



Betsy Alles asks, 'How do you Sheboygan?'

Betsy Alles returned to the lakeshore region last year after a 20-month stint heading up the State YMCA of Michigan. Before that, she ran the Manitowoc County Chamber for almost three years. Now the executive director of the Sheboygan County Chamber of Commerce, Alles sat down with Insight Editor Margaret LeBrun to discuss why it's important that people in Wisconsin learn how to boast.

I CONSIDER MYSELF TO BE THE hired natural braggart for Sheboygan County. I came in from the outside and I can see things that people over the years have begun to take for granted. I carry with me a list of about 37 things that my husband and I have done since we moved here, and I challenge every group I address by asking, "How many have you seen lately?"

The lakefront has an absolutely fabulous river walk, and at any given time of the year — even October through February — you can see surfers and sailboarders. Road America is an incredible asset to our county that brings in hundreds of thousands of

people — it has everything from classic sports car events to classic motorcycle and NASCAR events. And then we have Elkhart Lake, which I call the Victorian village of resorts. People tell us our dining is as good as Chicago; we have some wonderful chefs that come from the Kohler tradition. We have five of the top 100 golf courses in the country here in Sheboygan County.

"How do you Sheboygan?" is the name of our tourism campaign this year. It's meant to be promoted outside our county, but we've also decided that you have to work from the inside out. First, we need to convince people here to brag a little. It's kind

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of an unusual thing in Wisconsin — people are not used to doing it. So I actually teach people how to brag.

I started a column in the local paper last week about how I “Sheboygan.” One of my favorites is just to wander downtown and see the folks who run the shops. We have a lot of unique entrepreneurs there. I live right downtown, I walk to work. I also love to bicycle, so I have bicycled out to our air museum and to our state park. This is how I “Sheboygan.”

Agriculture and business are also important here. One of our strongest points is the number of family-owned enterprises in our county that have deep roots, multigenerational owners, and they've weathered the recession fairly well. Companies like Sargento, Sartori, Johnsonville, Kohler. Here's an example of what I love most about my job: I get to tour these companies, in the

company of the general manager or CEO. And what I see is the employer truly cares about the employees. They know them by name; they know what's going on in their lives. The employees have an incredible work ethic. I sincerely believe that's the heart of the business success in our county.

This job I started March 1, 2010. I have a long history in corporate communications; my hometown is Battle Creek, Mich., and my last corporate job was in Cincinnati. Probably the most pertinent is that I was the chamber director in Manitowoc County from 2005 to 2008. I came here with my husband, who was recruited by Kohler as a staff engineer.

The way that our chamber is kind of flexing and changing is the most exciting to me. We are focusing our board on engaging with our businesses directly, which means part of their

role now will be to convene members in different sectors and meet at least a couple of times a year.

Last August, we moved our offices into a 15-year old building that we renovated. And about a year ago, the Sheboygan County Economic Development Corporation got off the ground; it's headed up by Patrick Drinan, and we work very closely, collaborating with them. They've been established about a year; we've been established 97 years. The business retention piece is important to all of us and everyone is concerned about retaining our businesses.

I love to bring people together. What I really look forward to is that every business owner I've talked to says that things are getting better and will be better in the next five years. There's nothing like coming into a job on the upswing. ①

Grant Thornton is pleased to welcome Jeff French to the Wisconsin practice



Jeff French recently joined Grant Thornton as an audit partner and brings over 23 years of public accounting experience to the firm.

Jeff has served public and private companies in manufacturing, distribution, service and technology industries. He has experience with entities operating nationally and internationally, private equity-based companies and public companies.

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