

# Island summit on Mackinac “was great”

By Will Craig

The 2019 meeting of the Great Lakes Island Alliance “was great” according to Mary Martin Andersen who attended that meeting on Mackinac Island, October 20-23. Some 126 people from 14 islands met to discuss common issues.

Representing Washington Island were Martin and Mary Martin Andersen and Jeff and Ti Heal. That same foursome had represented our Island last year, too. All were eager to return because they learned much last year and because they made so many good connections with people from other islands. Jeff says, “We share concerns over common problems and share solutions when they are found.”

The opening session began with a shout-out to Washington Island from our peers on Madeline Island for loaning them a fire truck following a fire in March that destroyed seven trucks. “That’s an example of what we’re here for,” said the speaker. “We’re like family.”

What followed were two full days of sessions on economic development; housing; health, welfare, and safety; community organizations; infrastructure; and community development. Mary Martin Andersen, being president of the Washington Island Chamber of Commerce, was especially interested in tourism. She learned that Mackinac Island has a room tax like we do. Among other things, that tax pays for significant

flowers and other things that make Mackinac attractive. They also use fees collected for trash disposal.

Indeed, Mackinac Island (pop. 492) provided other examples of solutions that appealed to our team. Jeff Heal talked about the innovative work of their schools, which are even smaller than ours, but augments their curriculum by connecting students to virtual classrooms; apparently Michigan supports virtual classroom in their state. Hands-on classes, like shop, will see students spending 1-2 weeks off-island to get that experience.

Martin Andersen, member of the Washington Island town board, was impressed by how Mackinac handles their waste. Significant effort goes into recycling – including composting biodegradable waste, crushing cans, and separating plastics. Treated sludge from their sewage treatment plant and compost are spread locally.

Not all is well on Mackinac. Housing costs are very high and a real problem for public employees. The city solves its problem by renting city-owned housing to employees at a below-market rate. The school tries to address the problem by paying teachers a \$40 thousand starting salary and hoping they can find something they can afford.

Despite “crappy” weather, the Andersens and Heals took field trips to Mackinac’s solid waste disposal site, airport, and sewage treatment plant. Like all trips on Mackinac Island,

travel was by horse-drawn carriage, because motor vehicles are mostly prohibited. The trip was led by Mike Olson, Mackinac Island’s Public Work Director.

They also visited Mackinac State Park, a beautiful area that had been America’s second national park, just after Yellowstone, before the land was transferred to the state in 1895. They were hosted by the park commissioner, an indication of the stature GLIA has already attained in its short life.

Jeff Heal, an active member of the Washington Island Lions Club, was especially interested talking with Lions club members from other islands. It was a pleasant surprise to learn that a central part of the Mackinac Island welcome session included the head of their Lions Club, Lisa Powers, Heal said.

An even more of a pleasant surprise was to learn that Powers is also chairwoman of the Mackinac Bands of Chippewa and Ottawa Indians. One of the aims of Lions is to “create and foster a spirit of understanding among the peoples of the world,”

Heal explained.

Next year’s annual GLIA summit will be on Put-In-Bay, South Bass Island – one of four GLIA island members in western Lake Erie. It is scheduled for the first week in October. Between now and then, GLIA members will connect on monthly phone calls and online discussions over critical issues.

Jeff Heal is looking forward to next year’s meeting. Aside from a field trip to the Mackinac Island treatment plant, there was nothing on the 2019 agenda about handling sewage. He sees it as an important issue and would like a serious discussion by GLIA members.

Information about each GLIA member island is presented in a “Great Lakes Islands Showcase” section of the GLIA website (search for “GLIA Islands.”) The wonderful photos in the Washington Island listing were provided by Door Guide Publishing, which supports the Chamber of Commerce’s WashingtonIsland.com website.



After the GLIA Summit, Mary and Martin Andersen and Ti and Jeff Heal wait for the horse-drawn taxi that will take them to the ferry leaving Mackinac Island for St. Ignace, Michigan, and the long drive home. PHOTO SUBMITTED

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