

The Review

The official magazine of the  michigan municipal league

Summer 2026

America250 Across Michigan

Celebrating America's 250th Anniversary



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Summer 2026

Volume 99, Number 3

The official magazine of the
 michigan municipal league

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On the Cover

Ypsilanti Historical Society Board of Trustees and Eastern Michigan University partners gather in front of the Ypsilanti Historical Museum.

Back row, left to right:

Catherine Sanford (EMU Archives Intern), McKinley Striggow (Museum Intern), Kirk Profit, Rick Katon, Nancy Bryk (EMU Professor), and Morgan Schuster.

Front row, left to right:

Barry LaRue, Amy Singer, Bill Nickels, Maria Davis, and Al Rudisill.

Board of Trustee members not pictured include:

Nancy Balogh, Pattie Harrington, Jerry Jennings, Marcia McCrary, Tom Warner.



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At the Human Scale

Executive Director's Message

Here's a fun word: Semiquincentennial.

As our nation approaches the Semiquincentennial—also known as its 250th anniversary—it's worth reflecting on where democracy is most real in everyday life: the human scale. At a time when many Americans feel disconnected from large-scale government, frustrated by political polarization, or just uncertain whether their voices really matter, local leadership remains one of the most tangible and immediate ways people can shape their communities.

The challenges facing our country can seem overwhelming. National and international issues dominate headlines. And those issues can be mind-bogglingly complex, with no obvious solution. Decisions made in faraway statehouses, by leaders you don't know, can feel beyond any regular person's reach.

But even now, in our almost unfathomably interconnected world, the issues that most affect us are local. The roads we drive on, the sidewalks we walk on, the parks where our kids play, and the downtowns we visit are all products of local decisions—both by our local leaders and ordinary residents. All of us live in intentionally built environments, the result of conversations at City Hall, public meetings at libraries and community centers and school auditoriums, planning commissions and council meetings—a constant dialogue between residents and local officials.

That is democracy at the human scale.

Local leaders across Michigan participate in the same process: They ask residents what they want. They listen. They gather ideas. They offer a response. They listen again. Then they work to turn those ideas into reality. Then they start over with something else. Minus some technological progress and fashion choices, the approach is much the same as it was 250 years ago.

The specifics of what people want vary from community to community because no two communities are exactly alike. What works in a seasonal waterfront village may not work in a fast-growing township, which will have different needs from a dense industrial city. Residents know that intuitively, and they choose the leadership they want based on those qualities.

That intimate knowledge of one's own community is one of the great strengths of municipal government. A person may never meet the president or their senator, but they can talk

to the mayor this week if they want to. They might see their city manager at the grocery store, checking the expiration dates on milk jugs. Their kids play soccer alongside their city councilperson's kids, at the park whose design they shared their opinion on at a planning meeting.

They may not agree with every single decision their local leaders make. But they know them—human to human—which means it's easier to build trust.

When our local leaders promise to build a park and then that park appears, people notice. When potholes are filled and sidewalks are repaired, people notice. When community priorities are addressed, people notice. Everyone appreciates a competent leader. Competence matters because it shows that the government can solve problems and improve everyone's quality of life. It's a building block of trust.

Ideally, the discussions happening at your local City Hall are about competently finding solutions to concrete issues. How can we improve this or that neighborhood? How should we invest in public infrastructure? What will make our community stronger for future generations?

Local government provides a place where residents can see for themselves how participatory democracy leads to improvements in their own lives and the lives of their loved ones. It allows for a forum where voices can be heard, dialogue can be had, and progress can be made in ways that people can see and experience for themselves.

The work is not always glamorous. Odds are it won't make national headlines. But it's where democracy works best.

At the human scale, leadership means representation, competence, and trust. It is about knowing your community, listening to the people who live there alongside you, and working together to keep it thriving.

That work matters as much now as it did in 1776.



Dan Gilmartin

League Executive Director and CEO
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First Amendment: The Right to Peaceably Assemble

By Jonathan Tromp

The news is riddled with stories of gatherings and protests throughout the nation. Whether prompted by national events or local concerns, these assemblies can raise issues for municipal officials trying to navigate regulating them.

So important is assembly and the free expression of opinion that the Founding Fathers enshrined it as the First Amendment to the nation's Constitution: "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Though it is well enshrined by the United States Supreme Court ("Court") that "peaceful picketing and leafletting are expressive activities involving 'speech' protected by the First Amendment" and that the First Amendment "affords protection to symbolic or expressive conduct as well as to actual speech," those protections "are not absolute, and [the Court has] long recognized that the government may regulate certain categories of expression consistent with the Constitution."

The question for municipal officials, then, is what do these regulations look like?

Municipal Regulation: Public Forums

The Court has emphasized that the right to free speech and assembly does not mean that everyone with opinions or beliefs to express may address a group at any place or time.

The level of First Amendment protection regarding the right to speak and assemble varies based on the speaker's forum, or the location in which they are speaking or assembled—the so called "Public Forum Doctrine." The Court has divided public forums into three types:

1. traditional public forums,
2. designated public forums, and
3. nonpublic forums.

Traditional Public Forums

Traditional public forums—such as streets and parks—are places that have traditionally been available for public expression to which the public has a guaranteed right of access. Though a government cannot completely cut off this access

L *"The Court has emphasized that the right to free speech and assembly does not mean that everyone with opinions or beliefs to express may address a group at any place or time."*



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or prohibit speech there, a government can regulate access and speech through time, place, and manner restrictions. These restrictions must be content-neutral (i.e., not favoring or disfavoring particular viewpoints), narrowly tailored to accomplish a significant governmental interest, and provide alternative means of expression.

Designated Public Forums

Designated public forums consist of government property that has been intentionally opened for First Amendment activities; e.g., a library. Such availability may only be temporary, or for a specific limited purpose such as accessing information, books, and programs. In regulating designated public forums, a government may impose reasonable restrictions considering the purpose of the forum but is still bound by the same prohibitions on viewpoint discrimination as a traditional public forum.

Nonpublic Forums

Nonpublic forums include such places as portions of government administrative offices, police departments, and polling locations, in which a government may restrict speech content so long as the restrictions are reasonable and do not discriminate based on viewpoint.

Ordinance & Permit Considerations

Cities and villages may impose reasonable regulations on assemblies, including through ordinances, but in so doing must consider the nature of the place and its pattern of normal activities at a given time. The “crucial question” is whether the manner of expression is incompatible with the normal activity of a particular place at a particular time.

While peaceful and orderly assembly falls within First Amendment protections, a clear and present danger of riots, disorder, interference with traffic, or other threats to public health, safety, peace, and order would be within the power of the city or village to “prevent or punish.” For example, a demonstrator would not be justified in blocking traffic during rush hour or blocking the entrance to a public or private building as a form of free speech or assembly.

Likewise, the Court has recognized that noise control is particularly important around medical facilities, e.g., where demonstrators were protesting abortions and there were “high noise levels outside the clinic.” Accordingly, local noise, trespassing, disorderly conduct, and other such ordinances must be applied carefully and require consideration of location, time, and circumstances.

Cities and villages may adopt permitting systems for assemblies, particularly where events may be large or disruptive to normal public use. However, like ordinances, permitting requirements must be carefully considered to survive challenges of imposing prior restraints on free speech.

In addition to having content-neutral time, place, and manner regulations, permits must not “delegate overly broad licensing discretion to a government official.” Permitting requirements should contain narrow, objective, and definitive standards to guide the licensing authorities and be tailored to serve a significant government interest while leaving room for alternative channels of communication.

Ordinances that allow for the denial of a permit based on vague concepts such as “public interest” or “community standards” may be vulnerable to challenge.

Further, municipalities cannot treat similar events differently based on the viewpoint being expressed. A peaceful protest advocating a controversial position must be treated the same as a community-run festival.

Like the permits themselves, any fees imposed must also be content-neutral, based on objective factors, and nominal. The Court struck down a fee structure that varied the fee to reflect the estimated cost to maintain public order based on anticipated reaction to the speaker, as impermissible content-based restrictions.

Managing public assemblies is about balance. Municipal officials are tasked with protecting both the safety and functionality of the community as well as the constitutional rights of individuals. When ordinances and other regulatory mechanisms such as permits and fees are clearly written, narrowly tailored, consistently applied, and structured to promote specific governmental interests, they can accomplish the proper balance.

Cities and villages can benefit from reviewing existing ordinances to confirm they include clear definitions, objective standards, and appropriate procedural safeguards; ensuring that any permitting thresholds—such as crowd size or use of public streets—are clearly articulated; and that permitting procedures provide an objective and unambiguous basis for denial and appeal processes for denied applications.

First Amendment questions are fact-specific and come with risk for municipalities. If your city or village has questions about its regulatory mechanisms related to assemblies, it should contact the municipal attorney. 

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Comprehensive Federal Housing Package Could Boost Local Governments

By Michael Wallace

Housing is on the minds of elected officials at every level of government. According to National League of Cities' (NLC) 2025 *State of the Cities* report, 57 percent of local leaders surveyed rated the availability of housing in their community as Poor or Very Poor; and 72 percent of mayors identified the high cost of housing as a primary challenge. At the same time, local governments across the country are pioneering new approaches to development and partnership to increase housing supply and reduce costs for renters and homebuyers. A recent article in the *New York Times* captured some of these new approaches, saying, "Local governments are trying to create housing that is permanently affordable by investing directly in construction. They are rewriting how housing programs have traditionally operated."

Given the overwhelming need for attainable housing across the country, with an estimated deficit of four million housing units nationally, local efforts like these could use a boost. That's what Congress could deliver through the 21st Century Road to Housing Act, a comprehensive bipartisan housing package that would improve existing grant programs, unlock more private capital, and reduce federal regulatory barriers. Just as importantly, none of the provisions in the package attempt to side-step local government's role in housing through preemptions or unfunded mandates.

The 21st Century Road to Housing Act is primarily a policy bill, not a new funding bill. It would give local governments new program flexibility to address housing and housing-related infrastructure, ease some requirements for environmental review, and improve opportunities for public-private partnership. Although the bill is still undergoing tweaks between the House and Senate, key provisions that would assist local governments are expected to be retained. Those include new flexibilities for the Community Development Block Grant program (CDBG) and the HOME Investment Partnership Program (HOME).

For the first time, the bill would allow CDBG to fund new construction. Presently, CDBG is limited to funding rehabilitation and preservation of existing housing stock. This new flexibility may come with some strings attached for CDBG grantees, like requiring them to identify and make searchable all undeveloped land within their jurisdiction. The bill would also increase the income threshold for HOME-funded developments, meaning HOME could help fund a larger range of developments from deeply affordable to workforce housing. Some HOME grantees, those that don't also receive CDBG, would also be allowed to spend HOME funds directly on infrastructure needs related to permitting more housing.

A handful of new pilot programs would also be authorized. One would make funds available for cities and towns seeking to incorporate pre-approved housing designs, also called pattern book homes, into the permitting process to shorten development timelines for builders that meet all pre-approved design requirements. Another would expand the grants for lead hazard reduction into a whole-homes repair program to maintain existing affordable housing stock.

On the regulatory side, the housing package would exclude certain small-scale and infill housing development from costly federal NEPA environmental review requirements. It would also direct better coordination and alignment between HUD and USDA housing programs and requirements, streamline inspection requirements for landlords participating in the Housing Choice voucher program, modernize policies and reduce regulatory obstacles related to factory-built homes, and reduce obstacles for veterans' housing such as excluding disability benefits from income calculations necessary to qualify for assistance through the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program.

While the provisions above are unlikely to change very much, the outlook for other proposals is less certain. The House is expected to release several new tweaks to the housing package that will be voted on in the coming weeks. Those tweaks could change how the package addresses institutional investors that often outcompete individual buyers for single family homes, whether build-to-rent homes will be subject to time-limits requiring their eventual conversion to owner-occupied homes, and whether the CDBG-Disaster Recovery program is permanently authorized and funded through the annual appropriations process. NLC has long supported permanent authorization for CDBG-Disaster Recovery to improve the certainty and speed at which such dollars reach disaster-struck communities.

A few unrelated provisions are also hitching a ride in the housing package, such as one that would ban the Federal Reserve from issuing central bank digital currencies until the end of 2030. Although not central to housing policy, differences on this issue between the House and Senate must also be ironed out for the 21st Century Road to Housing Act to advance this year.

Given the White House has stated that the President supports the 21st Century Road to Housing Act, the odds of passage this year are better than even but still not guaranteed. Now is the time for local leaders to communicate support for the 21st Century Road to Housing Act. While waiting for the package to advance, now is also a good time for cities and towns to start planning and identifying opportunities for the new resources and flexibilities that could be made available.

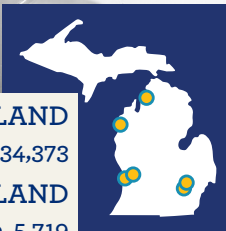
CDBG and HOME grantees can review how those grants are being utilized now and if a shift in focus or strategy is warranted. Local governments can begin cataloging opportunities for infill development to take advantage of the reduction in environmental compliance costs. And with new federal funding on the horizon to support zoning and permitting modernization, missing middle and workforce housing development, and office/industrial conversion to residential, this is also a good time to examine if the rules governing land use are aligned with established housing goals.

As NLC CEO and Executive Director Clarence E. Anthony said in our endorsement of the 21st Century Road to Housing Act, "For the first time in more than a decade, we are seeing strong, bipartisan action in Congress to address the housing crisis through pragmatic, locally informed policy solutions based on partnerships, not preemptions." That's the right approach at the federal level and one that states should consider following. 

Michael Wallace is the legislative director of housing, community, and economic development for the National League of Cities. You may contact Michael at wallace@nlc.org.



America250 Across Michigan



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pop. 34,373

ZEELAND

pop. 5,719

YPSILANTI

pop. 20,648

NORTHVILLE

pop. 6,119

MANISTEE

pop. 6,259

CHARLEVOIX

pop. 2,348

Scene of the Charlevoix Depot in the 1890s.

By Emily Pinsuwan

Established by Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020 and jointly led by the Historical Society of Michigan and the Michigan History Center, America250MI is the state's official committee for commemorating the nation's Semiquincentennial: the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

America250MI administers a grant program, funded through a bipartisan appropriation from the Michigan Legislature, supporting local programming that “offer[s] an opportunity for education, civic involvement, and examination of the historic themes and values upon which our country is based.”

We spoke to several communities that were recipients of America250MI grants to learn more about their projects and what they mean to communities—how places conceive of themselves, how that conception has changed, and how the stories of Michigan's communities reflect the broader American journey.

Oral Histories of Holland & Zeeland

West Michigan's settler history is often conceived as the story of Dutch immigration. Founded by settlers who arrived from the Netherlands in the 1840s seeking religious freedom and new opportunities, the communities became known for their Dutch heritage. Even the names of these cities—Holland, Zeeland (meaning “Woodland” and “Sealand,” respectively)—reflect the communities the migrants left behind.

Yet the story of West Michigan did not stop with those first European settlers.

This is the genesis of *We the People*, a multimedia project by the Zeeland Historical Society and Holland Museum that explores questions of citizenship, identity, and belonging through oral histories shared by today's residents. It is being funded with a \$25,000 America250MI grant awarded to the Zeeland Historical Society.

Over the generations, these two communities have continued to evolve with new residents from around the world, including refugees. According to Audrey Rojo, curator and interim director of the Zeeland Historical Society, the goal is to connect the experiences of contemporary residents with the stories of earlier immigrants.

“[We] incorporated that Dutch story into the modern stories by pointing out similarities and differences,” she says. “Historically, what did it mean to become a citizen when the Dutch immigrants arrived in West Michigan? Who had the right to vote? How has that changed over time? What pieces of their identity did they bring over and carry on here in West Michigan?”

Five interviews were conducted in which subjects were asked to share their personal histories, including their connection to Michigan and how they or their ancestors got here—that is, if they weren't already here to begin with. One oral history comes from a woman who is a member of the Potawatomi and Ojibwe Nations (Native Americans were not granted U.S. citizenship until 1924); another is a group interview with members of LAUP (Latin Americans United for Progress), a Hispanic advocacy group out of Holland.

Three interviews of *We the People* are with Laotian American residents, two of whom were born in refugee camps in Thailand before immigrating to Michigan. “We have a large Lao community here in Holland,” Rojo adds. “They've brought things that represent their religion, their cultural dress, much like the Dutch did when they came.”

The concept of “community” was a recurring theme during interviews this spring—around the time of Holland’s popular Tulip Time festival. “A lot of people were talking about how Tulip Time is an amazing thing because it celebrates Dutch culture, but everybody from the Holland and Zeeland area participates,” says Rojo. “You have diverse people from different backgrounds participating in things like Dutch dance and eating street food.”

“It was really nice to talk about the positive ways in which our community comes together.”

One final question was asked of all interview subjects: What does it mean to be an American? “We got a lot of interesting answers, and overwhelmingly, throughout the interviews, *resilience* was brought up time and again,” says Rojo.

“Working through things like the pandemic, the economic crisis in 2008, our community has a way to come together and overcome hard things together, which I thought was really beautiful.”

The oral histories are being displayed on large touch screens at the two museums; they are also available online. Afterwards, *We the People* will become part of the permanent collections of both museums.

Says Rojo: “In another 250 years, we’ll still be able to look back on this.”

Ypsilanti Safeguards Its Stories

Ypsilanti’s unusual name dates to an earlier anniversary. As Americans prepared to celebrate the nation’s 50th anniversary in 1826, local leaders of a village previously named Woodruff’s Grove chose to honor Demetrios Ypsilantis, a hero of the Greek War of Independence (1821–1832) described in American newspapers as the “George Washington of his day,” according

to local amateur historian and former city councilmember Barry LaRue. The Greek Revival architecture around the city stands as testament to that heritage.

Over the next two centuries, industry expanded, manufacturing flourished; veterans returned home from World War II to attend what is now Eastern Michigan University; and the community developed a reputation for civic engagement and social progress. “We were one of the first communities in the state of Michigan to have an equal rights ordinance for gay and lesbian citizens back in 1998,” says Bill Nickels, president of the Ypsilanti Historical Society (and also a former city councilmember).

“The history of our community kind of parallels the major events that happened in Michigan,” he adds.

Despite limited resources, the Ypsilanti Historical Society Museum (which was founded in 1960) has assembled an extensive collection—of artifacts, photographs, tax documents, church records, fire insurance maps—that chronicles the city’s development. “Our archives really are very impressive,” says Nickels. “There are larger cities than ours that don’t have as nice a museum and don’t have an archive with as much reference material as we do.”

The \$20,440 grant the Society was awarded from America250MI will support technology upgrades, a comprehensive inventory of museum artifacts, and the creation of a new exhibit illustrating important milestones in Ypsilanti’s history.

Among the artifacts is an oil cup associated with Elijah McCoy, the inventor whose lubrication devices helped inspire the phrase “the real McCoy.” There is also a World War II-era insurance policy protecting property against bombing, an 1885 Tiffany window, and garments from a 19th century ladies underwear factory (“Never wear, never tear, Ypsilanti underwear”).



A feature from the *We The People* exhibit at the Holland Museum.

AMERICA'S 250TH BIRTHDAY

While many items have already been properly documented, a sizable number in the museum collection has never been fully cataloged. Through the America250MI grant, the museum will be able to conduct a detailed inventory, creating a searchable database of the collection.

Ypsilanti's museum is a prime example of history as a resource. As the official repository of historical documents, the museum consults with City Hall on all sorts of projects. "There's a staff person who manages [Ypsilanti's] historic district, and she uses her street files on buildings that are within the historic district," says Nickels. "When our local municipal water [utility] was re-doing the water lines in the city, they came in to look for what information we had on the properties."

The project is being carried out alongside Eastern Michigan University's Historic Preservation Program, as a continuation of a partnership that has existed for nearly two decades. Professor Nancy Bryk and her graduate students will help with the cataloguing and planning of the new exhibit, providing boots-on-the-ground experience for the next generation of historic preservationists.

Nickels and LaRue hope the work being done will encourage Ypsilanti residents to explore the museum and its archives and discover more about their community's history.

"We've got lots of research material here," says Nickels. "We're pretty proud of it."

A Walk to Remember in Northville

The City of Northville is using its America250MI Grant of \$50,000 to make the community's long history more visible through a self-guided history trail that will wend its way through the city's two square miles.

"It's kind of a little microcosm of Michigan history in this one location," says Wendy Wilmers Longpre, the City of Northville's director of strategic planning and special projects. "It really has been a fertile ground where the spirits of independence and freedom have thrived."

Northville (so named simply because it is north of Plymouth) is one of Michigan's oldest settler communities. Located at the confluence of three rivers, it got its start as a mill town in 1827, the site of some of the only grist mills in the Michigan Territory. It went on to develop deep connections to the economic and technological advancements that grew Michigan into an industrial powerhouse.

The city was home to the Ford Valve Plant and a Stinson Aircraft manufacturing facility. It developed industries ranging from brickmaking and fish farming to medicine. Historical records show that Northville may have been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

"Pretty much anything that has happened in Michigan also happened here in Northville," says Wilmers Longpre.

And so, the upcoming Northville History Trail is meant to bring those stories to life. The project will install around 27 interpretive signs throughout the city. Some will be bronze markers mounted on historic buildings; others will have full-color interpretive displays for sites where there is no physical remnant. Each sign will have a QR code for those interested in learning more.

Once completed, the trail will be accompanied by a map that residents and visitors can use to take a self-guided tour of the city. Planned stops include the old factory building that housed the Ford Valve Plant; historic medical facilities such as the former Sessions Hospital; the home of the "Yarnell Gold Cure," an early method of treating drug and alcohol addiction in Civil War veterans; and the site of the old opera and vaudeville house on Main Street.

"We're really looking at this trail as a way of not only preserving the history, but of sharing it with those who haven't been in this community for a long time," says Wilmers Longpre. "It's a way of demonstrating the city's identity and helping to share that and move it forward into the future."



An 1885 Tiffany window displayed at the Ypsilanti Historical Society Museum.



One of Manistee's Journeys sculptures will feature a life-sized sawyer cutting seven planks of wood, representing the city's seven former lumber mills.

Manistee's History, Forged in Steel

The history of Manistee is inseparable from the water that surrounds it. Long before the city was named, the Ojibwe people called the river that flowed through it "Manistee," possibly meaning "river with islands at its mouth."

Since the 1700s and into the 20th century, Manistee grew from a convenient trading point for the Objive to a major center of shipping, lumber production, manufacturing, and industry, thanks to the Manistee River. "We had the most millionaires per capita in the 1880s with the lumber boom, and then we had the salt deposits with Morton Salt," says City Manager Bill Gambill. "We have a very rich history to mine."

That rich history is the focus of *Journeys*, an upcoming public art and heritage tourism project, funded with a \$50,000 America250MI grant, that will add an interactive exploration of the city's history to its popular Riverwalk.

The project builds on *Origins*, another installation completed four years ago in Douglas Park that tells the story of 20 influential people who helped shape Manistee. Developed in partnership with the Manistee County Historical Society and the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, *Origins* sought to tell a more complete story of the community by including Native American leaders alongside lumber barons like the Stronach brothers, who founded the first European settlement in Manistee in the 1840s.

But there was still more history to tell. "We really started thinking and conceptualizing *Journeys* as soon as we were placing *Origins*," says Sammie Lukaskiewicz of Manistee Tourism.

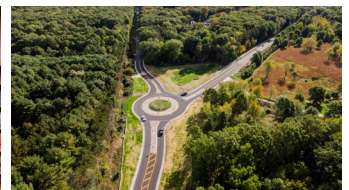
Journeys will use a series of large-scale Corten steel sculptures and interpretive signs to highlight four themes that have defined Manistee's development: Native American history, vessels and maritime commerce, industry, and fisheries. The sculptures will be assembled and welded by West Shore Community College students. "It's not just an art installation and a historical project," says Lukaskiewicz. "It's really workforce development."

The sculptures illustrate "the resilience of the community itself, having to reinvent ourselves again and again," says Lukaskiewicz.

One sculpture features a life-sized sawyer cutting seven planks of wood, representing the seven lumber mills that once operated in Manistee. Another depicts vessels that traveled the river and helped establish the city as a maritime center. A fisheries installation incorporates cutout images of fish found in the Manistee River, from sturgeon to the world-record brown trout caught there. Another highlights the Native American presence, depicting a man navigating a scale-model canoe.

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The City views *Journeys* as an opportunity to help residents connect more deeply with their community's history. "It's not just [for] tourists," says Gambill.

By placing interactive installations along the Riverwalk, one of Manistee's most heavily used public spaces, *Journeys* will make local history more visible and accessible to people who may not typically visit a museum or historical site. "I didn't know a lot of the history of Manistee when I first moved here," says Lukaskiewicz. "I can't imagine I'm alone."

"When a community tells its story well, that creates a stronger connection for everyone."

All Aboard to Charlevoix

Charlevoix was built on water and resource extraction. The area's first European residents were fishermen in the 1830s, with more permanent settlement beginning in 1854. At one time, northern Lake Michigan supported some of the world's richest freshwater fisheries, but reaching the community was excruciatingly arduous.

"You came by boat or you walked," says David Miles, curator of the Charlevoix Historical Society Museum at Harsha House. "Eventually, we got stagecoaches connecting us to Traverse City and Petoskey—but basically 99 percent of the people who came here, came by boat." A single boat trip from Chicago could take up to 40 hours. And then, everything changed.

Through its \$28,760 American250MI Grant, the Charlevoix Historical Society intends to share the day "Charlevoix became Charlevoix": June 26, 1892, when the railroad came.

The story of Michigan as a state can be seen as reflecting the evolution of mechanized transportation. A new exhibit of interpretive panels displayed in the historic Charlevoix Depot will examine how one particular form of transportation—rail—was the catalyst that transformed the isolated fishing and lumber town named after a French Jesuit priest into a premier cultural destination in the emerging web of the United States.

"All of a sudden, Charlevoix started to explode," says Miles. "We got people from California, we got people from New York, we got people from Florida."

Connection to the Chicago and West Michigan Railroads fueled rapid growth in tourism and hospitality. The Belvedere Hotel tripled its rooms. Charlevoix's reputation as a summer destination spread throughout the country, and in Michigan was second only to Mackinac Island in its opulence.

The exhibit, titled "Tracks to Tourism: How the Railroad Shaped Charlevoix," will cover topics including the initial campaign to bring the rail lines to Charlevoix and their construction, the depot's history, the growth of tourism and industry, the decline of passenger rail service, and the eventual preservation of the depot itself, which is now a historically designated place. It will acknowledge Charlevoix's pre-European history, including



Charlevoix bridge tenders manually turning the railroad bridge with 'keys,' later replaced by electricity.

the story of Louis McSauba (Amikaasaaba), an Odawa leader whose property once encompassed much of the north side of Charlevoix.

"This will be a more comprehensive story," says Denise Fate, president emerita and grant chair of the Charlevoix Historical Society. "We'll be telling stories previously untold."

Miles views the story of Charlevoix as a dynamic one, based on constant movement—and change. The rail connections that transformed Charlevoix lasted less than a century. "When the last passenger train pulled out of here in 1962, only one paying passenger got on board," he says. "She was headed for retirement in California." It didn't even make the newspaper.

Like so many Michigan communities, Charlevoix has outlasted the technology that created it. The tracks that brought millions of rail travelers into town are now just imprints in the pavement next to the depot building. But people still come: by sail, by motorboat, by car, by plane.

"I just drove by the airport the other day, and there were four jets—private jets—out there," laughs Miles.

"Little Charlevoix, handling private jets. Who'd have thunk it?"

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

Leave Chicago daily except Sunday at 8:35 p. m., arrive Charlevoix at 8:55 next morning. Full information of train service, tourist fares and reservation of sleeping car space on request to

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Pere Marquette Resort Special ad, 1913, from the Chicago Herald newspaper. Notice that none of the other dozen or so stops out of Chicago are even mentioned. It's Charlevoix alone.

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How Communities Can Meet (and Surpass!) Recycling Benchmarks

A child recycling a plastic bottle in Benzie County, 2021. Image credit: EGLE

By Matt Flechter

If you're a municipal leader in Michigan today, chances are recycling is on your mind and on your community's agenda.

Good news: The State of Michigan has guidelines and support to make recycling improvements achievable no matter where your community is starting from.

In 2022, an update to the state's solid waste law, known as Part 115 of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, became law, calling for counties to implement a materials management plan focusing on recyclable materials.

In 2025, Michigan reached a record-high recycling rate of 26 percent—the fifth straight yearly increase. The state's overall goal is a 45 percent rate, with no hard deadline but with an interim step of 30 percent by 2029. That target was set out in House Bill 4455 of 2021, which also set benchmark standards for access to recycling services.

So, what do these Benchmark Recycling Standards (BRS) mean for your community? How can you leverage planning, funding, and technical assistance to meet (and exceed) them?

BRSs represent a baseline to help assess where your community stands. At their heart is a simple question: Do your residents have reasonable access to recycling?

For curbside service, there's a clear metric: Access for 90 percent of single-family homes by January 1, 2026, in U.S. Census urban areas and by January 1, 2028, for nonurban municipalities with more than 5,000 residents. "Access" means collection at least twice a month, whether by local government or a private hauler, with materials properly processed at compliant facilities.

Access is the foundation, because if residents can't recycle easily, participation and overall recycling rates will stall.

But access alone can fall short without information and outreach. Do your residents and businesses know how to recycle? Is information easy to find and consistent? If recycling services are opt-in, how can you increase enrollment?

This is where Materials Management Planning becomes essential. A Materials Management Plan (MMP) is designed to map existing recycling access across your planning area, identify gaps, and outline steps to close those gaps. The process can reveal important nuances:

- A community may technically offer curbside recycling but with low participation due to cost barriers.
- Subscription-based services may exist, but residents aren't aware of them.
- Information about what's recyclable may be hard to find or inconsistent.

MMPs are meant to reveal and solve challenges like these.

While recycling carts and curbside service get most of the attention, drop-off recycling is vital, especially in rural or lower-density areas. By January 1, 2032, counties must ensure drop-off locations are provided and open at least 24 hours a month based on the number of residents without curbside access:

- One site per 10,000 residents in counties with under 100,000 population.
- One site per 50,000 residents in counties with over 100,000 population.



Find tools and resources by searching Materials Management Planning at Michigan.gov/EGLE.

Metro Detroit's recycling cart rollout, 2017. Image credit: EGLE

“Communities can share regional drop-off agreements or co-locate with existing facilities.”

Smart planning is key. Many communities are already exploring shared regional drop-off agreements or strategically located “hub and spoke” systems, or co-locating with existing facilities to offer both compliance and convenience.

Local communities aren't left to do this alone. The state is backing these requirements with funding to support Materials Management Planning; competitive recycling infrastructure grants for equipment, carts, and facilities; and more.

These funding streams support planning (like data collection, analysis, and strategy development) and implementation (expanding curbside routes, launching drop-off sites, and upgrading infrastructure).

Beyond funding, the state offers hands-on support through the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE):

- Regional recycling specialists who understand local conditions.
- Planning tools and data resources to simplify analysis.
- Direct guidance on meeting BRS requirements.

There's also support through programs like NextCycle Michigan, which helps communities and partners develop new recycling solutions and connect with industry expertise.

You can learn more by exploring the information available through EGLE's Recycling webpage and Achieving Benchmark Recycling Standards explainer. [L](#)

Matt Flechter is a recycling market development specialist at the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy. You may contact Matt at 517-614-7353 or flechterm@michigan.gov.



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- What the USDA Rural Development Agency Can Do for You
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- The First Amendment & the Right to Peaceably Assemble
- Community Voices at the Center: Guiding Data Center Development Together
- Legislative Update
- Making Every Vote Accessible: Empowering Your Community
- Building Coalitions to Address Homelessness and Housing Vulnerable Communities



By Bill Mathewson



In the Spring issue of the *Review*, this column focused on an opinion of the Michigan Attorney General (OAG 7318, February 4, 2022) that addressed Michigan's Open Meetings Act (OMA) in the context of the requirements of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). While the Opinion was not a new one, League members' inquiries on the subject prompted it to be the topic for the column. Keeping in mind that opinions of the Attorney General (AG) are controlling on state agencies but not local governments, generally, the AG opines that local boards and commissions must provide reasonable accommodation, including virtual participation, to qualified persons with a disability. That said, the AG also speaks to not requiring a board or commission incurring an undue burden or fundamentally altering the nature of the meetings. And the Opinion states that a fully virtual option, such as all members participating remotely, is more likely to be a fundamental alteration and therefore not required.

There is a recent published opinion of the Michigan Court of Appeals (COA) that further elaborates on the interplay between the OMA and the rights of disabled persons. The case is *Charles Blackwell v. City of Inkster* (April 7, 2026). Rather than the federal ADA, this case involves the Michigan Persons with Disabilities Civil Rights Act (PWDCRA). Here the plaintiff, who was confined to a wheelchair due to a spinal-cord injury that rendered him paraplegic, was, as the COA describes, "a thorn in the side of local officials in the Detroit area" and a "self-styled local government watchdog."

The background is that the plaintiff would have "great difficulty attending meetings of the Inkster city council in person." The meetings were streamed to the public, allowing anyone to virtually watch them, but virtual participation was not possible. The plaintiff wanted to make comments during the public comment portion of the meeting and asked the city clerk for an accommodation. Specifically, that he be allowed to submit prepared comments to the clerk and city attorney by email that would be read aloud at council meetings. This was done at two meetings. The City then adopted a policy that required public comments to be made in person. The plaintiff sued, claiming a violation of the PWDCRA and seeking an injunction to require the City to provide a reasonable accommodation. The trial court issued a temporary restraining order in favor of the plaintiff's position.

The City then sought to resolve the matter by revising its policy to provide that the public could submit comments by email 72 hours before a meeting, which would be provided to each councilmember and be included in the official minutes of the meeting. In the trial court, the City also argued that what the plaintiff wanted would be an undue hardship and fundamentally change the City's meetings. Nonetheless, the trial court held for the plaintiff. It agreed that the 72-hour policy was not equivalent because people and councilmembers in attendance would not hear the plaintiff's comments. And the court held that the plaintiff's request would not impose an undue hardship on the City, in part because it had been done for two council meetings.

Further, the City would be able to enforce other rules generally applicable to public comment at meetings.

The COA affirmed the decision of a permanent injunction, holding that the City's refusal to accommodate his disability denied him the "full and equal enjoyment" of a public service. In addition to its conclusion under the PWDCRA that the 72-hour written notice provision the City put in place was not

sufficient, the COA addressed the OMA. It found that there was nothing in the record indicating that the reading of the plaintiff's comments on two occasions imposed any undue hardship on the City.

In summary, the PWDCRA seeks to protect the rights of persons with a disability. The OMA seeks to have public meetings be in-person rather than virtual and provides for municipalities to establish rules for their meetings and protects them from undue hardship. Under the facts weighed by the trial court, the COA concluded that the "...court delicately struck an appropriate balance between the standards of the OMA and the requirements of the PWDCRA, thereby harmonizing the statutory dictates prescribed by our Legislature." ¹

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

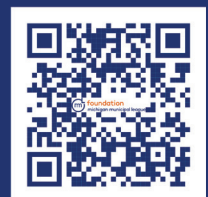
This column highlights a recent judicial decision or Michigan Municipal League Legal Defense Fund case that impacts municipalities. The information in this column should not be considered a legal opinion or to constitute legal advice.

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No Pass for Vampire of the Great Lakes

By Emily Pinsuwan

Downtown Traverse City will soon become a destination for more than just tourists. At the site formerly known as the Union Street Dam, a project called FishPass aims to restore native fish populations while preventing invasive species from moving upstream.

"The Boardman-Ottaway River, which runs through downtown Traverse City, had been dammed up over the last century primarily for logging purposes—a little bit of energy generation, but mostly for logging," says Leah Bagdon McCallum, Public Affairs Officer for FishPass and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC). "Dams are bad for fish migration."

Fish that hatch in rivers eventually migrate into Lake Michigan, supporting a valuable fishing economy on both sides of the international border. Over the past two decades, local governments, nonprofits, tribal partners, and others concerned about Northern Michigan's waterways have worked together to remove barriers to their journey.

The upper dams in the system have already been removed. FishPass now occupies the location of the final downstream barrier.

First, let's learn about the main aquatic antagonist: An unsettling creature called the sea lamprey.

"The Great Lakes Fishery Commission was formed specifically to manage sea lampreys," says Bagdon McCallum. The species entered the Great Lakes through shipping channels in the 1930s and 1940s and has, significantly reduced populations of fish such as whitefish and lake trout.

A partial inspiration for the sandworms in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, sea lampreys are nightmarishly effective predators. "If you're digging for dinosaur bones, you'll find fossilized skeletons of sea lampreys that look just like the ones today," says Bagdon McCallum. "Their design is perfect." Nicknamed "the vampire of the Great Lakes," sea lampreys attach themselves to host fish using a circular mouth lined with more than 100 teeth.

"They basically bore a hole in the side of their host, and they suck its blood and guts out. It's terrible."

A sea lamprey might be akin to a mosquito bite for a large ocean fish, but Great Lakes species are far more vulnerable. "When they do it in Lake Michigan on a whitefish that averages about 12 inches long, that fish is going to die," Bagdon McCallum says.

"Sea lampreys have no natural predators in the Great Lakes. They lay 100,000 eggs in their lifetime. They make rabbits look like amateurs."

Enter FishPass, designed to sort fish by species; it allows desirable native fish to continue upstream while blocking invasive species.

"It's like single-stream recycling," she says. Just as recyclables are sorted through a series of technologies, FishPass will use a variety of behavioral cues to sort fish.

"Different fish respond differently to things like a bubble curtain, light, sound, or pheromone cues," explains Bagdon McCallum. "We will deploy all these different interventions along the length of the FishPass sorting channel. What's new and novel about FishPass is that we've never been able to do these things in combination with one another."

Multiple people I spoke to about this article, including Bagdon McCallum and Dan Gilmartin, compared the FishPass channel to American Ninja Warrior for fish. At the end of the obstacle course, the competing fish will be sorted into species groups based on how well they did. The losers, ideally, will be the sea lampreys. They will not get to go forward.

A ceremonial groundbreaking took place in 2020, at the height of the pandemic. "We had masks printed with sea lamprey mouths on them, which were honestly really scary," recalls Bagdon McCallum.

The project soon hit a snag. A week after the groundbreaking, a Traverse City resident filed suit, arguing that FishPass represented an improper use of parkland. The case eventually reached the Michigan Supreme Court. The Michigan Municipal League Legal Defense Fund joined the litigation through an amicus brief, alongside the City of Traverse City and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission.

"We won, but it caused substantial project delays," says Bagdon McCallum.

As a result, official construction did not begin until 2024. The project is now advancing towards the end of the second of three construction phases. Work within the river channel is nearing completion, and crews are constructing the fish sorting channel through a series of concrete pours and infrastructure installations.

"We should be wrapping up construction towards the end of next year, and have it be fully operational towards the end of 2027 or the beginning of 2028," she says.

FishPass involves four principal partners. The Great Lakes Fishery Commission has led development efforts, while the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative provides most of the project funding. The City of Traverse City owns the site and will ultimately own the completed infrastructure and public amenities. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians keep decision-making authority on fish passage.

"Sea lampreys are pretty darn invincible, and they were in a lot of the other rivers that were under consideration already," says Bagdon McCallum. The Boardman-Ottaway River system presented a unique opportunity. Because of the dams, the system doesn't have any sea lampreys upstream.

"There are so many fish that used to be prolific in this system," says Bagdon McCallum. "Lake sturgeon, Arctic grayling, and walleye are in very low numbers. They should be much more plentiful."

"That's my favorite part of this whole project: The chance to restore a native fishery exists here in a way that it doesn't anywhere else in the Great Lakes Basin."

"That's my favorite part of this whole project: The chance to restore a native fishery exists here in a way that it doesn't anywhere else in the Great Lakes Basin."

In 2025, the tribe and DNR released Arctic grayling fry upstream in the watershed. The species had previously been fished to extinction and was unable to reestablish itself because of barriers that prevented natural movement.

"They're just beautiful," Bagdon McCallum says. "They have this huge iridescent rainbow fin."

She adds that the restoration effort would not be possible without a mechanism to prevent invasive species from entering the system. "There's cool stuff happening in the river now—because of FishPass."

FishPass researchers continue to develop performance measures for the project. Scientific teams meet regularly and have collected data for years in partnership with tribal and state agencies. One area of interest involves the genetic diversity of walleye populations isolated upstream by the dams for more than a century.

"When we start letting members of that same species that have been out in Grand Traverse Bay upstream, how will that change?" Bagdon McCallum says. "That's stuff that we're modeling right now."

The project faced an unexpected challenge in early April when unprecedented storms and rainfall caused severe flooding throughout Michigan. "Our whole watershed had what we now know was between a 400- and 500-year flood event," says Bagdon McCallum. Bridges upstream were washed out, and the FishPass construction site was completely inundated.

"There were some folks that they would say things like, 'Well, I've lived here for 50 years, and I never saw anything like this until FishPass was built,' almost wanting to pass off blame onto us for what happened from Mother Nature," says Bagdon McCallum.



Animated illustration of the condition of the Boardman River and the Union Street Dam after construction of FishPass. This is an artist rendering and is for illustrative purposes only. Image credit: Great Lakes Fishery Commission

"In reality, if that old earthen dam had still been in place—with the same safety rating as the Midland dams that failed," she says, "it would have washed out all of downtown Traverse City."

"People were scared and confused, evacuated from their homes," she continues. "I couldn't have been more proud of the team working on FishPass that just stayed up all night bringing in sandbags, finding pumps from downstate and driving them up here, getting the water out, making sure no further erosion happened."

She credits project staff and contractors with preventing more damage, preserving infrastructure—saving downtown, really.

"People who work for units of government get yelled at more than they ever get high fives," she says. "This was a time when everybody deserved big fat high fives."

FishPass also includes placemaking for human visitors to downtown Traverse City. Public input helped shape amenities, including an outdoor education amphitheater, kayak launches, trails, pedestrian connections, and rain gardens.

"The Fishery Commission wants FishPass to be a part of the community, to be something that gets people excited about science, about the river and about the fish that are supposed to be here," says Bagdon McCallum. "If there are ways to bring people onto the site, that's more likely to happen."

Bagdon McCallum herself lives only a few blocks from the FishPass site. "The idea that I could get on the Boardman Lake Loop, up in Garfield Township, take a walk, ride my bike around that loop, hit the boardwalk on the north side of the river, cross that pedestrian bridge over the fish sorting channel, look down and see which fish are in the river at that time, get on the boardwalk on the north side by the church, head west, follow that boardwalk all the way along the length of the river and end up in Lake Michigan?"

"That's just cool," she says. "That's never been done before."

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. The Home Rule Village Act (HRVA) requires a person to reside in the village for two years to be eligible to serve on the charter commission. Do city charter commissions have the same requirements?

A. There was a 1971 court case (*Green v. McKeon*) striking down a two-year residency requirement, and then it was reinforced by a second case in 1981 (*Joseph v. City of Birmingham*). The residency provision was reduced to one year.

The Home Rule City Act (HRCA) has a three-year residency requirement for candidates for charter commissioners. This would also be subject to the precedence of *Green v. McKeon* and *Joseph v. Birmingham*—so, a one-year residency. There is no freeholder requirement in the HRCA for city charter commissioners. However, this provision exists for cities (whereas it does not exist for villages):

No city officer or employee, whether elected or appointed, shall be eligible to a place on the commission. (MCL 117.18)

Another difference is that the HRVA requires the county prosecutor to serve as a consultant (advisor) to a village charter commission.

For cities, residents may vote on both the question of revising the charter and the ballot of charter commission candidates may be voted upon at the same or in separate elections. The HRVA does not contain an equivalent provision for village charter commissions.

Q: Our charter is from 1957 and all the positions in it refer to males. How do we change this to make it gender neutral?

A. Changing gender language in a charter can be done through a charter amendment. We have sample charter amendment ballot language in our library. Please send requests to info@mml.org.

Q. Is it common to require a councilmember to resign from office before running for mayor?

What about an employee running for an elected office (councilmember or mayor)—do they need to resign from their job first?

A. This exists in some charters but is not common. According to the League's charter database, only 25 cities require a candidate to resign from the office of councilmember in order to run for mayor (or other office). The issue is: if the candidate doesn't win the mayoral (or other) seat, they still retain their council seat.

Employees running for office is typically a provision a city regulates in an ethics ordinance. There are many cities that require an employee to resign their position with the city in order to run for an elected office within the city.

Q. Do we have to hold a roll call vote on every matter considered by council? And do we have to read every ordinance and resolution in its entirety before a vote can be taken?

A. The answer to both of these questions is, "it depends." There is nothing in state law requiring a roll call vote on all matters before council nor for the full reading of every ordinance or resolution. It depends on your local charter as well as your council rules. Some municipalities require roll calls on every vote; some require full readings of ordinances and resolutions. It is under local control.

Q. Is the public allowed to participate or comment at a work session of the council?

A. Yes. Although work sessions are intended to provide opportunities for council/board members to study difficult issues, gather and analyze information, and clarify problems, whenever a governing body holds a meeting, as defined by the Open Meetings Act (OMA), it must be posted and people must have an opportunity to address the governing body (MCL 15.263). Making attendees aware of the purpose of a work session—to study issues, not to take action—often helps.

Conducting work sessions under the OMA helps to minimize the public's concern that decisions are not made "in the sunshine." This perception can be addressed by making it clear that council holds work sessions for difficult issues, but nonetheless, these sessions are open to the public and no action is taken except in a regular meeting.

See the League's *Fact Sheet: Work Sessions—Use by Legislative Bodies*, available at www.mml.org.

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

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By Rick Haglund

Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti are located just a few miles apart in Washtenaw County. But Ann Arbor, with a much richer tax base, is far better able to afford government services for its residents than its neighbor to the east. “We have a very affluent community on the western side of the county, while much of the poverty in the county is concentrated here,” said Ypsilanti City Manager Andrew Hellenga. “It impacts our ability to provide services.”

That’s because, under Michigan’s municipal finance structure, cities, villages, and other local governments generate most of their revenues from property taxes. Municipalities with lots of expensive homes and high-value commercial and industrial properties collect higher tax revenues per capita than similar-sized municipalities with less valuable parcels. That’s not a new phenomenon, but a recent University of Michigan study has put a name to it: “tax base fragmentation.” The study, which focuses on metropolitan areas, asserts that fragmented jurisdictional boundaries and economic segregation interact to create an unequal allocation of property wealth across local government jurisdictions. And the study provides policymakers with a wealth of data to consider for possible reforms.

“It’s not the case that everywhere in Michigan is impoverished or is facing economic challenges,” said Robert Manduca, an assistant professor of sociology and the study’s lead author. “But rather, because of the way jurisdictional boundaries are drawn, and because of the way that local governments are funded, this sort of creates these extreme economic challenges.” Under this situation, wealthier communities can provide better services while assessing a lower effective property tax rate than in poorer communities. For example, the U-M study found that Bloomfield Hills, a Detroit suburb and one of the wealthiest communities in the state, generated \$2,188 in tax revenue per capita with a property tax rate of just 0.4 percent in 2017. Detroit, one of the poorest major cities in the country, took in just \$367 in revenue per capita with a 1.5 percent property tax. Michigan’s municipal finance system and wealth disparity set communities like Detroit and Ypsilanti up “for a very rough time,” Manduca said. His study found that metro Detroit, one of the most racially segregated regions of the country, also has the highest level of tax base fragmentation among metros with at least a population of one million in the country.

The U-M study uses a formula, called the fiscal capacity ratio (FCR), to determine the per capita financial resources available to every local jurisdiction, relative to their metro areas, in the United States. The percentage ratio is calculated by taking the sum of the appraised value of all taxable property in a jurisdiction and dividing it by the population of the jurisdiction. Places with an FCR of 33 percent or less are considered fiscally impoverished. “They have very few resources relative to the metro areas where they are located,” Manduca said. A nationwide list of FCRs can be found at ([Taxbasefragmentation.net](https://taxbasefragmentation.net).)

FCRs vary widely throughout metropolitan areas. Bloomfield Hills, for instance, has an FCR of 599 percent, while the FCR in

neighboring Pontiac is just 32 percent. The spread isn’t quite as wide between Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor. Ypsilanti has an FCR of 39 percent while Ann Arbor’s is 117 percent. But Hellenga said the gap points to Ypsilanti’s challenges in providing services to its residents. For example, a city with Ypsilanti’s population should have 40 police officers, but he said Ypsilanti can afford only 33. Its financial burden is exacerbated by two tax limitation laws: the Headlee Amendment, which restricts a local government’s tax revenue from growing faster than inflation; and Proposal A, which limits the annual growth of an individual parcel to five percent or the rate of inflation, whichever is less.

Overburdened and affluent communities alike have long complained about the inadequacies of the state’s municipal finance structure. Many say state revenue sharing payments are insufficient and hard to predict from year to year. Most state revenue sharing payments are doled out on a per capita basis that “ignores this inequity” among local governments, said Eric Lupher, president of the Citizens Research Council of Michigan. In some cases, poorer communities must provide more services than their wealthier neighbors. One example, Lupher said, is transit. Residents in poorer communities are less able to afford cars and are more dependent on public transportation that many wealthier communities don’t need to provide. “It’s an issue important to local governments that people gloss over,” Lupher said.

But the problem of fragmented tax bases goes beyond state and local financing of municipalities, Manduca said. Unlike some other countries where the federal government has primary responsibility for financing local government, Washington provides relatively little support to municipalities. Manduca said the federal government could pump more money into local governments on a permanent basis, similar to the aid provided to state and local units during the COVID-19 pandemic.

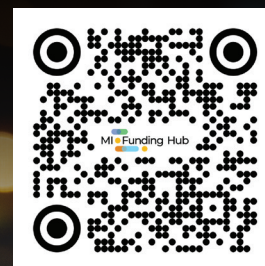
He acknowledges that more financial support from the federal government and other solutions, such as making it easier for larger jurisdictions to annex smaller ones, allowing cities and counties to merge, and changing state funding formulas to provide more support to poorer municipalities is politically fraught. But Lupher said more services, such as libraries and policing, should be funded on a county or regional basis, easing the financial burden on local governments less able to provide them. “If done on a county or regional basis a lot of [the inequities of tax base fragmentation] gets washed out,” he said.

Hellenga, Ypsilanti’s city manager, said if he could wave a magic wand, he would reform Michigan’s revenue sharing structure. “What I would do is have the state legislature reimagine how revenue transfers would work to make them more equitable so cities can provide equal services to residents.” Whether or not that will ever happen, Hellenga is unsure. “I hope for the best, but prepare for the worst,” he said. ■

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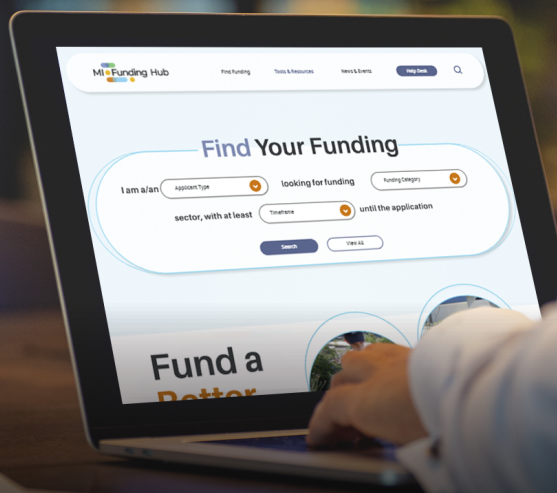


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CEA Contest 2026 Timeline

4/30/26:

Deadline for submissions

7/20/26:

Four finalists announced

10/7/26:

**MML Convention, Traverse City
Voting & Winners Announced!**



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This is your opportunity to highlight local success stories and best practices, and to share innovative community programs or projects on a statewide platform.

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:
cea.mml.org

“I Pledge to Promote Civility..”

By Kim Cekola

The League’s inquiry service hears about really tough situations from our members, such as:

“What can we do about a councilmember who is rude and verbally abusive in council meetings and in the community?”

“...one trustee stomped out of the meeting after being called out for abusive behavior of other trustees and the audience.”

“Our audiences are horribly disruptive and frequently downright rude. It’s to the point where I abhor meetings and I’m pretty sure others feel the same.”

In 2018, the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), part of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, had an encouraging report: “While national political discourse may be becoming increasingly hostile, Michigan officials have generally positive views on local discourse...”

- Discourse among local elected officials: 71 percent say it is constructive; only eight percent say it’s divisive
- Discourse between residents and elected officials: 67 percent say it’s constructive; just five percent say it’s divisive
- Discourse on local policy issues among residents: 38 percent of local leaders say it’s constructive; 11 percent divisive; and 39 percent say it’s mixed

In all three cases, leaders in municipalities of 30,000+ population are more likely to say the discourse is divisive. Similarly, appointed officials in municipalities of all sizes are more likely to say the discourse is divisive.

By 2022, the headline had changed significantly: “Statewide survey finds a majority of Michigan local governments experiencing harassment and other abuse.”

- 47 percent of top elected and appointed local officials report harassment over the last few years, including disrespectful or hostile comments, graphic language or slurs, shouting, and rude or aggressive gestures.
- Such harassment is more common in communities of more than 5,000 residents... 67 percent.

I don’t think I need to list more reasons to bolster the idea of individual municipal officials adopting a civility pledge or adopting a Resolution as a board. Granted, these may sound insufficient or even quaint when confronted with harassment or abuse. But it’s a start. And I think this could be a significant one.

“In the interest of civility, I pledge to promote civility by listening, being respectful of others, acknowledging that we are all striving to support and improve our community and understanding that we each may have different ideas for achieving that objective.”

A civility pledge or a Resolution, coupled with adopting council rules of procedure that clearly state the reasons why someone may be removed from a council meeting, is a method of dealing with disruptive behavior.

Here is an excerpt from council rules of procedure drafted by the League:

The president/mayor may call to order any person who is being disorderly by speaking out of order or otherwise disrupting the proceedings, failing to be germane, speaking longer than the allotted time, or speaking vulgarities. Such person shall be seated until the chair determines whether the person is in order. If the person so engaged is called out of order, he or she shall not be permitted to continue to speak at the same meeting except by special leave of the council. If the person shall continue to be disorderly and disrupt the meeting, the chair may order the sergeant at arms to remove the person from the meeting. No person shall be removed from a public meeting except for an actual breach of the peace committed at the meeting.

It is suggested that there be an ordinance governing disruption of public meetings, prepared with advice of the village/city attorney on the risks, limits, and force allowed to eject members. This ordinance should stipulate the procedure to be followed and the resource to be used for the sergeant at arms function, e.g., local police, county sheriff, etc. By planning in advance how to handle attempted disruptions, you can keep the meeting in order.

Other state leagues and the National League of Cities (NLC) have been promoting civility pledges. The NLC stated, “. . . a growing national effort among municipalities to address rising tensions in civic spaces while ensuring residents continue to have opportunities to engage constructively with their local governments.”

For sample civility pledges or Resolutions, please email requests to info@mml.org. 

Kim Cekola is a research specialist/editor at the League. You may contact Kim at 734-668-6321 or kcekola@mml.org.



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Newly Elected Officials (NEO) Training
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February 13, 2027

Virtual NEO Training
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Find a full list of trainings and events at mml.org/events.

