

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 30, 2026

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Jennifer Owens Named Chief Executive Officer of Southwest Michigan First

Nationally recognized economic development leader returns to the region to guide its next phase of scaled, measurable growth

KALAMAZOO, Mich. — The Southwest Michigan First board of directors has selected Jennifer Owens to serve as chief executive officer of the regional economic development organization. A nationally recognized economic development executive with more than 20 years of experience leading multicounty, market-driven organizations, Owens will guide Southwest Michigan First as the region transitions from strong momentum to scaled, measurable regional impact. She succeeds Jonas Peterson, who departed earlier this year, and interim CEO Carla Sones, who has served in that role since Feb. 27, 2026. Owens is expected to begin on Aug. 17, 2026.

Owens returns to Southwest Michigan First, where she previously served as vice president. She joins from Lakeshore Advantage in Holland, where she has served as president since 2014.

“Jennifer brings exactly the combination of vision, discipline and proven results our region needs for this next chapter,” said Greg Dobson, chair of Southwest Michigan First and chief operating officer and principal of AVB. “She has built data-driven regional strategies, earned the confidence of investors and site selectors and delivered measurable impact at every stop in her career. Just as meaningful, she knows this region. Our board is confident she is the right leader to execute The Road to Regional Prosperity strategic action plan and position Southwest Michigan as a top-tier destination for investment and talent.”

During her tenure leading the two-county Lakeshore Advantage region, Owens supported expansion projects totaling more than \$2 billion in private investment and the creation of more than 2,300 jobs. She also grew the organization’s revenue fourfold and raised more than \$10 million to launch The Next Center, a regional innovation and entrepreneurship hub now home to more than 50 early-stage startups.

“Jennifer has been a transformational leader for Lakeshore Advantage, and we could not be prouder to see her step into this next chapter,” said Jeff Stutz, chair of the Lakeshore Advantage board of directors. “Under her leadership, we built a high-performing team and a durable foundation of data-driven strategy, trusted investor relationships and measurable community impact. That foundation is exactly why Lakeshore Advantage is so well positioned for what comes next. Our board and talented staff will carry this momentum forward without missing a step. We are grateful for all Jennifer has built here and wish her every success.”

Earlier in her career, Owens held leadership roles at Ann Arbor SPARK and spent a decade at the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, where she served as vice president of business retention, primary media spokesperson and public information officer. She is a Certified Economic Developer, a graduate of the Advanced Economic Development Leadership program and holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from Michigan State University.

"I share Southwest Michigan First's conviction that the greatest force for change is a job," said Owens. "My connection to this region is both professional and personal. My grandfather owned a die-casting company in Bangor that helped put me through college. I am now the proud mother of two Western Michigan University students. That experience made economic development real to me, not as a concept, but as an opportunity that changes families and strengthens communities. I'm honored to lead Southwest Michigan First and to serve as a unifying voice for the region's next phase of growth."

About Southwest Michigan First

Southwest Michigan First is a privately funded, 501(c)(3), community and economic development organization whose mission is to increase economic prosperity for all in Southwest Michigan. Founded in 1999 on the principle that *the greatest force for change is a job*, the organization works across all industries to advance economic, workforce and community development initiatives throughout the seven counties that make up the Southwest Michigan region.

Learn more at southwestmichiganfirst.com.

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