

The Review

The official magazine of the  michigan municipal league

Spring 2025

Houghton Takes the Trophy

2024 Community Excellence Award Winner



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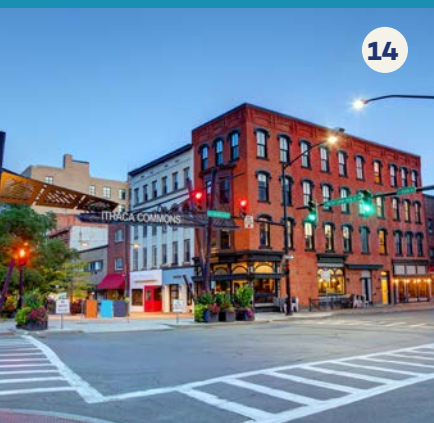
The Review

Spring 2025

Volume 98, Number 2

The official magazine of the
 michigan municipal league

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- Lukas Axford – Beautification Volunteer
- Kaitie Koski – Administrative Assistant

Front row L to R:

- Tyler Axford – Beautification Volunteer
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- Martie Leonard – Beautification Volunteer
- Jan Cole – City Councilor (and Beautification Volunteer)
- Amy Zawada – Community and Business Development Director



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Champions of Local

Executive Director's Message

The words of Bob Dylan (or Timothée Chalamet, depending on whom you ask), are back on everyone's lips again: The times they are a-changin'.

Indeed.

Whether we agree or disagree with the new administration in Washington, one thing is clear: Big changes are coming to Michigan that could impact everything from the auto industry to education and health care. We must be ready to avoid the pitfalls and take advantage of the opportunities. There'll be plenty of both.

And that means finding ways to work together. We all saw the past legislative year end with a tumultuous lame duck session fraught with party infighting and cross-aisle antagonism, as all those forces came together in a perfect storm that some labelled "toxic" at worst and "chaotic" at best.

Now, with so many big issues left on the table and Michigan's seesaw politics taking another huge tilt, that's all got to change. Like sailors on an uncertain sea, we need to have an all-hands-on-deck attitude, working together to steer the best course forward for Michigan's future.

And the best way to do that is to ensure that Michigan's municipalities are strong and successful and resilient. It doesn't matter if you're Republican or Democrat or a purple rhinoceros—hopefully, both sides of the aisle can see that supporting our cities, villages, and urban centers supports our citizens.

When our communities thrive, our citizens thrive . . . because our communities are the people.

That's why Capital Conference was more important than ever this year. I'd like to personally thank every one of you who joined us at CapCon in March. It truly set the tone for the level of engagement and energy needed to move the dial in the direction our great state takes to shape the future of our communities.

So now it's time to build on that momentum and push forward with our legislative priorities for the year ahead. In this issue, our advocacy team will share their insights into the challenges we face and the opportunities we'll embrace.

There is a great deal we want to accomplish:

- A Revenue Sharing Trust Fund to protect your ability to provide the essential services your citizens need.
- A Neighborhood Roads Fund to care for the streets outside every resident's front door.
- Ongoing investment in the Revitalization and Placemaking (RAP) Program to create the vibrant spaces that attract and retain residents so our communities can continue to grow and thrive.
- And so much more, from protecting locals' ability to regulate short-term rentals, to implementing an Employer Housing Tax Credit.

But to make any of this happen, we need the active involvement of you, our members. That's why this issue features the League's recent Policy Committee Kick-Off at the Capitol in Lansing. The article includes interviews with League members who have served on committees before and those who are new, and how this involvement informs and impacts their work as local officials.

You'll also read about the newly passed Ground Emergency Medical Transport (GEMT) bill, and last year's CEA winner, the City of Houghton.

We'll also introduce you to the MML Foundation's new Michigan Subnational Diplomacy Initiative. The working group seeks to position Michigan as a leader in leveraging international partnerships to forge global economic opportunities. The official launch celebration at the US Department of State in January was attended in person and virtually by more than a dozen Michigan leaders.

As municipal leaders, you are our communities' strongest advocates and the champions of local control. We need you right here on the frontlines with us, side by side, as we take on the key legislative issues confronting us all in the months ahead. Your engagement is our firepower. Without your voices, we are shouting into the void.

As Dylan—or Chalamet—might say: Michigan's future is blowin' in the wind. It's up to us which way that wind blows.



Dan Gilmartin

League Executive Director and CEO
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League Finds Success in Chaotic Lame Duck

By John LaMacchia

The 2023–24 legislative session closed with one of the strangest and most chaotic lame ducks in recent memory, and maybe ever. The final few weeks were filled with ups and downs and the type of drama meant for a Hollywood script. An entire caucus walked off the floor and didn't return, individual legislators didn't show up, and a 29-hour marathon session ended the year. In the end, several big issues were left on the table, and disappointment, frustration, and anger could be felt throughout the Capitol.

From the League's perspective, we were still able to get a big win amidst all the chaos and held off a dozen issues we opposed. Unfortunately, we also had some of our biggest priorities fall short because of the disorder.

Our biggest victory of lame duck was the passage of the Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT) Program. Major items we were able to defeat included legislation that would have required minimum staffing be a mandatory subject of collective bargaining, and housing bills that eroded local control.

Our top priority of establishing the Revenue Sharing Trust Fund died in the Senate, and the Short-Term Rental Regulation Act that would have maintained our right to regulate short-term rentals and institute a six percent excise tax on all short-term rentals died in the House.

The biggest item of concern was the passage of House Bill 6058. This legislation modifies the Publicly Funded Health Insurance Contribution Act (PA 152). While we were able to hold off a full repeal, there were modifications made to the

hard cap and a flipping of the 80/20 cost share from a ceiling to a floor that are problematic for our members.

In an odd turn of events, this bill was not presented to Governor Whitmer before the close of session. Since then, the new Speaker of the House has not presented the bill, and the Senate has pursued litigation to compel the Speaker to do so. This issue continues to remain in limbo and there is no clear outcome currently.

The inaction in lame duck on major items such as economic development, road funding, and changes to tipped wage and earned sick time laws are certain to carry over into the first months of the new legislative session.

Here is a recap of the major legislative issues from lame duck.

Big Win Opens Door for Millions in Federal Funding for Michigan Communities!

- *Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT) Program: HB 5695*
 - HB 5695 will authorize Michigan's participation in the federal Ground Emergency Medical Transportation Program. This is a voluntary opt-in supplemental reimbursement program administered by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) for eligible public ground emergency medical transportation providers.
 - This legislation will bring tens of millions of federal dollars into Michigan that we have been missing out on and will help improve public safety services.

“Your constant engagement on key legislative issues is the number one reason for our success, and we thank you for that.”

Protecting Local Control, Resources, and Our Ability to Govern

We opposed and successfully prevented the following bills from passing.

- *Minimum Staffing: HB 4688 and SB 1167*
 - This legislation would have required minimum staffing levels to be a mandatory subject of collective bargaining between the public employer and the representative of its police and fire department employees. Minimum staffing levels also would have been subject to arbitration.
- *Housing: House Bills 6095, 6096, 6097, and 6098*
 - These bills were an attempt to preempt local control and reduce regulation, and were being touted as a way to reduce costs and help address Michigan’s housing crisis through housing reform at the local level.
- *Water Affordability: Senate Bills 549–554, 980 and House Bills 5088–5092, 6228*
 - These bills would have created the low-income water residential affordability program and fund. Revenue for the fund would be generated by a \$2 per month fee on retail water meter fees assessed on all residential water customers in the state.
- *Aggregates: House Bills 4526, 4527, 4528, 6108, 6109, 6110, and 6111*
 - This legislation would have stripped local control over the permitting of aggregate mines and undercut years of court precedent.
- *Polluter Pay: Senate Bills 605 and 606*
 - These bills would have created new standards for cleanups that could increase costs and liability, and potentially negatively impact brownfield developments.
- *Video Franchise Fees: House Bill 4965*
 - Exempted streaming services from the Video Services Act and specified that they are not required to pay franchise fees.
- *Electric Vehicle Charging Stations: House Bill 4708*
 - Exempted electric vehicle charging stations from paying Personal Property Tax.
- *Continuing Care: House Bill 5380*
 - Exempted continuing care facilities from paying property taxes.
- *Postmark Property Taxes: House Bill 5797*
 - Required all cities, villages, and townships to accept the postmark as the date of receipt for property tax payments.



League members tour the Capitol Building following the annual Legislative Committee Kick-Off Meeting in January.

Priorities That Did Not Pass

These bills did not make it across the finish line, but they will continue to be a top priority moving forward.

- *Revenue Sharing Trust Fund: House Bills 4274 and 4275*
 - Would have established the Revenue Sharing Trust Fund, dedicated 8.7 percent of the four percent sales tax to the fund, and protected and secured resources for local government.
- *Short-Term Rentals: House Bill: House Bill 5438*
 - Would have created the Short-Term Rental Regulation Act, maintained a local unit of government’s right to regulate STRs, and created a six percent STR excise tax to assist municipalities with the public costs of tourism.
- *Public Safety Trust Fund: House Bills 4605 and 4606*
 - Would have established the Public Safety and Violence Prevention Trust Fund and dedicated \$75 million on an annual basis to the fund.
- *Stormwater Utilities: Senate Bill 660*
 - This bill would have created the Stormwater Management Utility Act as guidance for local units of government should they utilize their existing authority to establish a stormwater management utility.

Finally, we would be remiss not to point out one other major success: The engagement from our membership. We called upon you several times in lame duck, and every time you answered. Your constant engagement on key legislative issues is the number one reason for our success, and we thank you for that. You proved once again that local voices matter! 📌

John LaMacchia is the director of state and federal affairs for the League. You can reach John at 517-908-0303 or jlamacchia@mml.org.



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GEMT IMPLEMENTATION:

What Local Governments Need to Know

A Conversation with Chief Kevin Edmond

By Herasanna Richards

The passage of legislation enabling the Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT) program in Michigan marks a major milestone for local governments and public EMS providers. GEMT is a federal Medicaid reimbursement program designed to offset uncompensated costs for emergency medical transports provided by publicly owned and operated ambulance services.

Now that the legislation has passed, what comes next? How should municipalities, fire departments, and municipal leaders prepare for implementation?

To answer these questions, I sat down with Chief Kevin Edmond, an experienced fire chief and EMS leader, who has worked with GEMT implementation in other states and is now navigating the process in Michigan.

Q: Can you start by sharing your background and experience with GEMT?

Chief Edmond: I've been in fire-based EMS for several decades, starting in the mid-1980s. In 2017, I became a fire chief, and during my time in Illinois, I saw firsthand how the GEMT program could benefit municipalities. Illinois launched GEMT in 2019, and at first, my agency wasn't ready to participate due to the short 30-day window for submitting cost reports and documentation. However, GEMT allows agencies to opt-in annually, which gave us time to prepare.

In 2020, we joined the program, and I initially projected \$230,000 in additional revenue. That first year, the actual amount came in at about \$270,000—money that could be used for staffing, equipment, and operational costs.

EMS services are costly, and Medicaid reimbursement rates remain low. The cost of an EMS transport for my department is around \$1,600 per run, while the average Medicaid reimbursement is only \$326. Meanwhile, EMS costs have risen 10 to 15 percent post-pandemic, while revenue has only increased five percent. That growing gap puts financial pressure on municipalities, and GEMT helps provide much-needed support.

Q: What is GEMT, and how does it work?

Chief Edmond: GEMT is a federal program that allows public EMS providers to receive supplemental Medicaid reimbursements to help cover the actual cost of emergency

medical transports. It applies only to publicly owned and operated EMS agencies that provide ambulance transport services.

The program works on a cost reporting model using a direct payment methodology, meaning agencies document their actual EMS-related expenses, and the federal government matches a percentage of those costs—this is known as the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP). In Michigan, the FMAP match is 65 percent, meaning for every dollar of cost incurred, the federal government reimburses 65 cents, while the remaining 35 cents is covered upfront by local agencies but then reimbursed through the program.

Q: Now that GEMT is law in Michigan, what should local governments do?

Chief Edmond: The most important next step is education—for fire chiefs, city managers, finance directors, and municipal leaders. Agencies need to understand how the program works, what costs are eligible, and how to accurately report their data.

A statewide education initiative should happen to ensure agencies have a clear path forward. Additionally, we need to work closely with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) to establish a clear implementation framework that aligns with best practices from other states.

Q: What data should municipalities start collecting now?

Chief Edmond: Agencies should begin compiling:

- **Payroll and labor costs** for EMS personnel
- **Operational expenses** (fuel, medical supplies, training)
- **EMS call volume and transport numbers for Medicaid** (fee for service and managed care) **and all other payors**
- **Equipment depreciation and maintenance costs**

Many agencies already collect this data as it is part of Medicare Ground Ambulance Data Collection cost reporting requirements. Some departments may have completed cost reporting exercises without realizing it—so checking with finance departments is a good first step.

Additionally, municipalities can use GEMT revenue to:

- **Hire and retain** more EMTs and paramedics.
- **Invest in training** and professional development.
- **Purchase new ambulances and medical equipment.**

Q: What's your final advice for municipal leaders just beginning this process?

Chief Edmond: Start the conversation now. City managers and elected officials should sit down with their fire chiefs or EMS directors to assess whether GEMT is a good fit. If agencies have already done the Medicare Ground Ambulance Data Collection cost reporting, that's a great starting point.

Most importantly, don't leave money on the table. This program exists to support public EMS services, and while participation is voluntary, many municipalities that initially hesitated later realized how valuable the funding was.

With GEMT now in Michigan, local governments have a new tool to help fund EMS services, reduce uncompensated costs, and strengthen public safety infrastructure. While implementation requires planning and collaboration, the long-term benefits will positively impact communities statewide. [L](#)

Herasanna Richards is a legislative associate for the League. You may contact Herasanna at 517-908-0309 or hrichards@mml.org.



State Representative Mike McFall, Sterling Heights Fire Chief Kevin Edmond, Detroit Fire Department 2nd Deputy Commissioner Derek Hillman, Madison Heights Fire Captain Matt Dwyer, members of the Sterling Heights Fire Department, and others gather in Sterling Heights to celebrate the signing of the GEMT implementation.

Q: Some municipalities worry about the cost of preparing cost reports. Is outsourcing necessary?

Chief Edmond: No, outsourcing is not necessary. Some agencies hire consultants or billing companies to compile cost reports, and those costs can be high—sometimes \$50,000 or more.

But in my experience, the data needed is already available in municipal finance records. I worked directly with my finance director to extract the necessary information and compile the report myself. A third-party consultant may make sense for some agencies, but for many, this can be done in-house with proper guidance.

Q: What are the key compliance considerations for municipalities?

Chief Edmond: The most important things to keep in mind:

1. **Accurate cost allocation** – Ensure costs are properly categorized (direct, indirect, and shared costs).
2. **Timely reporting** – GEMT participation requires annual reporting; missing deadlines can jeopardize funding.
3. **Intergovernmental agreements (IGAs)** – Local agencies will need agreements with the state to process reimbursements.
4. **Audits and oversight** – The state and federal governments can audit cost reports, so documentation must be thorough and accurate.

Q: How can GEMT funding help address EMS staffing shortages?

Chief Edmond: Many local fire departments are stepping in to fill gaps left by struggling private EMS providers. Communities like Flint had to reinstate their own ambulance services after private providers left. GEMT helps fund these transitions, ensuring sustainable EMS coverage.



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Legislative Policy Committee Kick-Off

By Emily Landau



Top row, left image: Southfield Councilmember Charles Hicks. Top row, middle image: Hastings City Manager Sarah Moyer-Cale. Middle row, right image: State Representatives Amos O'Neal and Mark Tisdell.

In January, an array of municipal leaders, legislators, and League advocacy teams braved sub-Arctic conditions to take part in the Legislative Committee Kick-Off Meeting, held at Heritage Hall in the Capitol, ahead of the opening of the legislative session. Coffee, snacks, and friendly conversation set the spirit of the day.

The League runs five Policy Committees—Energy & Environment; Economic Development & Land Use; Municipal Services; Municipal Finance; and Transportation, Infrastructure, & Technology—which meet on a quarterly basis throughout the year, offering guidance and legislative policy recommendations on a variety of local government issues.

Committee-building begins in October of the preceding year, during which League members are asked whether they are interested in a committee assignment, and if so, to give their preferences. Those members are then organized into equal sized teams with expertise across the various subjects.

The Committee Kick-Off is the culmination of that process, a welcoming event that introduces League staff (including Executive Director & CEO Dan Gilmartin, and Equity & Member Engagement Director Kelly Warren) and a representative from the Board of Trustees (VP Joshua Atwood); explains policies and processes; introduces the League's legislative priorities for the year; and—most importantly—acquaints members with one another as collaborators and peers.

“All the committees are set up really nicely to tackle key municipal concerns across the state,” said Farmington Hills City Attorney Steve Joppich, who described himself as “the newbie” as he began his first year on the Economic Development & Land Use Committee. “Having state law and statutes structured in a way that is usable, understandable, and beneficial—not just for businesses, but for communities—is crucial. So, those two topics—economic development and land use—can have some of the biggest impacts on keeping communities strong and making them better, more desirable places to live.”

“It’s good to have a partner like the League to help represent us on important legislative issues,” added Joppich’s colleague Gary Mekjian, city manager of Farmington Hills, who’s served as the chair of the Transportation, Infrastructure, & Technology Committee for about six years. “Having that relationship with [State & Federal Affairs Director John LaMacchia] and our state reps and senators is so important. Being able to pick up the phone and have that one-on-one conversation—to let them know the local government perspective and the potential detriment of a bill if it became law—was really helpful.”

The League’s State & Federal Affairs team was also on hand to welcome, orient, and share insights.

“Committee Kick-Off is a great event to bring our members together, celebrating their commitment to the organization by supporting us in one of our most important initiatives, which is our advocacy in and around legislative policy,” said League Legislative Associate Herasanna Richards, who also serves as staff liaison to the Energy & Environment Committee. “It’s an opportunity for them to come [to the Capitol] to see where these decisions are made, to meet some of our most significant champions.”

Those champions, in this case, were the League’s 2024 Legislators of the Year, State Representatives Amos O’Neal (D-Saginaw) and Mark Tisdell (R-Rochester Hills), who led a conversation and Q&A to wrap up the meeting. Despite being on opposite sides of the aisle ideologically, both representatives emphasized the importance of cooperation, pragmatism, and incremental progress to benefit all communities. “Though we disagree on many issues, after all these years, I consider Mark a good friend,” said Rep. O’Neal.

Rep. Tisdell stressed the importance of nonpartisanship in the legislative process. “Success often requires zigzagging, making adjustments, and pulling people along with you. As we move back into a divided government, we should be working *more* with the other side—not entrenching ourselves in an us-versus-them mentality.”

Asked what single operating principle would be best for every committee member to understand, Rep. Tisdell stressed the importance of collective thought: “You might think you can impose top-down controls and redirect things, but ultimately, it’s the millions of voluntary decisions made every day by individuals that shape the world. So maybe we need a little humility. Pull it back in. Calm down. Give people the freedom to make mistakes and find their own way.”

Attendees were also treated to lunch and a tour of the Capitol. Eyes drawn upwards, this diverse group of Michiganders *oohed* and *aahed* as they took in the rich Victorian interiors, historic legislative chambers, and portraits of those who came before them—a humbling reminder of what can be achieved with collective effort. 

Emily Landau is a content writer for the League. You may contact Emily at 734-669-6320 or elandau@mml.org.

Our 2025–26 Legislative Priorities to Foster

Thriving Communities

By Dave Hodgkins

The Michigan Municipal League has released its eight legislative priorities for the 2025–26 session, identified by local government leaders as necessary to foster thriving communities.

Michigan's future relies on local successes—for example, the state's economic development requires healthy local housing markets and flourishing business districts. The state can support its communities by providing necessary tools that allow municipalities to deliver high-quality local infrastructure and services. Roads, drinking water, and public safety all support residents in pursuing their own best lives.

It is time for our state to step up. The League offers the following policy actions to begin rebuilding solid foundations for thriving communities and Michigan's road to growth.

“The League offers the following policy actions to begin rebuilding solid foundations for thriving communities and Michigan’s road to growth.”

Revenue Sharing Trust Fund

Revenue sharing is one of two primary funding sources local governments rely on to provide core services to residents. It ensures we can keep our communities safe and secure, provide safe drinking water, maintain parks, and be attractive to small businesses and entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, even with recent increases, this important funding stream is hundreds of millions of dollars less annually than it was in the late '90s. This places undue pressure on local governments to continue identifying funding sources to provide core services. It is time to change this dynamic by creating a system that protects and provides predictability for local units of government.

The Policy

All state shared revenue for local units of government should be secured utilizing a trust fund model. Additionally, those resources should be calculated based on a percentage of sales tax collected, allowing resources to rise and fall with economic change.

- Amend the Michigan Trust Fund Act to establish a Revenue Sharing Trust Fund within the Department of Treasury.
- Amend the General Sales Tax Act to require the Department of Treasury to deposit 8.7 percent of the money received and collected from the tax imposed at a rate of 4 percent into the newly created Revenue Sharing Trust Fund.
- Beginning on October 1, 2025, the State Treasurer would have to transfer and disburse money received by the Revenue Sharing Trust Fund from sales tax revenue.

Neighborhood Roads Fund

The need for new resources to fund our roads, bridges, and transit systems has been well documented over the years. Recently, the state has been able to use its bonding authority to pump billions into fixing state roads. Additionally, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provided billions more to fix state and local roads, but only those that are federal aid eligible. While these new resources are helpful, our neighborhood roads, which millions of Michigan residents live and rely on, have been left behind.

The Policy

Create a Neighborhood Roads Fund where funding generated by a “Retail Delivery Fee” would be specifically dedicated to fixing residential and neighborhood streets.

- A Retail Delivery Fee of 50 cents would be imposed on all deliveries by motor vehicle. This would be to any location in Michigan with at least one item of taxable, tangible personal property subject to state sales or use tax. It would include items such as appliances, electronics, flowers, food (groceries and takeout), and furniture.
- Any retailer licensed to make sales in Michigan would collect the retail delivery fee on all deliveries made by motor vehicle to a location in Michigan. This includes brick-and-mortar retailers, e-commerce sellers, grocery stores, and restaurants. Deliveries of business-to-business retail sales would also be subject to the fee, but wholesale transactions would be exempt.
- A business that had \$500,000 or less of retail sales in the prior year or is new would be exempt from the retail delivery fee.

Funds would be distributed to local road agencies based on the number of centerline miles of non-federal aid eligible roads classified as “Local Roads” within cities and villages, or as “County Urban Local Miles” for county road agencies. A retail delivery fee of 50 cents would be expected to generate approximately \$275 million in new revenue for our neighborhood roads.

The e-commerce sector is expected to continue rapid expansion, with a predicted growth rate of 68 percent in the next five years, creating more residential traffic impacts. A retail delivery fee would connect this fast-growing traffic segment to the local streets it uses.

Continue Funding for the Revitalization and Placemaking (RAP) Program

The RAP Program allows local communities to partner with the state to proactively address revitalization needs by investing in projects that promote population and tax revenue growth. These investments help create the environment necessary to attract and retain talent, add new housing options, enable business creation and

attraction, and provide resources for Michigan citizens and communities. Funding for the program runs through September 30, 2026.

The Policy

Utilize a portion of the corporate income tax to annually provide \$50 million to support the RAP Program in perpetuity.

- Continue ongoing investment in RAP to utilize existing funding that leverages private market capital and allows access to gap financing for:
 - Place-based infrastructure development.
 - Real estate rehabilitation and development, including housing projects.
 - Public space improvements.

Additional legislative priorities include:

- Addressing the Interaction Between Headlee and Proposal A
- Implementing an Employer Housing Tax Credit
- Protecting Locals' Ability to Regulate Short-Term Rentals
- Enacting the Michigan Mobility Trust Fund
- Codifying the Process for Implementing a Stormwater Utility

For additional details on all priorities, visit *The League's 2025-26 Legislative Priorities to Foster Thriving Communities* at the QR code below. 

Dave Hodgkins is a legislative associate for the League. You may contact Dave at 517-908-0304 or dhodgkins@mml.org.





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CONNECTING HOUGHTON

By Emily Landau

HOUGHTON
pop. 8,386



The winner of the 2024 Community Excellence Award was the City of Houghton with Connecting Houghton,

a placemaking project decades in the making that transformed the city's aging downtown and waterfront into a vibrant, accessible, and unique public space through a combination of incremental change, community engagement, and DIY spirit.

For years, this city of about 8,300 on the Upper Peninsula's Keweenaw Waterway had been developing its waterfront, a muddy, hazardous industrial area originally used by trains and freighters hauling copper and coal. "We started acquiring waterfront property in the '70s and '80s," said Tom Merz, former mayor of Houghton (from 1996 to 2006) and chairperson of the city's planning commission. "By 1990, most of it was public. The goal was to transform it from a place where kids weren't allowed to play into the place where you bring your kids."

A key development in the project took place in 2006 with the dedication of the new Portage Lake District Library on the waterfront (the old library building is now a community center). “I don’t know if this is true, but I’ll tell it anyway, because it’s a good story,” said Merz. “We’re the only library in Michigan where you can drive right up to the dock. We have a sign facing the water on the waterfront, and people can just pull up in a boat and go to the library.”

In 2015, Houghton’s Beautification Committee began, made up entirely of volunteers (including the wives of both Merz and City Manager Eric Waara), which meets on Tuesday nights. “There would be two volunteers some nights, others there would be 11,” said Waara. “It started with a mural, donated plants, gardens. Suddenly more murals are getting painted—it started to build on itself. Someone would thin out their daylilies or hostas, they’d all end up in my driveway, I’d haul them somewhere. The Beautification Committee planted the flowers where there were none before. It was really organic, no pun intended.”

As the committee worked its magic, the City noticed that Houghton residents were starting to naturally gravitate towards the waterfront. “It was people lingering. Having picnics and just sitting on benches, watching the world go by,” said Waara.

The ball was rolling, but the City was still hoping to build something more akin to a “town square.” And so, in 2018, they started working with the Michigan Economic

Development Corporation (MEDC) to secure funding to rebuild the pier, which saw its fruition in what Waara described as “a ginormous gathering space downtown.” Community & Business Development Director Amy Zawada worked with DPW to install firepits, tables, and other amenities to attract even more residents down to the waterfront and its new pier.

The project had long been hindered by what Waara described as “the 800-pound gorilla that we had worked around for 40 years.” This was a rapidly deteriorating, blighted parking deck that ate up valuable sunlight and tens of thousands of square feet of space. Built in 1978, the structure had its own history as the first municipal parking deck in the Upper Peninsula—but had long since overstayed its usefulness.

\$1.6 million had already been sunk into maintaining the parking deck, with the hope of getting at least a decade of use out of it, but by year eight, it was clear that the City was at a crossroads.

Instead of spending millions more on repairs, it was decided the best choice would be for the parking deck to come down. Houghton received a \$1 million MEDC revitalization and placemaking grant in 2022 and bonded for the demolition and infrastructure improvements. Once the eyesore of the parking deck had been removed, the City was faced with wide-open space that cried out for redevelopment.

“The goal was to transform it from a place where kids weren’t allowed to play into the place where you bring your kids.”



Snowboarders and the community gather for Houghton’s 2025 Jibba Jabba Rail Jam in downtown Houghton.



Houghton worked with a landscape architect to create a space designed for people, not just cars, including engineered rain gardens and a universal access ramp to allow pedestrians of all abilities to move between Main Street and the waterfront. Beautification Committee volunteers added plants from the local nursery. DPW took advantage of a mild winter to build amenities along the waterfront, including wooden porch swings, benches, and a “lunch counter” with bar stools overlooking the water.

Faced with the problem of pizza boxes clogging up garbage cans, Houghton once again got creative. “I looked all over Hell’s half acre, every park supply place and Google: Does anybody make something for jamming pizza boxes into? Nope,” said Waara. “Okay! Public Works, here’s a sketch. Make something like this. So now we have receptacles on the waterfront, basically a mailbox for your pizza box, that doesn’t jam up the garbage cans. Because one pizza box at 4 on Friday afternoon means that garbage can is pretty much out of service till Saturday morning, when the guys come out to empty them.”

Bolstered by a new Social District, Houghton’s waterfront now has a buzzing events calendar: a growing concert series, Fall Fest, the New Year’s Eve Chook Drop, and Jibba Jabba, a snowboarding competition sponsored by Red Bull and featuring over 30 professional snowboarders (including, this year, eight female snowboarders).

“We were having placemaking meetings, just kind of a mishmash of community members that would get together to brainstorm stuff,” said Zawada. “Jibba Jabba was something we did a decade or more ago. It was really popular but fell by the wayside. People would say, ‘You guys should bring that back somehow.’ And at the placemaking meeting we said, ‘let’s do it.’”

The City intentionally left some areas of the waterfront empty as an opportunity for further development. “We’re gonna leave this space, see how it feels when it’s all done. And then we’ll figure out what to do with it,” said Waara. “Once you can stand there and people walk there, you get ideas.”

“It’s like when you have a living room,” added Zawada. “You don’t want to jam your living room full of furniture. You leave it open and spacious, and you can do all sorts of really fun stuff.”

In 2025, Houghton is looking to improve accessibility for boaters and kayakers. The City is also focusing on supporting existing infrastructure, ensuring that the revitalized waterfront stays in great shape for the next half-century.

“It’s a beautiful place,” said Waara. “You got sunrises, you got sunsets, you got date nights, you got jogging and walking, kids and dogs and people learning how to ride bikes. That was always the intent—we wanted to turn back toward the water as a public resource, instead of just a place to load and unload coal and vegetables.”

For more information, visit: cea.mml.org



Houghton’s Waterfront Walk—built for people of all mobilities to move between downtown and waterfront.

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BRIGHTON
pop. 7,446

The **Brighton Main Street Streetscape Project** is a community-driven initiative to enhance Brighton's historic downtown. Key improvements include widened sidewalks, which allow greater space for outdoor dining and safer crosswalks; eco-friendly LED lighting; replacement of century-old utilities with upgraded underground lines; and enhanced landscaping. The project also introduced a curb-less roadway, allowing the downtown to seamlessly transform into a pedestrian festival space. Historical elements include natural stone benches and preserve a sense of place, honoring Brighton's heritage as a center of mill activity.

Recognizing a need for more public space, as well as greater integration of the Kent District Library (which had been separated from the downtown by a large parking lot), the Grandville Downtown Development Authority created the **Commons & Market Pavilion**. The project included a 6,600-square-foot expansion to the library, a covered walking path connecting the library to downtown, and a multifunctional pavilion boasting a sound system, circular pergola with porch swings, and seating area. The resulting Grandville Community Commons has become a hub for the community, with farmers markets, a Social District, and community events occurring year-round.



GRANDVILLE
pop. 16,083



OAK PARK
pop. 29,560

Through a combination of federal, state, and private grants—as well as a little crowdfunding—the **Nine Mile Redesign Project** has given new life to an underutilized stretch of Nine Mile Road. Protected bike lanes, traffic calming, and back-in angled parking improved pedestrian and cyclist safety, while green spaces, play structures, and public art have resulted in a beautiful and vibrant community space. The project's success has inspired Oak Park's neighbors in the Detroit Metro Area, leading to a regional Nine Mile Task Force.

Emily Landau is a content writer for the League. You may contact Emily at 734-669-6320 or elandau@mml.org.

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Linking Local Futures

By Emily Landau



From left to right: Helen Johnson, Pat Lockwood, Ben Marchionna, Emilie LaGrow, Amy Shamroe, Gregory Dill, Andrew DeLeeuw, Christina Anderson, Khalfani Stephens, Julie Egan, Mark Washington, Jeanette Pierce, and Hassan Sheikh at the State Department in Washington, D.C.

In January, the Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment, Jose W. Fernandez, and the Michigan Municipal League Foundation announced the launch of Michigan's new Subnational Diplomacy Working Group, the first in the nation. This nonpartisan group will develop a subnational diplomacy strategy for Michigan, exploring how communities can leverage international economic partnerships.

Prior to the creation of the Working Group, Julie Egan, Senior Fellow at the MML Foundation and a former U.S. diplomat, had facilitated trips for Michigan leaders to Armenia, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, intended to spark dialogue on economic collaboration. We spoke with several participants in this nonpartisan initiative to learn more about it.

and Subnational Diplomacy

What is “subnational diplomacy”?

Helen Johnson (President, MML Foundation): Subnational diplomacy refers to the global partnerships that can be formed between municipal and state leaders and leaders all over the world, either in collaboration with the federal government or independently.

Julie Egan (Senior Fellow, MML Foundation): Subnational diplomacy has been an area of focus for a long time in many areas of the world . . . The unit was founded in 2022, and its mission is to support local leaders who want to build their capacity in international affairs.

How did the Michigan Municipal League get involved in subnational diplomacy?

Helen Johnson: The Foundation has been in conversation for quite a long time about bringing innovation to local communities, bringing in people who have big ideas and strong networks, creating a platform for them to advance economic, social, and cultural growth. We saw opportunities to expand into other forms of diplomacy: sports diplomacy, arts and cultural diplomacy, and economic diplomacy. Thus, we launched the Senior Fellowship Initiative.

Michigan is the first state to have a subnational diplomacy initiative. Why Michigan?

Julie Egan: There was a *Eureka!* moment between the Foundation, the State Department, and me: Michigan is an important leader. We have the most economically important international border in the country. We have municipalities of all sizes that have international investments. So, we started exploring how Michigan could step forward as a leader in developing a global engagement strategy.

Assad Turfe (Deputy Executive, Wayne County): Michigan is uniquely positioned to lead in subnational diplomacy because of its diversity, economic strength, and strategic location. Wayne County is one of the most dynamic and globally connected regions in the country.

Emilie LaGrow (Manager, Village of Cassopolis): Our current governor talks about Michiganders having grit, and I don't

think there's anybody grittier than the salt of the earth, rural farming communities that make up 70 percent of our state. We're just figuring out how to get stuff done. No one is doing it for us. And because of our small size, you're likely to get your project done here much faster than in larger municipalities.

What are some of the forms this initiative has taken?

Julie Egan: When Michigan works with the State Department, we want to ensure that Michigan has a seat at the table. We made sure there was a local leader from Michigan—Oakland County Executive David Coulter—on this trip to Armenia. The Memorandum of Understanding, which the State Department helped facilitate, is a first step, showing cooperation between Oakland County and an Armenian province called Tavush.

For the second phase, the Oakland County Executive organized listening tours within the Armenian American community in Oakland County. He and his team are looking at opportunities to return to Armenia and dig into some specific areas of cooperation. It shows how useful local leaders can be as international advisors of sorts, who can advise and advocate on behalf of their communities.

A longer trip took place in late 2024 to the Middle East, involving about a dozen participants.

Bilal Hammoud (Executive Director, American Arab Chamber of Commerce): It was a 10-day trip. We flew to Qatar to attend the Doha Forum. Then Muscat, where we celebrated the 15-year free trade agreement between the U.S. and Oman. After that, we were in Abu Dhabi for two days. Finally, we traveled to Dubai and spent the rest of the trip there.

Emilie LaGrow: It's an experience that leaves you a little bit speechless, and that doesn't happen to me often. We had a packed schedule. It was not uncommon for us to get our itinerary for the next day at 2 a.m. for a 7:30 a.m. call. It was exhausting, brain-wise, but stimulating at the same time.



From left to right: Helen Johnson, Jose Fernandez, and Julie Egan on the porch of the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island.

Andrew DeLeeuw (Deputy Administrator, Washtenaw County): A common thing we heard was the desire to diversify economies. People were very cognizant about needing to do more, to have more opportunities for their residents in terms of jobs and education, and to use the benefits from oil and gas to transition into something sustainable. The parallels with the auto industry really jumped out to me, where you have a society that provided a lot of wealth for the region, but the industry is changing and there's a need to think about what comes next. Just a great experience, very educational.

Julie Egan: The purpose of the trip was to build relationships. These opportunities are now up to the communities to explore. But there were some key projects that were brainstormed, such as the potential of a direct flight between Muscat and Detroit, university partnerships, and partnerships with cultural institutions like the Louvre Abu Dhabi. It was a door-opening mission, aiming to come back with a handful of potentially viable partnerships that could be explored in a second phase.

Can you speak about some of the other benefits of the trip?

Julie Egan: One of the highlights for me was seeing the group interact. We were in meetings all day, traveling to different countries, back-to-back meetings. It's very intense and you get to know people, build bonds. There's a lot of intellectual exchange, fertile grounds for cross-city, cross-county collaboration that you might not have thought of had you not had the chance to sit with them for days.

Bilal Hammoud: It was a very productive trip, not just because we got to showcase Michigan to these other folks, but we got to showcase Michigan to Michigan. Counties do not always collaborate; things get siloed. But when you go into these meetings, spend 10 days pitching the same thing, you realize that the people in your group are listening, too.

Assad Turfe: Beyond economic opportunities, the trip reinforced how much we have in common once we move past cultural differences. Whether in Michigan or the Gulf, people share the same aspirations: strong communities, economic prosperity, and opportunities for future generations. These connections go beyond business. They foster understanding, build relationships, and create a foundation for partnerships that benefit us both.

Emilie LaGrow: Every meeting we had, every interaction with a sheik or an ambassador or even with each other, every single person wanted the same things for their people that I want for mine in Cassopolis. They want to give them opportunity. They want to ensure that they have a sustainable way of life. They want them to have education and healthcare. Wherever we are in the world, at the end of the day, we all are after the same thing.

Andrew DeLeeuw: Travel, from my perspective, is a gift. You get to learn a lot of new things. You're made a little bit



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uncomfortable—in a good sense, you're made more open to new things. We were treated very warmly by all the different governments and entities who greeted us; we got a good sense of what their interests are, how they're looking to grow and advance. I found we share a lot of parallels with each other.

What are the next steps in the subnational diplomacy initiative?

Bilal Hammoud: We're continuing to collaborate with the MML Foundation. Some initiatives that are in the preliminary stages include developing data centers in Washtenaw County, taking advantage of its brownfield properties and growing tech infrastructure, as well as strengthening Michigan's role in AI and technology by fostering partnerships with Gulf-based innovation hubs.

Julie Egan: There is interest in a second phase, a follow-up trip to be discussed within the Working Group. For potential future trips, Africa—particularly Morocco—is of interest. France has extensive experience with subnational diplomacy and could be informative as a study mission. I think there's still quite a bit to be learned.

What, in your view, is the value of subnational diplomacy as a concept?

Bilal Hammoud: Building local relationships is key to ensuring that people, opportunities, and economic development can exchange freely. As Michigan moves forward, we must recognize that it's time to look outward, embrace a global perspective. This is where subnational diplomacy becomes critical. It's something I truly believe in, and it's why having the League as a partner was such an instrumental part of this exchange.

Emilie LaGrow: It's about breaking bread and building bridges. It's that human connection that says, this is what my community has to offer. We're going to welcome you with open arms. We're open for business. We're all after the same things: How one can leave a lasting impact in this community, make it sustainable and better for the next generation. There are opportunities available to all of us, but you have to reach out and get them. You can't be afraid of them. You just have to keep your mind and your doors open—you might be surprised at who walks through. [L](#)

Interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

Emily Landau is a content writer for the League. You may contact Emily at 734-669-6320 or elandau@mml.org.

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CAP CON 2025



The League's 2025 Capitol Conference took place March 18–19 in Lansing. Local officials from across the state heard legislative updates and in-depth conversations on matters from lobbying and clean energy to leadership in times of crisis. An atmosphere of positivity and connection buzzed throughout the networking breaks, luncheons, and receptions. For a full list of program graduates and award recipients, visit mml.org/about-us/awards.



The League's State and Federal Affairs Division (SFAD) advocates for the municipal viewpoint on many of the thousands of bills that are introduced in the Michigan Legislature during each two-year session. SFAD members are regular contributors to League communications with members, from providing timely updates on legislative activities on the bimonthly *Live with the League* webcast and the Inside208 blog to chairing both general and breakout sessions at CapCon.



Betsy Richardson,
Capital Office
Coordinator
Started at MML: 2018

Betsy is responsible for assisting in the day-to-day operation of the Lansing office.

Fun Fact: Betsy ran her first half marathon in 2024 and is planning on doing the Detroit Half Marathon to celebrate her birthday in 2025.

Bio: I was born and raised in the Lansing area and have now put down roots in East Lansing. I love to travel and spend time with my large family as much as possible. My favorite hobby is running—especially when I can get outside and enjoy our beautiful state!

Favorite Big Ten school: Michigan State University, of course!



John LaMacchia,
Director of State &
Federal Affairs
Started at MML: 2013

Issue Areas: Transportation, infrastructure, tax policy, and municipal finance

Fun Fact: My two favorite athletes growing up were Alan Trammell and Isiah Thomas.

Bio: I grew up in the Lansing area, attended Michigan State University, and reside in DeWitt with my wife and three children. I am an avid sports fan, extremely competitive, love spending time with my family, wish I played more golf, and am a connoisseur of smoked meats and cheeses. When I'm not crushing it as a lobbyist, most of my time is spent carting kids to swimming, cross country, soccer, basketball, and gymnastics, and occasionally getting to say hi to my wife as we pass each other in the driveway!

Favorite Big Ten school: Michigan State University. Go White!



Herasanna Richards, Legislative
Associate
Started at MML: 2019

Issue Areas: Energy, environment, and public safety

Fun Fact: Definitely the first and only "Herasanna" you have ever met. My name is a portmanteau created from my parents' names. I can also play the clarinet.

Bio: I'm a Michigan transplant by way of Tennessee. I love travel and cool hospitality experiences! I'm happiest exploring new places, fun hotels, and unique restaurants with my husband. #justmarried. I come from a huge, tight-knit family with Caribbean roots. I love spending time with them and celebrating our Virgin Islands culture! My favorite TV shows are period dramas, especially with political themes. Saturday happy place is watching historical period dramas while Wiki-surfing for accuracy.

Favorite Big Ten school: My alma mater, Michigan State University! Go, State!



Jennifer Rigterink,
Assistant Director
of State & Federal
Affairs
Started at MML: 2016

Issue Areas: Economic development, land use and housing

Fun Fact: I once denied Grant Hill and his entourage access to a member-only athletic club in SE Michigan during the NBA lockout. I didn't recognize him and he had no ID.

Bio: I'm a Michigan State University graduate and was excited when my daughter chose to go there last fall. My husband and I are small business owners (let's chat if you're in need of a new mattress). I love Sunday dinners with extended family. My favorite childhood memory is when my great uncle would visit from New Zealand. He would always bring me a small gift and I got to take him for show and tell in the second grade.

Favorite Big Ten school: Michigan State University. Go Green!



Dave Hodgkins,
Legislative Associate
Started at MML: 2023

Issue Areas: elections, labor issues, and parks and recreation

Fun Fact: I was obsessed with wanting to be tall as a kid so I would hang upside down from everything trying to stretch out. By 13, I was 6'2.

Bio: I'm from Ionia but lived in the Lansing area for 12 years after attending Central Michigan University. Recently, my family moved to Mt. Pleasant where we love to stay active through sports and getting out into the community.

Favorite Big Ten school: Not Ohio State.



**CAP
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2025**





Local Marijuana Regulation— Key Court Decisions

By Bill Mathewson

This column will summarize two Michigan Regulation and Taxation of Marihuana Act (MRTMA) decisions.

In an interesting and perhaps ironic case, four home rule cities were successful in not allowing a voter-initiated ballot proposal that would have provided for a variety of regulations governing recreational marijuana. The petitions were rejected for certification on several grounds, including faulty wording. However, the key was whether the proposed charter amendments were preempted by MRTMA.

The proponents sued to overturn the decisions of the city clerks. The trial court held for the cities, and the Michigan Court of Appeals (COA), in a published decision, unanimously affirmed the trial court's ruling. (*City of Farmington v. Farmington Surv. Comm.*, No. 372022, 2024 WL 4030631, Mich Ct App Sept 3, 2024)

The COA discussed the extensive authority of home rule cities under the Michigan Constitution, as well as possible state preemption. The opinion reviewed the authority of local governments detailed in MRTMA, which the COA said was “a comprehensive scheme governing the regulation of recreational marijuana use” “Individuals may petition to initiate an ordinance to provide for the number of marihuana establishments allowed within a municipality or to completely prohibit marihuana establishments within a municipality” The COA agreed with the trial court that “[o]therwise, . . . MRTMA reserved the power of local regulation over marijuana establishments for municipalities through their legislative process. . . . individuals of the electorate are afforded one narrow power of initiative: to seek an ordinance prohibiting or setting the number of marijuana retail establishments.”

Ultimately, with respect to preemption of home rule authority, the COA concludes that “these specific provisions of MRTMA control over the more general and otherwise applicable provisions of the [Home Rule Cities Act].”

The second case resulted in a unanimous and published COA decision concerning a city's recreational marijuana ordinance. (*Exclusive Capital Partners, LLC v. City of Royal Oak*, Mich Ct App Dec 4, 2024)

The plaintiffs were two unsuccessful license applicants. Among the several claims was the competitive selection process, the city manager's role, and a claimed Open Meetings Act (OMA) violation. The trial court held for the City on all counts.

With one exception, the COA didn't find merit in the plaintiffs' claims. The City's process had 10 selection criteria. The manager applied the ordinance, with input from a workgroup. He reviewed all applications, considered each in relation to the competitive criteria, and independently ranked the applicants.

The COA did not find fault with the City's process. However, it did remand the case to the trial court regarding its ruling that there wasn't an OMA violation. The COA underscored the precedent set by a recent decision of the Michigan Supreme Court in *Pinebrook, LLC v. City of Warren*.

The COA said the ordinance did not grant the city manager the authority to make the final decisions on who would be granted licenses. However, “[i]n practice . . . the city manager's role was not limited to administering the applications process and scoring the applicants: Whichever applicants made it through the city manager's process received licenses. . . . The minutes of the City Commission meeting . . . do not reflect any discussion of other applicants. Consequently, the city manager effectively selected who would receive the two recreational marijuana licenses.” And thus, the COA determined that the city manager's role met the definition of a “governing body,” so was subject to the OMA, and the manager's work group meetings should have been open meetings.

The COA remanded the case to the trial court to determine if the two licenses at issue should be invalidated. And maybe most interesting, the COA added: “We observe that the OMA provides other remedial options for the public body in this instance. . . . providing a mechanism for a public body to ‘reenact the disputed decision in conformity with [the] act’ to avoid invalidation.” This would seem to imply that the COA was not troubled by the result of the city's process. 

City of Farmington v. Farmington Surv. Comm., No. 372022, 2024 WL 4030631, Mich Ct App Sept 3, 2024

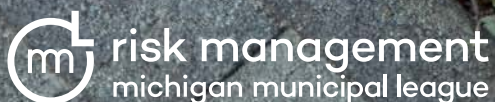
Exclusive Capital Partners, LLC v. City of Royal Oak, Mich Ct App Dec 4, 2024

This column highlights a recent judicial decision or Michigan Municipal League Legal Defense Fund case that impacts municipalities. The information in this column should not be considered a legal opinion or to constitute legal advice.

Bill Mathewson is a legal consultant to the League. You may contact Bill at wmathewson@mml.org.



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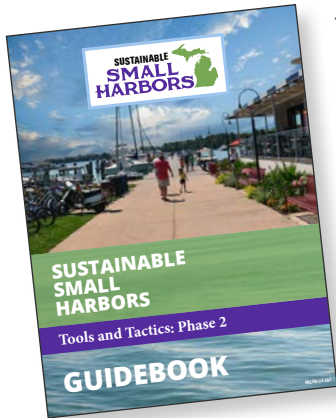
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Sustainable Small Harbors— Au Gres

By Donald Carpenter and Geneva Langeland



The Sustainable Small Harbors program is intended to enable communities to develop long-term, sustainable strategies to maximize the benefits of their harbor facilities to the community, in the face of uncertain environmental conditions and funding sources. The project has been primarily funded by Michigan Sea Grant (MISG) and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE). In-depth

information on the project, including the community-oriented *Tools and Tactics Guidebook*, can be found at sustainablesmallharbors.org. Here, we showcase ways the Sustainable Small Harbors process has empowered local leaders in one community to make positive changes and fuel economic growth.

Au Gres

The City of Au Gres is located along the Au Gres River, approximately two miles upstream from the outlet to Saginaw Bay in Lake Huron. In early years, Au Gres was considered a logging community; however, as that industry faded, a new focus for natural resources tourism now provides economic activity. The city has been known unofficially as “The Perch Capital” and is also a highly regarded portal to Saginaw Bay’s walleye fishery and duck hunting. The Au Gres River carries a heavy sediment load that influences channel depth, and the channel was dredged in 2014 with funding assistance from the State of Michigan.

Community-Driven Improvements

In 2015, the MISG-funded Sustainable Small Harbors program engaged Au Gres in a community visioning process to improve the city’s public waterfront access and sustainability. The visioning effort and ongoing grant-writing support from MISG empowered Au Gres to acquire the former state-managed harbor, open it to the public as Riverside Park, upgrade site facilities, and manage stormwater with student-led green infrastructure projects. Au Gres has supported these improvements with state, tribal, and local grant funding.

Acquiring the former state-managed harbor enabled Au Gres to offer an improved waterfront access point for boaters, anglers, and other residents and visitors. Upgrades at Riverside Park included refurbishing existing infrastructure and adding a fish cleaning station, new splash pad and playscape, kayak launch, and barrier-free fishing pier.

With fresh momentum from Riverside Park, the city’s riverfront campground has expanded occupancy from around four seasonal sites in 2016 to 35 fully booked seasonal sites in 2023. There are also an additional 74 sites for short-term camping reservations and two mini-cabins. Plans for further expansion include additional seasonal sites, larger sites to accommodate longer vehicles, and more mini cabins.

Working with the Huron Pines organization, Au Gres received grants from the Bay Area Community Foundation and Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network to conduct a stormwater assessment in 2017. They identified multiple areas where rain gardens and bioswales—groupings of deep-rooted native plants—could capture and filter stormwater runoff from roads and parking lots. These installations help reduce risk of flooding, minimize water

With fresh momentum from Riverside Park, the city’s riverfront campground has expanded occupancy from around four seasonal sites in 2016 to 35 fully booked seasonal sites in 2023.





Lake Huron Forever Pledge

The City of Au Gres knows that a healthy Lake Huron means a healthy, strong, and vibrant future for our community. As a result, we are committed to keeping the protection of Lake Huron at the forefront of our planning, decision making and resource allocation. Our community well-being and economic prosperity are tied to Lake Huron. We understand that access to healthy natural resources like fresh air, clean water and public land improve the health and wellness of our entire community. We must work together to protect the forests, wetlands and waterways to address threats of pollution and flooding caused by stormwater, proactively plan for the impacts of a changing climate, support native plant restoration and provide corridors for wildlife. We are committed to understanding the unique connections our residents and visitors have to Au Gres and to incorporating their priorities and concerns into our decision making as we continue to lead natural resources protection efforts in our region. We pledge to protect Lake Huron forever.



pollution, and add green space to the community. Huron Pines and students at Au Gres-Sims School worked together to design and install a rain garden at Riverside Park in 2020. They've since planted two bioswales to capture road runoff along East Michigan Avenue, along with rain gardens in other locations.

The city further built their partnership with Huron Pines in 2022 when it became the first city to take the Lake Huron Forever Pledge, a commitment to manage stormwater runoff, invasive species, and chemical hazards. [L](#)

For more information on Michigan Sea Grant's Sustainable Harbors program, visit: sustainablesmallharbors.org

Learn more about Michigan Sea Grant at michiganseagrant.org

Donald Carpenter, PhD, PE, LEED AP is vice president of Drummond Carpenter, an engineering and research firm. He served as the primary researcher for the Sustainable Small Harbors program. You may contact Donald at 248-763-4099 or dcarpenter@drummondcarpenter.com.

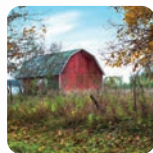
Geneva Langeland is Michigan Sea Grant's communications editor. You may contact Geneva at genlang@umich.edu.



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Q. Our councilmembers get paid an annual amount for their service and duties—is there a way to change the method of compensating them so they receive payment only for meetings attended?

A. If the method is set in the charter, then it will take a charter amendment to change it. You could change it to per meeting attended, to be paid quarterly, or something similar. Request sample charter provisions by emailing info@mml.org. We also have resources on how to amend the charter, and a Wage & Salary database with council pay from other cities and villages for comparison.

Q. We would like to institute a policy that councilmembers cannot use cellphones/text during council meetings. Do you have sample policies from other municipalities that you could share with us?

A. The League has a handful of samples on this. We would be happy to send them. Please email info@mml.org to make a request.

Q. Sometimes councilmembers request that their comments during council meetings be put in the meeting minutes verbatim. Is that good practice?

A. It is up to the municipality if it would like to implement this activity. The League has sample council rules of procedure from other municipalities, and we would be happy to send them. Please email info@mml.org to make a request.

Q. Do other city or village charters have a provision prohibiting a councilmember from being employed by the municipality within a certain amount of time after leaving office?

A. Our charter databases show that 170 cities have such a prohibition, ranging from six months to two years, while no villages have this type of provision in their charters.

Q. What happens if a motion ends in a tie vote at a council meeting (well, really, we're wondering for any of our meetings—planning commissions, zoning board of appeals, etc.)?

A. A tie vote means that the motion has failed to pass. Actions require an affirmative vote.

Q. What are the rules for a husband and wife serving on council together?

A. This is the type of rule that will be found in an individual municipality's charter, ordinance, policy, or other local rule. There is no statewide prohibition. In small municipalities, it is often hard for a council to fill its council seats without relatives serving together. [L](#)

The League's Information Service provides member officials with answers to questions on a vast array of municipal topics. Call 1-800-653-2483 or email info@mml.org.



Handbooks

Updated in 2024

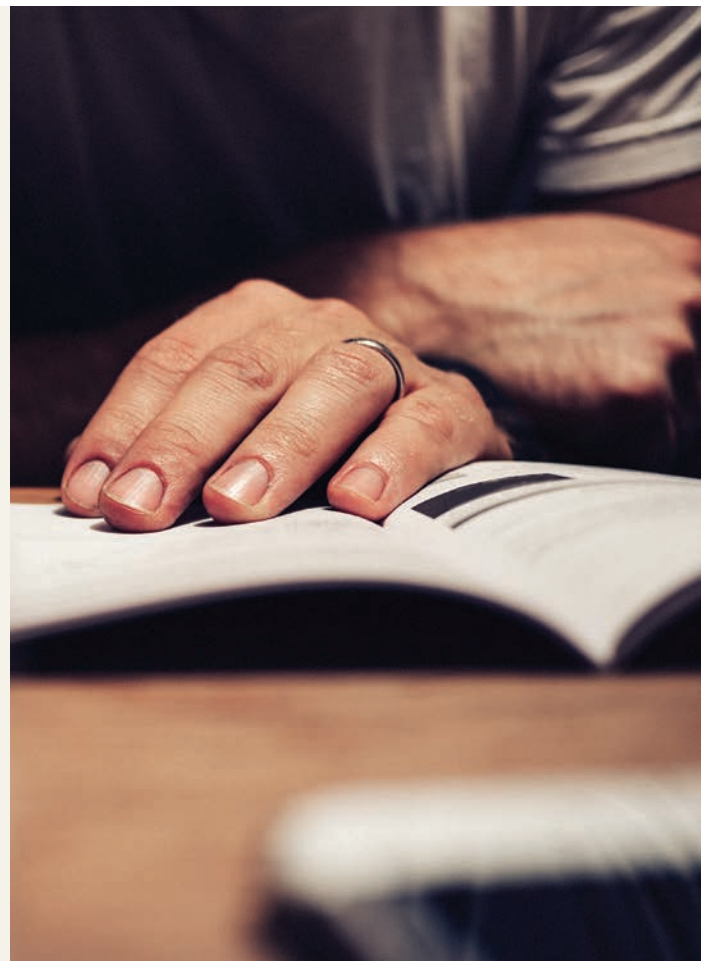
These handbooks are essential reading material for new and veteran elected and appointed officials in cities, general law, and home-rule villages.

Topics covered include:

- Structure and Function of Local Government in Michigan
- Roles and Responsibilities of Municipal Officials
- How to Select and Work with Consultants
- Running Meetings
- Personnel and Human Resources Issues
- Special Assessments and User Charges
- Planning and Zoning Basics

Numerous appendices include:

- Open Meetings Act
- Freedom of Information Act
- Sample Council Rules of Procedure
- A Glossary
- Frequently Asked Questions
- A Sample Budget Ordinance



Ferndale's Resident-Led Finance Review Committee

By Rick Haglund

FERNDALE
pop. 19,190



Ferndale, an older, inner-ring Detroit suburb that prides itself in being welcoming to all, was at a crossroads in 2023. Many of its aging buildings were in dire need of repair or replacement. Labor costs were rising. Future state revenue sharing payments were uncertain. And a Headlee Amendment override millage that produced 30 percent of the city's property tax revenues was set to expire in two years.

Facing low trust in government, then—City Manager Joseph Gacioch didn't think Ferndale could effectively address its issues without greater community involvement. "We thought with the complexity of the override and the affordability issues of a millage vote, bringing residents directly into the fold was really the only pathway to success," he said. That led to the innovative idea of creating a task force of 10 city residents who would meet for seven months, studying every aspect of the City's financial condition with the aid of city staffers. Gacioch, who is now Royal Oak's city manager, said he's unaware of any other Michigan city that has engaged residents in such a comprehensive effort to deal with difficult financial challenges.

The resident-led Finance Review Committee issued a 47-page report to the city council in March 2024 that, among other things, recommended a Headlee override vote be placed on the November 2024 ballot to approve an 8.586-mill levy that would have restored the City's millage rate to its originally authorized 20 mills. The initiative was a finalist last year in the Michigan Municipal League's Community Excellence Award competition, which honors innovative placemaking programs and projects.

Gacioch and several of the committee members said the effort to understand the City's financial challenges and recommend solutions was invaluable, even though voters defeated the Headlee override ballot request by a 54 percent-to-46 percent tally. "It was always going to be an uphill battle in this economic environment," Gacioch said.

The City is going back to voters in May, asking them to renew the smaller 2015 Headlee override of 5.4452 mills. If that vote fails, the City will need to cut \$4 million from a \$29 million general fund budget, a prospect Finance Review Committee Chair Quinn Zeagler said would be devastating.

Zeagler, who moved to Ferndale six years ago, said she didn't know much about municipal finance when she was asked by former Mayor Melanie Piana to serve on the committee. "It was very much an eye-opener. I went in knowing very little. It was really a crash course." But as the committee pored over voluminous documents, Zeagler said it became apparent the City needed a mix of cost-cutting measures, greater operational efficiencies, and new revenues to achieve fiscal stability.

The committee voted 8-2 to submit the report's recommendations to city council in March 2024. In addition to the Headlee override vote proposal, the committee also recommended looking for areas to cut costs, improve efficiencies, and consider implementing a city income tax. Surprisingly, Zeagler, who works on residential energy efficiency programs for a large corporation, voted against the report's recommendations. She said she thought the size of the Headlee override proposal was unaffordable for many residents.



“We thought with the complexity of the override and the affordability issues of a millage vote, bringing residents directly into the fold was really the only pathway to success.”

– Joseph Gacioch, City Manager

“What I said in those meetings is that going to 18 mills would have been a slight increase from where we were at and been more palatable for voters,” she said. “But it wouldn’t get us the recreational facilities we wanted or address the major building concerns we had with the police and fire departments.” Although she voted no, Zeagler led the campaign to pass the 2024 Headlee override millage proposal. She said she did so after hearing “how excited people were” about the prospect of having new facilities, an enthusiasm generated in part by the work of her committee.

Zeagler said the City needs extra revenue to upgrade its facilities, many of which are between 60 and 100 years old. Ferndale also needs to become more financially competitive in recruiting talent, particularly in its police and fire departments. “Our police officers could make about \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year working somewhere else. If we want good people working for the City in general, you at least have to pay them as much as those working in the community next door.”

Panel Vice Chair David Hoppe also voted against the committee’s recommendations. Rather than ask voters for more money, Hoppe believes the City should be more focused on cutting costs. He also said he thinks city government needs to define its needs more clearly before asking voters to dig deeper into their pockets. “Everybody wants a better community and a place where people can thrive at all income levels,” said Hoppe, a certified public accountant. “The City needs to find a middle ground.”

Despite their “no” votes, Hoppe and Zeagler said there were a lot of good ideas for the City to consider, including a recommendation the City hire an outside expert to review city finances. And the committee’s work has led to some cost cuts, like reducing election costs by decreasing the number of voting precincts due to increased absentee and early voting.

Was the committee’s work worthwhile? “Absolutely,” Zeagler said. “It was a beneficial experience to everyone on the committee. It’s helped to educate others in the community about the City’s finances.” Gacioch said it was an important tool in “building a bench” of civic-minded community leaders. Many of the committee members went on to serve the city on other boards and commissions. Among them, Zeagler is running for a city council seat.

Zeagler and Gacioch said the committee’s work reaffirmed an inconvenient truth about municipal finance: Ferndale can’t control its own destiny because of tax limitations imposed by state law and the legal inability to create local taxing authorities for combined services.

“They need to step up,” Gacioch said about state policymakers. “Our hands are tied. We can’t solve these issues.”

Rick Haglund is a freelance writer. You may contact Rick at 248-761-4594 or haglund.rick@gmail.com.



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Addressing Food Waste

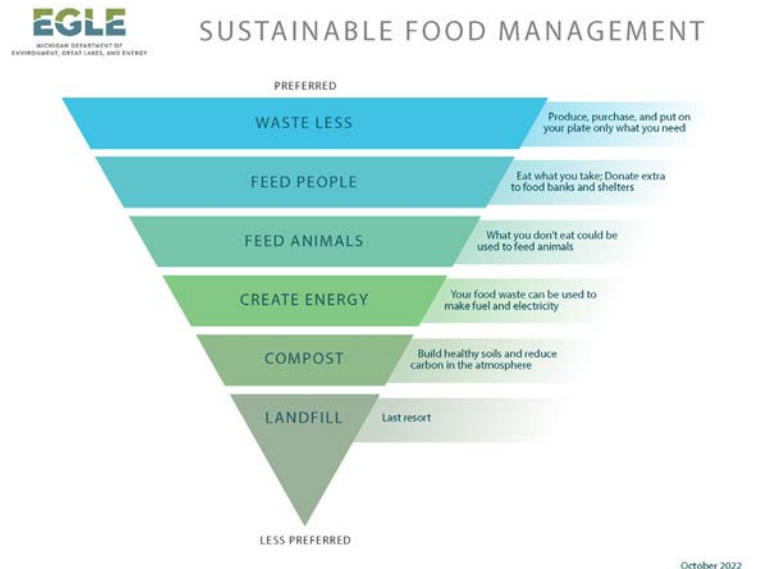
By Lydia Schaafsma

According to ReFED, a nonprofit focused on food waste reduction in the United States, 47 percent of consumer food was wasted in the United States in 2023, costing approximately \$264 billion. This cost the average American almost \$800! Your community likely has organizations, such as food banks and soup kitchens, that dedicate time to capturing food waste. Local governments can further this work by facilitating connections with residents, businesses, and institutions in the community—like schools, grocery stores, restaurants, and hospitals—to reduce food waste.

One way that municipalities can engage in planning around food waste reduction to maximize their environmental, economic, and social benefits is to participate in the Michigan Green Communities (MGC) program. The MGC program, administered by the League, is a statewide network of local and state government staff and officials that collaborate and promote innovative sustainability solutions at the local, state, regional, national, and international levels.

What Is the Best Way to Reduce Food Waste?

The Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) have made reducing food waste one of its major priorities because of its ability to reduce climate emissions and redirect food to those who need it. The strategies for reducing food waste and recovering food for other uses are organized from most to least impactful in EGLE's Sustainable Food Management hierarchy. The upside-down triangle outlines where food waste ends up, organized by the actions, from highest to lowest potential, for food waste reduction and recovery. "Waste less" is at the top of the triangle, representing the action with the greatest impact. Preventing food from being wasted in the first place saves money and resources and prevents greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from entering the atmosphere. Moving down the triangle, next is "feed people," then "feed animals," "create energy" (this one is harder to do at home!), "compost," and lastly "landfill." Local governments can intervene to help direct food waste to sections higher up in the triangle and to cut down on how much food enters landfills.



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What Are Local Governments in Michigan Doing to Address Food Waste?

Many local governments across Michigan are working to start compost programs in their communities, but you'll notice that composting is lower on the list of the preferred food management strategies in the Sustainable Food Management hierarchy. To explore how local governments can facilitate the higher-impact food management strategies, EGLE awarded the nonprofit Make Food Not Waste a grant to partner with the City of Southfield to conduct a food waste elimination study and develop a food waste reduction implementation plan focused on source reduction, food rescue, upcycling, and organics recycling.

In partnership with Make Food Not Waste, Southfield kicked off a food waste elimination study in early 2024. From the study, the City learned that 15,000 tons of food are wasted annually in the city, with a \$3.8 million value of food rescue potential. Of that food waste, 46 percent comes from residents, while 35 percent is produced by restaurants. From these results, Southfield was able to target key producers of food waste in their community. The project team launched a public education campaign targeted at educating residents on lowering their food waste. Southfield took the first steps toward achieving zero waste by hosting in-person events and creating a dedicated website (southfieldcounts.org) to connect residents with educational resources and opportunities to get involved. You can read more online in their full plan, *A Blueprint to Zero Food Waste in Southfield*.

Southfield has paved the way for other local governments to consider food waste. Similar projects in Southeast Michigan are underway in municipalities like Canton, Dearborn, Farmington Hills, and Livonia.

What Are Basic Actions that Local Governments Can Take to Reduce Food Waste?

The good news is that your community isn't the first to tackle this complex issue. Learn from communities like Southfield that have already begun the work. Even if your community doesn't have the time, capacity, or funding to complete a comprehensive food waste study and community plan, there are impactful actions your local government can take.

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has a free resource, *Tackling Food Waste in Cities: A Policy and Program Toolkit*, to help local governments minimize food waste. The recommendations involve the key concepts of "Rethink,

Reduce, Rescue, Recycle." Easy wins to start with include pointing community members to resources on a public website and elevating existing food donation programs.

The Michigan Green Communities (MGC) program is another great place to start. A core component of the MGC program is the MGC Challenge, an annual sustainability benchmarking program that guides and supports communities in adapting to a changing climate, protecting infrastructure, improving the quality of life for residents, and creating a more environmentally and economically sustainable future for the state of Michigan. The Challenge consists of 23 metrics and 133 action items based on best practices in the areas of planning, water, climate resilience and adaptation, energy, community engagement, mobility, materials management, and economic development and land use.

In 2024, the MGC Challenge added six new action items to encourage local governments to reduce food waste in their communities:

- Implement policies and/or programs within and across municipal/county government to reduce food waste, donate surplus food, compost and/or better manage food scraps.
- Estimate local baseline level of food waste or update your local baseline if there are any major changes to the community that would affect food waste generation (e.g., new health care institutions, restaurants, housing, etc.). Resources available include the EPA's Excess Food Opportunities Map and the NRDC food waste toolkit.
- Evaluate your community's waste system to identify opportunities to boost food waste prevention, food donation, and food scrap recycling efforts.
- Develop a food waste reduction strategy with food waste reduction targets or include a strategy in an existing community-wide plan.
- Increase public awareness and provide concrete strategies for how households, businesses, and institutes can prevent food waste, donate food, and compost food scraps.

The current Michigan Green Communities Challenge reporting period is open until May 1. Local governments can get started by creating an account at migreencommunities.com/register.

Make your community thrive by reducing food waste! 

Lydia Schaafsma was a program associate for the League in a grant-funded position. You may contact Danielle Beard for questions on food waste reduction at 517-908-0308 or dbeard@mml.org.



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