

# Commission Quarterly

## Muskegon Lake AOC Delisting

October 1, 2025, marked a major milestone in the history of Muskegon. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) joined local leaders and partners in celebrating the cleanup and restoration of the Muskegon Lake Area of Concern (AOC). After decades of work, the lake has officially been removed from the binational list of "Areas of Concern." Muskegon Lake is the eighth AOC to be delisted.

Federal, state, and local project partners remediated more than 190,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment totaling an investment of approximately \$47 million. EPA provided \$21 million of Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) funding and \$9.2 million of funding under the Great Lakes Legacy Act cost-share program. These

investments leveraged an additional \$16.3 million from state and local partners through in-kind and cash contributions.

Partners completed seven (7) habitat restoration projects with \$38 million in GLRI funding, restoring approximately 134 acres of habitat and over 6,000 feet of shoreline. These restored areas include nearly 100 acres of open water and emergent wetlands, as well as habitat for fish and native plants. Additionally, project partners removed more than 110,000 tons of logging-era sawmill debris from the lake, restoring habitat for bottom-dwelling invertebrates and for fish and wildlife populations.

This effort was possible through the hard work and dedication of numerous partners including the Muskegon Lake Watershed Partnership (MWLP), EPA, EGLE,

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Grand Valley State University Annis Water Resources Institute (GVSU AWRI), Great Lakes Commission (GLC), cities of Muskegon and North Muskegon, Laketon Township, Muskegon County, Muskegon Conservation District, the staff here at WMSRDC, and numerous local landowners and stakeholders.

WMSRDC is honored to have been part of the monumental transformation of Muskegon Lake. This achievement marks the end of an era but the beginning of a new chapter, one that will shape the community for generations to come. As Muskegon closes the book on Muskegon Lake's designation as an Area of Concern, the community celebrates a powerful moment in its shared history. It's a privilege to stand together in this historic transition, and now this community has the opportunity, and responsibility, to redefine Muskegon Lake and its future while never losing sight of how far its come.

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Speakers from the press conference at Heritage Landing.

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## Special Projects: West Michigan Agri-Cluster Coalition

The West Michigan Agriculture Impact Analysis, completed in August 2025, contains a wealth of insight regarding agriculture and food processing in West Michigan. The Analysis report and other deliverables are publicly accessible through the WMSRDC website, [wmsrdc.org/project/west-michigan-agriculture-impact-analysis/](https://wmsrdc.org/project/west-michigan-agriculture-impact-analysis/). After completion of the Analysis, efforts turned toward implementation. WMSRDC, with agriculture and food systems specialist, Annika Gacnik, committed to organizing a quartet of quarterly “coalition” meetings to coordinate efforts that address priority issues identified in Analysis.

Thus, the West Michigan Agri-Cluster Coalition was born.

The Coalition has met twice since the concept was launched, and initial feedback from attendees indicates that the coalition concept may have an important role to play within the West Michigan food system. A major challenge, however, is the inherent complexity of local food systems: multiple stakeholders, initiatives, and priorities across the public-private spectrum within the same ecosystem. With so many variables and so much energy in this space, where is the Coalition to start?

In the near-term, the Coalition will convene in March and June



to discuss known agriculture sector priorities (identified in the Analysis) and explore options for the Coalition’s future. For more information or to stay informed regarding the West Michigan Agri-Cluster Coalition, please send a message to [info@wmsrdc.org](mailto:info@wmsrdc.org).

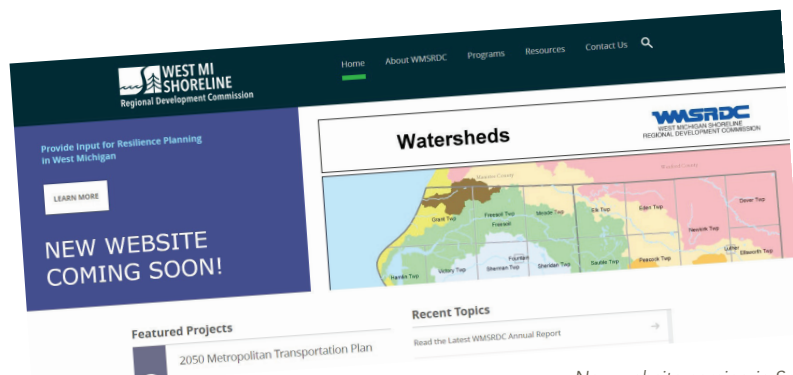
## Special Projects: Communications Update

In October, WMSRDC was awarded a grant designed for regional councils to expand capacity around community engagement and outreach. With this support, WMSRDC staff will develop a comprehensive communications plan, establish clearer internal protocols, and provide tailored outreach strategies for each core program area. The project also includes staff training to strengthen facilitation and engagement skills and independent review of the WMSRDC website to improve public access, transparency, and user interaction. WMSRDC has selected KWB Strategies as the consultant to lead this work and support the organization through each phase of development.

This grant also provides an exciting opportunity for WMSRDC to redesign its website. Following a competitive proposal process with nine submissions, WMSRDC selected REVIZE, a firm specializing in websites for local governments, to complete the redesign. The new website will feature a modern design, ADA-compliant structure, mobile responsiveness

across all devices, and a searchable document and project database. Development will begin in early 2025, with the new website expected to launch in Spring 2026.

Funding for this opportunity is provided by the Keystone Policy Center in partnership with the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC).



New website coming in Spring 2026!



## Environmental: Muskegon Tree Inventory Results

This summer, Davey Resources Group conducted an inventory of the City of Muskegon trees. The inventory included 10,609 street trees and 3,574 trees on public properties owned and managed by the City.

Trees play a vital role in the environment by providing a wide array of economic, environmental, and social benefits which far exceed the investments in planting, maintaining, and removing them. Trees reduce air pollution, improve public health outcomes, reduce stormwater runoff, sequester and store carbon, reduce energy use, and increase property value, among other benefits. *Figure 2* shows the total estimated ecological benefits from Muskegon urban trees. The i-Tree Eco model estimated Muskegon's annual value from carbon sequestered, air pollution removed, and stormwater runoff reduced.

Replacement value is the approximate cost to replace an existing tree with a tree of a similar size and species. Doing this is not always reasonable. For example, you cannot replace a 20-inch diameter tree with another tree of similar size, but replacement value can give us an idea of the overall value of trees in Muskegon. In total, Muskegon's inventoried trees have a replacement value of \$60.7 million.

*Figure 1* shows maples are the most common tree in Muskegon, followed by oaks. To implement diversity within plant communities, the City's new tree management plan will prioritize plantings of trees that are less commonly found. A diverse tree canopy is important for protecting against disturbances such as tree pests and extreme weather events.

Under their annual budget, the City of Muskegon will assume the responsibilities described in the management plan, which will also include dangerous tree removal, pruning and other maintenance efforts, administering updates to tree inventory data, and consistent health monitoring of all trees within the city's jurisdiction.

WMSRDC and the City of Muskegon would like to thank the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Urban and Community Forestry Inflation Reduction Act (UCF IRA) Grant Program made possible through IRA funding provided by the USDA Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program for this unique opportunity!

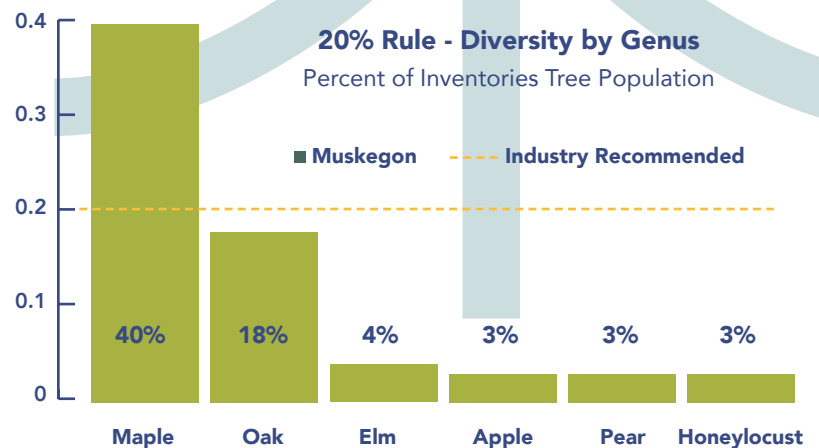


Figure 1

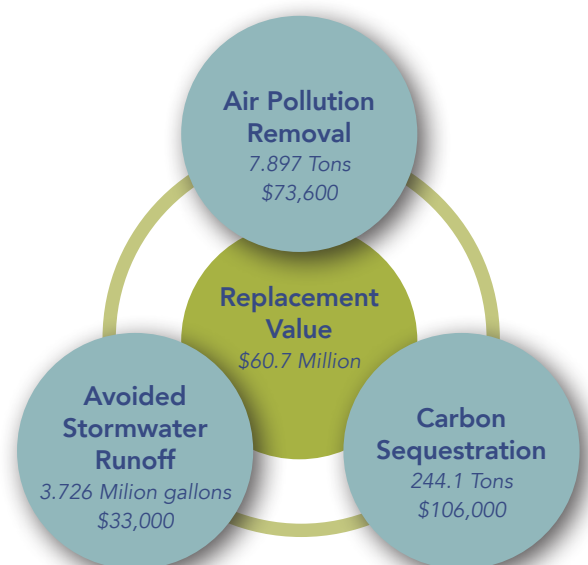


Figure 2

## Transportation: Non-Motorized Updates

WMSRDC staff have been busy throughout the region assisting and serving multiple stakeholder groups that are working on planning and developing non-motorized trails. In Mason County, there is an effort to create a regional trail system that will connect the City of Ludington with the state park to the north and the proposed Hart-Pentwater Trail to the south. There is also an effort to develop a trail from the City of Ludington that will go east to Scottville and eventually connect with Baldwin. The planning for these efforts involves four different stakeholder groups that have been meeting monthly to discuss the different sections of the proposed trails and discuss the most efficient potential routes. WMSRDC has been supporting this discussion by developing a geospatial network of proposed trail routes.

There is also an effort underway in Newaygo County to develop and connect trails throughout the county. The focal point has been the Fremont-White Cloud-Newaygo "loop" that will

provide connectivity between the three cities. There has also been discussion about a future connection between Muskegon and Fremont which would extend from the Fred Meijer Berry Junction Trail. Much of the discussion has involved route planning and property ownership along the potential routes as well as funding opportunities at the state and local levels.

In Oceana County, the connection between Hart and Pentwater continues to move forward with both TAP funding and Safe Routes to School funding being sought to fund the connection. The Friends of the Pentwater Hart Trail (FPHT) group is leading this effort and has been working on securing funding and right of way for several years. WMSRDC staff has assisted throughout the process and continues to support this effort.

In the Muskegon area, staff continue to work on issues related to the recently completed STAG plan (Shoreline Trails and Greenways). WMSRDC



*Path in Fremont*

coordinates and hosts a quarterly meeting of interested agencies and individuals to move the plan forward. The group hopes to secure funding for additional artist renderings of proposed trails. These types of pictures are helpful in letting the public and elected officials envision how trail improvements can benefit their communities. WMSRDC has also been exploring different methods of promoting trails through shared public applications, and GIS.

## Transportation: MPO Update

The WestPlan MPO Technical and Policy Committees have recently approved the FY2026-2029 Transportation Improvement Program Amendment (3). This is the third amendment to the recently developed project list. Several new projects were introduced for amendment 3, with most of them being State jobs. On the local side, a Safe Routes to School grant was awarded for the City of Montague. Details of the amendment can be found on the WMSRDC website.

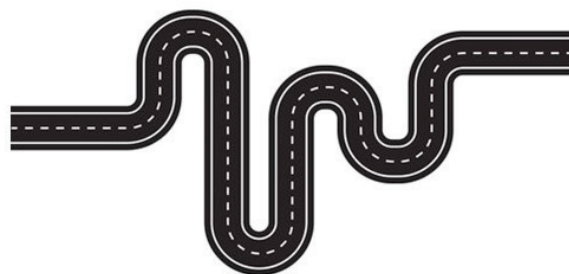


*Lakeshore Drive in Muskegon*

## Transportation: MPO Update *continued*

MPO Committees also supported the Highway Safety Improvement Program Safety Performance Measures that were developed by the Michigan Department of Transportation for FY2026. By supporting these measures, WestPlan will work toward meeting these targets by planning and programming projects that contribute toward this accomplishment. The supported targets for FY2026 can also be found on the WMSRDC website.

There are 818 miles of Federal Aid eligible roads within the WestPlan MPO.



## Transportation: Regional RTF Regional, Rural, and Small Urban

**Regional Transportation Planning** The West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission (WMSRDC) has continued to assist the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) in administering the Rural Task Force and Small Urban program. WMSRDC performs these tasks for the counties of Muskegon, Oceana, Newaygo, Lake, and Mason. It also administers the Small Urban Transportation Program. WMSRDC is responsible for scheduling meetings, administering the public involvement process, documenting meeting activities, and submitting information to MDOT.

**Rural Task Force** Local Rural Task Force (RTF) meetings were held with the individual counties throughout 2025 to review and approve amendments to the FY2026-2029 TIP. These amendments were presented to all five counties within the Rural Task Force at the joint meeting, which was held in October. The Rural Task Force received approximately \$4.0 million in federal funding and just over \$680,000 in State funding during the fiscal year. Typical projects funded through the RTF include road construction and road maintenance, as well as replacing transit buses and updating supporting equipment.

**Small Urban** WMSRDC convened committee meetings with each of the small urban areas in the region (Whitehall, Fremont, and Ludington) during the months of October and November. Each committee is comprised of representatives from local road agencies, transit agencies, and county road commissions and are tasked with selecting and approving projects to receive \$420,000 in federal funding on a biennial basis. During each meeting, the committee confirmed project details for the approved FY2026 projects and selected and prioritized projects to receive funding in FY2028 in their respective small urban areas.



M-120 in Muskegon County



Downtown Ludington



Local Government Services: Lake County Planning Assistance

WMSRDC recently signed an agreement with Lake County to update the Lake County Master Plan and Lake County Recreation Plan. The planning process will begin in June 2026 with a concerted public engagement campaign, including online surveys and in-person public meetings. We look forward to hearing from residents and visitors and helping to put that feedback to work for Lake County!



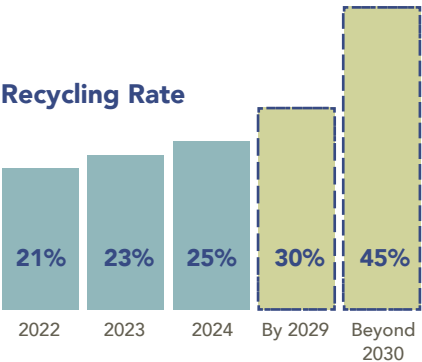
Lake County Courthouse in Baldwin, Michigan

Local Government Services: Materials Management Planning Update

The West Michigan Shoreline Materials Management Planning Committee (MMPC) has begun developing baseline materials management goals and objectives. This will outline a regional vision for materials management, with actionable objectives that will be used to measure progress toward goals. In early 2026, the goals and objectives will be made available to local governments for review.

Upcoming meetings will take place at 10:00 AM in the following counties: January 4, Mason County; February 2, Lake County; and March 2, Newaygo County. All meetings are open to the public. For additional information regarding materials management and the MMPC, go to [wmsrdc.org/program/materials-management-planning/](https://wmsrdc.org/program/materials-management-planning/).

State of Michigan Recycling Goals



Food Waste Reduction

Recycling goals for the State of Michigan



GIS: Regional Infrastructure Coordinating Hubs (RICH)

The Michigan Infrastructure Council launched the Regional Infrastructure Coordinating Hubs (RICH) program in 2024, which helps fund eligible projects that increase regional capacity to support asset management efforts. The West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission (WMSRDC) has signed a Memorandum of

Understanding (MOU) with the Michigan Department of Treasury to be part of the two-year pilot so that it can study the feasibility of implementing a regional GIS-based asset management system. This study is the first phase of implementing a functional and interoperable regional GIS system that supports a process to plan, analyze, and

coordinate asset management at the regional level and is expected to be completed by the end of summer 2026. The WMSRDC released a competitive request for proposals (RFP) in December 2025 and anticipates formalizing an agreement with the selected geospatial or asset management firm in January.

## Economic Development Update: CEDS Strategy Committee Update

WMSRDC maintains a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the region to ensure communities in Lake, Mason, Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana remain eligible for assistance through the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA). EDA grants are available on a rolling basis. Eligible applicants include local governments, nonprofits, and

other public entities. The CEDS process, including the 5-year plan and CEDS Committee, represents a framework for economic development visioning, coordination, and connecting stakeholders with resources.

The CEDS Strategy Committee meets quarterly to oversee the CEDS process. In 2026, the Committee will convene quarterly via virtual conference. Each meeting will feature a

CEDS-related theme. Tentative dates and themes are January 30 (Cluster Development), April 24 (Critical Infrastructure & Economic Resilience), July 31 (Workforce & Manufacturing), and October 30 (Innovation & Entrepreneurship). Please send an email to [info@wmsrdc.org](mailto:info@wmsrdc.org) if you are interested in receiving economic updates and meeting notices from WMSRDC!

## Commission Operations: Meet the Staff

Joel Fitzpatrick is the Transportation Planning Director and has worked for WMSRDC since 2007. In this role he oversees all transportation programs for the Commission, including the small urban and rural transportation initiatives across the five-county region, as well as the asset management and the traffic count programs.

Joel holds membership with the American Planning Association and is a Certified Planner through the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP). He has also completed the Michigan Infrastructure Council's Asset Management Champion Program. Joel holds an undergraduate degree in economics and a master's degree in public administration, both from Central Michigan University.



*Joel Fitzpatrick,  
Planning Director*

## Commission Operations: Office Manager Retires

Syndi Copeland recently announced her retirement from WMSRDC effective December 31, 2025. WMSRDC thanks Syndi for her 18 years of service at the Commission and wishes her the best as she begins a new chapter in her life.



*Syndi Copeland,  
Office Manager*



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## WMSRDC Staff

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Amanda Snyder, Finance Manager  
Syndi Copeland, Office Manager

**Economic Development,  
Community Development and  
Local Government Services**  
Stephen Carlson, Program Manager

**Transportation Planning**  
Joel Fitzpatrick, Planning Director  
Brian Mulnix, Program Manager  
Lauryn Blake, Planner  
Jack Grice, Planner and GIS Technician

**Environmental Planning**  
Fallon Chabala, Program Manager

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