



Photos by Tony Wittkowski / HP staff

Cornerstone Alliance President Rob Cleveland talks to visiting site consultants on a patio of the Welcome Center at Cook nuclear power plant in Lake Township on Thursday. Consultants were given a tour of the plant before eating dinner with a view of a sunset over the lake.

Making a pitch for Berrien

Economic development, business relocation flows through site consultants

By **TONY WITTKOWSKI**
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BRIDGMAN — Seated on an open veranda at the welcome center of Cook nuclear power plant, several guests eat dinner together while treated to a prominent view of a sunset cast over Lake Michigan.

The weather is mild and the conversation is genial among visitors.

Steve Arwood, CEO of the Michigan Economic Development Corp., welcomes the out-of-towners to Southwest Michigan with an introductory speech, before asking if anyone has ever had dinner next to a power plant.

A few raise their hands.



Cornerstone Alliance President Rob Cleveland listens while Steve Arwood, Michigan Economic Development Corp., speaks to visiting site consultants with Cook nuclear power plant as a backdrop to an evening dinner Thursday in Lake Township.

The visitors are site consultants, who are often hired by businesses looking to relocate. They were invited to see the best slice of life

Berrien County has to offer over the course of three days.

The dinner and tour of the Bridgman plant with its “Pure

Michigan view” was only a portion of a collaborative effort strung together by the MEDC, Cornerstone Alliance, and Indiana Michigan Power Co., which owns the Cook plant.

Cornerstone Alliance President Rob Cleveland was playing host at the dinner, having already played golf with a few consultants prior to the start of the Senior PGA Championship.

The site consultants who arrived for the golf tournament weekend have the opportunity to do these things all over the world, Cleveland said. In the U.S., consultants are invited to Final Four tournaments, World Series and Super Bowls.

“We really think this is our best way to leverage the tournament,” Cleveland said. “Due to its branding and global name recognition,

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it allows us the opportunity to go out and bring in these consultants. While we're competing to bring companies in, we're also competing for (the consultant's) attention."

The majority of the consultants in town until Saturday work for real estate companies. Often when corporations decide to locate elsewhere in the country, they contract with those real estate companies to help search for good locations. The real estate companies make recommendations based on the input gathered by consultants.

'Fam tours'

Cleveland said Cornerstone invited consultants the other two times the Senior PGA was held in Benton Harbor.

"We've really elevated the effort in 2016 because the key is not just bringing in consultants. It's bringing in consultants who are doing legitimate deals around the country," he said. "We want to show people who are actually talking to companies."

The consultants who stayed in town came from Dallas, Indianapolis and South Carolina. Cleveland said there was also a company on hand that was considering a relocation.

Communities across the country do what's called

"fam tours," which is short for familiarization tours.

"For communities that don't have the Senior PGA as an attraction, it is incredibly difficult," Cleveland said. "A lot of times you have to pay the consultants to come in. We didn't pay anybody to come in here, which shows the draw of the Senior PGA."

The participating economic development organizations asked these consultants to visit the Twin Cities area from Thursday afternoon until Saturday morning.

The itinerary was set to provide a private dinner Thursday night at Cook plant, a Friday morning visitation at Whirlpool Corp.'s global headquarters, a CEO roundtable at Hanson Mold in the afternoon, followed by a stop at Lake Michigan College and the new housing complex Lakeland is building.

Throughout these stops, Cleveland makes his pitch for Berrien County and Arwood talks up the state.

But it wasn't all business.

For Friday night's dinner at a select winery, consultants were able to chat with Benton Harbor and St. Joseph mayors Marcus Muhammad and Mike Garey.

"Any community in the country can show them a cornfield," Cleveland said. "They want to see what's unique. They want to meet members of the community."

Networking for business

There are two ways companies make decisions in the midst of relocating, Arwood says. They either internalize the decision or they retain site consultants to find the best location.

About 30 percent of the inbound investment that the MEDC deals with comes through site consultants. Because of that, Arwood shows them different parts of the state.

Amanda Taylor was one of several consultants at Cook plant on Thursday. Taylor works for McCallum Sweeney, which is based in Greenville, S.C. McCallum Sweeney is the

same firm that certified the Meadowbrook and Yore site in Benton Harbor – the only MSC certified site in the entire state.

While Taylor's firm does a lot of fam tours, she only attends two or three a year. Because of the time commitment, Taylor limits how many she goes to. Many times her clients need to move quickly when they start the site selection process because they're already behind in terms of the date they need to be operational.

During her visits, Taylor said she looks for communities that invest to make sure land is ready for development and that have a solid workforce established.

"When they hire us to find sites, the real estate side is a big part of our process," she said. "But the labor side is just as important. The labor market is tight because the unemployment rate is like 3 or 4 percent in a lot of areas. Companies are looking for a location where they can find people that they need."

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