase being on October 1st of this year and the last being October 1st of 2020.

In 2016, the 21st Century Infrastructure Commission estimated that the State needed \$2.2 billion annually to maintain and upgrade the crumbling infrastructure, the Governor's plan would generate about \$2.5 billion per year.

While the end numbers total to be enough to "fix the damn roads", which is a cornerstone of Gov. Whitmer's campaign, she also intends to use funds generated to increase state K-12 classroom spending by \$507 million. She says drivers are already paying a "road tax" in the form of vehicle repairs due to the pothole-afflicted Michigan roads. It is her hope to ultimately save Michiganders money in the long by raising the gas tax to fix damaged infrastructure.

Most Michigan residents would agree that the Michigan roads have been neglected and are overdue for repair. In order to get roads in a condition where all are safe to use them, action must be taken to raise the funds.

Raising gas tax directly affects the consumer because they will be the one taking on the burden of the newly imposed tax. Stations close to the Indiana-Michigan boarder are going to take a hit since some consumers are willing to drive out of their way for gas a few cents cheaper.

We also recognize that the logical way to raise funds for the roads are to make those who use the roads to help with the cost to maintain them. This choice will most likely not only affect the price at the pumps, but also the price of groceries due to the added cost of distribution fuel costs. If the proposal by Gov. Whitmer does pass, a guarantee from her and her team that all funds raised from the tax increase will go toward the improvement of roads and not into the general fund would help.

Choices to raise funds include to reallocate current spending, raise revenue, or both. It is our hope that Gov. Whitmer will work together with other elected officials to make sure the best practices are used to find funds to make sure Michigan roads are repaired and maintained.

We plan to weigh in, we know it could impact your business. We'd love to hear more about what you think [here](#). Please reach out.

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## Chamber's Economic Development Effort nets new fiber connectivity options

In 2018, the Chamber staff met with the tenants of the Bertrand Crossing Industrial Park. During that meeting, a number of opportunities were discussed. One that resonated with each of the tenants was their need for reliable broadband service at an affordable price. Chamber staff researched the various options available and determined that a partnership with [Midwest Energy & Communications](#) (MEC) was the most viable option since they were already serving the Niles Industrial Park and parts of downtown Niles.

The cost to run 3.5 miles of fiber from downtown Niles to Bertrand Crossing will cost approximately \$100,000. The funds were raised with generous contributions from the City of Niles, Bertrand Township, Indiana Michigan Power, the Hunter Foundation, and MEC. The fiber route will involve crossing the St. Joseph River at Grant Street, run southwest along Chicago Road, and west along US 12. The build will take place in the 2nd Quarter of 2019. Service will be available in late 2nd Quarter or early 3rd Quarter of 2019.

Residents and businesses along the route are encouraged to communicate their interest in receiving service by contacting MEC at: [jointhecrowd.teamfiber.com](http://jointhecrowd.teamfiber.com). Completing the online form does not commit you to receiving service. It is simply a way for MEC to gauge interest and communicate with potential customers in the future.

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## 100th Anniversary Luncheon is May 14

Please join the Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce in their 100th Anniversary Celebration Luncheon and Awards Ceremony on Tuesday, May 14! This annual celebratory event is an opportunity to gather with fellow business professionals and community leaders to celebrate the greater Niles area. This year, the Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce is proud to present five awards: Business of the Year, Volunteer of the Year, Young Professional of the Year, Chamber Ambassador of the Year, and the Community Leadership Award.

If one is interested in supporting this event through sponsorship opportunities, please contact [Eileen Villanueva](#) at 269.683.1833



## LifePlan Benton Harbor Ribbon Cutting and Grand Opening

April 4 | 12:00-4:00 PM

LifePlan, previously known as the Pregnancy Care Center, has opened a new satellite office in Benton Harbor Michigan. To celebrate this amazing achievement, the Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce and LifePlan will be hosting a ribbon cutting and grand opening ceremony on Thursday, April 4 from 12:00 noon until 4:00 p.m. with the ribbon cutting taking place at 12:15 p.m. This grand opening will offer the opportunity for attendees to tour the new Benton Harbor office, meet the LifePlan team, and learn more about LifePlan's extensive list of services.

## Welcome our New Members!

*Please give a warm welcome to The Grand LV and Katharos Catering, the Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce's newest members.*

**The Grand LV** is a newly renovated, unique event venue in the heart of downtown Niles. Built in 1928, the locale is filled with history and character that brings about the perfect atmosphere for your event!

[More Info](#)

**Katharos Catering** is a locally owned and operated all-occasion catering company. Owner Chef Cynthia Gallero-Greer studied at Le Cordon Bleu school of Culinary Arts in Chicago, and has chosen to now bring her delicious recipes to the Michiana area.

[More Info](#)

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