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For Immediate Release

AN HISTORIC MOMENT: VILLAGE AND TOWNSHIP JOIN FORCES

Onekama, Michigan – Applause rang out from the Village Hall on a frigid December 17th night marking an historic moment and a year of work to unify two governments around visions for a community they share: Onekama, known as a “place of great beauty” to Native Americans centuries ago. The applause followed a unanimous vote by the Council of the Village of Onekama and the Board of Trustees of Onekama Township to form a joint planning commission, only the seventh such body formed in Michigan. Village Council members include Dave Combs, Ken Bauer, Bob Blackmore, Ralph Drumm, Alice Hendricks, Kim Lagerquist and Dr. Donald Schwing. Representatives on the Township Board are David Meister, Helen Mathieu LaVone Beebe, Roland Clement and James Wisniski.

Uniquely positioned at the “*Gateway to M-22*,” the Village of Onekama and Onekama Township are the southern link of the M-22 corridor that loops around the Lake Michigan shoreline from Onekama and Manistee County north through Benzie and Leelanau Counties to Traverse City. The communities share the Portage Lake watershed and a population that has grown at three times the State average. They are also united by Lake Michigan and miles of sugar-sand shoreline; swaths of woodlands, wetlands, ridges and dunes; special agricultural lands and picturesque farms; distinct retail and restaurant enterprises as well as a first-class K-12 school system -- all blending together in a look, feel and place that are truly special.

It was those “special” qualities that brought the two governments together in January 2008 to explore ways to formally partner to plan for their future, with technical and financial support through the Manistee County Community Foundation and the Manistee-based Alliance for Economic Success.

In February 2008, the communities issued a request for proposals, seeking a consultant to help develop a Joint Master Plan for the Village and Township. In April, the firm Beckett & Raeder was selected. Since then, the process to develop the joint plan has included two community visioning sessions, the formation of a community leadership team to guide the process, a community open house and a draft “Onekama Community Master Plan” that is now available for input, leading to official action in 2009.

“It’s been a remarkable process, one for the textbooks on collaborative planning between local governments,” says John Iacoangelli who facilitates the joint planning effort for Beckett & Raeder. “The community took the crucial first step by recognizing the value of working together. Over 200 people, including students, have provided constructive, thoughtful input and the leadership team has kept the process on track. As a result of the community unity, the decision was made to take the first implementation step and form the joint Community Planning Commission even before the joint master plan was completed.”

Iacoangelli says that the community is forming a plan bent on action and results. Examples included in the draft plan include:

- Completing a zoning ordinance overhaul in 2009
- Developing a “Gateway to M-22” business and corridor plan, hopefully backed by federal funding during 2009, that would include a community trail and pathway plan and system
- Completing a sanitary sewer master plan and securing funding for systems to stop pollutants to Portage Lake from runoff and tributaries, in keeping with the new State-approved Portage Lake Watershed Forever Plan
- Developing a Downtown Development Authority, including completion of a streetscape and a targeted business attraction program
- Renovating and expanding waterfront parks
- Implementing a “Safe Route to Schools” program
- Building community-wide high speed internet infrastructure

“Funding from the Manistee County Community Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Michigan Coastal Management Program and Oleson Foundation have been instrumental in the collaborative effort, along with Village and Township resources and the donation of hundreds of hours of time by people who care about this special place,” said Tim Ervin of the Alliance for Economic Success and Manistee County Community Foundation. “We hope to help the Onkama community secure implementation funding through sources like the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, the expected economic stimulus funding and others to ramp up plan implementation. This is a working model of how governments can work together to realize economies of scale and unify around a vision and a plan where everybody wins.”