

# The Review

The official magazine of the  michigan municipal league

Fall 2025

## Taking Care of Business

**No Business or Opportunity Is Too Small**

**06** Michigan  
Infrastructure Council

**11** U.P. Community  
Exchange

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Ecosystem

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in Monroe

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Fall 2025

Volume 98, Number 4

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 michigan municipal league

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of the magazine and past issues.



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# We're on the Housing Frontlines

## Executive Director's Message

Housing, housing, housing.

It's the foundation—literal and metaphorical—upon which individuals, families, and entire communities build stability and opportunity. When residents have a reliable place to call home, they are better able to contribute to their neighborhoods, succeed in the workforce, and invest in the well-being of themselves and the people around them.

It doesn't matter whether we're talking about Hamtramck, Clare, Ypsilanti, or Iron Mountain—the ripple effects of housing availability extend far beyond the mailbox. A strong housing market is the foundation of a thriving community, and a thriving community can support local entrepreneurship, attract and keep businesses, and foster the human connection that makes our cities, villages, and townships the places we love to live in. When communities thrive, schools perform better, public health outcomes improve, and civic engagement deepens.

And yet, Michigan communities face an ever-growing housing crisis. According to the 2024 Michigan Statewide Housing Needs Assessment, fully half of Michigan's renters are cost-burdened—spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing—and over a quarter of those are severely cost-burdened, with more than half of their income going to housing costs.

But, of course, you already knew this. Municipal leaders across Michigan are on the frontlines of these challenges. Just as a healthy housing market causes a butterfly effect of benefits, an anemic one—hampered by rising costs, aging infrastructure, and limited supply—burdens residents and local governments alike. At the risk of sounding like a corrupted .mp3 file (the “broken record” metaphor is rapidly drifting towards obsolescence), there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the housing question. Michigan's needs are diverse—what fits the needs of East Lansing may not work in Au Gres.

That all leads, of course, to the MI Home Program. You may have already seen our press conference in Lansing back in August; you may also have heard about it at Convention last month. You'll certainly read about it in this issue of the *Review*. But hey—we're proud of this, and we're excited about what it could mean for the state, so I'm going to keep talking about it.

The MI Home Program is a five-year, \$160 million-per-year proposal, the motto of which is “Partnership over Preemption.” It aims to build or rehabilitate more than 10,000 homes, enable lasting financing solutions through a statewide revolving loan fund, and modernize zoning rules. We hope that, together, achieving these goals will make housing more available, affordable, and sustainable for all Michiganders—no matter where in the state they live.

There's more to come, and more to talk about, but I hope you're as optimistic about this as I am.

As “Partnership over Preemption” implies, collaboration is essential. As eager and passionate as we may be as municipal leaders, we alone cannot be the sole drivers of a thriving Michigan. Partnerships with state agencies, nonprofits, developers, and residents are critical. Together, we can expand the range of housing options, modernize infrastructure, and ensure fair access for all. We must also embrace innovation—whether via adaptive reuse (check out what Monroe is doing, pg. 21), creative financing tools, or zoning reforms that reflect the realities of today's housing market.

Most importantly, our work must remain centered on the human beings who live here. Housing is square one of a thriving community, but it certainly doesn't hurt if the community itself is also a safe, welcoming, and joyful place to be. In this issue, you'll read about how cities and villages across the state are paving the path to thriving, and how the League (and the League Foundation) is helping them get there.

Every step of the way, we here at the League are committed to advancing this vision of a thriving Michigan. With teamwork and passion, ingenuity and grit, humor and grace, we can ensure that every Michigander has the foundation they need to thrive, and that every community across Michigan stays strong and resilient.

Happy autumn, and go football team of your choice!



**Dan Gilmartin**

League Executive Director and CEO  
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# Michigan Infrastructure Council: Aligning People, Projects, and Policies for Michigan's Future

By Ryan Laruwe

Housed within the Department of Treasury's Bureau of Local Governments and School Services, the Michigan Infrastructure Council (MIC) is a statewide advisory council dedicated to improving community infrastructure outcomes through accelerating the adoption of infrastructure asset management. The MIC collaborates with the Water Asset Management Council (WAMC), the Transportation Asset Management Council (TAMC), and the directors of various state departments. Together, we work to develop and implement programs and policies that support and prioritize asset management practices among public and private infrastructure owners and regulatory models.

## Why Infrastructure Asset Management Matters

Infrastructure is the backbone of a thriving community, supporting our daily lives, fueling businesses, and protecting our environment. While these systems have served us for decades, many assets are now nearing the end of their design life. Compounding this, historical underinvestment in maintenance has shortened their lifespans, which makes it difficult for communities to meet the needs of a 21st-century economy. The good news is that asset management provides a powerful path forward. An asset management approach ensures communities proactively coordinate activities to derive value from their assets as well as:

- Maximize the value and lifespan of aging infrastructure.
- Be more proactive in addressing critical risks to prevent future crises.
- Produce transparent and participatory models for making future decisions.

## Fostering a Statewide Culture of Asset Management

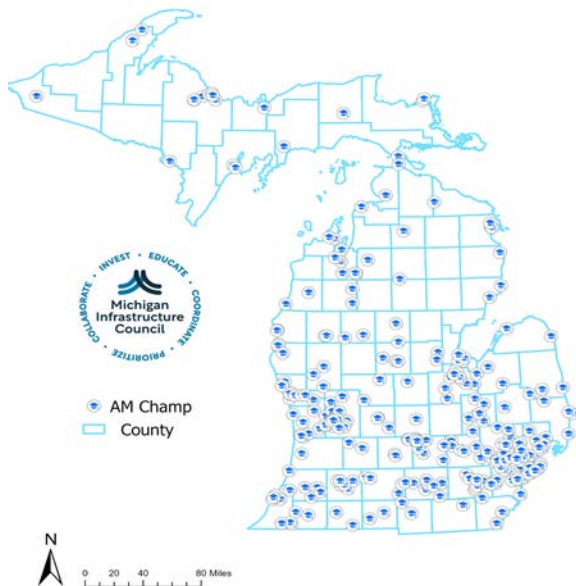
The MIC is driven by a clear mission: cultivating partnerships that strengthen Michigan's infrastructure to provide the foundation for public and environmental health, economic prosperity, and quality of life. The MIC has launched several programs and resources to increase awareness of how asset management supports communities. We invite you to explore these opportunities and join us in building a more sustainable and reliable infrastructure system for Michigan.

## Asset Management Champions

The MIC's Asset Management (AM) Champions program is fostering a statewide culture of effective infrastructure asset management. Participants will become community ambassadors, equipped to advocate for infrastructure asset management. These leaders will champion organizational change at the local level and drive the prioritization of coordinated planning and delivery. The AM Champions program offers a robust curriculum for infrastructure leaders, empowering them to make informed and effective infrastructure decisions that improve the efficiency and sustainability of local infrastructure—ultimately strengthening the state's overall economy.

The AM Champions program offers 25 hours of asynchronous training, designed for self-paced learning over a three-month period. Participants learn principles and processes of asset management and how to assess their current management practices against best practices using the Asset Management Readiness Scale (AMRS). The program also offers free consultations with industry leaders. Once participants successfully complete the coursework and live learning sessions, they receive a certificate of completion. This certificate is formally recognized by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy for 2.5 Continuing Education Credits applicable to drinking water operators and recognized by the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs for continuing education credits for professional engineers.





Today, there are more than 600 AM Champions across Michigan.

## Building a “Dig Once” Approach

Revitalizing Michigan’s aging infrastructure demands a strategic and efficient approach. Coordinating infrastructure projects to minimize repeated digging maximizes return on investment and reduces inconvenience for residents and businesses across the state. The MIC’s MiDIG Project Portal plays a crucial role in this effort by enabling infrastructure owners to share their capital improvement plans and connect project managers, advancing a more coordinated approach throughout Michigan.

MiDIG facilitates streamlined infrastructure planning through a secure, cloud-based platform. This centralized repository combines infrastructure data and visualizes it on a geospatial map. MiDIG leverages advanced and emerging technologies like Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and equips planners with extensive project oversight. Through intelligent data analysis, MiDIG identifies potential conflicts and overlaps between projects at an early stage, enabling a coordinated and collaborative approach that minimizes delays and ensures cost-effective project execution.

## 30-Year Integrated Infrastructure Strategy

The MIC’s 30-Year Integrated Infrastructure Strategy (the Strategy) is the first comprehensive infrastructure plan for the state of Michigan, and the first of its kind in the United States. Michigan has the opportunity to lead the nation in an integrated approach to managing infrastructure assets through facilitating and leading coordination and collaboration from both public and private infrastructure communities. The result will improve the quality and reliability of essential services delivered to all residents.

The Strategy is a joint effort led by the MIC, TAMC, and WAMC. It was shaped by the expertise and experiences of our members, the testimonials from our AM Champions, and the results of a public infrastructure survey. During the development of the Strategy, we aimed to identify new and emerging infrastructure challenges that transcend asset classes and geographical boundaries. Common challenges we heard included asset management knowledge, aging infrastructure, funding, climate adaptation, workforce, affordability, and inflation.

While a precise roadmap to our long-term aspirations is ever evolving, together, we can navigate toward them by keeping our vision at the forefront. By 2054, we believe Michigan will be a place where integrated infrastructure strategies and systems will strengthen social bonds, empower a robust economy, and safeguard our natural heritage—the Great Lakes—and quality of life for generations to come.

As our shared ability to coordinate and collaborate improves, Michigan will be better equipped to tackle more complex challenges. The MIC will facilitate and lead updates to the Strategy every five years, celebrating the successes achieved and identifying next steps to move Michigan forward.

If you are interested in learning more about the Michigan Infrastructure Council and its programs, please visit [michigan.gov/mic](https://michigan.gov/mic).

Ryan Laruwe is the executive director of the Michigan Infrastructure Council. Ryan can be reached at [laruwer1@michigan.gov](mailto:laruwer1@michigan.gov) or 517-290-4876.

## Michiganders Will

Have access to safe, reliable, resilient infrastructure services at a fair and reasonable price

Understand the value proposition of asset management as a long-term infrastructure strategy for achieving community goals

Have access to the information they need to make informed infrastructure decisions within their communities

Face minimal inconvenience, economic loss, and negative health and safety impacts associated with infrastructure operations

## Infrastructure Owners and Operators Will

Utilize infrastructure data to understand, plan, and communicate their system needs

Be able to explain their asset management strategy based on varying investment levels and how funding impacts levels of service

Be leaders in the clean energy transition by eliminating energy waste and investing in renewable energy and electric vehicle charging infrastructure

Have a workforce that understands and embraces the opportunity presented by emerging technology



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# U.P. Community Exchange Program Connects Ironwood and Hancock

By Margaret Mooney

Whatever challenge or opportunity a community is experiencing, sometimes the best advice and greatest inspiration come from local leaders in neighboring municipalities. Based on this idea and inspired by the positive outcomes of the Michigan Association of Mayors' (MAM) long-standing Community Exchange program (formerly "Mayors' Exchange"), the League launched a new iteration in 2025 with the unique needs and circumstances of Upper Peninsula communities in mind. Seeking to strengthen connections among the League's Upper Peninsula members, the U.P. Community Exchange is an opportunity for municipal officials in all roles to host and visit a fellow community—encouraging the "exchange" of invaluable peer ideas and strategies for success. While the possibilities for what this might look like are endless, the City of Hancock and City of Ironwood were among the inaugural group of U.P. Community Exchange applicants and eagerly arranged their visits after being connected in early spring.

For Ironwood City Manager Paul Anderson, it was a desire to "get new ideas on community development and learn how another city of our size operates" that inspired them to apply for the program. Similarly, Hancock City Manager Mary Babcock shared that her community applied "seeking to build camaraderie with fellow local leaders and understand how they handle the issues that we also deal with."

First, officials from Ironwood made the two-hour trip north on the Keweenaw Peninsula to visit Hancock. The day began with informal discussions, followed by a tour of several points of interest in the community. The tour included a stop at Hancock's 40-acre Business and Technology Park, which received significant federal and state funding in recent years to complete its expansion and infrastructure improvements. Designed to support business and economic growth in the community, the Business and Technology Park project was an exciting milestone to celebrate as part of Ironwood's visit to Hancock. Paul Anderson expressed, "It was great to see that Hancock still has developable land within their city boundaries that they are able to take advantage of." Although Ironwood is geographically larger than Hancock, Ironwood Community Development Director Tom Bergman observed, "we have an Industrial Park but with no room to expand it."



*Pictured from top to bottom: The City of Hancock Business and Technology Park, the Ironwood Memorial Building, and the City of Hancock City Hall.*



"It was interesting to hear that Ironwood thinks we have a lot of land to develop—we feel constrained and saw Ironwood as the community with more space for development," said Hancock Mayor Kurt Rickard.

The group also toured the now-closed campus of Finlandia University. After the university closed in 2023, three of its buildings were purchased by the City of Hancock, with plans for redevelopment to suit the community's current needs. Babcock reflected that Ironwood's hopeful perspective on the building's opportunities "brought new life back into how we look at this situation." She added that although the path ahead feels daunting, "we envision that in about eight years, the closing of Finlandia will prove to have been a good thing for the community." Mayor Rickard echoed the importance of looking ahead, stating, "We've seen with the Business and Technology Park that changes may not happen overnight, but imagining what Hancock could look like in 20 years is exciting."

Next, the Hancock team journeyed south and gathered at the Ironwood Memorial Building, where the City's municipal offices are located. This historic facility also serves as a venue for weddings, reunions, art shows, and other community events. Because this was the second U.P. Community Exchange visit, Ironwood created an agenda of talking points based on the initial conversations from their time in Hancock. This included an overview of Ironwood's budget process and other City operations, with the discovery of Ironwood's millage rate of 19 mills being a key takeaway for Hancock. Mayor Rickard explained, "We've always been told that the State of Michigan limits millage rates, but after learning from Ironwood we are inspired to 'do our homework' and explore millage options and opportunities for our community."

Upon reflection of the overall experience, Babcock shared that as their exchange visit approached, taking the time to step away from day-to-day operations felt challenging but proved rewarding. She explained that with all there is to do and the pressure to always get more done as local officials, the U.P. Community Exchange, "helped us pause and realize what we already have done."

"The conversations in the car generated different ideas and ways to think about things," said Babcock. "We got a feel for the amazing job Ironwood has done moving their city forward," she added. The inspiration goes both ways: Anderson and Bergman shared that Hancock's campground, which hosts seasonal community events and supports the local economy, caught their attention. "We want to explore how we could benefit more from our campground in Ironwood," said Bergman.

*"Spending time in each other's communities and understanding each other's challenges has opened communication."*

For Bergman, "building our network and relationships" was also a benefit. "If something comes up, I feel comfortable giving Kurt and Mary a call and asking them what they think." He added, "Even though Mary and I have met in the past, spending time in each other's communities and understanding each other's challenges has opened communication." Anderson highlighted that the program gave Ironwood the opportunity to "take a look backwards and celebrate our wins—something we don't often get to do. Most of the time, we are so focused on the projects we are currently working on, it was nice to showcase our community and reflect on our successes."

For U.P. communities interested in participating in next year's exchange program, online submissions are due February 1, 2026. Visit [mml.org](http://mml.org) and search for U.P. Community Exchange.

Margaret Mooney is a membership associate for the League. You may contact Margaret at 734-669-6324 or [mmooney@mml.org](mailto:mmooney@mml.org).

*"Changes may not happen overnight, but imagining what Hancock could look like in 20 years is exciting."*

# Choose Your Own Sustainability Adventure

HOLLAND  
pop. 34,378



By Emily Landau Pinsuwan

Growing up in the '70s and '80s, "I spent 99 percent of my time in one of two places: in the woods behind my house or at the creek behind my grandparent's house in Holland, Michigan," writes Holland Sustainability Manager Dan Broersma in his new book, *Practical Sustainability*. "After a while, I started noticing the litter and trash in the places I loved." Back at home, he was put to work doing what he found to be the unpleasant chore of washing out used household items, which his family then took to the recycling center every weekend.

"I started to put the two together. Being taught to recycle was not just a chore but a good thing. To recycle meant we were using resources in the way they were intended to be acquired, used, and then reused or recycled," he continues.

*"I started to understand it was our responsibility as a community to create the infrastructure to be able to recycle more for our neighbors and friends."*

Those childhood lessons stayed with Broersma as he grew up and went into a career working in IT at Herman Miller (now MillerKnoll) at their Zeeland headquarters. Setting up recycling programs and volunteering on environmental teams led to a full-time position in the company's first sustainability role, with Broersma working his way up to corporate and helping the supply chain reduce its environmental footprint. After 18 years at MillerKnoll, he moved to Goodwill of West Michigan, working to make the already sustainability-conscious nonprofit more so.

A few years later, "the City of Holland designed its first sustainability manager job," recalls Broersma. "Being a resident of Holland, still living in Holland, I was very proud of my community." He got the job and now has been working for the City for about five years, taking leadership roles in the MI Green Communities (MGC) network—Holland currently holds Gold Level status in the yearly MGC Challenge. "The Green Communities program gives us a way to connect, probably better than any other group



Dan Broersma shares his insights on embedding sustainability into local government policies and operations during a breakout session at the League's 2025 Convention.

does," he says. "I've learned so much from what everybody does . . . It's nice to be able to talk to other communities and listen to their struggles—but also listen to their wins."

Broersma never expected his lifelong passion to become a career, and yet here we are: Over the years, he's worked to deploy sustainability initiatives in the corporate, nonprofit, and municipal worlds, and has done a huge amount of volunteer consulting with churches, schools, and more. ("I have a problem with not saying 'no,'" he laughs.) With all this experience, Broersma has developed a very particular set of skills. Enter *Practical Sustainability*, subtitled *A Perspective, Philosophy, and Guide for Implementing Sustainability in Any Organization*.

"The reason for [writing] the book was because every time somebody either asked for my help, or I'd been sent by my old jobs to go help, they'd say, 'We don't even know where to start,'" he says.

One common issue for organizations looking to get into sustainability is an excess of ambition. "The first thing they'd say is, 'I want to put solar panels on my plant.' I'm going, 'Well, you haven't even done the basic stuff—let's fix the foundation first,'" says Broersma. "I see a lot of organizations out there just doing the big projects and not, say, fixing the trash can that's under somebody's desk. Let's do the small stuff first."



“The book is very simple to read, and that's by design.”

Divided into chapters covering Broersma's basic philosophies of sustainability and simple steps people can take to meet their green goals, *Practical Sustainability* is intended as a sort of “Choose Your Own Adventure” guide to making sustainability work within the frameworks necessary in any given organization. Intermixed with everything is an array of anecdotes and strategies Broersma has amassed from his lengthy career.

As the name suggests, *Practical Sustainability* is not intended as a manifesto or a political statement. “The book is very simple to read, and that's by design,” says Broersma. “If somebody picks it up, someone who thinks sustainability is just a political thing, then they read it and think, *Okay, this makes sense in my organization*, and they become more sustainable—not because it's a ‘green’ thing to do, but because it makes sense—then I feel like it's a success.”

One of Broersma's secret weapons is that he doesn't come to the table with any agenda. Instead, he listens to and observes organizations to learn more about their priorities, processes, and needs. His belief is that sustainability affects every facet of an organization, so there's no area in which it can't potentially improve something. And you never know what solutions you might discover: Once, he recalls, he was visiting a school to test out a recycling program and noticed that janitorial staff were leaving

lights on to signal which rooms had been cleaned. “We identified an energy issue while we were trying to figure out a recycling issue,” he laughs.

For municipalities looking to dip their toes into sustainability, Broersma's biggest piece of advice is to keep it simple. “You don't need to hire a sustainability manager to start with,” he says. “Find a passionate person and start small. Make sure that you support that person. Make sure that you're doing the baseline stuff of just figuring out what your actual goals are—find a simple, small, winnable, thing. And then just repeat, continue—but don't stop at one little thing.”

*Practical Sustainability* is now available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other book-selling platforms; readers who attended last month's Convention may have already snagged themselves a signed copy from Broersma's break-out session alongside MGC. He's also released each chapter as a series of five free guides, available on his website. Broersma has no desire to gatekeep the knowledge that he's amassed; he wants it out there for organizations of all kinds to implement in their sustainability journeys.

“I have a perspective that says if you see a problem, get involved—and that's what I did.”

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

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# The Small Business Ecosystem

By Emily Landau Pinsuwan

BELLEVILLE pop. 3,998  
BRIGHTON pop. 8,302  
CHELSEA pop. 5,451  
HOWELL pop. 10,078  
MARINE CITY pop. 5,226

MILAN pop. 6,067  
MONROE pop. 20,462  
ORTONVILLE pop. 1,351  
UTICA pop. 5,226



For the past few years, the League's Policy Research Labs team has been in the trenches with its Local Economies Initiative, the goal of which is to help Michigan communities discover and close gaps in accessing capital, technical assistance, networks, and more to support their small business environments.

The project has been a decade in the making. The League's placemaking work, dating back to the mid-2010s, focuses on main streets and the human experience in communities—how to make communities nice places where people want to visit and linger.

Back then, the focus was the public realm—what happens between the buildings, rather than what happens inside them. But even in those long-ago years, we noticed that successful main streets always benefited from the presence of small, unique local businesses.

To make a long story short: unprecedented things happened in 2020, and small businesses suddenly found themselves fighting to survive. Communities quickly stepped in with

emergency measures. That summer, main streets became pedestrian dining areas, with the introduction of wildly successful Social Districts keeping restaurants alive.

Later that year, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) asked the League to administer the Pure Michigan Small Business Relief Initiative, offering \$10,000 grants. Demand was staggering—over 8,000 applications poured in on the first day, for funding that could only support about 700 businesses.

This was our first real foray into small business support, and it was a clear sign of the overwhelming need.

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation approached the League in 2022, asking about a partnership in supporting local small business and entrepreneurship. Based on our experience during the pandemic, we knew that there was a need. As fragile as small business ecosystems could be, they were integral to the placemaking work and main street revitalization initiatives that we'd been talking about for a decade and a half.



*What we found was that local business ecosystems are driven more by word-of-mouth than by formal networks, which demonstrated the need to strengthen connections and help entrepreneurs build relationships on the ground.*

The Wilson Foundation provided a small needs assessment grant for League staff to go out and get the lay of the small business land. What we learned was that communities need small businesses, and small businesses need help—help finding out what capital sources are available, help connecting to those sources, help with technical assistance like business accounting and tax filing.

Then came the “diagnostic phase”: We focused on Howell, Brighton, and Monroe—communities with enough activity to learn from but which could still use support. Over a few months, League staff sat down with local leaders and business owners. They asked about the day-to-day challenges, successes, partners, and resources. That helped us spot gaps and see where the League’s framework could make a difference.

From there, the Local Economies Initiative scaled up. Our next group consisted of Ortonville, Belleville, Milan, Chelsea, Utica, and Marine City. During full-day site visits, we met first with local entrepreneurs to learn about their experiences: what it’s like to do business locally, what resources they use, where communication gaps exist. One meeting included local leadership, and the other did not, so that these business people could speak (and sometimes vent) freely.

Visits also included representatives from organizations such as the MEDC or regional chambers, which were (potentially) in a position to provide funding and other support.

What we found was that local business ecosystems are driven more by word-of-mouth than by formal networks, which demonstrated the need to strengthen connections and help entrepreneurs build relationships on the ground.

The site visits and conversations culminated in the Labs team producing an “Opportunity Report” for each community. Opportunity Reports are a summary of what the League heard and observed during site visits, along with areas for potential improvement, short- and long-term opportunities, resources to consider, and inspiration from other communities doing similar work.

For example, Marine City’s Opportunity Report praised the city’s strong local identity and supportive small business community but saw a disconnect, both physical and “emotional,” between its four main business districts. Among other things, the report recommended the City improve its wayfinding to create greater flow between these districts. Similarly, Utica’s report noticed a lack of connectivity between the popular Jimmy John’s Field and its downtown, meaning that baseball fans would come to town to watch the game—and then hop into their cars to go eat, shop, and mingle elsewhere.

Pairing the Wilson funding with a grant from the DTE Foundation, the Local Economies Initiative invited communities that received Opportunity Reports to apply on a rolling basis for grants to implement a project that addressed one of their reports’ recommendations. Marine City received a grant to launch a wayfinding signage project, using it to cover over half the budget. Utica, meanwhile, used its grant to create a pocket park on a vacant green space between Deanna’s Men’s Styling Shop and Mr. Miguel’s Mexican Grill & Cantina. The park sits along a busy path to Jimmy John’s Field, helping connect the ballpark to downtown.



Community members gather for a free Friday night concert in Riley Park, downtown Farmington.





The Local Economies Initiative held its first Convening this past June, with representatives from participating communities meeting up at John Cowley & Sons Irish Pub in downtown Farmington to meet, swap tips, and brag about placemaking projects. The City of Belleville DDA debuted its plans for The WhereHouse, a business incubator located in (naturally) an old warehouse on 458 Main Street. The City of Monroe discussed its ambitious revitalization of its historic St. Mary Academy site (see article, pg. 21). Other activities included presentations on zoning, branding, and a walking tour of Farmington's revitalized downtown, courtesy of its DDA.

The formal, daylong site visits and Opportunity Reports have concluded, but the work of the Local Economies Initiative continues. Its legacy includes the two Microbusiness Playbooks, which provide lists of action items for municipalities to implement to improve their friendliness to microbusinesses (i.e., businesses with 10 or fewer employees, a category which makes up over 90 percent of businesses in the United States). The Essentials Playbook is for communities taking their first steps in this process, listing basic steps that every community should take; the Comprehensive Playbook is for municipalities ready for advanced work, providing a menu of more in-depth action items to choose from based on their unique needs.



*Farmington Mayor Joe LaRussa and Downtown Development Authority Executive Director Jessica Westendorf (not pictured) lead a walking tour and Q&A session through downtown Farmington, highlighting the DDA's strategic investments, creative pop-up and placemaking efforts, and small businesses collaborations.*







Jane Dixon, AICP, NCI Principal Planner at McKenna (left), and Ashley Jankowski, AICP, Associate Planner at McKenna (right), present on how utilizing zoning ordinances can support both new and existing small businesses.

*You can view all the Local Economies Initiative's materials—including Opportunity Reports, Microbusiness Playbooks, and the Local Economies Dashboard—online at [mml.org/local-economies](http://mml.org/local-economies).*

The Local Economies Initiative has also partnered with Data Driven Detroit to create a “data dashboard” that brings together various data points the League uses when investigating a community to understand the challenges residents might face. While it's not a comprehensive review of a local small business environment, it offers insights into who works in town—whether employees live locally or commute in from elsewhere—and what that might mean for housing, transit, and childcare needs. These regular, human “life factors” play a huge role in residents' ability to work for or start a small business.

In the works is a League Online Learning Course, which will discuss the research and lessons of the Initiative.

You can view all the Local Economies Initiative's materials—including Opportunity Reports, Microbusiness Playbooks, and the Local Economies Dashboard—online at [mml.org/local-economies](http://mml.org/local-economies)

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# All in for Adaptive Reuse in Monroe

By Emily Landau Pinsuwan

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pop. 20,462



*For nearly a century, St. Mary Academy has been a Monroe landmark. Built in 1932 as a private Catholic school for girls, the Gothic-style building—on the National Register of Historic Places—has sat vacant for over two decades. In May 2024, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM Sisters), signed an option-to-purchase agreement with Keith Masserant, a local developer who once attended classes at St. Mary's. This kicked off a two-year period of due diligence and planning for a mixed-use transformation of the 16-acre, 260,000-square-foot campus.*

*The project envisions 115 “missing middle” apartments, restoration of its theater, an entrepreneurship space, a museum in its former library, and more—while preserving the architecture. Funding comes from an array of partners, including the Michigan Municipal League Foundation; Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation; Michigan Housing Development Authority; Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC); and the City of Monroe. Construction is slated to begin in summer of 2026. We spoke to some of the people involved to learn more about this uniquely collaborative, ambitious example of adaptive reuse.*

## **What does the St. Mary site mean for Monroe as a community?**

**Mark Cochran (Assistant City Manager, City of Monroe):** The facility and institution are deeply rooted in the city's history. The IHM Sisters built it out of brick, steel, and concrete in the middle of the Great Depression. They lived lives of meager means so they could build it. It's a magnificent, gorgeous facility. There is probably not a person in Monroe who has not been touched by it in some way. It has stood as a beacon and an icon right in the middle of the City.

**Keith Masserant (Developer, KM Cornerstone):** A lot of passion and heart went into this building. The Sisters worked hard to build and pay for it. Just the spirit of the building means a lot to all of us. It was built to be robust—a “forever building.” A few years ago, I met with the City of Monroe and Monroe County, trying to figure out what to do with St. Mary's. One option on the table was to demolish it. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I stood up and said, “We can save this. This is the jewel of Monroe.”

**Sister Maxine Kollasch (President, IHM Sisters):** That building is a reflection of the congregation's love for the students—for the ministry of education. Over the last 20 years it has been closed, we've worked hard to keep it secure and preserved. A couple years ago, through the Community Foundation and in conversations with Keith Masserant, an option arose for a collaborative approach to the possibilities of the building.

## **How has the collaboration between organizations helped move the project forward?**

**Mark Cochran:** Keith and I meet with the Sisters once a month to talk about how things are going. We also have an advisory committee with cross-sector representation, including nonprofits. We've met with the neighbors: “This is in your backyard. What would you like to have here?” We've had an open house where we invited the public to learn about the plans and share their thoughts and ideas. There's so much excitement. I think the community has dreamed about what this can be just as much as City leadership.

**Keith Masserant:** The City of Monroe brought forward the MML Foundation and other organizations, who were wonderful in helping to get me to where I'm at now, from the assessment on the inside to working on the architecture. It helps me out, knowing that there's backing out there. It made me feel like I was doing the right thing with this building—that I was moving in the right direction.

**Helen D. Johnson (President, MML Foundation):** When cities don't “go it alone,” and instead bring in other partners, it creates a model for others—because no one has the funding at City Hall to do huge projects on their own. Success at bringing together a cross-sector group of partners is exactly the juice we need for this to happen all over Michigan. It's like that children's story, *Stone Soup*. This is going to be better if we all get in here, roll up our sleeves, and make it happen as a team—as a partnership. That's exactly what we're seeing here.

**Sister Maxine Kollasch:** It's an exciting collaboration because of the kind of energy that everybody feels about this—especially the Sisters—and the possibilities



it opens for the community. That kind of energy is what's characteristic of it. It makes the collaboration very much a team approach of wanting the best for the building and the people who come in the future. This kind of project is a joy to be a part of.

### **How has philanthropy served to make a project of this scale and complexity possible?**

**Helen D. Johnson:** There often isn't enough risk capital in a community's budget to be able to put the sort of early dollars in to make sure these projects can happen. And so, it falls to philanthropy to create the preconditions for opportunities like this. That's what we were able to do in our partnership with the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation—providing that risk capital, moving it forward into Monroe so that they could work with the Community Foundation, the Sisters, the developer, and the City; bringing together what I think is one of the best examples of cross-sector collaboration in adaptive reuse.

**Mark Cochran:** I call it "Frankenstein funding"—it will take a lot of pots [of money] to make this monster come to life. A nonprofit, the Friends of St. Mary Academy, will tap into the strong alumni group. It's no secret the MML has been active in addressing the residential piece and housing needs throughout the state. We've had discussions with MEDC, Historic Preservation Credits, and Brownfield funds to identify other components with funding resources available. Obviously, it's eating the elephant one bite at a time. It's not all going to be done at once.

**Valerie Orr (Executive Director, Community Foundation of Monroe County):** With such a community-oriented project, philanthropy plays a critical role in ensuring it crosses the finish line. These individuals have so much love, care, and understanding of the history behind the Academy. Often, philanthropy is disguised as only high-net-worth individuals, but in this case, we believe anybody who cares about their community can be a philanthropist, no matter their background or their socioeconomic status. Anyone can be a part of this project, and that's how we're approaching it—making sure everybody has the opportunity to engage.

**Keith Masserant:** It's been tough at times. But in the spirit of whatever we're into, the moment I start feeling that we're not moving, something comes up. My phone will ring, and I hear people are bringing grants and opportunities forward. People have offered expertise in bookkeeping and legal services. The City of Monroe has given all they can to help support this. I don't know why the IHM Sisters took faith in me, but I'm honored. There are so many people who want to support this.

### **When the project is complete, what will success look like to you?**

**Mark Cochran:** Growing up in Monroe, I'd always had a feeling of mystery as I passed the campus: What does the inside look like? I think a lot of people here feel that way. Success will be when the community can enjoy the inside as much as they've cherished the outside. Whatever that looks like—whether they're grabbing a cup of coffee, working in an office, living in one of the apartments, or going to the museum.



*Exterior view of St. Mary Academy, Monroe, MI, 2025.*

**Sister Maxine Kollasch:** Success will reflect the spirit of collaboration. As Catholic sisters, community is a big part of our religious life. As we look to the next part of the life of St. Mary's, success would mean that community piece continues, rooted in relationships that are respectful, honest, and caring; reflective of the gospel values of love that Jesus exemplifies. I can't even tell you how great the excitement here is among the Sisters—to be that kind of hope and light for people in the future. We pray every day for this project.

**Keith Masserant:** I'd like to see families participate, live in the building, and prepare for the next generation. That was my main goal, and it still is. I want to be a mentor for other people to understand that you can stand up and take these challenges on. I'm the local guy. With big buildings like this, usually large companies come in from out of state or out of town. I took this on locally. It'll take everything I have to do it, but I'm gonna do it.

*Interviews have been edited for length and clarity.*

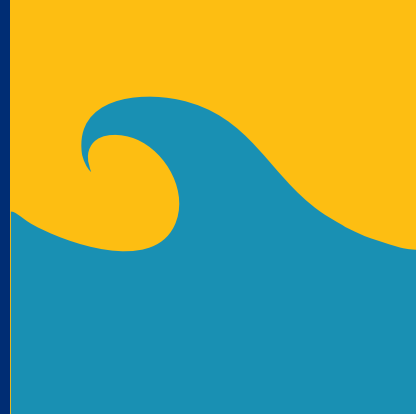
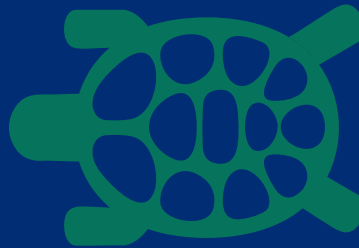
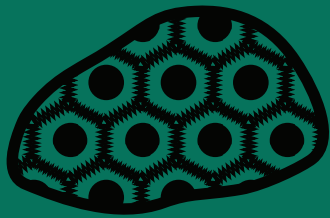
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# MICHIGAN MUNICIPAL LEAGUE CONVENTION 2025

The League's premier annual gathering—Convention 2025—took place September 17–19 in Grand Rapids. Over five hundred local leaders from across the state gathered to network, hear legislative updates, and take part in conversations on matters from A.I. to placemaking and zoning. Especially popular this year were the Education Tours, which took participants out into the city to see Grand Rapids' achievements in housing, sustainability, and more.

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# 2025 AWARDS

## Jenasia Morris

### Emerging Leader Award

The new Emerging Leader Award highlights the importance of nurturing the next generation of leaders poised to tackle emerging issues and shape the future in Michigan with creativity, passion, and a deep commitment to their communities.



## Melanie Piana

### Honorary Life Membership Award

Honorary Life Membership, first awarded in 1932, is the League's highest honor, reserved for the most active and inspiring leaders dedicated to the League and its mission.

## Robert E. Clark

### Michael A. Guido Leadership and Public Service Award

Celebrating a chief elected official who personifies professionalism and leadership, is an active League member, is dedicated to the citizens in their community and advocates on their behalf in Lansing and Washington, DC.



## Edward Klobucher

### Jim Sinclair Exceptional Service Award

Celebrating a person dedicated to public service who has shown passion and commitment to the League, enthusiastically supporting its mission and promoting its purpose.

*Not pictured, Abdullah Hammoud, Community Builder Award*





Houghton City Manager and 2024 CEA recipient Eric Waara (left) passes the CEA trophy to Negaunee City Manager Nate Heffron (right).

From left to right: Negaunee Former Councilmember Tony Stagliano, City Manager Nate Heffron, and Mayor Craig Ilmonen celebrate with the Community Excellence Award trophy after receiving the award.

## City of Negaunee

### Negaunee Downtown Enhancement Project

The Negaunee Downtown Enhancement Project is a transformative investment in the city's future. It revitalized a neglected downtown by replacing aging infrastructure and adding streetscape and placemaking elements that honor historic charm while supporting long-term growth. The project strengthens community pride, attracts investment, and positions Negaunee as a model of resilience—ushering in a new era of opportunity for generations to come.

## — 2025 FINALISTS —



### Village of Milford

Central Park: The Heart of Milford



### City of Hart

The HArt Project: Community Spirit Initiative



### Village of Roscommon

Bird City Michigan and Kirtland's Warbler sculpture





# MI Home Program: A Proactive Housing Proposal

By John LaMacchia

In cities and villages across Michigan, local leaders, residents, and employers have been grappling with the state's housing crisis. Whether the need is a handful of new housing units or several thousand, this is an issue our members are constantly bringing to our attention.

The League's Board of Trustees has taken a deep dive into this issue. They determined it was important for the organization to engage in creating a proactive policy solution to help communities address their housing needs. They also recognized the state has made progress in this area, but more needs to be done. While others have pushed preemption as the answer, the Board firmly believed that if the goal is to build more homes, a model based on partnership over preemption is the best way forward.

## Proposal Release

On August 19, the League released a housing proposal called the **MI Home Program**. This proposal is meant to complement existing efforts and is targeted toward building and rehabbing attainable housing. It places resources directly in the hands of developers to help with funding gaps and promotes zoning reform at the local level. The MI Home Program ensures accountability and will build and rehab at least 10,000 new housing units. Furthermore, it has support from a bipartisan group of legislators, developers, and builders all while maintaining the ability for local leaders to work with their residents and businesses to address their unique housing needs.

## MI Home Program Components

The proposal would require the State of Michigan to invest \$160 million annually for five years to stimulate housing investment through four targeted programs.

### *MI Home Readiness (\$5 million annually)*

- Continue to provide funding for Housing Readiness Incentive Grants to local governments for the purpose of updating zoning regulations in support of housing needs. Capped at \$50,000 per applicant.
- Create a statewide matchmaking platform to identify housing opportunities and make connections between the state, municipalities, and developers.

### *MI Home Grant (\$95 million in years one and two, \$145 million in years three through five)*

- Establish a grant fund to pay for the cost of building or rehabbing qualified residential property. Capped at \$100,000 for new construction and \$30,000 for rehab per dwelling unit but cannot exceed 1/3 of the cost of construction or rehab. The caps will increase annually by an amount equal to the Headlee Inflation Rate Multiplier.

### *MI Home Fund (\$50 million in years one and two)*

- Create a revolving loan fund that addresses gaps for building or rehabbing qualified residential property.





Lansing Mayor Andy Schor speaks during the press conference announcing the MI Home Program proposal. He was joined on stage by: State Legislators: Rep. Mark Tisdell, Rep. Amos O'Neal, Rep. Samantha Steckloff, Rep. Natalie Price, Rep. Mike McFall

Housing & Development Leaders: Daniel Dimitroff (Partner, RDS Management), Brian Farkas (Director of Workforce Housing, Allen Edwin Homes)

Michigan Municipal League Members: Bob Clark (Mayor, Monroe), Valerie Kindle (Mayor, Harper Woods), Barb Ziarko (Councilmember, Sterling Heights), Mark Vanderpool (City Manager, Sterling Heights), Brenda F. Moore (Mayor, Saginaw), Ed Klobucher (City Manager, Hazel Park), Stephen Kepley (Mayor, Kentwood), Joshua Atwood (Mayor Pro Tem, Lapeer), Donald Gerrie (Mayor, Sault Sainte Marie), Theresa Rich (Mayor, Farmington Hills), Ivery Toussant, Jr. (Councilmember, Harper Woods), Jennifer Antel (Mayor, Wayland), Joe LaRussa (Mayor, Farmington), George Bosanic (City Manager, Greenville)

#### **MI Home Employer (\$10 million annually)**

- a. Continue providing funding for the Employer-Assisted Housing Fund to promote public-private partnerships, with the State matching employer contributions to their employees' housing.

The proposed program would promote local zoning reform and increase efficiency by encouraging specific housing-related zoning changes. Local units of government that proactively make or have made 50 percent or more of the following recommended actions and have been approved by the State unlock the ability for a qualified developer to utilize the MI Home Grant and the MI Home Fund within those communities.

- Reduce residential parking requirements to 1.5 space per dwelling or less
- Allow accessory dwelling units (ADU) for long-term housing (not short-term rentals) as permitted use
- Allow duplex as permitted use in residential
- Adopt pre-approved plans
- Allow higher density near transit and employment centers
- Allow single room occupancy for non-related individuals for long-term housing (not short-term rentals)
- Reduce allowable dwelling unit size
- Allow multiuse dwellings and mixed-use where commercial is allowed
- Reduce governing body approvals by expanding and expediting administrative review approvals
- Reduce minimum lot size requirements
- Provide height density bonuses
- Reduce tap fees
- Allow modular as a permitted use in residential
- Complete the Redevelopment Ready Communities program





## Eligibility and Qualifications

Eligible properties include a single-unit house, duplex, triplex, and fourplex or unit(s) within; townhouse, row house, condo in a complex/community, dwelling units in a mixed-use structure, and modular homes.

Grants may be awarded to nonprofit developers, land bank authorities, traditional developers, and, in limited cases, individuals. Properties awarded a grant shall be sold or rented to individuals who have an annual income of not more than 120 percent of the Area Median Income and must remain affordable for no less than 10 years.

The proposal also develops grant limits, reporting, monitoring, and compliance measures to ensure resources are spent on attainable housing and institutes penalties for when program parameters are not followed.

## Moving Forward

This program achieves what we all desire, builds more homes, and does so by choosing partnership over preemption. It is a bold strategy to improve access to attainable housing and does so without eroding the voices of our local elected officials and the residents they represent. And this is just the beginning!

As an organization, we stand ready to continue working collectively to address the state's housing needs. This proposal represents a key component of that effort. To further this effort legislatively, we need your support. Your voice, collectively with the voice of other local leaders, will give us the opportunity to showcase a strong and united effort behind this proposal. Please take the time to share this proposal with your legislators and ask them to support our effort to address the state's housing needs. [L](#)

John LaMacchia is the director of state and federal affairs for the League. You may reach John at 517-908-0303 or [jlamacchia@mml.org](mailto:jlamacchia@mml.org).



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# Your New Roadmap for Funding Success

By Melissa Milton-Pung

We all know that federal funding is undergoing a transformation, so buckle up, folks, and hit the rerouted funding highway. Here's a new roadmap for your journey on this changed funding landscape.

## Get Ready to Shift Gears

Our industry sources now predict that the Fiscal Year 2026 budget will dramatically increase pass-through funding to the states. As such, local governments must sharpen their focus on state agencies as key conduits for the funds that fuel many vital programs and services. In parallel lanes, merit-based funding is becoming the norm, not the exception, while philanthropic institutions are shifting toward relationship-based funding models.

## Hands at 10 and 2: Stay Alert

Just like paying attention to the mile markers on the freeway, you need to monitor state-level funding opportunities to see the signs and quickly identify notices of funding. If you miss your exit, that's okay; you can turn around and come back during next year's funding window. This vigilance will increase your speed in utilizing known funding cycles and developing plans for incremental grant funding over multiple years.

## Obey the Speed Limit

Policy alignment is a lot like following the posted speed limits: pretend like you're driving in Ohio. There's no messing around. For many federal and state grants, it's increasingly important to organize your supporting evidence in ways that align projects with federal policy. Anticipate the speed trap near the state line by being ready to demonstrate support for how your application follows national priorities. Review current and future projects, ensure they align with federal policy (national security, energy dominance, industrialization, etc.), and you won't get stuck with a ticket.

## Have an Emergency Kit

No matter how well planned the trip or the grant application, problems may emerge. Local governments can prepare by creating "evidence lockers" that store past performance metrics and demonstrated need. Be sure to have your data in good shape to support your application, either to clearly provide supporting documentation or respond to requests for further information. These raw data tables can be used and reused in each new application to help prove previous awards and show future funding eligibility. It's like carrying fix-a-flat in your trunk.

## Do the Zipper Merge

While Michigan drivers will forever debate combining lanes early or at the last minute, merging is a must, no matter what. The same goes for funding sources. It's becoming increasingly rare to land that One Big Grant. Instead, funders favor funding balance sheets demonstrating "braided" funding from multiple sources. Well-reasoned budgets that spread risk, hit several metrics at once, and share the burden across numerous sources are more likely to be scored favorably by funders. It's like doing the two-finger wave to usher someone into the lane ahead. This strategy can help reduce traffic backups on the funding highway and sometimes even score you a few bonus points in application evaluations.

## Set the Cruise Control

Driver fatigue contributes to mistakes on the road and so does funding search exhaustion. Give yourself a break from the gas pedal by adopting purpose-built technology to identify, ensure you qualify, and help apply for funding. Utilizing automated searches for key terms can be one of the single greatest capacity boosters for funding identification by local governments. The MI Funding Hub is an aggregator that is constantly updated with emerging search features developed by our partners at Syncurrent. Using these tools, you can set the speed and your search parameters, then let the search engine take the wheel.

### Optimize Your Gas Mileage

Due to changes in public sector funding and other factors, large-scale institutional giving is tightening, but community-oriented funding remains steady. While it's tempting to do a jackrabbit start once the light turns green, or when you finally meet a private foundation's program officer, you will get better mileage with philanthropic funders by gently easing in the clutch and not grinding your gears. Slow and steady will help you cultivate genuine relationships with finesse that will match the pace of community foundations. You may find that getting off the federal trunk line and taking a Sunday drive through the backroads may not be the fastest way to funding, but this path often results in long-term relationships that lead to direct funding allocations.

For more information on shifts in philanthropic giving, visit these websites:

- [JohnsonCenter.org](http://JohnsonCenter.org)
- [Philanthropy.com](http://Philanthropy.com)

Like your dad checking the oil before a big road trip, we've given you our best advice. Keep your bearings by watching your blind spots with good policy alignment, use your hands-free with grant search engines at [MIFundingHub.org](http://MIFundingHub.org), top off your tank when you can by adding in other funding sources, and always use your turn signal by practicing good strategic planning in advance. While this roadmap is not foolproof, it will guide your fund-seeking journey.

Drive safe, you guys!



Melissa Milton-Pung is a policy research labs program manager for the League. You may contact Melissa at 734-669-6328 or [mmiltonpung@mml.org](mailto:mmiltonpung@mml.org).



# *People & Place* Blog

Do you want to hear from the League more between magazines? Subscribe to our new blog!

Taking you behind the scenes to meet the people who are transforming their communities and reimagining what's possible—because they love where they live.







# A.I. Potential to Expand Capacity and Save Resources

By Rick Haglund

Artificial intelligence is sweeping through business, academia, and health care, transforming how work is conducted. Municipalities across Michigan are also starting to participate in this technological revolution. They're using A.I. for a variety of functions, including translating documents, creating chatbots to answer residents' questions, and analyzing household recycling habits with the help of A.I.-powered robotic cameras.

"It's not so much that A.I. is replacing jobs or minimizing the need for local government. The promise is that it will allow local governments to provide more services and make the quality of life better for people," said Trevor Odelberg, a U.S. Congressional Fellow working in the Senate on energy and technology policy issues. He also is the main author of the *Artificial Intelligence Handbook for Local Government*, a joint project of the Michigan Municipal League and the Science, Technology and Public Policy Program at the University of Michigan Ford School of Public Policy.

Odelberg said the handbook was produced last year in response to the League fielding an increasing number of inquiries by municipalities about using A.I. "They were hearing a lot from their members who were seeing more and more A.I. marketing being pitched to them, but not a lot of information on how to use it," he said. The 42-page handbook explains what A.I. is, examines various applications of A.I. that could benefit local governments, and provides a recommended list of guidelines for the safe usage of A.I. tools.

"We want local officials to think holistically about the opportunities, the risks, and boundaries involved in A.I.," said Odelberg, who earned a doctorate degree in computer and electrical engineering at the University of Michigan last year. The educational handbook has piqued the interest of local officials. At a recent League conference, attendees scarfed up all 100 printed copies of the report. As of mid-August, it had been downloaded more than 600 times.

Municipalities across Michigan are now using A.I. in a variety of ways:

- Holland partnered with Saskatchewan-based Prairie Robotics last year in a one-year pilot project that used A.I.-powered cameras, the Global Positioning System (GPS), and computers on City recycling trucks to monitor the contents of curbside recycling bins. The project, funded by a \$38,000 state grant, was designed to educate residents on items that should and shouldn't be recycled.
- Ann Arbor last year launched "Ask Ann," an automated web chat assistant to help people find information on the City's website. "Ask Ann understands and communicates proficiently in 71 different languages, showcasing the advancements in conversational A.I. for a more seamless and inclusive customer experience," the City said in a press release announcing the chatbot last year.



- Mount Pleasant is using mapping company Placer.ai to determine the most popular destinations in the city for planning future development. Placer.ai buys cell phone data, allowing it to track the number of people visiting various locations, City Manager Aaron Desentz told WCMU Public Media.
- Detroit is using an A.I.-driven tool to pinpoint the most critical lead service lines for replacement, saving time and other resources. They're also asking contractors to include A.I. solutions in responding to the City's requests for proposals. To implement smart street intersection technologies, the City is using a federally funded \$2 million grant, which will enhance road safety and address transportation equity, particularly within historically disadvantaged communities. The program is called Mobility Optimization through Data for Equity and Safety (MODES).

But experts say there's still a "wild west" aspect to A.I., which is largely unregulated at the state and federal levels. Because A.I. machines are trained on historical data that can be biased by race, gender, and other factors, A.I.-generated reports can reflect "unintended biases" in areas such as housing and health care, Odelberg said. And answers to queries posed to generative A.I. applications—such as the wildly popular ChatGPT—can be wrong, leading to inaccurate government reports.

There's also the potential for scammers to take advantage of A.I., exposing residents and municipalities to privacy


breaches and financial losses. Even OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, whose company built ChatGPT, recently warned of a potential "fraud crisis" in which bad actors use "deepfake" voices and videos to trick people out of money or threaten their arrest.

Courts and law enforcement agencies must be "extremely careful" when using A.I. in their operations, Odelberg said. A recent survey by the U-M's Ford School found that a third of Michigan law enforcement agencies have adopted or were planning to use A.I. tools in policing. Many are taking a cautious approach in implementing the new technologies. More than half of local government officials surveyed said they were unsure if law enforcement A.I. tools were more or less accurate than human assessments. About two-thirds of sheriffs and county prosecutors expressed the same concern.

Grayling City Manager Erich Podjaske said his city is not using A.I., mainly because he doesn't know enough about it. But he said putting a web chat assistant on the city's website, like Ann Arbor's, could be used to answer routine questions that now are handled by city staffers. "It could take the load off a few people," he said.

That's the promise of A.I. for cash-strapped municipalities struggling to provide quality government services. But adopting this new technology will require great care to protect residents and local government operations. [L](#)



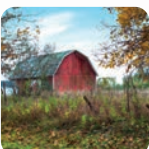

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# Michigan Municipal League–Specific Terms and Acronyms

A helpful list of acronyms and initialisms for members to know as they explore resources like the League website and publications.

**1-800-MLEAGUE** The League's toll-free number (1-800-653-2483)

**CapCon** Capital Conference; the League's annual spring conference held in Lansing with a legislative focus

**CEA** Community Excellence Award; peer-nominated annual League award recognizing innovative solutions in municipal governing

**Conv** Convention; the League's annual fall conference focusing on municipal concerns held in various locations around the state

**EOA** Elected Officials Academy; voluntary League recognition program for elected officials

**Fact Sheets** Short, easy-to-read summaries of common local government topics; online League publications

**Fund** Workers' Compensation Fund; a nonprofit self-insurance pool owned and governed by its members

**GLV** General Law Village

**GLV Handbook** Handbook for General Law Village Officials; online League publication

**HMO** Handbook for Municipal Officials; online League publication

**HRC** Home Rule City

**HRV** Home Rule Village

**Inquiry Service** Provides member officials with responses to questions on an array of municipal topics; [info@mml.org](mailto:info@mml.org)

**Inside208** Advocacy blog on [mml.org](http://mml.org) written by our State and Federal Affairs staff

**LDF** Legal Defense Fund provides amicus curiae (friend of the court) briefs to support municipalities involved in litigation with statewide significance

**LEAF** Law Enforcement Action Forum, League Liability & Property Pool; a group of law enforcement executives working with loss control staff to develop law enforcement model policies and related materials

**Live with the League** A bi-monthly show broadcast live on Zoom (later available on YouTube) featuring League programs, legislative news, and member stories

**MAM** Michigan Association of Mayors; a League affiliate organization

**MAMA** Michigan Association of Municipal Attorneys; a League affiliate organization

**MAMC** Michigan Association of Municipal Clerks; a League affiliate organization

**MBC-LEO** Michigan Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials; a League affiliate organization

**Michigan Green Communities** A network of local government staff and officials that promotes innovative sustainability solutions; Michigan Green Communities Challenge tracks and benchmarks sustainability progress

**MI Funding Hub** An initiative that assists municipalities to find state and federal funding

**MME** Michigan Municipal Executives; a League affiliate organization of city, village, township, and county managers and administrators

**MMLF** Michigan Municipal League Foundation; serves as the philanthropic arm of the League

**MWING** Michigan Women in Municipal Government; a League affiliate organization

**NEO** Newly Elected Official; also a series of League in-person and virtual trainings on "introduction to local government" topics

**People & Place** League blog covering story-based, human interest topics

**Policy Committees** Legislative Governance Committee and five policy committees provide general direction and policy recommendations to the League Board of Trustees and legislative staff

**Pool** Liability & Property Pool; a nonprofit self-insurance pool owned and governed by its members

**Wage & Salary Survey** An annual membership survey of compensation for over 150 local government positions; results can be searched by position, population, and location by participants

The League's Inquiry 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](mailto:info@mml.org).





# The Success of Ishpeming's Books & Badges Program

By Emily Landau Pinsuwan

ISHPEMING  
pop. 6,140



Heather Lander, children's librarian at the Ishpeming Carnegie Public Library (left), and Police Chief Chad Radabaugh (right), at the first Ishpeming Books & Badges event, held in September 2024.

The Ishpeming Police Department is on a new beat: sharing the joy of reading.

For about a year, the department has been participating in a program that brings local police officers to the library to read, bond, and interact with neighborhood children.

It all began in 2024 when Heather Lander, children's librarian at the Ishpeming Carnegie Public Library, connected Police Chief Chad Radabaugh with The Starfish Assignment, an Ohio nonprofit that administers Books & Badges, a program that (according to its website) "connects law enforcement officers with elementary school students to encourage literacy and build relationships in the community."

"It seemed like a really great program to pass along to our PD," says Lander. "So, I let Chief Radabaugh know that we would happily partner."

The Starfish Assignment gives participating police departments a list of books, published by Scholastic, which departments can pick from and then read to kids at events organized within the community. Each child gets a copy of the book afterwards, with a sticker inside that includes the reading officer's name and badge number.

The first Ishpeming Books & Badges was held in September 2024, with Radabaugh reading *If You Give a Pig a Party* by Laura Numeroff to around 65 Ishpeming kids and caregivers. The event was, naturally, party-themed, with cake and party favors and pointy party hats.

"It always helps when you bring cake," he laughs.

There have been about a half-dozen Books & Badges events since then, always helmed by Chief Radabaugh at the library. (Additional events are in the works with other officers, as well as at Birchview Elementary School, read by the district's school resource officer.) "We did a giveaway for the *Flat Stanley* books," recalls Radabaugh. "We did *Splat the Cat Takes the Cake*. That was a good one the kids liked."

"For [the *Splat the Cat*] event, our group helped teach Chief Chad our special story time songs," adds Lander.

"Including our fan favorite, 'Toast in the Toaster,' which is a jumping song."

The readings are followed by a free-form question-and-answer period. Sometimes the kids ask about the book; others are curious about the life of a police officer. "The most common question with the kids is always about my Taser—if I carry a Taser gun," says Radabaugh. Kids are always excited to know if police officers chase "bad guys." "For some reason, they always want to know if we tackle them."

The reading, cake, and questions concluded, it's time for the real main event: Getting to play with Radabaugh's squad car, which they get to sit in, play with the lights and sirens, and talk to their parents using the loudspeaker. "They always ask me how fast I've gone," he says.

With questions about the more adult aspects of his job, Radabaugh keeps things vague and light. "We go into, 'What's wrong with the situation?' and bad things not to do," he says. "There's a way we can spin into a good thing, like a teaching moment—even though the questions are sometimes a little goofy."



Ishpeming Police Chief Chad Radabaugh reads *If You Give a Pig a Party* by Laura Numeroff to children and caregivers during the Book & Badges event.

*“It’s promoted a different kind of relationship with me and some of the parents.”*

In a small town like Ishpeming, it’s inevitable that Radabaugh sees parents the department has interacted with in a law enforcement context. “You always wonder if there’s going to be an awkwardness,” he says. “But it’s actually been quite the opposite . . . it’s promoted a different kind of relationship with me and some of the parents.”

Radabaugh and Lander recommend Books & Badges wholeheartedly. “I’ve had nothing but good luck with this program,” Radabaugh says. “A lot of the kids recognize me outside of work—run into me at Walmart or the local stores in town—and come up to me. They always say hi.”

“Each event received rave reviews from families in our community—with many asking when we will do it again,” says Lander. “It’s very important for children to have the opportunity to meet our local community helpers in such a fun and personal way.”

“The kids have asked me questions like why I became a cop,” says Radabaugh. “Do I still like being a cop?” The answer is yes, and connection-building programs like Books & Badges are a big part of it.

*“It’s a reassurance of why I went into this 21 years ago.”*

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

*“Each event received rave reviews from families in our community.”*

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# Regulatory Takings— Application of the Penn Central Test

By Bill Mathewson

Municipalities nationwide seek to use land use regulations to enhance and preserve the character of the community that their residents want. In this case, *Tollbrook, LLC v. City of Troy*, which has spanned several years in federal and state courts, the City was successful in defending its regulations in a case recently decided by the Michigan Court of Appeals (COA).

The plaintiffs claimed that the City's land use regulation was such a burden on their properties that it amounted to a "taking" under Article 10, Section 2 of the Michigan Constitution. The properties had been zoned single-family residential since the 1960s. The plaintiffs sought to have them rezoned to be in the Big Beaver District (mixed-use corridor) so that "they may pursue a broader array of uses." Troy's master plan designated the plaintiff's properties for future inclusion in the Big Beaver District. The zoning ordinance requires that the proposed use of the property be indicated in an application; the plaintiff's applications stated "that no specific development was planned at that time and that market research would determine what uses were 'feasible.'" Preliminary sketches submitted with the application showed three-story mixed-use and apartment buildings.

The City Planning Commission voted to recommend denial of the plaintiff's rezoning requests. At the City Council meeting, several people spoke in opposition to the rezoning; the Council voted 7–0 to deny the rezoning requests, citing the lack of a proposed use and incompatibility with the adjacent single-family residential area.

The parties agreed that the appropriate standard for evaluation was the balancing test articulated in a seminal 1978 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Penn Central Transp Co v. City of New York*. That test requires courts to "engage in an 'ad hoc, factual inquiry,' centering on three factors: (1) the character of the government's action, (2) the economic effect of the regulation on the property, and (3) the extent by which the regulation has interfered with distinct, investment-backed expectations."

The COA opinion stated, with respect to the second factor of the *Penn Central* test: "At the outset, plaintiffs face a critical deficiency on the second factor, economic impact . . . plaintiffs merely assert that 'the City cannot seriously dispute' that rezoning would make their property 'much more valuable' than limiting it to single-family housing. That may be true in the abstract: a property would not become less valuable by allowing its owners to use it in more ways. But the *Penn Central* inquiry requires more than logical assumptions—it requires evidence."

The COA then quotes the *American Law of Zoning* (5th ed.), "[t]he denial of a discretionary land use approval may effect an unconstitutional taking if it renders the property essentially unusable or economically valueless. If reasonable uses of the property still exist without the variance, however, the courts will reject a regulatory takings claim."

"Here, plaintiffs offer no evidence—no appraisal report, no market analysis, no expert affidavit—that would allow a court to weigh the extent of the economic impact."

The COA also did not find the plaintiff's arguments with respect to the other two factors persuasive. "As to the first factor—the character of the government's action—plaintiffs point to no physical occupation or forced dedication of land. Instead, the City of Troy has simply declined to rezone property that has been zoned for single-family residential use since the 1960s . . . Finally, the third factor—the extent of interference with distinct, investment-backed expectations—at best offers plaintiffs only limited support." The COA opinion does recognize that " . . . it is understandable that the master plan's designation, combined with the properties' proximity to a commercial district and major highway, may have contributed to that expectation." However, "[the plaintiffs]. . . have not offered, for instance, testimony from another developer with experience in Troy indicating that such an expectation would have been reasonable. As a result, this factor at most slightly favors plaintiffs—but not enough to overcome the weight of the other two factors."

Thus, the opinion was that the trial court's decision, in favor of the City, should be affirmed. While the Court of Appeals' opinion is not published, its analysis and presentation of the *Penn Central* test can be useful to municipalities. However, as a caveat, on the subject of takings, local governments need also to be aware of several recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions that are limiting to local and state authority in the context of private property rights. ■

*Footnote to Stefanski v. Saginaw County 911 Communications Center Authority*—The topic of the previous Legal Spotlight was the expansion of whistle blowers' protection by the Supreme Court. It was noted that the Court remanded the case to the Court of Appeals (COA) and that there might ultimately be some narrowing of the standard articulated by the Court. From the new opinion of the COA, this would not appear to be the case, as it concludes that gross negligence does in fact constitute a violation of "a" law. And although remanded to the trial court, it would also appear from the COA opinion that the plaintiff's actions constituted a "report" as required by the Act.

The information in this column should not be considered a legal opinion or constitute legal advice.

Bill Mathewson is a legal consultant to the League. You may contact Bill at [wmathewson@mml.org](mailto:wmathewson@mml.org).

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