

## SECTION 1: General Overview

---

### *HISTORY OF THE PLANNING PROCESS*

US-23 from Mackinaw City to Standish is nearly 200 miles of an excellent roadway system that takes travelers by spectacular scenic views of Lake Huron, and an astounding array of large public forest, park and recreational properties (see **Map 1**). The coastal counties of Alcona, Alpena, Arenac, Cheboygan, Iosco and Presque Isle contain some of the most extensive and significant recreational, ecological, historical and cultural sites in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Unlike the shoreline of northern Lake Michigan, where private ownership is the norm, the northern Lake Huron shoreline is graced with large tracts of publicly owned properties. Thus much of the northern Lake Huron shoreline is free and accessible to residents and visitors alike.

For those who are familiar with the area, this section of US-23 has long been a favorite destination for travelers seeking a pleasant, leisurely drive through beautiful settings. One can choose to drive the entire 195 mile length or take a shorter trip, allowing time to stop and enjoy some of the numerous parks, campgrounds, picnic areas, scenic points, historic sites and the inviting communities along the way. It is the type of travel experience that many tourists are seeking in an attempt to escape from their stressful urban lives.

This coastal region is not as well known as a tourist and recreational destination as other Great Lakes areas of Michigan, therefore many potential tourists never come to the area. Many of the visitors who do come to the region are not aware of all of the recreational, cultural and historical points of interest clustered along US-23, so do not fully enjoy the area's amenities. Efforts to promote this area by local, regional and state tourist organizations have done much to raise the public's level of awareness about this coastal area, but there is a great deal of work left to be done. The vast majority of tourists still visit this area only during the months of July and August, making the successful operation of a small tourist based business very difficult. High unemployment rates and low incomes are still the norm in this part of the State, which makes a livable family income difficult to sustain.

Local, regional and state community leaders are aware of the challenges faced by this coastal area. They continue to seek ways in which to strengthen the local economy while preserving the natural beauty and historical integrity of the area. It is felt that having the US-23 corridor, from Mackinaw City to Standish, designated as a State Heritage Route is an excellent way in which many of these challenges can be addressed in a positive environmental manner. The idea of making this portion of US-23 the part of a marked vehicular trailway has been around for many years, but has, so far, been met with limited success. It is felt that having official State designated "Heritage Route" status will help to overcome the problem of lack of public recognition that other trailway efforts have encountered.

The planning process for designation of US-23 of the proposed Sunrise Side Coastal Highway as a State Heritage Route has been underway since the summer of 2002. Based on the encouragement of State Representative Dale Sheltrown and the Michigan Department of Transportation, a partnership of local and regional groups and individuals has been formed to undertake the designation process. Three regional organizations have been helping to shepherd this process: the Michigan Sunrise Side Travel Association, the Northeast Michigan

Council of Governments and the East Central Michigan Planning and Development Regional Commission.

Committees dedicated towards the preparation of this management plan have been actively working on this process over the last year. County teams, made up of interested local elected leaders, tourist groups, historical society members, planning commission representatives, business owners, community staff members, interested citizens and others have been meeting on a periodic basis. Representatives of all county committees have met as a group, as well. The Heritage Route vision statement, goals, objectives, priority tasks and projects found in this management plan were generated, reviewed, revised and approved by the appropriate county teams and by the overall committee.



*Figure 1: Members of all six county teams meet to discuss the plan*



*Figure 2: Meeting of the Arenac County Team*

