



D.C. Fly-In Recap: Advocating for Your West Coast Community in D.C.

By **Erich Boileau** | Partner, Boileau & Co.

Earlier this year, leaders from local businesses and organizations participated in the Michigan West Coast Chamber of Commerce's first ever Washington D.C. Fly-In event. For three days in mid-March, we toured our nation's capital and met with elected representatives, including Rep. Bill Huizinga and Sen. Gary Peters. Our trip also included briefings and Q&As with leaders in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce—the world's largest business advocacy group and the largest political lobby in the U.S.

West Coast Chamber leaders Jodi Owczarski and Hannah Bowen joined Rep. Huizinga's office Chief of Staff Todd Whiteman and U.S. Chamber Great Lakes Region Senior Manager Ryan Gleason as our guides to navigating some of the political realities that influence important issues in our region.

We were also richly blessed to arrive at full bloom for D.C.'s 9000+ cherry trees, an event that only lasts 3-4 days of the year before the blossoms begin to scatter. Washington's first cherry trees were brought from Japan as a gift of friendship from the People of Japan in the early 20th century. Having spent a few years of my early career in Japan, it was nostalgic to walk under the trees and participate in hanami again.

Attainable Housing Challenges

At each of our meetings with both elected officials and staffers, the topic of workforce housing was at the center of our conversation. You have likely heard about West Michigan's housing affordability crisis as well as the important work that organizations like Jubilee Ministries,

Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity, and ICCF have undertaken to meet the growing need for housing in our region.

What you may not have heard is that while millions of dollars are available for workforce housing development, including \$13.5M in funding through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) for housing in Ottawa County and \$10M in funding from the Michigan Strategic Fund (MSF), only a fraction of these funds have made it to local builders to address the problem. The majority of the money has been delayed for years in bureaucracy or tied up in opaque financial structures.

In another poignant example, Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity Executive Director Don Wilkinson, who joined us on the trip to Washington, revealed to lawmakers how Habitat recently had to turn down \$1M in funding it received through Michigan's Missing-Middle Housing Program grant because the organization's volunteer and sweat-equity model didn't meet the government's "prevailing wage" requirements.

Our lawmakers seemed genuinely surprised to learn that the well-intentioned money wasn't making its way to help the intended recipients, and we remain optimistic that our legislators will do what they can to free up funding and help Habitat, Jubilee and others continue to address the housing crisis that continues to hamper our region's growth.



Erich is a strategic thinker, writer, and coach whose passion is to see people and organizations grow into the truest expression of their best selves. People (and their stories) are complicated by nature, and he enjoys the challenge of bringing clarity and understanding into complex scenarios. Prior to becoming a partner in 2021, Erich served the company in various roles for 12 years. His approach to communications is informed by nearly a decade of non-profit leadership while living abroad in Morocco and Japan. He earned his bachelor's degree in English from Grand Valley State University in 2009 and a master's degree in psychology from Divine Mercy University in 2024. Erich is fascinated by the human brain, and outside the office he enjoys co-hosting a Japanese-language podcast on mental health with his wife, barstool philosophizing with friends, and spending time with his new son and little dog Fuji.



Tax & Regulation Issues

Members of our group also brought up challenges their clients have had with the Corporate Transparency Act, which went into effect January 1 of this year. The act was intended to curb fraud and other financial crimes but has had an outsized impact on small businesses, which struggle to comply without spending hours of research.

Finally, we discussed expiring laws regarding the tax treatment of research and development (R&D) expenses, which impacts a number of West Michigan organizations. There exists some proposed legislation that would foster a conducive environment in many types of organizations to expand investments, however it requires action from Congress to build momentum.

The Next Fly-In

While it sounds like the Chamber is still early in the planning process, there seems to be growing interest in making visits to D.C. from our region a more regular event. I would encourage anyone from our region, but especially business and organizational leaders, to consider the trip.

