

# MICHIGAN COUNTIES



Kent County's Stan Ponstein addresses a plenary session of the 2022 Annual Conference in St. Clair County.



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*\*1 seat currently vacant*

# Letter from the Executive Director



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Currie'.

**STEPHAN W. CURRIE**  
MAC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**“MAC makes a concerted effort each year to include briefings on veterans-related legislations and issues at our major conferences.”**

As the son of a veteran, Nov. 11, Veterans Day, holds a special place on my calendar, so I was pleased this summer when the National Association of Counties (NACo) endorsed Operation Green Light for Veterans.

Promoted by Carbon County, Pa. Commissioner Chris Lukasevich and others, Operation Green Light for Veterans “hopes to shine a light on the plight of veterans in counties across the country who are having a hard time connecting with benefits after serving their country.”

Lukasevich, chair of NACo’s Veterans and Military Services Committee, noted to the NACo Board that:

- As of 2019, 11.7 million veterans are over the age of 65, which is about 61 percent of all veterans.
- Veterans make up roughly 11 percent of adults experiencing homelessness.
- Some 70 percent of veterans experiencing homelessness also experience substance abuse, and 50 percent live with mental illnesses like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

One problem, he noted, is that counties don’t know when veterans have moved to their community, which makes it difficult to connect them to benefits.

As part of Operation Green Light counties will literally shine green lights from their county buildings from Nov. 7-13 to “send a clear message to inspire veterans to reach out to their county veteran service officers.”

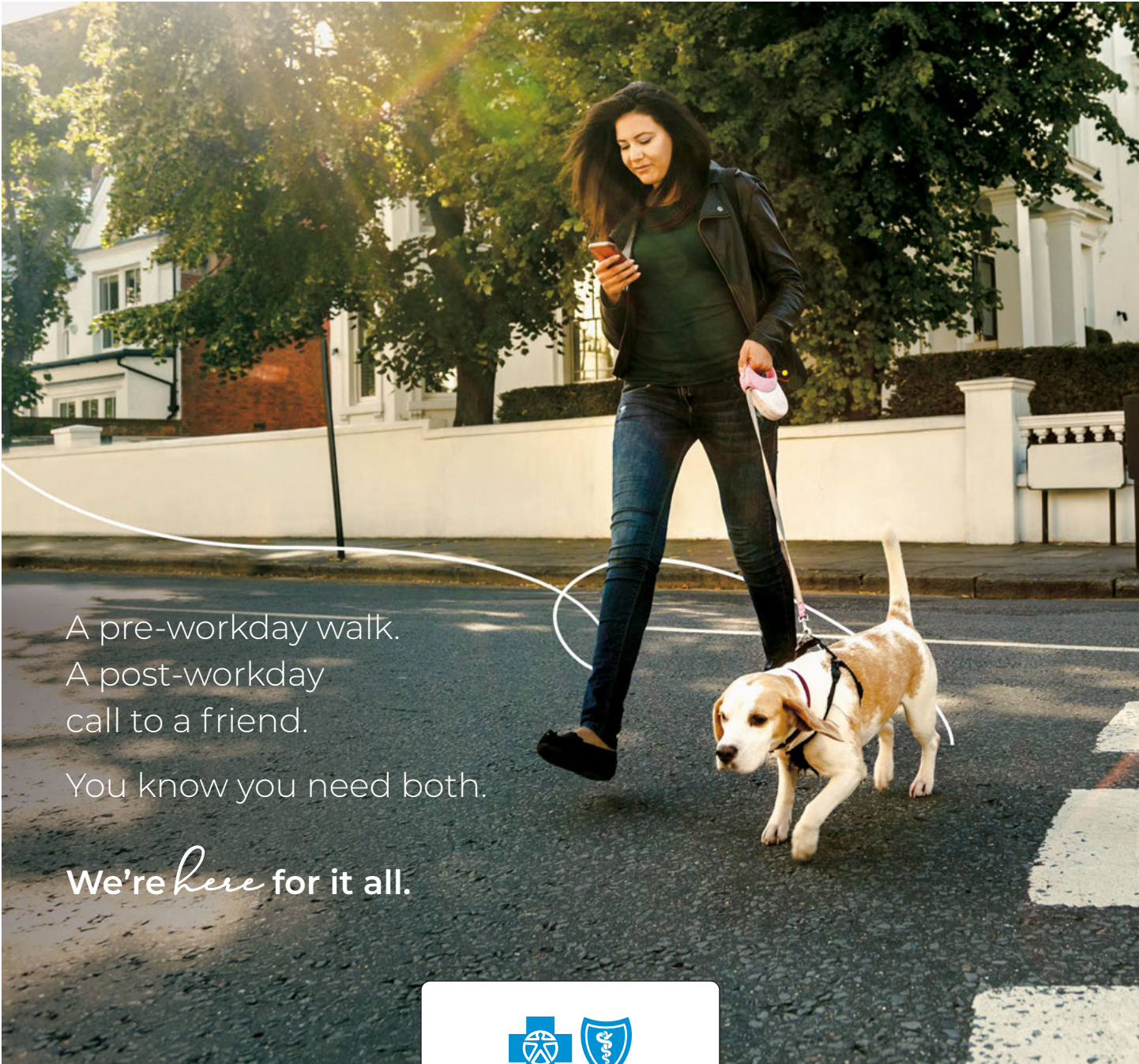
In support, NACo is offering a toolkit at <https://www.naco.org/resources/operation-green-light-veterans-county-toolkit> to get the word out. The toolkit includes a blueprint for declaring a resolution in your county; sending out press releases; writing a letter to the editor to your local newspaper; writing a letter to Congress; and posting information on social media.

There were about 562,000 veterans in Michigan in 2020, according to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. And while Michigan’s veteran population has been decreasing in recent decades, their needs have not. In its 2021 annual report, the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency stated, “A record number of veterans reached out to us last year, seeking assistance in all facets of their lives ...”

MAC makes a concerted effort each year to include briefings on veterans-related legislations and issues at our major conferences. And our Governmental Affairs Team has worked closely with allies in the Legislature to secure and increase funds so that county veterans offices can increase their outreach to local veterans to ensure they are fully utilizing the benefits and services available.

These efforts, of course, pale in comparison to the sacrifices made by those who volunteer to serve and protect our nation. But if we all can contribute, even in just a small way, to helping others, the effect can be huge.

Thank you, veterans, for your service. ♦



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# Letter from the President



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stan Ponstein".

**STAN PONSTEIN**  
PRESIDENT, MAC BOARD OF  
DIRECTORS

**“The MAC has provided experiences that have broadened my knowledge of statewide issues and introduced me to a multitude of outstanding community leaders and businesspeople.”**

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Stan Ponstein of Kent County was sworn in as MAC’s 114th board president during the 2022 Annual Conference in September. Below are excerpts from his inaugural address on Sept. 20, 2022.*

So where do I begin? I guess it all started 43 years ago, after serving 2 years as a high school student representative on the Grandville Board of Education. Since I was interested in political science, I thought it would be a good idea to run for an elected position. So, at the age of 19, I ran for a seat on the board, and I won! I ultimately served 21 years on the board of ed. It started a life-long learning process about holding public office.

For some of you who are old enough to remember, newspaper reporters attended local meetings and wrote articles for newspapers. Emphasis on “paper”! The Grandville School District overlapped two counties (Kent and Ottawa) so the Lakeshore edition in Ottawa provided my uncles some reading enjoyment about Grandville. One of my uncles was a professor of religious studies at Hope College and the other an Ottawa County District judge. They liked to clip the school board articles and mail them to me, highlighting my comments as quoted by the reporter, and adding their own opinions, which often started with, “Do you think it would be more effective if you had said it this way?”

A blind date later led to marrying a Wexford County native, who often proofread my campaign letters and speeches. She too would share a familiar comment while yielding a red pen: “Wouldn’t it sound better if you said it this way?” May I introduce, and extend my sincere appreciation to, my wife of 25 years: Melissa Ponstein.

I have been fortunate to have many individuals take note of my public service. Former high school teachers and professors from Aquinas College, as well as parents, friends and current and former elected officials, have been very supportive of my ambitions throughout the last 40-plus years. ...

I had the pleasure of representing Kent County as an at-large member of the MAC Board, filling a four-month term. I had no idea that I would be standing here today, but I’m extremely proud that I am. The MAC has provided experiences that have broadened my knowledge of statewide issues and introduced me to a multitude of outstanding community leaders and businesspeople. ...

When I was sworn in as second vice president, I made a commitment to revisit all 83 counties before being sworn in as president. Little did I know, four months later, we



**CONTINUED ON PAGE 13**

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*\*Special thanks to Jim Maike for his \$500 to kick off the 2022 campaign*

**Note: Donations listed are from 12/8/21 forward**

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**KEN MITCHELL (LEFT) AND WILLIAM MILLER ARE SWORN IN AS MAC BOARD DIRECTORS BY MAC LEGAL COUNSEL JOHN DOYLE IN PORT HURON ON SEPT. 20.**

## Commissioners from Clinton, Macomb and Oakland elected to MAC Board

During regional caucuses held at the Michigan Counties Annual Conference Sept. 18-20 in Port Huron, MAC members elected three new members to the MAC Board of Directors and re-elected two incumbents.

The newest members of the 16-member governing body are:

- Ken Mitchell of Clinton County
- Antoinette Wallace of Macomb County
- William Miller of Oakland County

Returning to the MAC Board for another three-year term are incumbent directors Vaughn Begick of Bay County and Scott Noesen of Midland County. Board members can serve a maximum of three 3-year terms.

Leading the Board will be Stan Ponstein of Kent County. Joining Ponstein as Board officers for the 2022-23 term are Eileen Kowall of Oakland County (first vice president) and Jim Storey of Allegan County (second vice president).

## Registration opens for 2022 edition of New Commissioner School

MAC is again pleased to partner with Michigan State University Extension to present the New Commissioner School for newly

elected county officials in November and December.

The 2022 program will offer a hybrid model for participants, who can be newly elected or veteran commissioners. The program will feature an introductory session via Zoom followed by access to the online learning modules. Then participants will have the opportunity to attend one of four locations for in-person learning and networking session with experts and experienced commissioners.

The program will feature an introductory session on Nov. 18 at 11 a.m. via zoom to help new commissioners learn what is available to them through the self-paced course and share a bit about the onsite learning and discussion opportunities.

Attendees at the in-person sessions will hear the latest from Michigan State University Extension and the Michigan Association of Counties and expand learning through focused discussion with experts and experienced commissioners around:

- Use of ARPA Funds
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- Economic Development and Housing
- Preparing for Meetings
- Other local hot topics developed through discussion.

The four in-person sessions will run from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The sessions are scheduled for:

- Nov. 28: Bavarian Inn and Conference Center, One Covered Bridge Lane, Frankenmuth, MI 48734
- Nov. 29: BayPointe Inn, 11456 Marsh Road, Shelbyville, MI 49344
- Dec. 5: Landmark Inn, 230 N. Front St., Marquette, MI 49855
- Dec. 12: Kirtland College, 4800 W. 4 Mile Road, Grayling, MI 49738

Full schedule details and registration are available at <https://events.anr.msu.edu/ncs/>.

## At least 1/3 of commissioners will be new in 2023

There will be plenty of new faces sitting in county boardrooms come January, according to a MAC review of candidate filings and primary results for the 2022 elections.

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 10**

Based on those reviews, and even before the results of the Nov. 8 General Election are known, Michigan will have at least 200 new county commissioners.

That number far exceeds those of previous election cycles, when you would see about 125 to 135 new commissioners elected, out of total of 622. However, with this being the first election after the decennial reapportionment, higher turnover was expected.

In checking with colleagues at MSU Extension (MSUE) about our figures, <AC learned a 30 percent rate would not be unusual for the first election after a reapportionment. But remember, 30 percent is the floor here. The percentage could be much higher once the General Elections are held.

Overall, Michigan will have fewer county commissioners in the coming decade, as the net result of 83 reapportionment decisions was to take the statewide figure from 622 to 619. This continues a historical trend.

Since 1968, the first year for elections for directly elected commissioners from geographic districts, the number has fallen from 2,218 to 690 in 2002 to this cycle's 619.

## Clinton's Showers honored by Michigan Works!



Clinton Commissioner Robert Showers, who just finished a nine-year run on the MAC Board of Directors, was recognized in September as the "Volunteer of the Year Award" at the statewide Michigan Works! Annual Conference.

Showers was nominated by Capital Area Michigan Works!, which lauded him as "a vocal advocate for the programs and services offered through the statewide and regional workforce development system, recognizing the important connection the demand-driven system offers to support both employers and job seekers alike."

## MAC salutes Lenawee on its 200th birthday

MAC Executive Director Stephan Currie routinely visits member counties to brief them on MAC activities, but his September journey to Lenawee County had a bonus: the opportunity to deliver a proclamation of tribute to the county on its bicentennial.



To mark the event, the county created a bicentennial webpage at <https://lenawee.mi.us/1034/Bicentennial-Celebration> to share the history of the county and interesting facts. ♦

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# Legislative year could end in roar, or whimper

BY DEENA BOSWORTH/MAC GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS DIRECTOR

**“The lame duck session will either prove to be hectic and fruitful or anti-climactic. Long days, long nights and many last-minute negotiations are still anticipated...”**

The year is not over yet! Lame duck session, the period between the General Election and sine die of the 101st Michigan Legislature, is set to begin on Nov. 9, with the sporadic return of incumbent legislators. Their initial focus will be on celebrating victories and mourning the losses. Leadership elections for the newly empowered party in each chamber will take place and then voting on policy will resume.

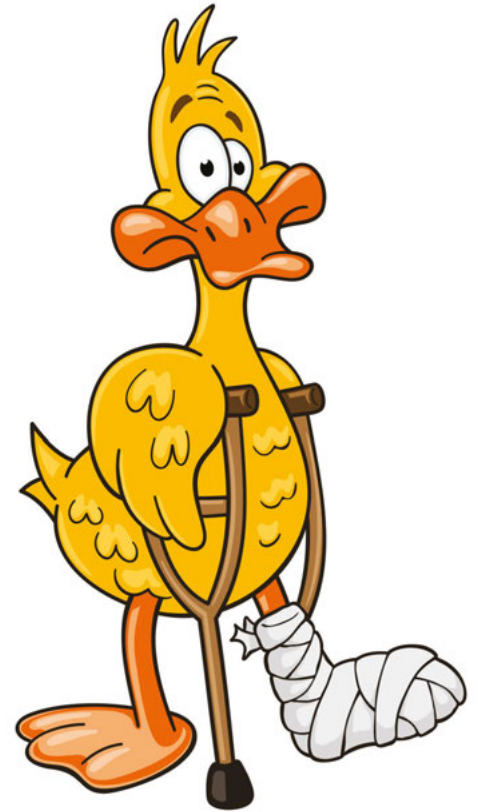
Whether due to the redrawing of district lines and contested races, or the lack of agreement between the decision-making bodies, the House and Senate have had few in-person session days since June, which does not bode well for those of us with policy priorities to accomplish.

In the August edition of Michigan Counties, we detailed out our priorities for the lame duck session. The list is aggressive and includes:

- the creation of a revenue sharing trust fund and increase in county revenue sharing;
- back-filling our losses associated with the disabled veterans property tax exemption;
- remote participation under the Open Meetings Act;
- restoration of our ability to collect fees from criminal defendants to help fund our courts;
- blocking the privatization of the mental health system;
- the appropriation of the remaining ARP funds for infrastructure; and
- securing our reimbursement for the expansion of the personal property tax exemption.

But the legislative calendar keeps shrinking and jeopardizing the enactment of our priorities. As of the writing, we are anticipating only six to nine session days before adjournment. And depending on the number of incumbents who lose on Nov. 8, their personal priorities might reshuffle the agenda even more.

The lame duck session will either prove to be hectic and fruitful or anti-climactic. Long



days, long nights and many last-minute negotiations are still anticipated, though as we enter the “silly” season, as it is known here in Lansing. Although we remain hopeful that our MAC agenda will get accomplished, we will nonetheless ensure that unfinished items top our list of priorities for 2023.

Another tradition of lame duck are the farewells made to departing legislators, many of whom have put in years of service and been extraordinary advocates for county issues, such as revenue sharing. I know that I, for one, will greatly miss the friends I’ve made and the heated and fruitful conversations over public policy I’ve had with them. I will remain thankful for their time serving our state. They know who they are, and I, as well as many of our members, will miss their dedication and expertise.

Thank you to all who have served; MAC wishes them all the best in their future endeavors. ♦

## Letter from the President FROM PAGE 5

would hear the phrase “COVID-19.” It would bring some challenges, but this past July I completed that journey. ...

Now as I take up the work as your president, I would be remiss if I did not recognize the amazing accomplishments in the last year under Phil Kuyers.

For example, you may have heard a little thing about 4-year commissioner terms. MAC got 'em!

Revenue sharing? Our payments went up 6 percent for the budget voted on this year and which takes effect in 10 days.

9-1-1 funding? MAC got that secured, too.

I call that an impressive year.

But, as county leaders, we know there is always more work to be done. And to contribute to that work, as your president, my first goal is to understand what I can and can't do as your president. ...

It will be my job number 1 to rally the troops — you here tonight and your colleagues back home — in a unified effort to make Michigan county government all it can be for the family, friends and neighbors we serve.

We have a busy year ahead. Let's get to it! ♦

**MAC**  
MICHIGAN ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

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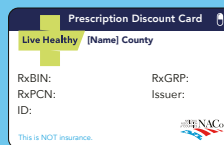
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# Ponstein installed as MAC president at 2022 Annual Conference



**“Plenary sessions at the conference focused on the expansion of broadband services to Michigan’s rural areas and the impact of the energy industry on the state.”**

**See pages 30-31 for more photos from the Annual Conference.**

**N**early 300 county officials, speakers and others from across Michigan this week to review and approve legislative policy positions at the 2022 Michigan Counties Annual Conference, held at the Blue Water Convention Center in Port Huron Sept. 18-20.

During the event, Commissioner Stan Ponstein of Kent County was sworn in as the MAC Board president. Ponstein is the 114th person to hold the president’s position for the organization that represents the leaders of Michigan’s 83 counties.

Plenary sessions at the conference focused on the expansion of broadband services to Michigan’s rural areas and the impact of the energy industry on the state.

Ponstein will lead a board that gained three new members via elections held at the conference: Antoinette Wallace of Macomb County, William Miller of Oakland County and Ken Mitchell of Clinton County.

As the conference closed, the MAC Board

confirmed officers for the 2022-23 term. Joining Ponstein are Eileen Kowall of Oakland County (first vice president) and Jim Storey of Allegan County (second vice president). Phil Kuyers of Ottawa County moves to the role of immediate past president.

On Sept. 20, during their Annual Business Meeting, MAC members approved policy platforms developed by MAC’s policy committees overseeing issue areas ranging from finance to agriculture and tourism.

“St. Clair County and Port Huron were excellent hosts for us” said Stephan W. Currie, MAC’s executive director. “It is important as a statewide organization to visit and support all sections of the state, so we were pleased to be able to convene in the Thumb.”

MAC’s 2023 Annual Conference will be Oct. 1-4 in Kalamazoo County.

For more information on the Michigan Association of Counties, visit [www.micounties.org](http://www.micounties.org). ♦



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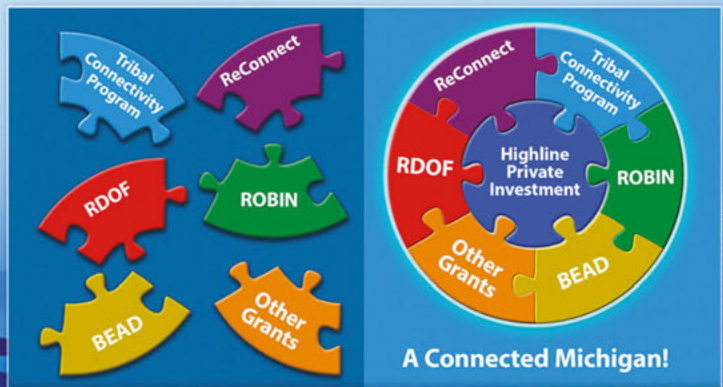
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# Political divisions making hash of Michigan Constitution

BY ERIC LUPHER/PRESIDENT, CITIZENS RESEARCH COUNCIL OF MICHIGAN



MAC strongly supports the work of the **Citizens Research Council of Michigan**, a nonpartisan, independent public policy research organization. MAC Executive Director Stephan Currie currently sits on the CRC Board.

The hyper partisan environment in which we live is resulting in bad public policy. I say that not because the ideas being espoused are bad — some are, and some aren't. My take is based on the way policy is being formulated and adopted.

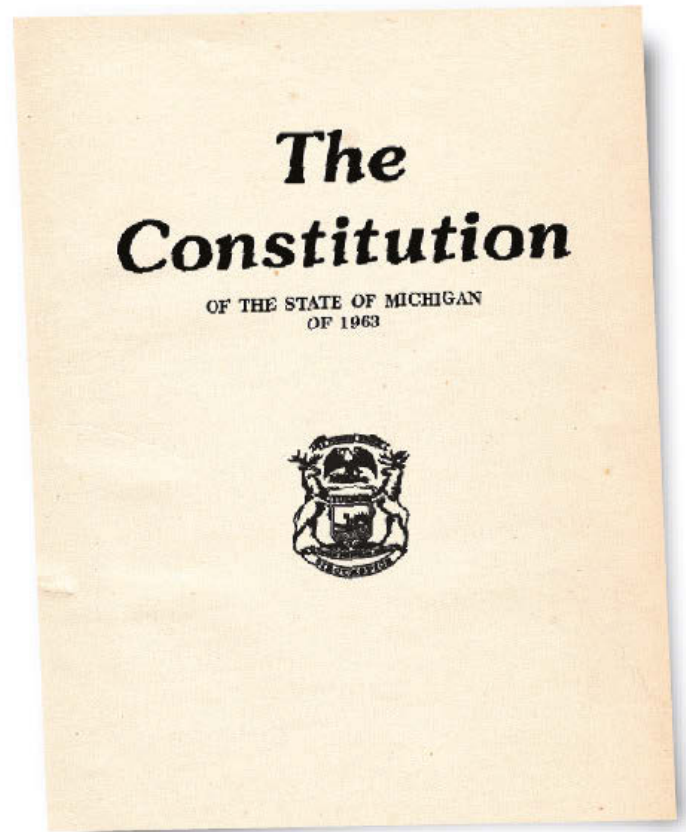
The first problem is that advocates for controversial issues do not seem interested in asking their opponents for input.

I've had many occasions to ponder a fundamental question inherent in public policy analysis: why do we have government? My answer is that government exists to manage the interactions between people. You might have a different take.

The best way to manage the interactions between people is by getting multiple perspectives on issues. Too often, issue advocates only consult those in agreement when drafting policies. In doing so, they're eliminating opportunities to identify stylistic, grammatical or legal issues.

We've seen this with initiated statutes and constitutional amendments, too. A 2014 effort to amend the state constitution to expand the number of non-tribal casinos would have used the revenues for schools, public safety and roads. Despite submitting petitions with the sufficient signatures, the proposal was disqualified from the ballot. It's a good thing, too, because we would still be litigating to decipher what the proponents meant by several provisions.

Failure to consult others also eliminates opportunities to identify even routine typos. You might notice Article 9 of the Michigan Constitution contains sections 35 and 35a.



While they are loosely related in subject matters, 35a is not subservient to 35. In fact, no one looked at the wording of 35a critically to observe that section 35 already existed. A little patience and open mindedness might have headed off this problem.

Several states require proposed initiatives to consult their attorneys general, service bureaus and even opponents of the measures before petitions are circulated to collect signatures. Proponents are not required to make any changes based on the feedback, but the fresh eyes can identify deficiencies or changes that may allow them to achieve their purposes in ways less offensive to opponents.

Additionally, we have the problem of including statutory detail in the state constitution. State constitutions should be fundamental organic documents establishing, defining



and limiting the basic organs of power, stating general principles and declaring the rights of the people. As such, they should not be elaborate documents; they should be relatively compact and economical in their general arrangement and draftsmanship; details should be avoided; and matters appropriate for legislation should not be incorporated into the organic document.

However, fear often causes issue advocates to pursue policy changes in the constitution instead of statutes and to put statutory language into the state constitution. Sometimes, issue advocates are afraid future generations will act counter to the will of the current generation. In 2006, Michigan adopted an amendment to put statutory language for the Michigan Conservation and Recreation Legacy Fund into the constitution verbatim to protect the fund from diversions for unrelated purposes.

Or they are afraid of the Legislature

implementing a constitutional amendment inconsistent with their intent. The 2018 Voters Not Politicians constitutional amendment included language that was statutory in nature. This proved problematic when the pandemic threw off timing of release of census data. Proposal 2 this year would copy and paste language for the Michigan election law into the constitution to protect it from statutory changes.

When we need to amend these laws, it will require a vote of the people instead of legislative action.

I don't have a cure for these failings. Michigan is a purple state with roughly equal shares of the population leaning toward conservative and progressive policies. Human nature and politics naturally will lead issue advocates to use all the tools available to them. We should recognize, though, that these practices will create future problems. ♦

**“Several states require proposed initiatives to consult their attorneys general, service bureaus and even opponents of the measures before petitions are circulated to collect signatures.”**

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# Five transformational opportunities facing county government

CATHERINE MCCLARY/WASHTENAW COUNTY TREASURER

**“Technology can no longer be separated from the work performed nor the public services provided. For every county employee, technology is part of their job.”**



**A**s a county treasurer for 26 years — and formerly as a county commissioner for 14 years — I see five major transformations under way in county government. Public servants are on the brink of generational and transformational progress — if we can remain adept, flexible and open-minded.

## **Technology is embedded in all aspects of work**

Technology can no longer be separated from the work performed nor the public services provided. For every county employee, technology is part of their job. Copying tax collections into a logbook by hand gave way to computerized tax records 20 years ago. All staff must be skilled in technology troubleshooting and system implementation. Leaders must work with IT staff and vendors to ensure county money is spent well on products that work, integrate with other systems and have appropriate security. This change necessitates hiring employees with modern skillsets and training existing staff.

## **Banking is no longer just the local bank on Main Street**

High levels of technological savvy are needed to conduct banking today. And the Main Street banks have merged, closed branches and moved online. We used to ask customers,

“Cash or check?” We now handle multiple forms of payment (cash, checks, electronic transfers, credit/debit cards, wires, PayPal, Apple Pay, etc.). Security has become tremendously important — not only has check fraud remained high with lower usage, but debit card and electronic payment fraud have surpassed it. PCI compliance is a standard that’s exacting to meet and required for insurance coverage. Just using email requires extraordinary diligence to repel hackers and ransomware attacks.

## **Offering virtual services to the public is required**

The public expects their government to deliver services as quickly and virtually as Amazon delivers packages. Offering online services can mitigate the current, difficult hiring environment, but again requires a skilled and nimble workforce. In Washtenaw County, we are using automation software to handle the increasing volume of mundane and repetitive tasks. When software performs repetitive, high-volume tasks, employee time is freed up for interacting with the public or handling complex tasks.

## **Work is what you do, not where you go**

According to Cisco’s Global Hybrid Work Study 2022, hybrid work is “predicted to continue within all levels of the government.”

Remote work enhances recruitment and retention of staff, lowers the carbon footprint for fuel to commute and power offices, and enhances the ability to attract more highly skilled staff who use technology in their daily lives. Opportunities for remote work improve employee satisfaction which in turn improves customer service.

Online services in combination with remote or hybrid staffing achieve other benefits, even on-site:

- Employees with VPN-access laptops can move from office to remote site to customer drop-in station throughout the county
- Increased use of electronic documents, shared securely, saves paper and frees up physical space
- Increased expertise in communication methods such as Teams, Zoom, and chat streamlines meetings, trainings, and travel when used appropriately

- Substituting mobile phones for land lines can be more effective for customer communication and less expensive
- Less travel, for both employees and residents, reduces the carbon footprint

### Case law and statutes continue to change

Treasurers serve the public under state mandates and follow the law. We work with our boards of commissioners to allocate the resources needed to provide mandated services and serve the public well. We work with the Legislature to provide information regarding how changes in law will affect the public. We coordinate our work with other units of government, assessors and State Treasury. And treasurers remain adept and flexible to prevent foreclosure, while protecting county revenue and assisting families in achieving and retaining homeownership. ♦

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Kalamazoo County Downtown Justice Facility

# Decisions on commissioner compensation must be made soon

BY MATT NORDFJORD/COHL, STOKER & TOSKEY, P.C.

This article will review several issues concerning compensation for county commissioners. Compensation for Commissioners is governed by MCL 46.415, which states, in part:

(1) A member of the county board of commissioners shall receive the compensation and mileage reimbursement fixed by resolution of the county board of commissioners or for a county which has a county officers compensation commission, fixed by a determination of the county officers compensation commission which is not rejected.

(2) The per mile mileage reimbursement fixed by the county board of commissioners or the county officers compensation commission shall not exceed the mileage reimbursement set for state officers as determined by the State Officers Compensation Commission.

The term “compensation” as used in MCL 46.415(1) includes fringe benefits such as retirement benefits (unlike the term “salary” used in the statutes relating to other county elected officials). Per diem payments are also included in the term “compensation.” However, “compensation” does not include mileage reimbursement.

Therefore, according to MCL 46.415(1), if there is no county officers compensation commission; the county board of commissioners has the exclusive authority to fix the compensation of the members of the board of commissioners, including the per diem payments, under the following requirements.

Changes in compensation of county commissioners are also governed by MCL 46.415, which provides in relevant part:

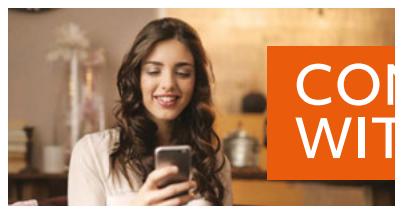


**“Per diem payments are also included in the term “compensation.” However, “compensation” does not include mileage reimbursement.”**

(3) Except as provided under subsection (5), changes in compensation shall become effective only after the time members of the county board of commissioners commence their terms of office after a general election, provided that it is voted upon before the commencement of the new terms of office, or for a county which has a county officers compensation commission, after the beginning of the first odd numbered year after the determination is made by the county officers compensation commission and is not rejected. (Emphasis added)

(4) This section shall not be construed to prohibit a structured change in compensation implemented in phases over the term of office.

Thus, state law provides that changes in compensation for county commissioners can only become effective after the commissioners commence a new term of office after a general election (i.e., Jan. 1 of an odd-numbered year). However, the change must be voted upon before the commencement of the new term (i.e., on or before Dec. 31). ♦



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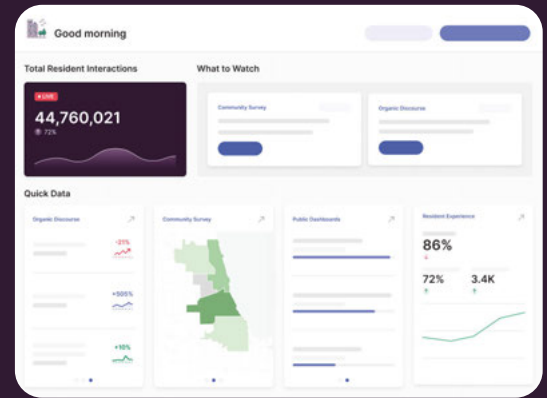


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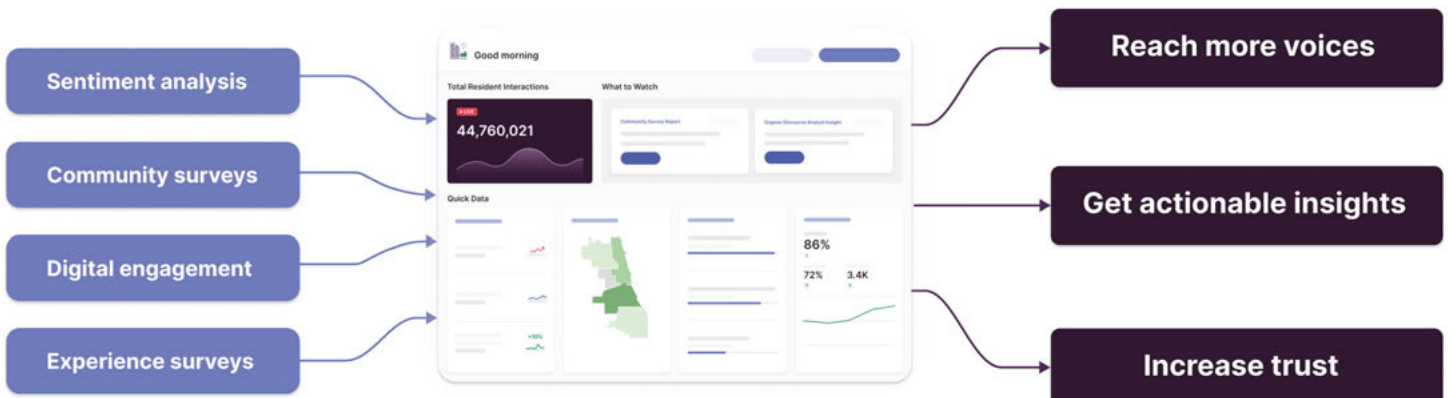
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# How Kent County used Zencity to assess threats and plan security strategy

EXPERT  
CORNER

BY HALEY SKLAR/ZENCITY

In April 2022, a Grand Rapids police officer fatally shot Patrick Lyoya. As video of the incident began circulating, public protests occurred in Grand Rapids.

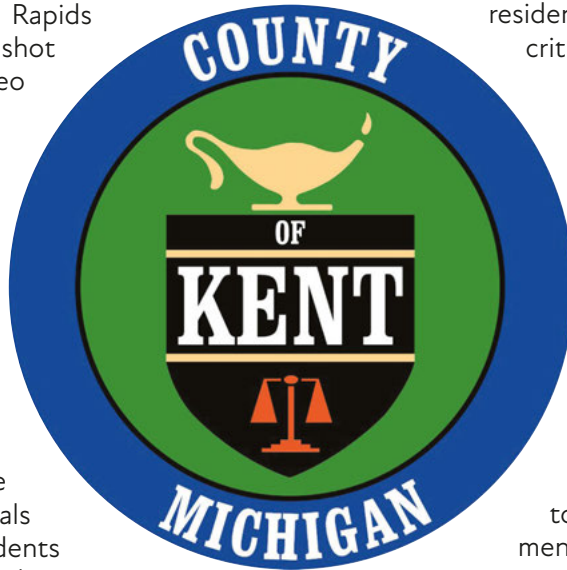
Kent County Administration offices are located in the same complex as the Grand Rapids City Hall. Exacerbating the county's concern was the fact that, as county officials knew all too well, residents are often not entirely clear as to the distinction between city and county services and their separate areas of responsibility.

In anticipation of the increased public attention and protests, the Kent County leadership was tasked with deciding the level of risk posed to the county's buildings and staff during the protests and allocating resources for security accordingly. Increasing security across all county buildings would cost money and could send a message that there was an expectation of escalation. On the other hand, not allocating sufficient resources could potentially result in harm to county staff and property resulting in injury to persons, thousands of dollars in repair costs and additional negative press.

As public tensions rose, Kent County leadership had to do two things quickly and in real-time:

- Understand and assess the volume of criticism, specifically towards the county.
- Assess the risk to the county buildings and allocate resources accordingly.

In the weeks following the release of the footage, posts and comments about the incident on various social media platforms amounted to over 378,000 interactions, the county's biggest challenge was keeping track of all the conversations and identifying where



residents were directing their criticism and anger.

Using Zencity Organic, Kent was able to set up a customized project dashboard collecting all resident online interactions regarding the shooting. Then, using Zencity's advanced search capabilities, Kent could narrow down the discourse to focus specifically on mentions of "Kent County."

In doing so, the county administrator recognized that out of the tens of thousands of interactions directly referencing the city, county and leaders, only 500 interactions — less than 6% — made direct reference to the county and county officials, suggesting that the county was not the main target of the backlash and protest.

With this data, the county made an informed, data-based decision as to how much to spend on protecting county buildings: "Instead of barricading all five buildings completely by putting giant construction barriers with fencing on top, I only put fencing around the courthouse, and I didn't even armor up the other buildings," explained Al Vanderberg, Kent County administrator.

Data-based risk analysis and resource allocation allowed the county to "save a lot of money, around \$500,000 — and focus resources where they were best served." It allowed Kent to provide for the required level of security without over-extending resources, escalating the situation or neglecting to provide adequate protection to County staff and protesters alike. ♦

*Learn more about how Zencity can transform your community engagement by visiting <https://zencity.io/>.* ♦

**"Using Zencity Organic, Kent was able to set up a customized project dashboard collecting all resident online interactions regarding the shooting."**



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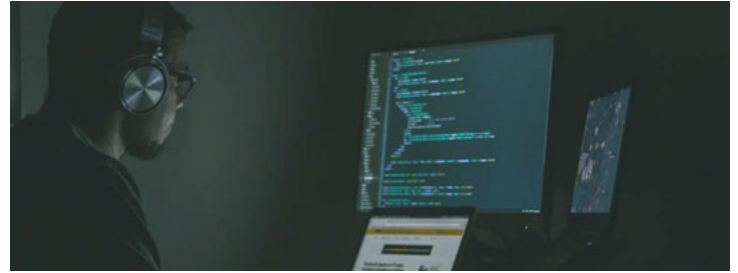
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– **Allen County Indiana Graduate, Director of Homeland Security**

This opportunity is available for registrations through Nov. 4. Questions? Contact Luke Afeman at [lukea@pdaleadership.com](mailto:lukea@pdaleadership.com) or 503-908-5381. ♦



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# Rookie administrator discovers power of belief in managing a county

BY ELIZABETH VOGEL/MISSAUKEE COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

**“Another part of the job I learned during the first days and weeks was that my title, county administrator, also included the term “chief financial officer.”**

A quote by self-help guru Lori Deschene hangs over the light switch by my office door:

“At the end of the day, remind yourself that you did the best you could today, and that is good enough.”

I’ve lived that quote every day since last summer when I began with Missaukee County and immediately found myself tossed into the proverbial deep end.

With the county’s fiscal year starting on the same day as the state’s, I had barely three months to complete my first budget. Overwhelmed doesn’t begin to describe the impact of the work it took to negotiate four union contracts, renew our self-insurance fund and complete the underwriting for the county insurance policy.

A few days after beginning my new role,



department head after department head appeared at my door with their list of “asks.” With delays caused by the pandemic and a four-month gap between administrators, everyone was anxious to move forward with pay raises, increased hours, stalled capital improvement projects, and, well, you name it. And, of course, I was also being tested during this time.

Another part of the job I learned during the first days and weeks was that my title, county administrator, also included the term “chief financial officer.” I must admit that the insecure part of me may not have applied for



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a job with the daunting CFO designation attached to it. That's due primarily to a negative hang-up I have about my qualifications, which includes that I haven't taken a math class since college ... well, since high school. Also, I'm not a CPA and don't have a degree in accounting, so how can I be a CFO? I'm not alone with this thought. I refer to a 2014 Harvard Business Review article that cites women are less likely to apply for a job unless they think they are 100 percent qualified. The bottom line I quickly learned is to not talk yourself out of a dream job before applying.

What I've managed to learn during my first 16 months as a county administrator is that being CFO has nothing to do with one's perceived math skills. It's clear to me now that a chief financial officer needs to think strategically and translate the numbers on a spreadsheet into a financial story that can be told and understood while answering the questions; where has the organization come from, and where is it going?

Regarding budgeting, I've learned over the past year that a spreadsheet is like a trusted friend who gives it to you straight. Spreadsheets paint a picture of the whole organization, showing how each department operates in serving the needs of county residents.



The work of a county administrator can sometimes move at a snail's pace, following policies and procedures and taking projects and recommendations before the board. But it's work I'm comfortable with now. So, as I approach a milestone birthday this month, I reflect on what I've accomplished, and I'm giving myself permission to be proud to be where I am.

As for my hang-ups, it's OK not to be perfect. And it's perfectly OK to reach for the unattainable, as long as you believe in yourself. ♦



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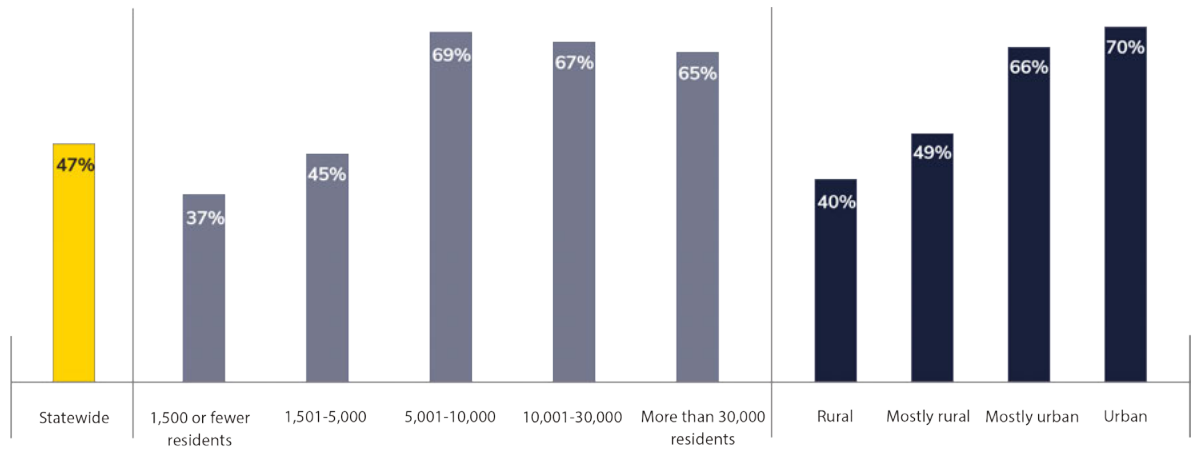


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# Democracy at local level: Resilient, but struggling

BY TOM IVACKO/CENTER FOR LOCAL, STATE AND URBAN POLICY

Tom Ivacko is executive director of the Center for Local, State and Urban Policy at the University of Michigan and directs the Michigan Public Policy Survey program, which surveys county and other local leaders on governance issues.



**PERCENTAGE OF JURISDICTIONS WHERE TOP OFFICIALS REPORT EXPERIENCING HARASSMENT OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, AS PART OF THEIR ROLE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT, BY POPULATION CATEGORY AND URBAN-RURAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION.**

**“More recently, we’ve seen extraordinary acts of public hostility unleashed on local governments and their personnel, including county public health directors and county commissions, K-12 school boards, city councils, public libraries, and more.”**

American politics, at the national level, have grown increasingly hostile over the last few decades, while citizen trust in government has plummeted and the health of our democracy has declined.

Still, through most of this time, U.S. democracy at the community level felt shielded by the focus on local issues. Citizens’ trust has long been highest in their local governments, lower in their state government, and lowest in the federal government.

Yet there are signs that our national political hostility is growing more virulent over time, and possibly spreading like an infection, down to the community level. The Pew Research Center has tracked these issues and found increasing percentages of partisans on each side of the divide associate negative traits with members of the other side, including closed-mindedness, immorality, dishonesty, laziness and lack of intelligence. So, the challenges for our democracy are not just about policy or politics but go much deeper.

More recently, we’ve seen extraordinary acts of public hostility unleashed on local governments and their personnel, including county public health directors and county commissions, K-12 school boards, city

councils, public libraries, and more. Videos are easy to find on social media with residents haranguing local officials, or worse, outright harassing them with veiled or even not-so-veiled threats.

The University of Michigan Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) has been tracking a range of democratic indicators to better understand these issues across the state, through the Michigan Public Policy Survey of the state’s local leaders.

A MPPS policy brief released in September showed a majority (53 percent) of the state’s local governments report their personnel have been subject to public harassment and abuse over the last few years. As shown in Figure 1, these problems are found statewide, in communities of all kinds, though they are most common in larger and more urban communities.

Across Michigan, 37 percent of county leaders report being harassed online, while 39 percent have faced abuse in person. Meanwhile, 22 percent say the harassment has included actual threats of some kind, while 9 percent report the most alarming findings, that they have experienced violent actions, though this includes property destruction, not just physical assaults.

Most of the abuse is targeted at the chief elected and appointed leaders, with 47 percent of respondents statewide reporting they personally have experienced harassment. But 26 to 29 percent of jurisdictions also report harassment of clerks and election workers, members of the board or council, and other government personnel, too.

This public hostility is making local governance more difficult. The MPPS survey and a similar national survey of cities last year found that negative impacts include fewer people willing to serve in local government either as employees or volunteers, higher levels of stress and fatigue among local personnel, and greater challenges for local governments dealing with contentious local policy issues.



Nonetheless, the same MPPS survey did find other causes for optimism. For example, most local leaders believe their community's general civic discourse on local issues, and local civic relationships of various kinds, remain quite positive, overall. It appears the

challenges of public harassment are coming from just a minority of very vocal residents, while the general civic health of our communities remains resilient. At least so far.

Our democracy will likely continue struggling in the coming years, but local leaders — even those beset with groups of hostile residents — are in a powerful position to help build democratic strength at the grassroots level, despite our worsening national politics. This may well be their highest calling today. ♦



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# Sights from the 2022 Annual Conference

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