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Human Faces:

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner by Brigit Frank

Like the rest of the country, land management is a hot topic in Michigan. Northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula have rich, green forests and numerous lakes and wetlands. To date, the majority of these areas are primarily rural. Naturally, the residents of Michigan, including the state's component manufacturers, are concerned about future plans to develop these areas.

WTCA's Michigan Chapter, the Wood Truss Council of Michigan (WTCM), wanted to learn more about land management and its effect on their state. They wanted to be certain that they fully understood all sides of the issue before flatly agreeing or disagreeing with any land usage policy. To that end, WTCM's President Phil Luneack of Bear Truss thought that it would be interesting to get the perspective of an environmental group on issues like development, forest preservation and lumber supplies.

Luneack knew that the Sierra Club was the environmental group with which he wanted WTCM to meet. "They [Sierra Club] are becoming a force to be dealt with," he remarked. "They are called on for opinions by policy makers."

More important than the Sierra Club's status in the public policy arena, was Luneack's goal of finding an approach to building and developing in Michigan that environmentalists could support. He knew that forging a relationship with these groups was the first necessary step.

The Sierra Club sent Anne Woiwode, the Interim Director of its Mackinac Chapter, the statewide chapter in Michigan, to meet with WTCM. Woiwode has been very involved with forestry issues for the Sierra Club and served as one of the primary negotiators in the settlement agreements struck on the Land and Resource Management Plans for Michigan's national forests. She has also served on the Forest Reform Campaign steering committee of the Sierra Club, which set the strategic direction on forest policies for the national Sierra Club.

Woiwode's presentation covered issues like wetland preservation, which are important to the Sierra Club. However, the majority of her talk dealt with land development issues. "She didn't come waiving a 'green flag,'" Luneack commented about the talk. "She was actually very practical."

Woiwode focused on planning in development. She used the example of a dairy farm to illustrate her point: A developer builds new homes around a dairy farm in a rural area. The new residents move into their beautiful homes and immediately begin complaining about the presence of the dairy farm. This is an example of poor city planning. Woiwode stressed the important role that

common sense plays in planning for developments: The goal of planning should be to give the maximum benefit to the maximum number of people affected by the development, while providing for the co-existence of multiple land-use needs.

Regarding the component industry specifically, Woiwode spoke about the importance of forestry replanting efforts and better use of existing resources. "Clearly," she declared, "this is an industry that can play a significant role in environmental protection issues through its choices of environmentally responsible materials and efficient utilization of materials." The message is simply to use our natural resources wisely and replace them whenever possible—a good fit with the component industry.

"I appreciated the willingness of WTCM to invite me to come speak," Woiwode said. "We had some useful discussions about both issues and perceptions of environmental organizations that were productive."

Both Luneack and Woiwode commented that there were skeptics in attendance, but that overall, the group was very interested in hearing about the Sierra Club's position on development. "I got more positive comments from members about this meeting than any other meeting I planned in the last two years," Luneack noted.

WTCM's meeting with the Sierra Club was clearly out of the ordinary, but by learning the position of other groups that have an interest in the environment and the use of natural resources, it is possible to find some common ground.

As you can imagine, getting someone from the Sierra Club to meet with an organization of component manufacturers, builders and suppliers was not easy. The group was understandably apprehensive. To avoid this frustration, Luneack recommends being specific about your meeting agenda. Anna Stamm, WTCM's administrator, also suggests talking with the environmental group's representative prior to the meeting to help both sides understand the other's expectations.

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