

The Greater Grand Rapids Area



The Region

The vitality of Grand Rapids stems from the hardworking traits of its highly skilled workforce. The three-time “All American City” ranks 50th in the nation in population and is one of the fastest growing areas in the Great Lakes region. Located 30 miles from Lake Michigan’s sandy beaches, Grand Rapids’ major highways place it only three hours from Detroit or Chicago. Contributing to continuing expansion are a diverse manufacturing base, low unemployment rate, healthcare costs below the national average, affordable housing and a reputation as a good place to raise a family.

Diversity in the advanced manufacturing base cushions the region from the impact of fluctuations in business cycles. The area’s ten largest employers represent eight different industries. In total, the Grand Rapids metropolitan area is home to 19 of the 20 manufacturing industries with no one industry dominating the more than 2,200 metropolitan area manufacturers. Superior employer-employee relations contribute to the regions business vitality. Similarly, emphasis on technology transfer, ongoing training, work ethic, and dedication to employees are key elements that put four West Michigan manufacturers on the list of “The Best 100 Companies to Work For in America.”

The Business-Led Organizations

The Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce (GRACC) and The Right Place, Inc. are the two dominant business organizations in the region. GRACC is the premier business membership organization in the region with more than 3,000 businesses from Western Michigan. GRACC is an advocate for the business community and attempts to strengthen the regional economy by promoting local businesses and industries.

The Right Place, Inc. is a regional, nonprofit economic development organization whose constituents consist of investors from small and large companies. Its mission is to promote area economic growth through high-quality jobs, productivity, and technology. Lately, The Right Place, Inc. has made a strong effort to attract and grow the manufacturing industry of Greater Grand Rapids.

The Regional Business-Civic Landscape

The Right Place, Inc. and GRACC often work cooperatively to improve the economic prosperity of the region; they compliment each other through strategies that are aimed at strengthening the regional economy. For example, The Right Place spends a significant amount of its resources attracting firms to the region, developing emerging industries and leading the way on manufacturing innovation strategies. GRACC supports The Right Place’s work by promoting emerging industries, which helps The Right Place, Inc.

in attracting firms to the region. The Right Place, Inc. and GRACC also work cooperatively to provide a voice for industry on regional issues such as workforce development, roadway and transportation infrastructure, and in promoting regional economic development. This cooperative relationship between GRACC and The Right Place, Inc. has helped the Grand Rapids area develop a strong manufacturing base precisely at a time when other regions are struggling to strengthen their manufacturing industry and retain jobs.

Overall, cooperation among the business-led organizations in the Greater Grand Rapids area is strong. This cooperation is not just among the larger business-civic organizations in the region; on occasion, GRACC will partner with local chambers of commerce on specific issues that may not necessarily be regional in nature. However, when it comes to the larger regional issues and regional economy, GRACC and The Right Place, Inc. are the two most prominent business-based organizations in the region.

Business Leadership

According to local leaders, there has been a high level of business involvement in civic issues over the years. However many feel business leaders' involvement in civic issues has started to decline, due to a weak economy and a constant change in business leadership. As one business executive stated, "CEOs are very active in the area. They've been heavily involved in improvement of the public schools — it can be seen as a partnership. Over the last year or so, the levels of attention and time spent have decreased because of economic concerns, but involvement has not at all gone away." Another business executive said, "The level of cooperation is somewhat high [in Grand Rapids]. More time needs to be spent on getting to know the business leaders, as there are not as many who are from here, but are only here a few years." These factors have made it more challenging for the top business leaders in the region to connect with each other and get involved in local/regional civic issues.