

The Review

The official magazine of the  michigan municipal league

Spring 2026

Magnetism Makes Negaunee a Winner

2025 Community Excellence Award



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Volume 99, Number 2

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 michigan municipal league

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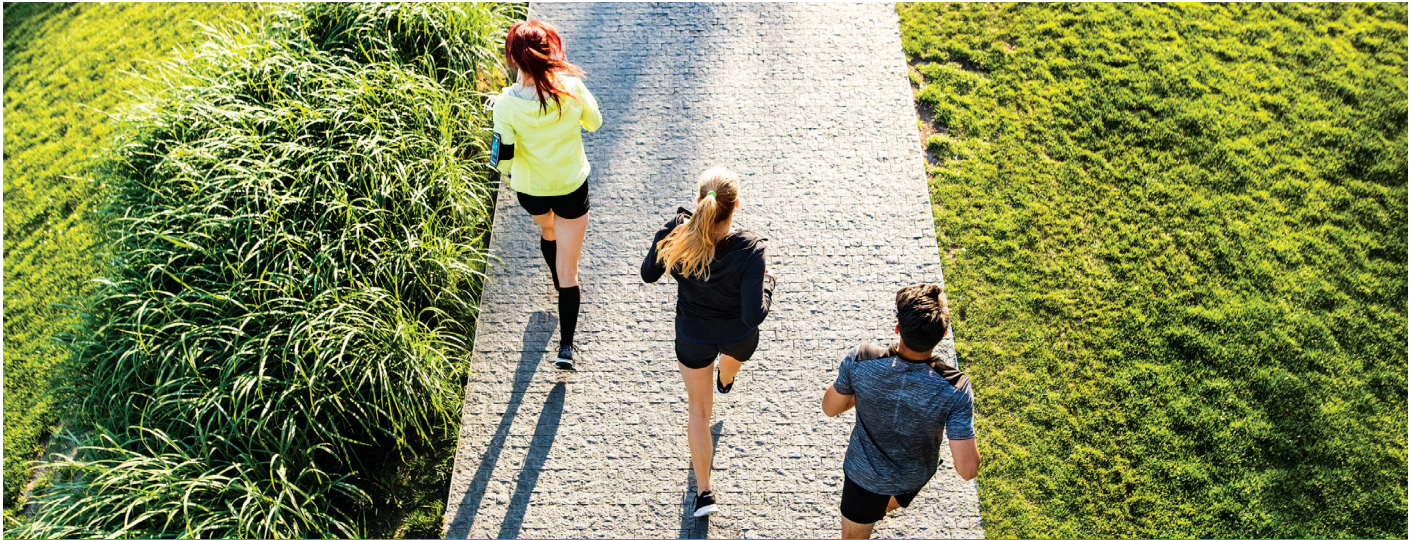
Pictured from left to right

Negaunee City Manager Nate Heffron, Mayor Craig Ilmonen, and former Councilmember Tony Stagliano celebrate Negaunee's win at the League's Convention 2025 in Grand Rapids.



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Be the Remedy

Executive Director's Message

I often find myself thinking about the difference between municipal governance and the civic realm. Many aspects are formal and process-oriented, driven by ordinance and law. We're sustaining an institution that was here long before any of us were. The other side of the job, meanwhile, is lived and human and dynamic, shaped by relationships and trust, driven by love of the places where we live and the desire to improve the experience of those who share them with us.

In challenging times, that boundary starts to become frayed. Maybe it was a false boundary all along, since it turns out that systems and human beings are not discrete entities. They are made of the same stuff, and when one is strained, the other feels it immediately.

And right now, we live in challenging times.

At its core, "government" is just a fancy word for people coming together to do something they can't do on their own. I think that truth is easiest to perceive at the local level. Local government is where the power of the collective really shines: Let's build this park. Let's fill this pothole. Let's replace these old pipes. At this level, it's hard to be performative. You can't hide in your office from your fellow councilmembers because they ran on an opposing platform. The park isn't getting built that way.

We may disagree; we are still members of the same community.

This concept has its own fancy name, by the way: "Subsidiarity." This is the idea that decisions are best made as close to home as possible. Subsidiarity recognizes that, as far as governance is concerned, local knowledge is often the best kind of knowledge.

The State of Michigan recognizes that communities possess an inherent right to self-governance, known as home rule. Authority is not granted from on high, as it is in politics governed under the opposite philosophy, Dillon's Rule. Instead, authority is inherently possessed by the community. Home rule exists to protect the autonomy of people and to maintain our ability to make decisions about the places we actually inhabit.

Home rule is a powerful civic value. I believe the League's members are excellent at reflecting the character, values, and practical realities of the places they've been elected and appointed to serve. Decisions made locally tend to fit better, last longer, and feel more legitimate, because the decision-makers are connected to the place, and are affected by them, too.

To be part of a governing organism within a home rule system is a profound responsibility. There are processes to follow and policies to respect, sure, but the deeper responsibility is to your fellow human beings. Being a part of local government means representing community character honestly, even when decisions are difficult.

This is where it becomes possible to "be the remedy."

Being the remedy to all the partisan craziness in the world doesn't mean you have to have all the answers. It doesn't demand that you're right all the time. Being the remedy means honoring the authority that your community has temporarily granted you. It means listening closely, communicating clearly, and acting responsibly, because when people are heard and respected, they are more willing to remain engaged—even when outcomes are imperfect.

Responsibility is a remedy to the empty grandstanding of today's political world. Being a responsible leader means acknowledging mistakes, explaining tradeoffs, and taking ownership of the authority that's been placed in you. It's much harder to pass the buck at the local level, and that's a good thing. Responsibility is often unfun, unsexy, unglamorous; but it reminds residents that self-governance is a good thing, and worth preserving.

In challenging times, problems can feel insurmountable. Institutions can be powerful forces for good, but when neglected, they erode just as easily as sewer pipes. Being the remedy means resisting the siren's song of larger, more abstract dysfunction. National politics may reward outrage, but local governance rewards cooperation.

So be the remedy. Be a responsible steward of self-governance. Be someone who appreciates both the mechanics of the municipal system and the human beings it's built to serve. Listen closely, act practically, and be generous in spirit. Be steady. Remember the human. None of us are infallible. Healing comes gradually, but it begins when people closest to home are trusted to act with care.



Dan Gilmartin

League Executive Director and CEO
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A DECADE IN THE MAKING: MICHIGAN'S NEW TRANSPORTATION FUNDING PLAN

By John LaMacchia

If we rewind to November 2015, legislative leaders and the governor were celebrating the passage of a road funding package that dedicated an additional \$1.2 billion to Michigan's transportation infrastructure. At the time, many organizations, including the League, cautioned that the legislation did not represent a long-term solution and warned that the state would need to revisit the topic of road funding in the near future.

When Gov. Whitmer was elected in 2018, she promised to "Fix the Damn Roads." Seven years later, and nearly a decade after the prior funding package, the legislature once again found itself working to assemble the policy framework and political support necessary to deliver on that commitment.

By early 2025, it was clear that funding for roads and bridges would dominate the policy agenda. Both Gov. Whitmer and Speaker Matt Hall released competing road funding proposals. While the differences between the plans were significant, there was also clear recognition on both sides that a solution was needed. After months of negotiations, public accusations toward each other and the Michigan Senate, as well as delays in finalizing the State budget, an agreement was ultimately reached.

The path to that agreement was far from smooth. Negotiations played out almost entirely behind closed doors, and while word circulated that a deal had been struck, details were not released until hours before the final vote. In the end, the legislature and the governor approved an additional \$1.6 billion investment in Michigan's transportation system—an amount projected to grow to nearly \$2 billion annually by 2031.

The final agreement is built on three major components.

First, the deal restructures fuel taxes by eliminating the six percent sales tax on gasoline and replacing it with a 20-cent per gallon increase in the motor fuel tax. This shift is expected to raise approximately \$1 billion annually and ensures that 100 percent of taxes paid at the pump are dedicated to transportation. However, it also creates an estimated \$1 billion gap in sales tax revenue that previously supported schools, local governments, transit, and the general fund. While school funding was backfilled, local governments will see a reduction in constitutional revenue sharing.

Second, the package increases taxes on marijuana by creating a new 24 percent wholesale excise tax, in addition to the existing 10 percent retail tax and six percent sales tax. This provision was strongly opposed by the cannabis industry, which argues that Michigan's market is already oversaturated. The new tax is projected to generate approximately \$420 million annually for road funding. Its legality is currently being challenged in court, though the State has prevailed to date.

Finally, the State will decouple from certain federal business tax reductions enacted under the Trump Administration's "One Big Beautiful Bill." While not characterized as a tax increase, this change slows the pace of scheduled business tax cuts, with the resulting revenue directed to transportation. This provision is expected to generate roughly \$600 million initially, growing to approximately \$1 billion over a five-year phase-in period.

“Throughout the negotiations, the governor and legislative leaders consistently emphasized a shared goal of directing a greater share of new resources to local roads.”



A Michigan road showing damage and in need of repair.

Impact on Local Road Agencies

Throughout the negotiations, the governor and legislative leaders consistently emphasized a shared goal of directing a greater share of new resources to local roads. The League supported this objective and advocated for the creation of a Neighborhood Road Fund. While the final structure differs from the League's original proposal, the concept was ultimately incorporated into the final agreement.

Despite the difficulty of negotiations, several major priorities for local governments were secured. These include a significant increase in funding for local roads, a meaningful investment in public transit, and the dedication of new resources for local bridges and rail grade separation projects.

In the first year of budget implementation, funding for cities and villages will increase by approximately one-third. Because the package takes effect after the start of the State's fiscal year, this amount reflects the collection of roughly two-thirds of a year's revenue. As a result, local governments will see another substantial increase in the second year before funding levels off in years three through five. By year five, cities and villages are projected to receive more than a 50 percent increase over current funding levels.

The agreement also includes a significant commitment to public transit, a longstanding priority for League members. Over the next five years, \$175 million will be dedicated to local bus operating assistance, helping communities stabilize and expand service. An additional \$325 million will be

invested in transit transformation projects aimed at improving efficiency, reliability, and long-term sustainability.


Beyond roads and transit, the package makes targeted investments in other critical local infrastructure needs. Over the same five-year period, \$500 million will be allocated for local bridge repairs and replacements, and \$200 million will be dedicated to rail grade separation projects, improving safety and reducing congestion at rail crossings.

Reduction in Constitutional Revenue Sharing

While the road funding agreement delivers substantial new investment in transportation, the decision to eliminate the sales tax on motor fuel will result in a reduction to constitutional revenue sharing for local governments. Current projections indicate that cities and villages will see an approximately one-percent reduction in overall revenue sharing when statutory payments are included, while townships are expected to experience an average reduction of roughly one and a half percent.

Throughout negotiations, the League consistently advocated for the protection of revenue sharing. While the final agreement does not fully preserve these revenues, the League was able to prevent a proposed 12 percent reduction in statutory revenue sharing and secure the creation of a new Public Safety Trust Fund. And despite the modest reductions in revenue sharing, for cities and villages, the increase in funding for roads, bridges, and transit addresses long-standing infrastructure needs that have placed growing pressure on local budgets. It is important to note that the impacts of the package are not uniform, as townships do not receive road funding.

“The increase in funding for roads, bridges, and transit addresses long-standing infrastructure needs that have placed growing pressure on local budgets.”

This budget cycle required sustained advocacy to reinforce the value of investing in local government, the importance of maintaining local transportation networks, and the role municipalities play in Michigan's economic vitality. Although revenue sharing could not be fully preserved, the resulting investments in transportation infrastructure and public safety represent a meaningful step forward and will deliver long-term benefits to communities across the state. 

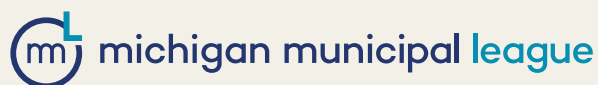
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On March 3, 2025, in Sterling Heights, the City of Sterling Heights and the Mi-GEMT Coalition celebrate the passage of HB 5695 into law.

By Dave Hodgkins

In the Michigan Legislature, 2025 was characterized by ongoing legal disputes over legislative procedures, minimal passage of new laws, and major delays in passing a state budget—a year shaped more by conflict than productivity.

In a typical year, the Michigan Legislature sends about 380 bills to the governor for a signature. Last year, it sent 74. Some were large, multi-bill packages, while others just changed highway names. There are legal disputes over whether House Republicans must send bills from the previous session to the governor, and another over whether prior budget funds can be clawed back. School districts are suing the State over funding, and the cannabis industry is challenging a provision in the transportation bill that raises the wholesale tax.

So, what did make it across the finish line, and what was the League's State and Federal Affairs Department (SFAD) engaged on? For starters, Michigan enacted major updates to the Minimum Wage Law and Earned Sick Time Act (ESTA), raising the state minimum wage to \$13.73 for 2026 and significantly expanding paid sick leave requirements. The changes were driven by a state Supreme Court ruling.

SFAD was heavily involved in implementing the Ground Emergency Medical Transport program. While the legislation to amend this was passed by the Michigan Legislature in 2024, Governor Whitmer signed it into law early in 2025, and the rollout process is ongoing. Well over 150 local emergency medical service agencies are eligible for this voluntary program, which helps address funding shortages for emergency services caused by increasing costs and a high volume of Medicaid enrollees in Michigan.

The other major policy item the Legislature tackled was transportation funding. After much debate, bipartisan support was secured for a proposal that raised nearly \$2 billion in additional funding for roads, bridges, and transit.

The team saw the return of minimum staffing legislation. The League and its members still oppose this. The bill would require staffing levels for PA 312 employees (police and fire) as a topic in collective bargaining.

In February, four bills were introduced in the House as part of a broader nine bill package to preempt local zoning authority. The full package would significantly restrict local authority by preempting local decision-making on key zoning issues, including duplexes, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), minimum setbacks, lot sizes, and dwelling unit sizes. SFAD will continue to be actively engaged in these discussions and vocal in pushing back on this front, representing League members' positions and ensuring their voices are heard.


On the flip side, the League was joined in the summer by other local government organizations, lawmakers, and businesses for an official rollout of the proposed MI Home Program. House Bills 5660–5661, which would create this proposal, enable a powerful partnership (over preemption) between the State and local units of government to improve access to attainable housing, support investment to accelerate housing construction and rehabilitation, and promote updates to local zoning regulations that will help cultivate thriving communities and stimulate economic vitality.

“Bipartisan support was secured for a proposal that raised nearly \$2 billion in additional funding for roads, bridges, and transit.”

There wasn't much legislative output in 2025, but there was still plenty of action and headlines. Michigan has a two-year legislative cycle, one that we are only halfway through. Adding complexity to an already difficult Lansing scene is a special election in Michigan's 35th Senate District. This 50-50-seat was vacated by now-U.S. Representative Kristen McDonald Rivet. The special election will be in May of this year and could reshape the Michigan Senate by giving Democrats one extra seat or creating a 19-19 split—where Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist would be required to break a tie vote on the simplest of bills.

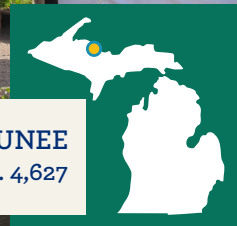
The remainder of 2026 will likely be shaped by one word: affordability. Legislative leaders have spoken about the need to reduce costs and have highlighted energy, healthcare, and property taxes as likely targets. These items are predicted to have a direct impact on state budget negotiations.

Recent revenue projections show a contraction of state resources that will make this year's budget challenging. We expect the governor to focus on maintaining key priorities and reinforcing legacy programs. With a tight budget, coupled with divided government and an election where every legislative seat will be on the ballot, we are sure to face similar challenges to those experienced in 2025.

Regardless, the League will continue to advocate on behalf of all our members—bringing you the latest from Lansing. 

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

FORGE YOUR ADVENTURE IN NEGAUNEE



The League's Marketing Manager Ariel Ryan and Content Writer Emily Pinsuwan meet with Negaunee City Manager Nate Heffron to learn about recent developments in the city.

By Emily Pinsuwan

Downtown Negaunee had gotten a little crusty.

For years, the commercial corridor along Iron Street was marked by a sense of desolation: cracked sidewalks, vacant and dilapidated storefronts, and outdated infrastructure. “There wasn’t much of a streetscape at all,” says Mona Lang, a Marquette-based consultant and former Downtown Development Authority executive director. “It was locally known for the number of bars and not much else.”

“If you don’t change, you evaporate,” says City Manager Nate Heffron. “And that’s what Negaunee was heading towards, evaporation—becoming a town where buildings are falling down.”

But—much like the iron ore that had once driven settlement to the area—underneath the surface, a magnetism was waiting to be activated in the community. Connected to the 47-mile multi-use Iron Ore Heritage Trail, which traverses the Marquette Range, the city has a rich outdoor culture that attracts visitors year-round. There was potential. “Downtown was in rough shape, but it had a great future if certain things were concentrated on,” says Heffron.

In 2020, the digging began. Heffron and the City Council brought in Lang, who helped to restart Negaunee’s DDA. Serendipitously, Revitalization and Placemaking (RAP) grants became available just as the City was beginning the overhaul. “As resources became available, we were able to really do a full, total facelift,” says Lang. “More than facelift—a total, complete re-envisioning of downtown.”

“We had to fix the bones of the community—water, sewer, electric, all the things that people don’t see but come to rely on,” says Heffron. “We’re not cutting corners. We didn’t want to just slap makeup on it and say, ‘Oh, we’re looking good now.’”

Things began with a complete water infrastructure replacement project, the funding for which the City was able to tie in with the RAP grant. “I guess you’d call it dumb luck,” says Heffron. “Money due to COVID kind of fell into our lap.”

“The timing was absolutely perfect,” says Lang.

Just a few short years later, Negaunee’s revitalized, iron-themed downtown is now the winner of the 2025 Community Excellence Award. What was termed the Downtown Enhancement Project—described by Mayor Craig Ilmonen as “a progressive building of our community”—marks the third placemaking initiative in an Upper Peninsula community that has won the CEA, after the City of Ironwood in 2013 and the City of Houghton in 2024.

Above ground, Iron Street was remade with wider sidewalks, benches, outlets, phone chargers, bike racks, irrigation, and landscaping that beckoned visitors to linger. Two local businesses—scratch Italian kitchen Strega Nonna and bike shop Love & Bicycles—were both awarded grants by the Michigan Arts and Culture Council to gussy up their façades with murals.

Downtown has new branding to match its new fittings, honoring Negaunee’s iron-rich history. Its motto, “Forge Your Adventure,” pays homage to the mining industry and hints at Negaunee being a gateway to outdoor recreation.



“If you don't change, you evaporate.”

Erickson Park, a pedestrian alley that connects Jackson and Iron Streets, is now a winding, leafy, ADA-accessible space, adorned on either end by decorative gates from the city cemetery. “The old gates were just, like, hanging out in the woods,” says Heffron. “I'm like, ‘Why are these here? They're just rotting away. Let's repurpose 'em.’”

A section of Marquette Street was permanently sectioned off with bollards; thus, Iron Town Plaza was born, a new pedestrian square featuring Adirondack chairs and planter boxes supplied by a local business owner. There are also power hook-ups for food trucks, anticipating any number of events to be held in the square.

The plaza is decorated with tall, iron columns that provide ambient LED lighting, changing colors as fits the theme or season. Additional lighting is provided by strings of Edison bulbs zig-zagging overhead, giving the plaza a rustic, homey vibe. “It's just this really neat, inviting place that's surrounded with landscaping,” says Heffron. “It's very comfortable and it takes you right to the downtown.”

Iron Town Plaza faces the Vista Theater, a historic building that had suffered a roof collapse right as planning for the project was underway. Demolition was proposed. “It's a landmark building in downtown,” says Lang. “I'm like, ‘Oh my God, you cannot tear it down.’” Eventually, the City was able to secure funding from the state to save the Vista. “It's going to be slow, but they are working on revitalizing, restoring, and reusing that building,” says Lang.

Work is expected to begin in fall or winter of 2026. “One day, we hope to bring forward [the rehabilitation of the Vista] as a Community Excellence Award,” says Heffron.

There's also Firefighter's Square, a pocket park that faces Negaunee's firehouse and was designed to ease traffic and make the intersection safer for pedestrians. The park features an 8-foot-tall, layered statue of a firefighter, made not out of iron but of stacked steel, placed on a concrete slab and surrounded by rocks from a local mine. The impressionistic image honors volunteer Negaunee firefighters of the past, present, and future. Plaques around the park tell the history of firefighting in the community. “[The fabricators] are local guys, and they really had a lot of care for the community, so they really put a lot of thought into how this was going to be designed,” says Heffron.

A ribbon cutting in September 2024 marked the Downtown Enhancement Project's completion, and scores of people turned out to celebrate. To longtime residents, downtown Negaunee felt like a real place again. “One guy told [Mayor Ilmonen], ‘I used to be embarrassed to tell people where I was from, because the place looked like a dump,’” says Heffron. “And he said, ‘But not today.’ He was crying.”

Storefronts that once sat idle are being upgraded, drawing people into the new, prettier, more pedestrian-friendly spaces. “When the city invests in itself, private investment follows,” says Heffron. “I always say that it's contagious,” adds Lang, “One property owner steps up, and then the next property owner follows, and then the next. It's a domino effect.” State funding has helped as well: thanks to additional RAP grants, two downtown businesses—Samara Floral and The Cone on Iron Street—will be getting façade improvements that will allow them to expand operations.



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“It's contagious. One property owner steps up, and the next follows.”

With a popular new downtown comes a packed events calendar. Heffron rattles off the list of festivities, including the recent addition of Fall Fest (“We were extremely shocked how well attended it was”); the first inaugural Witches Night Out (“a fun play on a ladies’ night out”); the New Year’s Eve Meatball Drop, hosted by Strega Nonna, in which a 30-pound meatball is dropped into a massive cauldron of tomato sauce (“it’s made on-site, cooked, lowered on a contraption approved by the Health Department, it makes a little flippy-flip into the pot, and then they break it up into little pieces and people eat it”); and, in February, the three-day Heikki Lunta Winter Festival, which includes a skiing and snowboarding contest held downtown in partnership with the Meijer State Winter Games.

“People remember this town being hopping,” says Heffron. “Like all downtowns back in the day, in the 1970s and 1960s. Before all the big mega-stores and everything moved in. And then, the community started dwindling. And now, it’s having a resurgence because we’re reinvesting in our community—in the downtown.”

Current-day Negaunee is an attractive place, in the literal sense—you’re drawn to it. Grabbing lunch at Midtown Bakery, sitting at Campfire Coffee Roasters, or enjoying time with friends at Upper Peninsula Brewing Company, one feels magnetically pulled to this place. You can imagine yourself living there—on a recent visit, League staff were checking Zillow listings.

Lang agrees. “Negaunee has turned into one of those little towns that you go into and say, ‘Oh, I had no idea this was here. This is really cool.’”

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

The Finalists

The League saw some amazing placemaking throughout our state this past year. You can read about all 14 submissions for the 2025 Community Excellence Awards on our *People & Place* Blog:



In the Heart of Hart, Public Art

The HArt Project, the informal name of the City of Hart’s resident-led “Community Spirit Initiative,” includes over two dozen works of public art: a war memorial on an island in Russell Creek, with a flagpole and solar lights; Migration of the Hart, a 40-foot mural paying homage to the region’s migrant workers and Hispanic immigrant families; and a 24-foot-tall Tin Man sculpture downtown. “The thought is by keeping it informal, it can retain that fun and that inclusiveness,” says former City Manager Rob Splane. “There’s space for anyone.”

Milford’s Central Park Gets a Glow-Up

Central Park, the 12 acres of green space on the banks of the Huron River, had become a bit unkempt. As luck would have it, in 2023, the Village of Milford found itself with a budget for the necessary makeover. The Village restored landscaping and the great lawn, addressed drainage and stormwater issues, redesigned walking paths and driveways to maximize river views, planted wildflowers, and added a pavilion and a boardwalk. “Everyone that goes in there, they’re just blown away at how beautiful it is,” says Village Manager Christian Wuerth.

Roscommon Puts a Bird on It

The Village of Roscommon lies right in the middle of the breeding range of the Kirtland’s warbler, a little songbird that was taken off the endangered species list in 2019 thanks to a concerted regional conservation effort. In 2025, Roscommon was certified by the Audubon Society as Michigan’s first Bird City. To celebrate the new designation, the Village unveiled a crowdfunded 15-foot-tall Kirtland’s warbler sculpture, designed by New York wildlife artist James Seaman, to a record crowd at the annual Kirtland’s Warbler Festival.

ESSENTIAL STEPS TO BUILDING A STRONG GRANT COMPLIANCE FRAMEWORK

By Amanda Ward, Stef Stephenson, & Gabrielle Wafer

Navigating the grant landscape requires precision and persistence. While compliance is non-negotiable, the evolving and often intricate requirements can pose significant challenges for even the most experienced teams. Organizations must navigate myriad laws, regulations, and standards to avoid penalties, protect their funding, and maintain operational integrity. Losing focus on compliance in this environment can lead to significant risks for your organization, including hefty fines and penalties, revocation of tax-exempt status, and loss of funding. Is a review of your compliance framework overdue? Here's how to start your journey now.

The path to achieving compliance begins with a thorough evaluation of the people, processes, and technologies within your organization; an examination of each grant to ensure proper adherence to the rules; and a durable framework to maintain compliance into the future.

Take a Team Approach

Compliance can't fall onto the shoulders of a single individual. It requires a dedicated team of knowledgeable professionals with a deep understanding of relevant laws, regulations, and industry standards and best practices, including Uniform Guidance, state-specific regulations, and other requirements. When building your compliance team, focus on the following key areas:

Define roles and responsibilities: Clearly distinguished roles ensure accountability and efficiency. Each team member must understand their specific duties and how they contribute to your organization's compliance strategy. If a shortage of qualified professionals leaves your organization without sufficient staff to handle critical duties, consider adding team members from outside of your organization. Outsourcing specific functions can be a cost-effective and time-efficient solution to address these needs.

Foster collaboration across departments: A comprehensive approach to compliance requires cooperation among various departments, grants, accounting, legal, and IT. Clear communication between departments ensures a

good flow of information around compliance and fosters a collective mindset of adhering to the rules. Working together as a team helps reduce the risk of noncompliance that often occurs in isolated operations. This collaborative approach fosters a comprehensive organizational response to compliance challenges.

Cultivate an ethical culture: An ethical culture naturally promotes compliance. Encourage individuals to act with integrity and to report concerns without fearing retribution. Leadership plays a pivotal role in setting the "tone at the top" for ethical behavior.

Train your team: Ensure that individuals responsible for grant administration have a sound understanding of the compliance requirements and established processes needed to perform their tasks. Grant requirements can be complex and may sometimes evolve, and training—internal and external—is necessary for individuals involved in grant management to meet compliance requirements. Update training programs regularly to cover new policies and best practices, reinforcing the commitment to compliance.

“Regular assessments help reveal potential compliance issues before they escalate into something more serious.”

Review Your Processes

Every organization needs a comprehensive, systematic approach to identify and address compliance risk exposure. This requires processes that result in strong internal controls, thorough risk management, diligent monitoring, and detailed documentation, to support your compliance efforts. To streamline compliance efforts while mitigating risk, focus on the following:

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Risk assessment and management: Start with a proactive enterprise risk management framework to ensure that risks and related dependencies are identified, evaluated, and mitigated. Regular assessments help reveal potential compliance issues before they escalate into something more serious.

Internal controls: Implementation of controls across all compliance-related areas and operations is essential. Effective internal controls are built around key focus areas—including risk assessment, control activities, monitoring, information flow, and the overall control environment—that help organizations safeguard assets, ensure compliance, and achieve operational objectives. To maintain operational integrity, occasional assessments should be conducted to confirm that segregation of duties aligns with each employee's role and responsibilities. Technology access must be restricted to authorized individuals. Implementing internal controls isn't a one-and-done task; it starts with education, followed by regular monitoring and updates to existing measures to maintain compliance.

Comprehensive policies and procedures: Establish clear policies and procedures as your foundation for compliance. They should be broad enough to apply to a variety of grants but specific enough to address unique circumstances. Involve all key stakeholders during development to ensure the guidelines are practical and applicable.

Monitor operational compliance: Monitoring grant compliance acts as a safeguard to ensure compliance efforts, i.e., processes and controls, are effective and incorporated into daily operations. Utilize internal and external audits to get an unbiased look into your compliance status. This dual approach results in a solid understanding of your organization's performance and allows for course correction as necessary.

Leverage Your Technology

In our digital age, technology can help streamline your compliance efforts. With the right tools in place, you can automate strenuous and time-consuming tasks while helping to ensure an accurate compliance record. Start with these four strategies:


Maximize your existing technology: Where possible, maximize the utility of your existing technology to increase efficiency and reduce the risk of errors. For instance, your chart of accounts can be designed to align your organization's financial transactions with grant requirements, elevating financial reporting accountability and helping to demystify the compliance process.

Adopt specialized software: Assess whether the volume and importance of your grant activity justify implementing an integrated compliance and grants management system to streamline tracking and oversight within your organizational structure.

Assess your data security and privacy posture: Protecting sensitive data is a critical aspect of compliance. Advanced security measures, e.g., encryption and access controls, help safeguard information from unauthorized access and breaches. The Office of Management and Budget's cybersecurity requirements provide a good starting point for building your organization's cybersecurity framework.

Build real-time reporting and analytics capabilities: These tools can provide valuable insights into compliance status, enabling organizations to identify trends, monitor key performance indicators, and make informed decisions. Dashboards and reporting tools can offer a visual representation of compliance metrics, making it easier for stakeholders to understand and act on the information. Data analysis tools can provide real-time insights, such as trends or anomalies in spending, to catch noncompliance earlier and more frequently.

Looking Ahead

A robust compliance framework protects your critical funding, mitigates risks, and fosters organizational integrity and trust. By ensuring each element of a successful framework—developing your team, enhancing processes, and integrating technology—your organization can have a resilient compliance environment and a strong foundation for accountability and long-term sustainability. 

Plante Moran is one of the nation's largest certified public accounting and business advisory firms, serving local governments in Michigan and beyond. They can be reached at 616-643-4081.

“Real-time reporting and analytics can provide valuable insights into compliance status.”

THE DATA CENTER IS COMING

What Michigan municipalities are doing to prepare

By Nina Ignaczak

Russell Whipple did not expect to spend his Tuesday nights being called a liar. The mayor of Mason, a city of about 8,300 people in Ingham County, began drafting a data center ordinance last August. The goal was straightforward: Get protective standards on the books before a developer showed up—not after.

But by December, Mason City Council meetings had swelled to 120 or 200 people. They ran for two, three, four hours. Speakers came from Royal Oak. One drove in from Buffalo. “My family’s been accused of things,” says Whipple. “My daughters have been called names.”

All of this happened before any data center had been proposed or even discussed in Mason. Members of the public voiced their concerns: Adopting a specific data center ordinance could be seen as a call for them to come to town.

“They kept perceiving it as an invitation,” says Whipple. “[But] the ‘invitation’ for a data center is anybody [who is] willing to sell them their land—because our ordinance, before this was passed, was way less stringent.”

Data centers are the physical infrastructure of the internet. The facilities store and process data powering cloud services, A.I. tools, streaming platforms, and financial transactions. Modern hyperscale facilities can cover hundreds of acres, consume as much electricity as a small city, and use between one and five million gallons of water per day—the equivalent of what 12,000 Americans use in a year.

Despite the outcry, Mason adopted its data center ordinance on February 2, establishing performance standards for noise, water, and infrastructure that any future developer must meet, notably with respect to municipal water access.

Whipple’s advice to every other elected official in Michigan: Start before you think you need to.

Why Michigan? Why Now?

Every Great Lakes state has enacted data center tax incentives over the past 20 years, in part to capitalize on the region’s most obvious asset: the Great Lakes, which hold 21 percent of the world’s surface freshwater. The Alliance for the Great Lakes says the strategy is working and that industries like data centers are choosing to locate in the region “in part because of its water resources.”

As of mid-2025, Ohio ranked fifth nationally, and Illinois fourth, in the number of data centers, behind only Virginia, Texas, and California. Michigan became a prime target in 2024 when state

lawmakers approved major tax incentives for data center development, exempting qualifying facilities from state sales and use taxes through at least 2050—a savings that could run into hundreds of millions of dollars per facility.

Dave Scurto, a principal planner with Carlisle/Wortman Associates, said he’s seeing projects crop up across the state, with a wide variety of sentiment.

“I’ve got some communities where it seems like everybody’s into it,” he says. “In other communities where the residents are opposed to it, the elected officials—they want the tax base.”

Brian Meissen is the president of the Village of New Haven. The situation reminds him of what happened after Michigan legalized cannabis in 2018. Communities that hadn’t thought through their zoning got overwhelmed. Those who had done the work in advance had leverage.

He recalls communities scrambling to catch up, developers with money, lawyers—and local officials left to figure it out on their own. “[Developers] come in as a bully,” says Meissen.

Moratoriums Buy Time, Not a Ban

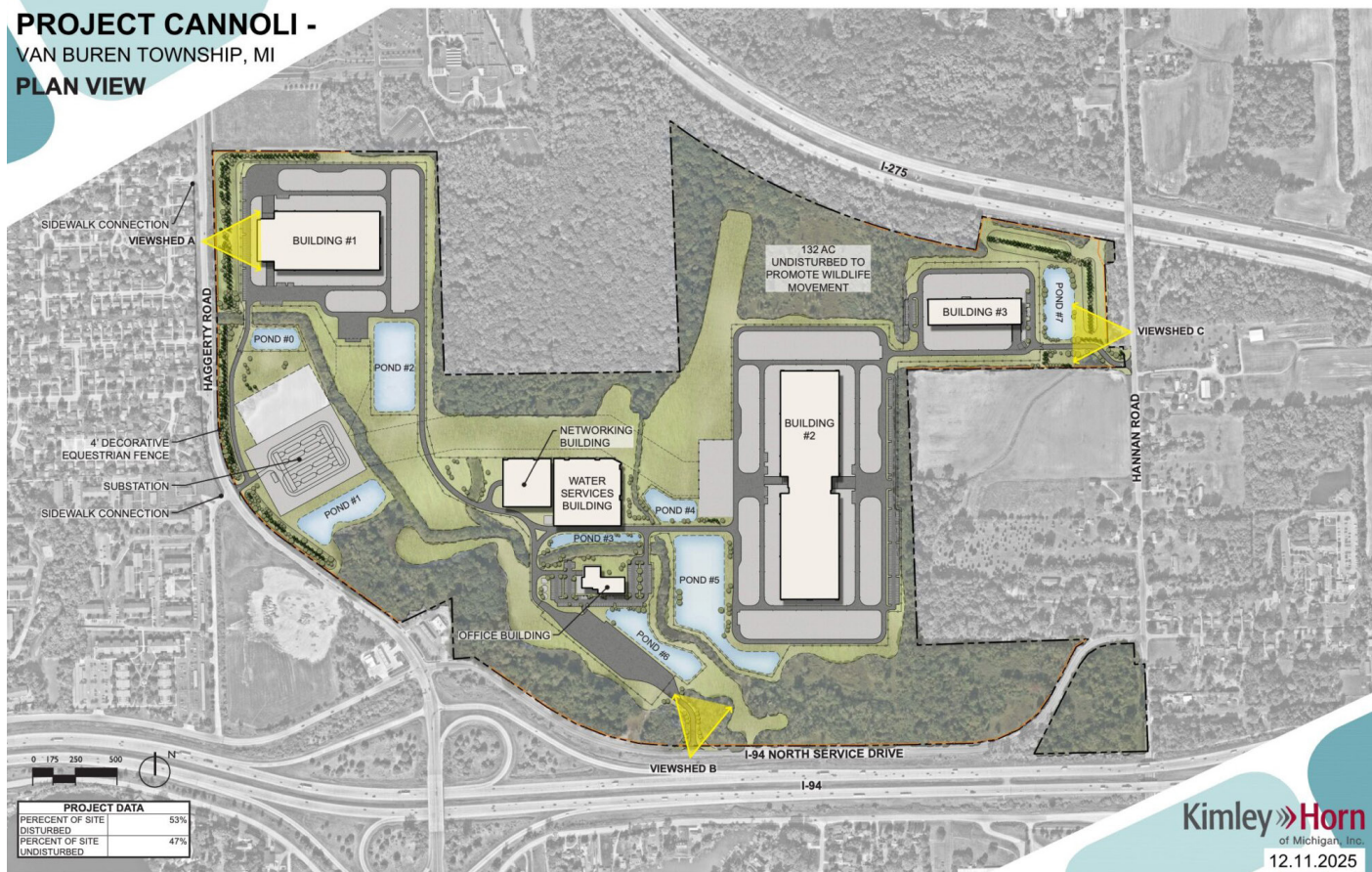
The single most consequential thing elected officials can understand about data center development is timing. Once a developer submits a formal rezoning application or site plan, a community’s options narrow sharply. Zoning updates generally cannot be applied retroactively to a pending proposal, meaning protections adopted after a developer files may not apply to that developer at all.

Meissen moved to avoid that situation. On January 13, New Haven’s village council passed a 12-month moratorium on data center development. He’s not alone. As of early February 2026, at least 19 Michigan communities had enacted similar pauses, and more were considering them.

A moratorium is not a ban. It is a temporary pause on accepting applications—typically six months to a year—while a community updates its ordinances.

The tactic has worked at least once. In Howell Township, the board passed a six-month moratorium in November 2025, and within weeks the developer behind a proposed \$1 billion facility on 1,077 acres of agricultural land withdrew its application, saying it wanted to “honor the current moratorium” and give the Township time to develop regulations. The developer has signaled it may return when the moratorium expires.

**PROJECT CANNOLI -
VAN BUREN TOWNSHIP, MI
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A rendering of Project Cannoli, a proposed data center in Van Buren Township. Photo via Van Buren Township.

In Springfield Township in Oakland County, officials passed a 180-day moratorium after an outside consultant told them they were unprepared for the impact of a data center, just days before a scheduled pre-application meeting with a developer already in the queue.

Township Supervisor Ric Davis framed the decision as a way to ensure the township is “planning from a position of strength, not reacting under pressure.”

Whether Michigan municipalities have clear authority to enact moratoriums is contested. There is no express statutory authority for moratoriums in Michigan's Zoning Enabling Act, and the township attorney for Washington and Chesterfield Townships told his boards there is “nothing” in the Act that authorizes one.

That same attorney acknowledged the general legal consensus is that a moratorium, “in limited circumstances, may be enforceable.” A University of Michigan urban planning professor has taken a stronger view, arguing the Act allows “sensible” moratoriums when tied to a genuine effort to update local codes.

Available legal guidance suggests how to draft one defensibly. According to the Varnum law firm, which advises data center developers in Michigan, “a valid moratorium should be tied to protecting public health, safety, and welfare,” and its enforceability depends heavily on its specific language and factual findings.

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DATA CENTERS

Duration matters, too. Nancy Olind, a municipal attorney with the Kelly Firm, warned that moratoriums “can only last for so long, without potentially opening communities to lawsuits.”

What You Can—and Cannot—Require

Michigan's Zoning Enabling Act gives local governments authority to regulate data centers, and communities that act carefully have tools at their disposal. They can control where data centers are located and under what conditions.

Performance standards like noise limits, setbacks, lighting restrictions, visual screening, water, and energy disclosure requirements are all within bounds when tied to documented impacts. Communities can create new zoning districts specifically for data centers, require special-use permits, and negotiate development agreements that require developers to fund necessary infrastructure upgrades.

Water use deserves special attention. More than 97 percent of the water used by major data center operators is purchased from municipal drinking water systems, which means that when a facility hooks up to your utility, the reporting obligation for that water use falls on your system—not the developer.

Mason addressed this directly with its City-owned and -operated water utility. The City commissioned a water resource study to determine the remaining capacity of its water source after accounting for full residential and commercial build-out and existing water service agreements with neighboring townships. Its new ordinance specifies that only what's left after that analysis can be offered to a data center.

Under Mason's ordinance, water utility agreements must cap maximum daily use, set minimum monthly payments to stabilize system finances, and require the developer to fund any infrastructure improvements needed to serve them. The City will not execute any utility agreement until the study confirms sufficient capacity exists “without compromising existing customers or long-term water sustainability.”

Michigan's 2024 tax incentive legislation took a step in this direction by requiring new enterprise data centers to connect to a municipal water system with available capacity. But the Alliance for the Great Lakes has flagged a gap: A developer can simply forgo the incentive and draw on groundwater instead. Communities negotiating development agreements might consider requiring water-use disclosure and efficiency commitments as explicit contract terms, rather than assumptions.

Fire protection also deserves scrutiny, says Scurto. Lithium battery fires—the kind that can occur in data center backup power systems—don't respond to conventional suppression. Local fire crews need both specialized training and the right equipment: A continuous water curtain to protect surrounding areas while a battery burns itself out.

“You might get a tax base,” he says, “but is there something coming back to help the fire departments?”

That question belongs in any development agreement conversation, says Scurto, noting that negotiating infrastructure commitments up front—while the community still has leverage—is far easier than trying to extract them after a project is approved.

He described a practical focus for data center siting and design: separation from residential areas, noise screening, and lighting controls.

“The noise level of these things can hit 90 decibels, which is slightly above a lawnmower,” he says. “Long term, if you're right next to one, you could have hearing loss at that level. So keep enough separation. Enough screening. Try to suppress that noise.”

What communities cannot do is simply say ‘no.’ The Michigan Zoning Enabling Act bars ordinances that “totally prohibit the establishment of a land use.”

Standards must be proportional to actual, documented impacts, not fear or speculation. Mason's public FAQ addressed this directly: It said imposing mile-wide exclusion zones around residential areas in a three-mile-wide city amounts to a *de facto* prohibition and isn't legally defensible.

The litigation risk is real: When Saline Township voted to reject a developer's rezoning request, it got sued two days later and entered a consent judgment rather than fight a protracted court battle.



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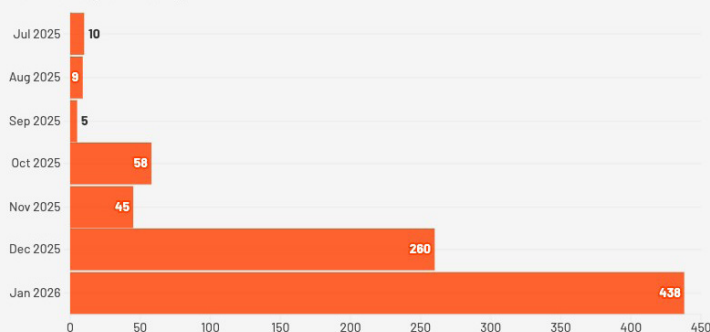
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Michigan cities and counties are talking about data centers – a lot more than they used to

Mentions in a public meeting



Source: Minutes by AP Newsroom • Public meetings mentioning “data center” in Michigan increased sharply through late 2025 and into 2026, with January 2026 seeing 33 meetings and 438 total mentions – more than the previous six months combined. The surge reflects growing local government engagement with data center proposals across the state.

“They have money to throw around, and if you don’t comply with what they want, they just turn around and sue the community,” says Meissen. “And a lot of communities are having to decide: ‘Do we want to drain our coffers to pay our lawyer to defend ourselves—or do we just try to settle?’”

The NDA Issue

One pattern has caught Michigan officials off guard: Requests from developers to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) before any formal application is filed. Leaders of at least four municipalities—Lowell, Lowell Township, Dorr Township, and Gaines Charter Township—signed NDAs tied to data center developments connected to Microsoft.

The Lowell Township case shows how the tactic works. In January 2025, Supervisor Jerry Hale signed an NDA with Microsoft. Ten months later, a rezoning request for 235 acres surfaced—filed not by Microsoft but by Franklin Lowell LLC, a real estate development company.

Microsoft didn’t publicly identify itself as the project’s backer until January 2026, a full year after the NDA was signed. Residents who packed the Township Hall to oppose the rezoning didn’t know who they were actually fighting.

Betsy López-Wagner, an organizer with Residents United for a Healthy Lowell, captured the mood: “Even for folks who would have been in favor of a data center, the fact that there has been no transparency and that the process is so dark and cloaked means they’re opposed.”

The legal ground for these agreements may be shakier than developers expect. Michigan’s Freedom of Information Act limits what an NDA can protect. A public body cannot use the trade secret exemption to withhold information submitted as a condition of receiving a government contract or benefit, and the Michigan Supreme Court has held that failure to follow strict procedural requirements means the exemption doesn’t apply at all.

In late 2025, legislation was introduced to ban local officials from signing NDAs in connection with data center discussions altogether.

Managing the Room

Whipple’s experience in Mason is a candid account of what elected officials can expect when data center development goes public. He said he and two councilmembers drove to New Albany, Ohio, in September 2025—on their own time and initiative—to see what data centers look like in a community that has many of them.

“All I saw was a big pile of buildings,” says Whipple. “And in certain places, depending on where you were, you might hear a fan humming.” He says this trip was later characterized by critics as a “secret meeting.”

Public opposition to data centers nationwide is growing. A poll of nearly 4,000 registered voters found that only 42 percent of Americans would welcome a data center near their community—a lower approval rating than nuclear power plants—with opposition running across party lines. Concerns included water and energy use, environmental impacts, and infrastructure strain.

Fears about health risks, property values, and water supply circulate fast. Mason’s FAQ document addresses each concern with citations to peer-reviewed research and regulatory standards.

Whipple says public comment soon became unproductive. “After the first three weeks, we never got any new information, other than new accusations.” The issues were finite: noise, aesthetics, resource use. Once the ordinance addressed them, he says, public comment became repetitive.

Scurto’s advice is to lead with facts and bring in a credible source to deliver them.

“It might take a couple of meetings,” he says. “But whoever’s applying should be very honest, very transparent with the facts—the raw noise levels, and what measures they’re going to take to mitigate those.”

Nina Ignaczak is the founder and executive editor of *Planet Detroit*. You may contact Nina at nina@planetdetroit.org.

What to Do Now

Communities that act before a developer arrives are in a fundamentally different position than those that don’t. Michigan-specific resources are available: The University of Michigan Graham Sustainability Institute published a guidebook for local governments in February 2026; the Washtenaw County Resiliency Office produced a practical toolkit in 2025.

The conversation to have with your planner and municipal attorney right now: Does your current zoning explicitly address data centers? Many communities are vulnerable to a proposal filed under existing industrial or warehouse classifications. What would a moratorium look like, and how quickly could you adopt one? What performance standards does your community want, and can you document a factual basis for them?



community excellence award

CEA Contest 2026 Timeline

4/17/26:
Deadline for submissions

7/20/26:
Four finalists announced

10/7/26:
MML Convention, Traverse City
Voting & Winners Announced!



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Submissions are accepted based on the community wealth building principles. All submissions will be accepted online. Preliminary voting will be done by a small voting board. The top four projects selected will go on to compete at Convention, where they will present their projects on the main stage and market their projects at designated CEA finalist booths. Convention attendees will vote for their favorite project, with the project winning the most votes awarded the official Community Excellence Award during the closing general session.

For More Information:
<https://cea.mml.org/>



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SISTER CITIES CULTIVATE A RICHER VIEW OF THE WORLD

ALBION pop. 7,700	
FARMINGTON pop. 11,597	
MONROE pop. 20,462	

During the mural unveiling at the Festival of the Forks, the Greater Albion Area Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau conducted an official ribbon cutting to celebrate the work. At the center of the image, Sister City delegate Annick Theisviemont, from France, cuts the celebratory ribbon surrounded by Albion community members, including the mayor, Albion College basketball team members, and other Sister City delegates. Photo credit: Cassidy Porter.

By Emily Pinsuwan

Since the founding of the Sister Cities International movement in the mid-twentieth century, Michigan communities small and large have inaugurated friendships with peer municipalities in other countries. While many of these relationships are with cities in Shiga Prefecture, Japan—born from the Sister State Agreement between Michigan and Shiga, signed in 1968 by then-Governors George Romney and Kinichiro Nozaki—international friendships exist between Michigan municipalities and communities on six continents.

Sister City relationships are sustained by the engagement and ideas of local residents. Many League member communities were eager to show off their international accomplishments with us; here is a sampling.

Albion ↔ Noisy-le-Roi & Bailly

Friendship, music, basketball

“It all began with relationships,” says Dianne Guenin-Lelle, Professor Emerita of French at Albion College and Albion Sister City Committee co-chair.

That spark between the City of Albion and the French village of Noisy-le-Roi goes back to 1997, spearheaded by two friends: Sue Marcos, president of the Greater Albion Chamber of Commerce, who had lived in the Noisy-le-Roi area; and Alain Frene, a member of Noisy-le-Roi’s City Council, who had come to Detroit Country Day School as an exchange student.

The neighboring town of Bailly joined in 2010. The partnership between Albion and the two French communities has been wide-ranging, and includes adult and child French classes, French cooking demonstrations at community events, artist exchanges, and visiting young musicians participating in Albion College’s Piano Festival.

Albion’s Sister City Committee is diverse and highly engaged. “Three of us head up the committee—we call ourselves the Three Muses,” laughs Guenin-Lelle. “We just make things happen.” The committee meets monthly to plan cultural initiatives with both the City of Albion and Albion College.

Student exchanges between Albion and Noisy-le-Roi are a major point of pride in the program. After 2016, when Albion lost its school district and merged with Marshall Public Schools, “the Sister City Committee took a conscious step to fill that gap [to sustain the educational exchanges],” says Guenin-Lelle. It now organizes trips to France for local public-school students, recruiting widely and meeting extensively to prepare students: “They have to know about culture. They have to get some basic French under their belt.”

Robust fundraising efforts ensure that cost is not a barrier to participation. “Some of the children were so effective at fundraising—especially their moms—that they didn’t have to pay anything.” Between 12 and 15 Albion students travel to Noisy-le-Roi and Bailly, eating local food, spending quality time with host families, and taking in the sights.

Basketball is a shared love between the two communities. For nearly 20 years, French youth teams have traveled to Albion to play pick-up games and connect with local families, including both the men’s and women’s basketball teams at Albion College. Excitement around the program has been bolstered by the fame of NBA phenomenon Victor Wembanyama, who is from the nearby town of Le Chesnay.

And, of course, there’s public art. “About a year and a half ago, we were able to get a grant from Albion Area Philanthropic Women,” says Guenin-Lelle. The award money was for a mural designed by local youth who had taken part in the cultural exchange inspired by their experiences in France.

L SISTER CITY PROGRAM

The mural's dedication took place in September of last year. "We were able to celebrate the dedication of the mural during an official visit to our Festival of the Forks," she says. "I would say 150 people attended. It was just lovely."

Painted by artist Michael Dixon and located on Superior Street, the mural blends images from Albion with landmarks from Noisy-le-Roi and Bailly. It also includes basketball imagery, and a silhouette of the participating children and their chaperones, taken from a photo from the trip.

Plans are already underway for trips to France for both kids and adults in 2027. A gospel music collaboration is also in the works. As Guenin-Lelle sees it, the friendship is stronger than it's ever been.

"This has been a labor of love for going on 30 years," she says. "There's a connection to pretty much every segment of Albion. Wherever you go, there's somebody who's got a Sister City story."

Farmington ↔ Vacri

Art, architecture, espresso

One of Michigan's newest Sister City relationships began when Farmington Mayor Joe LaRussa met Piergiuseppe Mammarella at a volunteer recognition event in Farmington. Mammarella's wife was a Farmington Hills native. "She had moved to Italy, met a boy, got married, and ended up staying there," says LaRussa. "Her husband ended up becoming the mayor of the town they lived in."

That town was Vacri, a small historic town in Italy's Abruzzo region. Afterward, the two mayors began corresponding. "We pen-pal-ed for a while," says LaRussa, "and then the proposal came from Vacri's side to deepen our dialogue." The two communities eventually formalized the connection through a Sister City agreement.



In October of 2025, Farmington Mayor Joe LaRussa and Vacri Mayor Piergiuseppe Mammarella formalize a Sister City agreement in Farmington.

A delegation from Vacri visited Farmington last October, bringing Mammarella along with municipal officials, including Council Manager Lucia Di Felice and two city council members, focusing on a variety of topics of common interest to the two municipalities.

"Italy being what it is, they have a lot of regulatory framework around historic preservation," says LaRussa. "We spent a lot of time talking about what that means for economic development."

Farmington, founded 35 years before Michigan became a state, values the charm of its historic downtown. The settlement of Vacri, by contrast, dates back to the Bronze Age. "Mayor Mammarella was surprised to hear that we receive funding from the state and federal government for historic preservation projects," recalls LaRussa. "He mentioned that in Vacri, Chieti Province actually gives him money to tear old stuff down . . . it was very jarring for him to hear that the funding mechanisms in the two cities were actually polar opposites. So that was an interesting topic for us."

Sponsored by the Italian Consulate, Marco Mazzei, an artist from the nearby town of Pescara, created a hammered aluminum leaf sculpture during the three-day trip, a reference to Farmington's tree-themed branding. The finished piece now hangs in Farmington City Hall.

"[Mazzei] did all that work at our DPW building, and he created a couple of smaller ones as a thank you to the DPW guys," says LaRussa. "They have one hanging in the DPW building."

The delegates participated in a film screening, community events in Riley Park, and a fused-glass public art project in which each visitor created a tile that will become part of a larger downtown installation.

"I did, of course, take them for espresso at one of the local coffee bars," says LaRussa. At Ground Control Coffee in downtown Farmington, "they were very impressed that they served sparkling water with the espresso shot—they had a taste of home while they were here too. They said the coffee was very good."

Residents and local businesses got involved, too. Community members attended the sculpture unveiling, and local organizations such as the Italian American Club of Livonia hosted dinners and gatherings with the delegation.

"They were very interested in our accomplishments downtown," says LaRussa. "As a small city in Italy, Vacri struggles with economic development and wants to grow their local economy. So, we were able to add a lot of value to them, showing them how we utilize our piazza as a gathering space."

Both cities hope to continue developing the partnership through cultural programs, economic collaboration, and future visits. "They have invited us to Vacri and we're in the midst of planning that reciprocal visit," says LaRussa. "And we are assembling a small group of Italian American residents who can shepherd the relationship," beyond the current administration.

"We want to be able to provide that richer view of the world that you get from experiencing other cultures—people from other places."

Monroe ↔ Hofu

Cars, classrooms, the County Fair

The relationship between Monroe and Hofu, in Yamaguchi Prefecture in Japan, has its roots in the automotive industry, when a Mazda-related seat manufacturing facility opened in Monroe to support automotive production in nearby Flat Rock. “They decided to build their seat factory here in Monroe because they could manufacture the seats with personnel here and then put them right into the cars,” says Mayor Robert Clark.

Hofu is home to major Mazda operations, and in 1992, the nonprofit Monroe International Friendship Association (MIFA) was formed to develop those corporate ties into something deeper. In 1993, the official Sister City agreement was signed.

While the corporate relationship didn’t last, “because we had such a strong community relationship, it went from a business to a community program,” says Clark.

At the heart of MIFA’s outreach is an annual high school student exchange program. Each summer, five students from Monroe County and five from Hofu participate in a monthlong exchange. Since its inauguration, over 200 students from Monroe and Hofu have traveled to their community’s Sister City.

MIFA exchange students in Hofu and Monroe live with two different host families, spending about two weeks with each. The goal is to give the kids diverse experiences. “We want to show them the city of Monroe, but we want to show also Monroe County, which is agricultural,” says Clark. “And [the Hofu families] do the same when our students go there. Some might live for a time with a host family in the city, and then they might be out in a rural area, like on a rice farm.”

“When they get here, we do a reception. The Consul General from Detroit has been here to join us,” says Clark. The event might include skits and songs. “It’s a big, big welcoming. And then the students that night go with their host families.” A popular event for the Japanese exchange students is the Monroe County Fair, which always overlaps with the MIFA exchange. “You see combines and things coming down the street,” says Clark. “They just love it.”


The program is open to high school students throughout Monroe County. Around 15 students apply every year. Applicants supply three letters of recommendation and write an essay explaining why they want to go to Japan: *What do you hope to gain from this experience? What skills will help you represent Monroe County? How will you share your experience upon returning to benefit your community?*

The connections formed during the MIFA exchanges can endure long after the return flights have landed. Former participants have returned as chaperones. Alumni of the Monroe exchange have gone on to study Japanese in college and then move to Japan to teach English.

One of the first students to go on the exchange grew up to have a son who also participated—staying with the same host family.

Beyond the high school student exchange, MIFA and the City of Monroe also have direct engagement with Hofu, which includes travel, mayoral delegations, and milestone reaffirmations of the agreement. Clark has traveled to Japan four times now, paying his own way each time. Even after pandemic-related pauses, exchanges have resumed, and the cities continue to celebrate major anniversaries together. Clark maintains a relationship with Hofu Mayor Yutaka Ikeda.

In 2023, Tonomi Elementary and Junior High School in Hofu unveiled its “Monroe Room,” a classroom decorated with photos of exchange students on their travels. The Monroe Room also includes a life-size cutout of Mayor Clark, taken by a local fifth grader.

“I told him he’s an international photographer now,” he laughs. 

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

SISTER CITIES AND PUBLIC SPACES

In Midland, the **Japanese Stone Lantern Garden** behind the Grace A. Dow Memorial Library serves as a small, quiet symbol of the City’s relationship with Handa, Aichi Prefecture, Japan. The garden was dedicated in 1991 to mark the 10th anniversary of the Midland–Handa partnership, which began following business connections through Dow Chemical. The garden’s centerpiece is a trio of traditional Japanese stone lanterns—Yukimi, Oribe, and Kasuga styles—arranged in a traditional landscaped setting.

The Kusatsu Friendship Garden at Pontiac City Hall reflects the City of Pontiac’s partnership with Kusatsu, Shiga Prefecture, established in 1978. The garden has hosted ceremonial plantings, including a Japanese weeping pine tree, donated by Goldner Walsh Garden and Home and planted during a Japanese delegation visit in 2016. The longstanding relationship between Pontiac and Kusatsu has included student exchanges, official visits, and community cultural programs.

The Japanese Cultural Center, Tea House and Gardens was born from the 1961 Sister City relationship between the City of Saginaw and Tokushima. Designed by landscape architect Yataro Suzue, the Tokushima–Saginaw Friendship Garden opened in 1971. Its centerpiece, the Awa–Saginaw–An teahouse, by architect Tsutomu Takenaka, was completed in 1986 using traditional materials and craftsmanship—one of a very few of its kind in the United States.

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CAP CON 2026



League President Josh Atwood presents the Legislator of the Year Award to State Senator Sarah Anthony.

CapCon 2026 took place March 10–11 in Lansing. Over 400 local officials from across the state heard updates from our State & Federal Affairs team, visions for the future from the 2026 gubernatorial candidates, and thoughtful discourse on matters from youth engagement and clean energy to 2030 Census preparedness. Whether catching up with state legislators at the Legislative Breakfast or meeting new vendors at the Expo Hall, our members could be counted on to bring positive energy. See you at Convention!



Hazel Park City Manager Ed Klobucher with State Representatives Mike McFall and Donovan McKinney.



Portage Councilmember Jihan Ain Young and Councilmember and League Board Trustee Nicole Miller.



Women's Elected Leadership Intensive Cohort (left to right): Wayland Mayor Jennifer Antel, Westland Councilmember Emily A. Bauman, Fenton Councilmember Tracy Bottecelli, Monroe Councilmember Michelle Germani, Southfield Councilmember Yolanda C. Haynes, Dearborn Heights Treasurer Lisa Hicks-Clayton, Big Rapids Commissioner Amanda Johnson, Ypsilanti Councilmember Me'Chelle King, Flint Councilmember Candice Mushatt, Flint Councilmember Judy Priestley.



Port Huron Mayor Anita Ashford receiving her Elected Officials Academy Level Four Award.



Elected Officials Academy Level Three Graduates (left to right): Monroe Mayor Bob Clark, Petoskey Mayor Pro Tem Tina DeMoore, Lowell Mayor Mike DeVore, Sault Sainte Marie Mayor Donald Gerrie, Hamtramck Councilmember Mohammed Hassan, Hazel Park Councilmember Andy LeCureaux, Ferndale Mayor Raylon Leaks-May, Farmington Mayor Joe LaRussa.



Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson (center) with students from Farmington and Farmington Hills' Mayor's Youth Council (left to right): Venkata Yakkanti, Anushka Hodaghatta Yogesh, Mariam Dakhan, Mrudhula Kannan.



General Session speakers (left to right): Michigan Public Service Commission Commissioner Shaquila Myers, Center for EmPowering Communities Director and University of Michigan PhD Sarah Mills, DTE Energy Director of Policy and Regional Affairs Daniel Mahoney, Michigan Municipal League Director of Policy Research Labs Shanna Draheim, Public Sector Consultants CEO Julie Metty Bennett.



Elected Officials Academy Level Two Graduates (left to right): Wayland Mayor Jennifer Antel, Lapeer Commissioner Joshua Atwood, Westland Councilmember Emily A. Bauman, Monroe Mayor Bob Clark, Fenton Councilmember Tracy Bottecelli, Springfield Mayor Harry Burdett, Charlotte Councilmember Joseph Chin, Greenville Councilmember James Barrus, Saginaw Mayor Pro Tempore Priscilla Garcia, Royal Oak Commissioner Brandon Kolo, Flint Councilmember Judy Priestley, Hamtramck Councilmember Mohammed Hassan, Detroit Community Advisory Council Rose Jones, Royal Oak Mayor Pro Tem Amanda Herzog.



Michigan Municipal League President and Lapeer Commissioner, Joshua Atwood.

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By Bill Mathewson

Typically, this column focuses on recent court decisions that impact cities and villages. However, the League's staff members who respond to your inquiries suggested, given the questions they have received recently, that some elaboration on the Open Meetings Act (OMA) related to meeting attendance would be helpful. Specifically, to summarize an opinion of the Michigan Attorney General (OAG 7318, February 4, 2022) that addresses this issue in the context of both the OMA and federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.

It's worthwhile to mention that Michigan Attorney General (AG) opinions are binding on State agencies but not legally binding on local governments. Local units (cities, townships, counties) are only expected to accord them "great respect," as they are advisory, not precedents. This is not to say that they are not factual, expertly reasoned, and persuasive... just not legally controlling. Thus, as always, you should rely on the advice of your city or village attorney, including to interpret the impact of opinions of the Attorney General.

There is at least a conceptual conflict between the OMA and the ADA. The OMA forcefully sets standards to promote transparent conduct of public meetings, which is furthered by requiring officials to be physically present. As we know, during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, special rules were put in place. They have expired, and while there is sentiment to utilize advances in communication technology and arguments in favor of remote participation, at present only active service members are specifically identified as being able to participate remotely.

At the same time, the ADA prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities, ensuring they have the same opportunities as everyone else in all areas of public life. This includes accessibility and reasonable accommodations to allow participation. A Michigan federal district court ruling (*Paul Palmer v. State of Michigan, et al*, March 19, 2022) held against a defendant multi-county board, the Community Mental Health Authority (CMHA), granting the motion of a board member for a preliminary injunction requiring the public mental health authority to allow remote participation (by Zoom) in board meetings as a reasonable accommodation under Title II of the ADA (and equivalent section of Michigan's law).

Mr. Palmer had cerebral palsy that impaired his speech and breathing and impeded effective communication while masked,

which he needed to do, as he was at a higher COVID-19 risk. The Board had struggled with what it should do once the special rules of the OMA expired at the end of 2021. After the opinion of the Attorney General was issued, CMHA took the position that Mr. Palmer would have to submit medical documentation or a letter from his physician to be able to participate by Zoom. However, the court found that here medical documentation was not justified as the need was apparent and known to CMHA. The parties also disputed whether Mr. Palmer had made a legally sufficient request for the accommodation. The court held that even if he didn't use the word "request" or "accommodation" in his email to the Board, it should have inferred that was what he was seeking. The court said that this accommodation would not cause irreputable harm or impose an undue burden on the CMHA. The court also noted in one context that "... the OMA's requirements must give way to the ADA." Last, the court referenced the Attorney General's opinion.

What then does OAG 7318 say? It concludes as follows: "It is my opinion, therefore, that the [ADA ... requires] state and local boards and commissions to provide reasonable accommodations, which could include an option to participate virtually, to qualified individuals with a disability who request an accommodation in order to fully participate as a board member or commission member or as a member of the general public in meetings that are required by the [OMA] to be held in a place available to the general public." To reach this opinion, the Attorney General opines that since the OMA is silent on accommodations for disabled, "to the extent the OMA is inconsistent with what is required under the ADA, the OMA is preempted."

Additionally, OAG 7318 states that "when a request for an accommodation is received from a qualified individual with a disability, a state or local board or commission must consider whether it can modify its meetings without incurring an undue burden or fundamentally altering the nature of the meetings." The Opinion also touts proactive measures: "... local boards and commissions are strongly encouraged to proactively evaluate the services they provide and, to the extent reasonably possible, offer alternatives to completely in-person, physical meetings..." Finally, although the Opinion is strongly in favor of access to virtual meetings, "... a request for a fully virtual option [presumably meaning all members participating remotely] is more likely to be viewed as a fundamental alteration of a board's or



commission's services, and therefore not required. More importantly, where that option is not necessary to accommodate a qualified individual with a disability, the ADA does not require it and the OMA would not permit it."

In presentations I have made on the OMA, discussion of remote attendance often brings out forceful opinions both in favor and opposition. It's a fascinating topic, pitting modern technological capability against the value of traditional in-person communication. While this "debate" continues, the OMA at present requires in-person attendance of members with the one exception. That said, the requirements of the ADA should not be ignored, as OAG 7318 opines.

In reviewing advisories of three Michigan law firms with substantial local government client bases, I would conclude that, relying on the advice of your municipal attorney, it is prudent to develop a plan for what approach you would take if an ADA request, re meeting participation, is presented to you. It will likely be a fact-specific inquiry. Questions should be asked such as whether the person has a "qualifying disability." In the Palmer case, the disability was presumably on-going. But what if the disability will be temporary, such as for post-surgery recovery? If it significantly limits major activities such as driving and ambulating, it would likely qualify. Another question is whether the request for accommodation is reasonable, including whether it will impose an undue financial or administrative bur-

den. Would it be a fundamental alteration of your operations? Do you have sufficient resources to provide remote access, and have you provided it in the past? Note that OAG 7318 also references accommodations other than virtual attendance, such as masking, plexiglass, and social distancing. Beyond what may be required regarding members of a public body, there is the issue of participation of a member of the public with a disability, especially in the public comment portion of a meeting. You may need to provide acceptable alternative methods such as videoconferencing, dial-in link, or submission of written comments in advance that will be read or shared with the public body.

Ultimately, because of the apparent conflict between the OMA and ADA, at least as interpreted by OAG 7318, city and village officials should carefully analyze whether and how to best accommodate both council, commission, board members, and members of the public who are individuals with disabilities seeking accommodations to participate remotely in meetings of these bodies. Again, with the advice of your city or village attorney, if a situation develops where you are facing either a violation of the OMA or of the ADA, it may even be advisable to seek a judicial determination before proceeding. [L](#)

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

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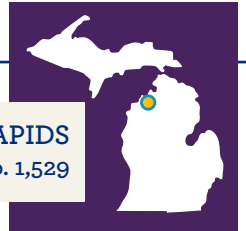
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Residents Stay Curious with the Elk Rapids Citizens Academy

By Emily Pinsuwan

It all boils down to wanting to know the *why*.

For the Village of Elk Rapids, on the shores of Grand Traverse Bay, that was the spark for a program to bridge the knowledge gap between municipal government and the people it serves. “People want to be involved, but we need to bring our language to a certain level where everyone can understand how things operate,” says Leah Moskovitz, former Village Clerk of Elk Rapids.

That program was the Elk Rapids Citizens Academy, a six-week, hands-on course created to demystify how the Village functions, who’s in charge of what, and how (and why) decisions are made.

To develop the “curriculum,” Moskovitz researched what village residents were interested in. She scoured Village Council meeting minutes, resident e-mails, and Facebook comments for common themes. She overhauled informational PowerPoint presentations and met with each department head individually to make sure the messaging was clear and accurate.

The basic agenda set, “I blasted it all over Facebook,” says Moskovitz. “I created an online application and a paper application too, trying to make sure all demographics are included. I also walked up and down our downtown passing out flyers with QR codes on them for businesses to hang up.” The Elk Rapids District Library and Chamber of Commerce also helped publicize the new initiative.

The first cohort of the Elk Rapids Citizens Academy included 10 participants, a good number for a community of Elk Rapids’ size. The group reflected a mix of ages and perspectives, from parents and retirees to residents who were fixtures at Village Council meetings. “Some of them were there to learn specifically about planning and zoning,” recalls Moskovitz. “Other people came to learn more about wastewater. One person came because they had a relationship with the harbor and wanted to learn more about that.”

The Academy met for six consecutive Wednesdays in fall of 2025 from 6 to 8 p.m. The first half of each session consisted of a presentation and Q&A with a municipal department head. Where possible, the second half included an on-site tour. Topics included Municipal Operations 101: the council-manager form of government, treasury and finance, planning and zoning, public works, wastewater, harbor operations, police and fire services, and the library. “We focused on every department, so there was something for everybody there,” says Moskovitz. Meetings were open to anyone, not just Citizens Academy participants, and some topics attracted drop-in attendees.

“People want to meet who is behind what’s happening,” says Moskovitz. “I got council members involved. I got all the department heads involved. It’s really just putting faces to names and creating those connections for them to be, ‘Oh, I’ve heard of this before. Oh, I know this person now.’”



Leah Moskovitz, former Village Clerk of Elk Rapids, with members of the third cohort of the Elk Rapids Citizens Academy.



In fall 2025, Harbormaster Mike Singleton leads members of the Elk Rapids Citizens Academy on a tour of the Edward C. Grace Memorial Harbor to learn about harbor operations.

At the time of the Academy's launch, several hot-button issues were gathering energy in the village. One involved the historic Elk Rapids Town Hall, a Township-owned building located within village limits. The Township sought to sell the property and proposed rezoning it to increase its value. Used for performances and gatherings, the building is a beloved community space. When the rezoning request came before the Village Council, "that brought people out in droves," recalls Moskowitz. "There was confusion among residents about what the rezoning process is: What can be rezoned? What can't be rezoned?"

Another issue involved aging dams along the Chain of Lakes in Antrim County. The need for repairs raised the possibility of special assessment districts spanning Antrim, Charlevoix, and Grand Traverse Counties. "I asked Leslie Meyers, the Drain Commissioner, to come out and speak on that," says Moskowitz. "We also did a tour of the hydroelectric plant that wasn't included in the original plan."


Antrim County had recently passed a bond for a new public safety center, but some residents remained skeptical about the need. The county sheriff participated in a Citizens Academy session, later hosting a tour of the existing facility as part of an additional, "bonus" session. "I was listening to the residents and they were saying, 'Oh my gosh, I'm so glad we voted yes for this. I can totally see the need.' Again, the big thing is people just want to know the *why*."

The Citizens Academy created space to unpack all these issues and more. Cohort members completed surveys and took quizzes to evaluate the sessions, with tricky subjects revisited as necessary. It also served as a recruitment tool: "Throughout these sessions, I would sprinkle in, 'Hey, if you're interested in helping out, these are commissions that we have open spots for—I'd be happy to connect you with the board or commission chair.'"

"At the end, one of [the Academy participants] came up to me and said, 'Wow, I thought I knew a lot about this government, but there's a lot more that I didn't know,'" recalls Moskowitz. "People want to know the why behind things. They get frustrated because they don't know what the process is behind getting an application or a permit approved; why do the rates go up; why certain things happen within municipalities. I just think they wanted someone to listen to them, take their concerns seriously, help them understand what they're asking about."



The Elk Rapids Citizen Academy had the additional benefit of driving a sense of belonging and ownership among residents. "I watched these people over six weeks become friends, start hanging out," says Moskowitz. "There were multiple layers to this: It was explaining the why, it was creating connection, but then it was also getting people motivated to join and volunteer for the Village." Two members of the cohort ultimately applied for and now serve on Village boards.

"I'm just thankful that residents have that curiosity, wanting to learn more about how their town operates and how they want to get involved in everything," says Moskowitz. "Municipalities can't function without our residents, and I think that this program is a great way to make that bridge." 

Leah Moskowitz is pursuing a postgraduate degree looking at citizens academies and is happy to talk to interested local officials. Leah can be reached at leahmoskovitz@gmail.com.

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

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By Kim Cekola

Q. What are the upcoming Department of Justice ADA Title II requirements?

A. State and local governments will be required to make their websites, mobile applications, and digital services accessible to people with disabilities.

Compliance deadlines vary by jurisdiction size:

- Large jurisdictions (over 50,000 population): April 24, 2026
- Smaller jurisdictions and special districts: April 26, 2027

Special note for smaller jurisdictions: Beginning April 24, 2026, all documents and digital content submitted to the Michigan Department of Treasury must comply with the updated ADA Title II rules.

The League has a webinar recording on this topic and other resources available at mml.org.

Q. We are interested in creating a more formal policy for our city's boards and commissions. Does the League have any resources on this?

A. Yes, we have samples on our website: mml.org/programs-services/inquiry-service/boards-commissions

There are boards and commissions that are provided for by statute, such as planning commissions, zoning boards of appeals, charter commissions, and boards of review. Then there are advisory voluntary committees, boards, and commissions that municipalities create to assist in the many governing tasks for which they are responsible. These types of boards are at the discretion of the municipal body, and they should be set up with care. The board members should know exactly what they are responsible for, what their authority is, and what they are supposed to accomplish. The board should have bylaws or meeting rules that establish basics, such as how members are appointed, how long they serve, and the number that constitutes a quorum.

The webpage contains sample applications, recruitment and appointment policies; we've also posted sample guidelines and handbooks. There are samples from the Village of Decatur (pop. 1,651), for our smaller members, and from Houghton (pop. 8,386) and Grand Rapids (pop. 198,917) for medium and larger cities.

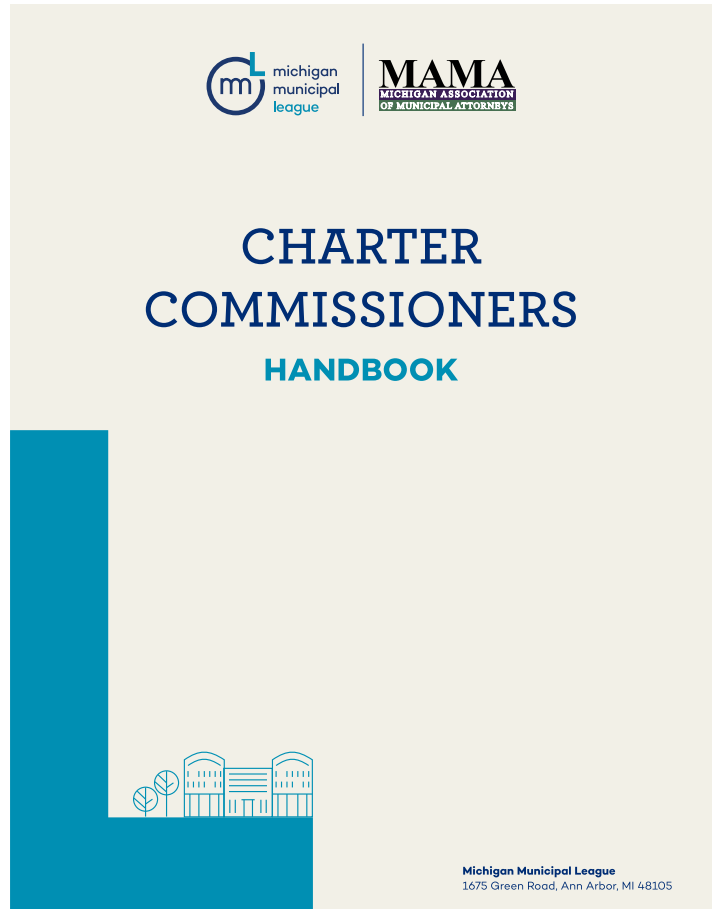
Q. We are thinking about regulating short-term rentals. Does the League have sample policies from other municipalities?

A. Yes, we have sample short-term rental (STR) policies and ordinances from other municipalities. Please send an email request to info@mml.org.

Q. Can the village clerk be on the council?

A. In cities and villages, the clerk (as well as the treasurer) is not part of the governing body. In townships, however, they are. [The forms of government are different.](#)

Kim Cekola is a research specialist/editor for the Michigan Municipal League. You may reach Kim at 734-669-6321 or kcekola@mml.org.



This handbook includes the statutory framework for charters, various implementing procedures, and a checklist of what must appear in municipal charters. It is the product of a committee of the Michigan Association of Municipal Attorneys (MAMA), the League, and individuals who have been active in charter revision work—professors, charter consultants, experienced charter commissioners, municipal attorneys, and specialists from the Attorney General's office.

Available at www.mml.org

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By Rick Haglund

Cities and villages have benefitted—to a degree—from rising state tax collections, a result of COVID-related federal stimulus funding and a growing state economy over the past several years. But those days may be coming to a quick end as federal funds have largely dried up, and the state economy is softening.

The current State budget cut more than \$60 million from constitutional revenue sharing. Prospects for restoring the cash in future budgets are grim, one budget expert said. “If you’re a local government that lost revenue sharing and hope to get something back, it’s probably going to be tough,” says Bob Schneider, senior research associate at the Citizens Research Council of Michigan.

The annual January revenue estimating conference provided a sobering assessment of the State’s fiscal future, estimating that general fund revenue in the current budget will likely come in at nearly \$1 billion less than forecasted last May. General fund revenue is expected to fall this year to \$14.1 billion, from \$14.5 billion in 2025, and remain essentially flat in fiscal 2027, which starts on October 1. “In the next two budgets, there is no room for growth at all,” says Schneider. “It’s pretty sparse.” Projected general fund revenue in fiscal 2028 just gets the state back to the \$14.5 billion level reached in 2025. And it’s possible there could be further forecast reductions in the upcoming May revenue estimating conference, he said.

Declining tax revenues reflect a state economy that has slowed over the past year in the face of a sluggish job market, and an auto industry struggling with rising tariffs and the end of federal consumer electric vehicle tax credits. Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis (formerly Chrysler) have collectively written off a staggering \$55 billion from their electric vehicle

operations and have laid off thousands of workers over the past year. In total, Michigan lost 2,000 manufacturing jobs last year. University of Michigan economists predict the state will lose another 3,000 manufacturing jobs this year and a total net loss of 2,000 payroll jobs. That would be the first net job loss in the state since the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

Schneider says flat general fund revenues means that a future proposal to boost spending in one area will require a cut in another line item. Local governments could take a hit because of pressure to boost state spending on health care and supplemental food benefits for low-income residents. “If I were a local government, I’d be concerned revenue sharing could get hit again,” he says. Although total revenue sharing for cities, villages, and townships has risen in recent years, it’s still about \$800 million less than full funding called for under state law, according to the state House Fiscal Agency.

An election this year to choose a new governor and members of the state legislature also could have a big impact on state revenues. Several Republican gubernatorial candidates have proposed cutting or eliminating the personal income tax, which generates about \$9 billion a year, or about 65 percent of the general fund budget. While the income tax doesn’t directly affect local governments, it could hurt them by the State having less money available for things such as economic development and housing initiatives, said John LaMacchia, director of federal and state affairs at the League.

A bigger threat comes from various proposals to lower or eliminate property taxes that are the primary source of revenues local government uses to fund basic government services and public safety.



A West Michigan group called AxMiTax has been working for several years to put an issue on the ballot calling for the elimination of all local property taxes. The group failed to get the issue on the November 2024 ballot and apparently is struggling to get enough signatures to put the measure on this November's ballot. LaMacchia says he doesn't "see any way" the proposal will make this year's ballot. But if the measure should make it and be approved by voters, it would cut \$17 billion in support for local governments, public safety agencies, and schools. Local governments would "almost cease to exist," LaMacchia said. "It would impact everything we do."

The movement to at least reduce property taxes isn't likely to go away as elected officials respond to constituents' demand to shrink the cost of living. "The broader narrative on affordability involves property tax relief in one shape or another," LaMacchia said. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, for instance, is pushing a total \$90 million tax refund for state residents 65 and older as part of her proposed fiscal 2027 budget. And House Speaker Matt Hall (R-Richland Township) has made comprehensive property tax relief a top legislative priority this year. "Affordability is probably going to be the biggest issue in the election" this year, he recently said on the public affairs program *Off the Record*.

The economic slowdown and move to cut taxes in Lansing come at a time when local government officials are increasingly worried about their communities' fiscal futures. A survey last year of all 1,856 Michigan cities, villages, townships, and

counties by the University of Michigan's Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy found the percentage of jurisdictions reporting relatively good fiscal health was at the lowest point in the past 11 years. Just over half (56 percent) said they were in good shape, down from nearly 75 percent in 2014. Smaller communities have been the hardest hit, with only 48 percent reporting they were relatively fiscally healthy. And just 39 percent of villages reported good fiscal health last year, down sharply from 61 percent in 2023. The survey cited concerns expressed by local officials about inadequate revenues, declining fund balances, and the difficulty of meeting service demands.

Local officials also said they were pessimistic about being able to meet fiscal needs this year and into the future. "Concerns about long-term fiscal stress have consistently increased since 2021, despite the infusion of state and federal funding during that period," the report said. LaMacchia says the League is going to be "very focused" on maintaining revenue sharing levels in a tight budget year and ensuring cities and villages are held harmless in whatever tax cut proposals emerge in the legislature and the governor's office. It's going to be a busy year. ■

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



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What Zoning Reforms Are Best for Your Community?

By Richard Murphy

The cost of housing is a hot topic in communities across Michigan, and zoning reform as a strategy for reducing costs has been a focus, particularly for “hot market” areas where shortages of housing relative to strong demand have driven up prices furthest. Unfortunately, this is a narrow understanding of our communities’ housing needs and the role of zoning reform.

Yes, development codes should be reviewed and updated periodically to stay relevant to current conditions and priorities, but effective updates rely on a clear evaluation of what those are. Understanding the local market context and selecting the right tools will go further towards addressing housing needs than a one-size-fits-all prescription that doesn’t, well, fit. We’ll look at some potential scenarios and resources, and of course the MI Home Program we’ve proposed to the legislature would support this approach of matching local strategies to local conditions.

The Hot Market Crunch

The national discussion of zoning reform has focused on expensive markets, where high costs of land dominate the overall price of housing: A 2024 Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) analysis found that in parts of California, land composed over 70 percent of the total cost of a home. In that situation, the most effective way to manage housing costs is to increase the number of homes using that expensive land. Zoning updates that increase permitted housing density—how many homes per unit of land—are a good approach here. These include increasing the maximum height or Floor Area Ratio (FAR) allowed, permitting large multi-family residential and mixed-use structures in commercial districts, and allowing smaller multi-home developments in neighborhoods.

Making more efficient use of expensive land in high-demand places like Leelanau County, where the analysis shows ¼ acre

of residential land averaging \$246,000, or Washtenaw County (\$155,000 per ¼ acre) can help bring down housing costs and limit the outward sprawl of those areas, protecting valuable farmland and outdoor recreation opportunities. Most of Michigan is not in that category, though.

Michigan’s Modest Land Prices

Buildable land is relatively affordable in most of Michigan: Statewide, that FHFA analysis shows land costs average about \$60,000 for a ¼-acre single-family home lot—putting us in 38th place nationally. In many communities, smaller lot sizes and lower demand mean there’s little cost efficiency to be achieved there—one developer told me their projects are typically under \$5,000 per dwelling in land costs.

In this situation, the costs of new construction are dominated by the hard costs—the “labor and lumber”—and the pace of new homes is limited by existing housing being cheaper than new homes. The theory of zoning-induced supply shortages doesn’t hold in these places, and the prescriptions that come from that theory will have little effect.

We know housing costs are still a concern in many of these areas. Where zoning amendments can potentially help is by enabling flexibility within existing homes: make sure your ordinance’s definitions of “family” or “household” allow for multigenerational living or roommates; allow for conversion of part of the house, or a garage, into an accessory dwelling unit. In main street areas, ensure vacant upper stories can be easily converted to apartments—not only in zoning but also by making sure your building official is comfortable applying the “existing buildings” provisions in building code. Reducing or eliminating required minimum floor areas can also help—don’t require people to maintain more home than they need.



Requiring garages to be set back behind the home’s front door protects pedestrian visibility and supports front-porch neighborliness.

Coding for Neighborhoods

In older communities, pro-housing zoning reforms might focus on encouraging infill construction opportunities scattered throughout neighborhoods, rather than on large-scale development. “Neighborhood repair” strategies can also be important. Minimum lot sizes or setbacks that create widespread nonconformities should be adjusted to fit the historical neighborhood pattern—both to remove a point of friction homeowners sometimes hit when trying to get financing or insurance, and to ease the process of filling vacant lots with new homes.

Streamlining the permitting process for speed and predictability can be helpful for the neighborhood-scale developer. This could include approaches like implementing a pre-reviewed housing program (see our *Pattern Book Homes* work) or a broader effort to stay up to date on Redevelopment Ready best practices.

Get Parking Under Control

While “character” sometimes gets used as a weapon to block needed housing, some targeted design-based rules can support safety, neighborliness, and sense of place without inflating costs or blocking construction. One easy example is to look at residential parking.

Reducing off-street minimum parking requirements can provide modest housing cost savings, add flexibility for smaller parcels, and reduce stormwater runoff impacts. In neighborhoods that are walkable and have transit service (and don’t face lake effect street snow removal demands), parking minimums can be eliminated, leaving builders and buyers to determine whether they need it. Where parking happens also matters. Requiring any garage be set back further from the street than the front of the house immediately prioritizes people over car storage and protects neighborhood interests. Bonus points if the parking is accessible from a side street or alley.

Zoning Alone Is Inadequate for Our Housing Needs

As much as it pains my code reform-loving heart to admit it, a lot of our housing challenges just aren’t about zoning. Conversations about meeting housing needs should address the full local context, not just the regulatory environment for development.

Your local strategy might also need to include:

Inventorying land that the municipality or other public sector partners control that could be made available for new housing.

Incentive or tax abatement tools that can close the gap between construction costs and local market conditions.

Programs that improve conditions in existing, aging homes to help meet housing demand (e.g., home rehab grants, weatherization programs).

Stability measures to support vulnerable residents, like foreclosure prevention and just-cause eviction measures.

We continue to compile various strategies on our Resources & Research page and new Idea Bank at mml.org.

If your community is doing something that we haven’t already covered, let us know!

Additional Resources for Zoning Updates:

- Congress for the New Urbanism—Michigan code reform guides: cnu.org/michigan
- Michigan Association of Planning—*Zoning Reform Toolkit*: planningmi.org/aws/MAP/asset_manager/get_file/901592
- National League of Cities—*Housing Supply Accelerator Playbook*: nlc.org/resource/housing-supply-accelerator-playbook

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Allowing the conversion or replacement of existing garages into accessory apartments gives homeowners flexibility within existing square footage.



New townhomes on 12 Mile Road reflect flexibility in Berkley's zoning, allowing residential development in traditionally commercial-only corridors.



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