

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONTACT

Carla Sones, President and Interim CEO

269.553.9588

csones@southwestmichiganfirst.com

Southwest Michigan First Appoints New CEO

Community engagement, inclusivity and commitment to improve economic development and employment opportunities for all guided the search process

Kalamazoo, Michigan – The Southwest Michigan First Board of Directors has selected Jonas R. Peterson, CECD, to serve as chief executive officer for the Southwest Michigan regional economic development organization. Peterson’s appointment follows a six-month national search that prioritized community input and inclusivity.

“After a rigorous national search, Jonas Peterson rose to the top as the individual who most thoroughly embodies the skills, experience and attributes identified by our community as critical for success in this position,” said Southwest Michigan First board member and CEO Search Committee Chair Bill Parfet. “As president and CEO of the Las Vegas Global Economic Alliance, he led the start up and explosive growth of what is now the largest nonprofit economic development organization in Nevada and one of the most productive community and economic development organizations in the southwestern United States.”

During his tenure at LVGEA, Peterson led a team that helped over 250 companies create more than 29,000 high-wage jobs between 2012 and 2021. He advanced local and national strategies for diversity, equity, and inclusion while integrating DEI within all LVGEA organizational work plans. He also implemented next-gen strategies for talent development, target industry advancement and business attraction, retention and expansion while working with statewide partners to help elevate Nevada from 50th in per capita job creation in 2013 to 1st in the nation prior to the pandemic.

“Jonas’s credentials are second to none and right for our community,” said Bill Manns, Southwest Michigan First board member and CEO Search Committee member. “The board charged us with identifying an exemplary slate of candidates, and the Southwest Michigan community unequivocally stated they wanted a visionary and inclusive leader with a proven history in economic development and in building partnerships with leaders in business, government and the community. Jonas exceeds all those criteria.”

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In April, the board appointed a CEO Search Committee* charged with leading an inclusive process to attract a diverse roster of highly qualified candidates. The committee engaged Jorgenson Consulting, a leading national executive search firm specializing in economic and community development, to assist with the search.

To guide its efforts, the search committee also conducted an extensive community survey soliciting input from 655 participants across 469 community organizations to uncover the key attributes that stakeholders believe the CEO should possess. Attributes that rose to the top were:

- A strong understanding of the economic development ecosystem and how to work within a multi-jurisdictional region to strengthen commerce.
- History of successful leadership that is visionary, diverse, inclusive, accessible, equitable and authentic.
- Ability to develop and sustain trusting relationships with leadership of companies, national and international site selectors, elected officials and community partners.

"I share Southwest Michigan First's conviction that the greatest force for change is a job," said Peterson. "That's the foundation of every business and talent attraction, retention, and development program I've led, and it's more important than ever as we drive an inclusive post-pandemic economic recovery in Southwest Michigan. I'm honored to join the Southwest Michigan First team, and I look forward to fostering new partnerships throughout the region."

Prior to joining LVGEA, Peterson served for three years as the president & CEO of the Santa Clarita Valley (CA) Economic Development Corporation, leading the start-up and operations of a public-private partnership to advance the economy in one of California's fastest growing regions. Before that, he served as director of the Mohave County Community and Economic Development Department in Kingman, Arizona.

He holds a Master of Professional Studies in Community and Economic Development from Penn State University, a Master of Business Administration from North Dakota State University, a Postbaccalaureate Certificate in Community and Economic Development from Penn State and a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Economics from North Dakota State. He completed executive leadership training programs at Stanford Graduate School of Business, Oxford University Saïd Business School and Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government. He is a Certified Economic Developer (CEd) through the International Economic Development Council and currently serves as the Council's vice chair.

Peterson is slated to start at Southwest Michigan First on January 5, 2022.

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*CEO Search Committee Members

- Bill Parfet, Committee Chair, Chairman & CEO, Northwood Group
- Bill Manns, President & CEO, Bronson Healthcare
- Jeffrey O'Brien, President & CEO, WSI
- Shawn Premer, Chief HR Officer, Consumers Credit Union
- Kelly Presta, Vice President, Sturgis Molded Products
- Sean Welsh, Regional President, West Michigan, PNC Financial Services Group
- Lynn Chen-Zhang, Partner & CEO, Zhang Financial

ABOUT SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN FIRST

Founded in 1999 on the principle that the greatest force for change is a job, Southwest Michigan First is an organization of privately funded economic development advisors who act as the catalyst for economic growth in Southwest Michigan. For more information about Southwest Michigan First, please visit us at www.southwestmichiganfirst.com, or call 269.553.9588.

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