

Southwest Michigan Planning Commission



Planning Great Communities Together

Serving Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties

2023

Annual Report

Southwest Michigan Planning Commission 2023 Board

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Senior Planner

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Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC)

We are one of fourteen state recognized regional planning governmental non-profit organizations in Michigan. The organization was enabled by state legislation (the Regional Planning Act, 1945 PA 281) and formally created in 1971 by the three counties it serves, Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren. SWMPC is a regional planning resource staffed with professional regional planners and is designed to be responsive to the planning needs of our region.

SWMPC is the USDOT and MDOT recognized Metropolitan Planning Organization for the Twin Cities Area (Benton Harbor-St. Joseph) and the Niles-Buchanan-Cass County Area Transportation Studies, as well as the rural and small urban transportation Regional Planning Agency for Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties. SWMPC is the state designated area-wide water quality management planning agency under the Clean Water Act, and the SWMPC leads and participates in watershed management planning. SWMPC is also the U.S. Economic Development Administration designated Economic Development District for those same three counties.

SWMPC Mission Statement

Our team uses its passion and expertise to connect people, assist communities and advance cooperative solutions to regional challenges experienced by the communities that created us.



Message from Our Executive Director

Our collective experience with a global pandemic has created a hard line between the before, and the after. In some respects, in 2023 this new perspective has given us clarity about where adjustments are needed. In others, that perspective has demanded that we dispense with the old and create something entirely new. At the SWMPC, 2023 has been illuminated by this new awareness. One of the many examples of where we have moved in quite new directions, is in partnership with Michigan's Department of Natural Resources. We collaborated in the development of an entirely new approach to the way that the state conducts a recreation grant program. The result, DNR's SPARK program, delivered unprecedented levels of funding for public recreation opportunities. Beyond that significant funding difference, a fundamental change in the approach for the program itself was that we influenced a reliance on rich layers of data analysis to project need and opportunity for communities throughout the state. The methodology was powerfully data driven. Additionally, other regional planning organizations across the state like the SWMPC, were folded directly into the technical assistance to communities throughout the process, from grant application through award implementation and reporting. This may not seem significant but, in fact, it is a dramatic and progressive change in approach. So much so, that the state is studying it through the Johnson Center for Philanthropy for broader application.

There are numerous areas where persistent SWMPC engagement, over time, has borne fruit. A great example is the dramatic change in momentum for non-motorized trail development (on-road, off-road, and water trails). The SWMPC frequently operates at a regional scale. At that scale, extensive, interconnected trail networks can take the better part of a decade to go from planning to construction. 2023 was a year where major breakthroughs in funding and implementation began to land in our region. Make no mistake, those successes do not happen without a deft planning strategy behind them.

The present housing crisis that has been experienced nationwide, is something that the SWMPC has been tracking, quantifying, and designing recommended solutions to, since 2019. By 2023, it has become apparent that solving the crisis will require informed, creative, multi-sector action. Planning organizations like the SWMPC cannot solve the problem, but we can have an important upstream effect to help inform the downstream actions that impact the what, where, why, and who. To this end, we have refined a housing diagnosis tool with a new 2.0 version. Additionally, we were invited into the Statewide Housing Plan process to help design how that Plan can be specifically tailored to southwest Michigan housing issues.

The work described above only scratches the surface. The 2023 Annual Report gets a bit deeper with detail on specific projects across a range of focus areas. As ever, if we have piqued your interest with this document, please reach out to us for more.



K. John Egelhaaf, AICP, Executive Director

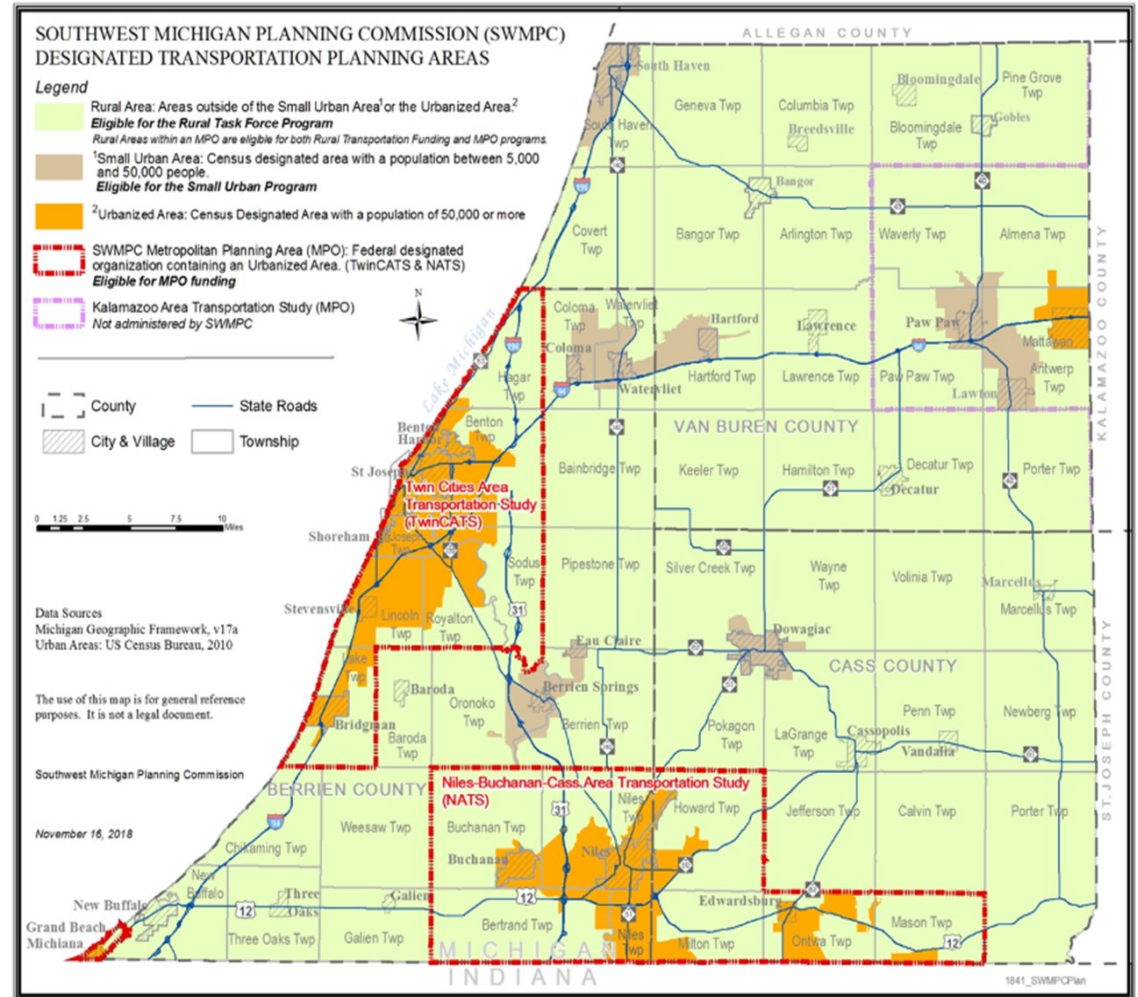
Transportation & Mobility

Transportation Planning

The SWMPC is the federal and state designated center of Transportation Planning for the region's urbanized and non-urbanized areas. Certified by the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration, SWMPC is the Metropolitan Planning Organization for two urbanized areas in the region – St. Joseph, Benton Harbor (TwinCATS) and the Niles, Buchanan Cass Area (NATS).

The SWMPC staff work closely with MDOT as well. We are often the bridge that links local roads and transit agencies with state and federal funding for transportation improvements and operations. This SWMPC coordination involves representation from elected officials and transportation agencies as the necessary lynchpin for federal and state-funded transportation projects.

SWMPC transportation planning staff members facilitate regular public meetings and work closely with area road and transit agencies to identify and plan for roads, public transit services, and non-motorized pathways. This program coordinates and facilitates regional planning for federal and state investments in surface transportation.



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Long Range Transportation Plan









Spotlight on the Long-Range Transportation Plan


Long-Range Transportation Plans (LRTP) are essential to SWMPC's transportation planning process. They are designed to evaluate the current and future transportation infrastructure over a 20-30-year period for the Benton Harbor-St. Joseph and Niles-Buchanan urbanized areas. This planning process helps coordinate regional transportation needs to create an efficient, convenient, safe, secure, and sustainable transportation system for all users. LRTPs are updated every four years.

In 2023, SWMPC staff developed the 2050 LRTPs for the Twin Cities Area Transportation Study (TwinCATS) and the Niles-Buchanan-Cass Area Transportation Study (NATS) with guidance from their respective Policy Committees and Technical Advisory Committees. These committees include representatives from cities, townships, villages, counties, public transit agencies, the airport authority, and road departments. The plans address future mobility challenges, including those posed by an aging population, emerging technologies, and funding shortfalls. Regional policies and actions outline strategies to improve education, equity, funding, preservation, resilience, safety, and shared prosperity. Implementing these plans will help improve southwest Michigan's quality of life.

The LRTPs outline how nearly \$520 million will be strategically allocated to address critical transportation needs, ensuring a more connected and prosperous region. The plans include regional transportation projects and investment priorities anticipated during the life of the plans. More details can be found on the [SWMPC website](#).

Principles in Motion >>> **GUIDING PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES**

-  **Economic Opportunity**
Supports growth, innovation, job creation and productivity.
-  **Environment**
Protects and preserves our natural resources, including land, water, and air.
-  **System Preservation**
Maintains existing facilities in good and reliable condition.
-  **Choice**
Offers multi-modal transportation options that are affordable and accessible.
-  **Safety & Security**
Enhances the safety and security of all users.
-  **Health**
Invites and enhances healthy and active lifestyles.
-  **Equity**
Provides access and opportunity for all people and all Neighborhoods.
-  **Resiliency & Reliability**
Improves the ability to prepare, plan for, absorb, and recover from actual or potential adverse events.




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2023-2026 Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP)

In 2023 the major focus continues to be the implementation of the Infrastructure Investment and Job Act.

Staff accomplishments:

- Developed scenarios for utilizing funds, across multiple programs.
- Collaborated with local road and transit agencies to explore various options.
- Facilitated committee meetings to get projects approved.
- Tracked budgets to ensure all funding was programed and obligated.

In 2023, SWMPC managed \$9.75 million in federal funding through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Additionally, SWMPC worked with the transit providers in Benton Harbor and Niles to manage \$2.8 million in funding from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).

FHWA Funding Breakdown:

Program	Allocated in 2023
Benton Harbor-St. Joseph Area (TwinCATS)	\$2,833,603
Niles-Buchanan-Cass Area (NATS)	\$1,432,405
Berrien Rural	\$1,083,454
Cass Rural	\$875,698
Van Buren Rural	\$1,140,419
Small Urban Areas (areas with a pop. of 5,000-49,000)	\$1,216,204
Transportation Air Quality Programs (CMAQ & CRP)	\$1,164,452
Total	\$9,746,235

Summary of Road Projects:

- 3.39 miles of non-motorized paths
- Two signal replacements
- 0.4 miles of roads reconstructed
- 7.7 miles of road rehabilitated
- 6.5 miles of preventive maintenance

Transit Summary:

Vehicle Replacements	\$2,429,588
Facility Repairs	\$396,757
Preventive Maintenance	\$550,000
Tools and Other Support Equipment	\$258,420
Communication Equipment	\$124,000
Consulting Services	\$125,000
Operation Assistance	\$1,068,979

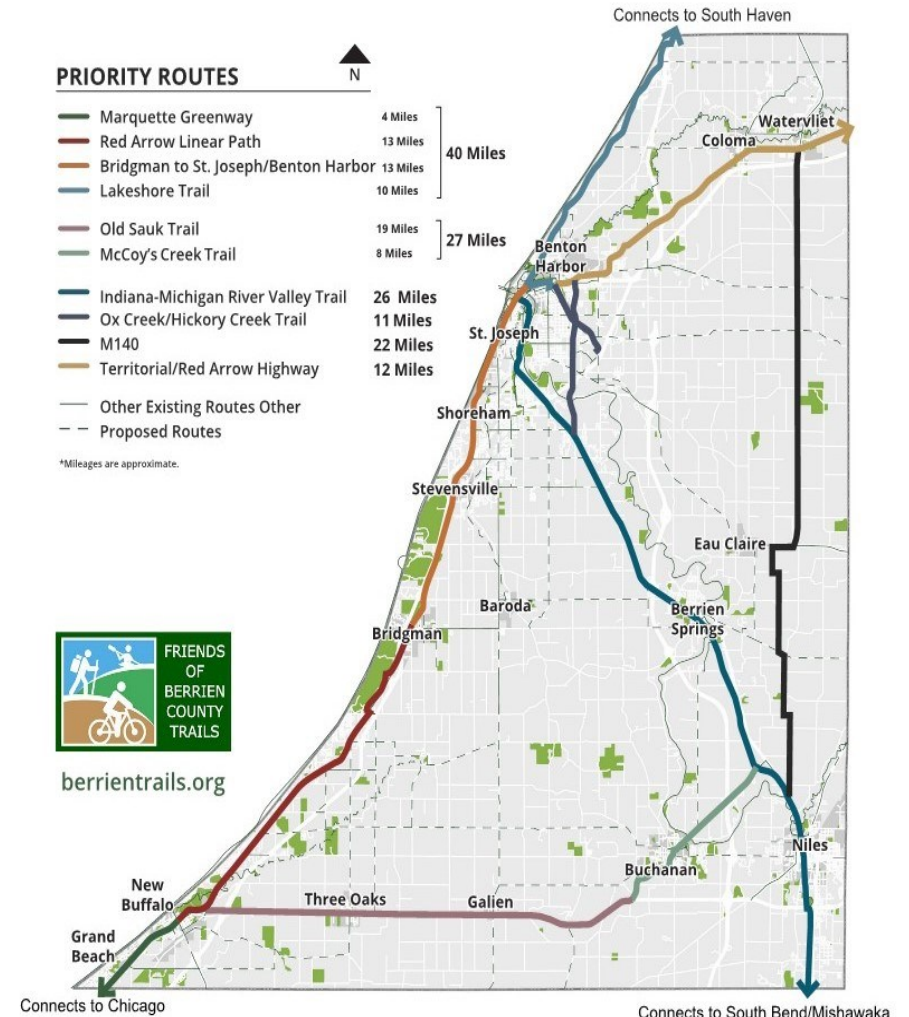


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Community Development

Berrien County Trails Master Plan

The SWMPC was on the leadership team along with the Friends of Berrien County Trails and Be Healthy Berrien to develop the first county-wide trails master plan for Berrien County. The plan lays out a bold vision and strategy to build a world class trail system in Berrien County. The trail facilities addressed in the plan include Shared Use Paths, Paved Shoulders/Bike Lanes, Sharrows, US Bike Routes, Water (paddling) Trails, Parks with Hiking Trails, Mountain Biking Trails, Cross Country Skiing Trails, and Equestrian Trails. Community engagement was a focus of the planning process with 100% participation from cities, villages and townships, over 2,000 survey responses and four well attended community meetings. The plan outlines current non-motorized infrastructure, the demand for non-motorized transportation and recreation infrastructure and gaps in coverage within Berrien County. The Berrien County Trails Master Plan then sets out an ambitious vision based on anticipated demand and the results of community engagement efforts. The many successful grants awarded to trails projects in Berrien County in 2023 can be at least partially attributed to the existence of the Berrien County Trails Master Plan. The Friends of Berrien County Trails was recognized by the SWMPC for their leadership on the Berrien County Trails Master Plan by being awarded the Graham Woodhouse Intergovernmental Effort Award in 2023.

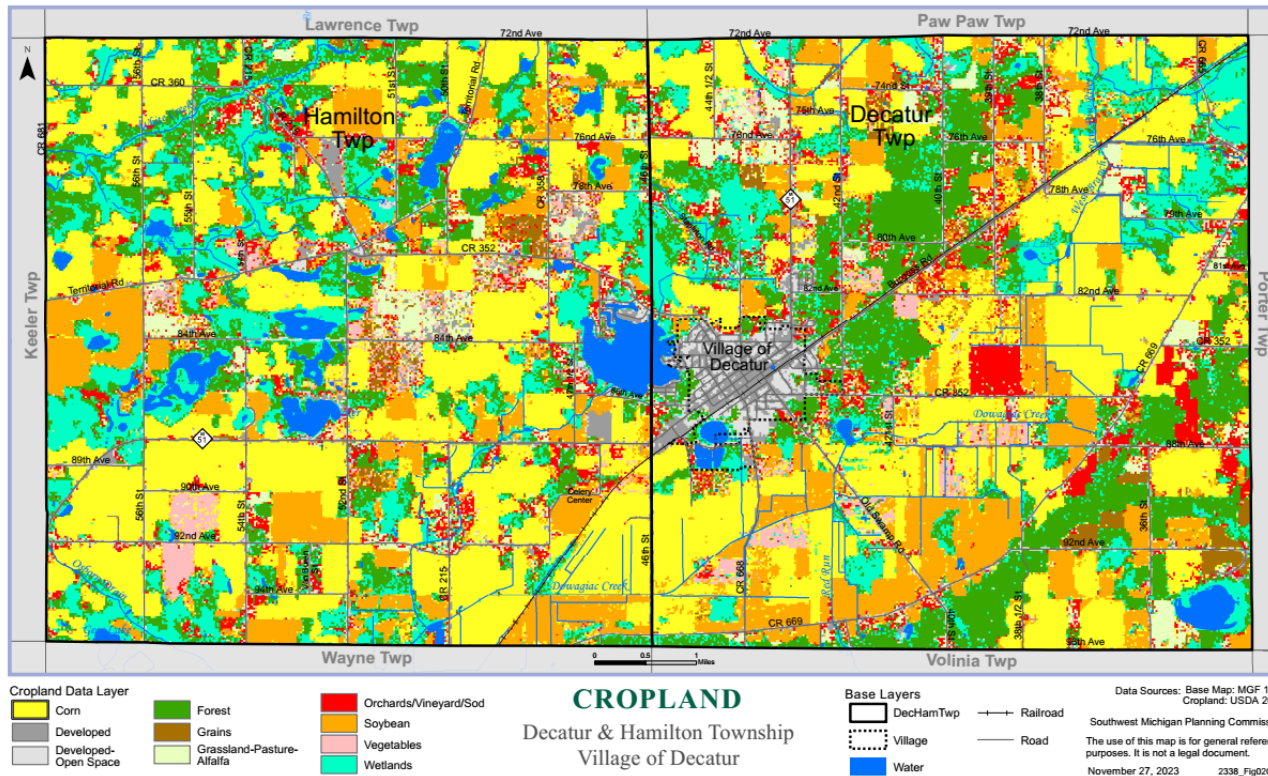


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Joint Master Plan

Decatur Village, Hamilton Township, and Decatur Township Master Plan Update

The SWMPC facilitated a Joint Master Plan update for the Village of Decatur, Decatur Township, and Hamilton Township. SWMPC updated demographics, maps, goals and objectives, future land use categories and the action plan. SWMPC staff met with all three planning commissions to gain insights on what elements needed to be updated. The three communities have been doing joint planning for over three decades. There continues to be strong alignment with the three communities to pursue joint planning and implementation efforts as they see themselves as one community. SWMPC believes this type of collaboration is a model for the region and the state and is proud to assist these communities with their joint planning.



2022 Croplands data layer, used as land use/land cover information for the Decatur – Hamilton joint Master Plan

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Environmental

Ox Creek Restoration and Revitalization

Efforts have come far since the 1980s, when now-Benton Harbor Interim City Manager Alex Little recalls the city buying the railway along the creek with a vision for a future nonmotorized trail. Fast forward to 2021, the Benton Harbor City Commission declared the Ox Creek corridor revitalization a priority by unanimous resolution. City and township leaders, local, county, regional, academic, state, and federal partners – including SWMPC and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy’s (EGLE) Office of the Great Lakes, teamed up to form the Ox Creek Collaborative Partnership to support efforts to revitalize and restore the creek. The project partners have a vision for a vibrant, healthy Ox Creek corridor with biking/walking trails and bridges, commercial development, housing opportunities, and more. Ox Creek links residents in the city and neighboring Benton Charter Township with history, social connections, and the natural environment. But it has suffered from excessive dumping of trash, urban and rural nonpoint source pollution, and other contamination and neglect. The Paw Paw River Watershed Management Plan written by SWMPC and approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), identified Ox Creek as the highest-priority sub-watershed for restoration. SWMPC staff has worked to secure over \$7 million in grant funding to support the restoration and revitalization of the Ox Creek corridor.



University of Michigan rendering of the restoration of Ox Creek at Hall Park and the Ox Creek Trail and pedestrian bridge



Community members and city leaders working with University of Michigan to develop the Ox Creek restoration and revitalization vision

Project Contact

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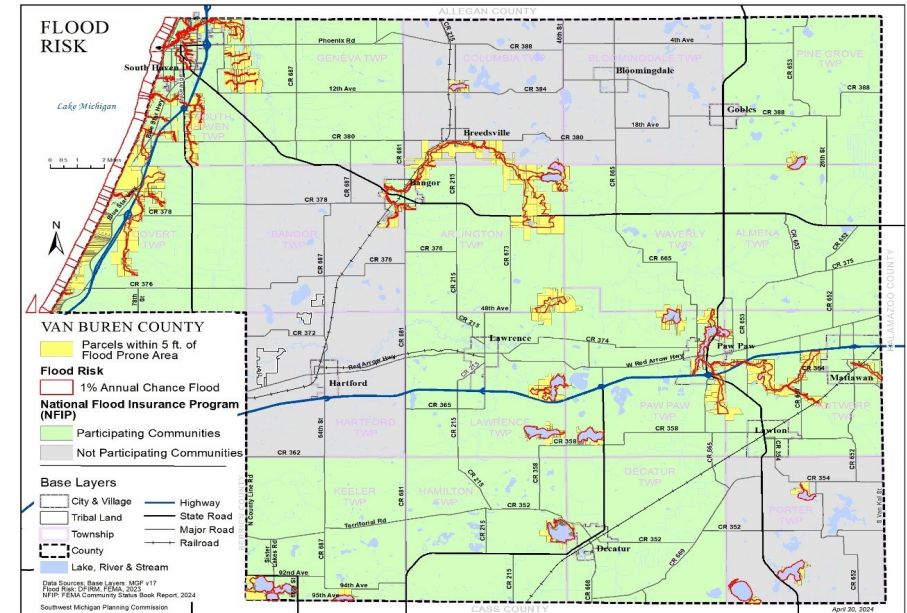
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Pokagon and Van Buren Hazard Mitigation Plans

The SWMPC updated the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians' Hazard Mitigation Plan and is currently updating Van Buren County's plan. Communities that wish to remain eligible for hazard mitigation project funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) must have an updated plan. Hazard Mitigation Plans contain in-depth data and mapping to understand the risk and vulnerabilities of natural and man-made disasters such as severe weather, flooding, coastal erosion, hazardous waste spills, extreme temperatures, infrastructure failures and public health emergencies. The plan contains proactive actions and strategies aimed to reduce loss of life and property by lessening the impact of disasters.

Examples of hazard mitigation include:

- Conducting public outreach on severe weather awareness and preparedness
- Limiting or restricting development in floodplain areas
- Removing existing buildings from flood or erosion prone hazard areas
- Using snow fences to limit blowing and drifting of snow over road corridors
- Constructing resilience hubs which are community-serving facilities to support residents and coordinate resource distribution and services before, during, or after a hazard event
- Burying overhead powerlines that may fail due to heavy snow, ice, or windstorms



2024 Flood Risk map for an update to Van Buren County Hazard Mitigation Plan

Economic Development

Palisades Recovery Strategy

The SWMPC teamed up with Kinexus Group (via Market Van Buren) and University of Michigan's Economic Growth Institute (EGI) to devise a recovery strategy to account for the loss of the Palisades Nuclear Plant in Covert Township, which has been scheduled to be decommissioned. This plant had upwards of 600 highly skilled employees when fully staffed, and the impact of the plant's closure would be massive. SWMPC staff has engaged with its partners and stakeholders in the affected communities by attending regular strategy meetings, working with EGI on its initiative to develop priorities and projects that could help the region diversify its economy and assisting communities with submitting grant applications to federal and state programs.

Now, with the seemingly impending announcement that the plant will reopen, it may seem that this process has been for naught. However, the findings of the study and recovery strategy, to be released later in 2024, will provide an informative and comprehensive strategy to diversify the region's economy, align grant opportunities with community priorities, and strive to build an attractive and thriving community for residents and newcomers. The discussions brought forward during the Palisades Recovery Strategy's development have also brought new opportunities for collaboration and growth between state agencies, communities, and economic development practitioners to collectively advance the region.

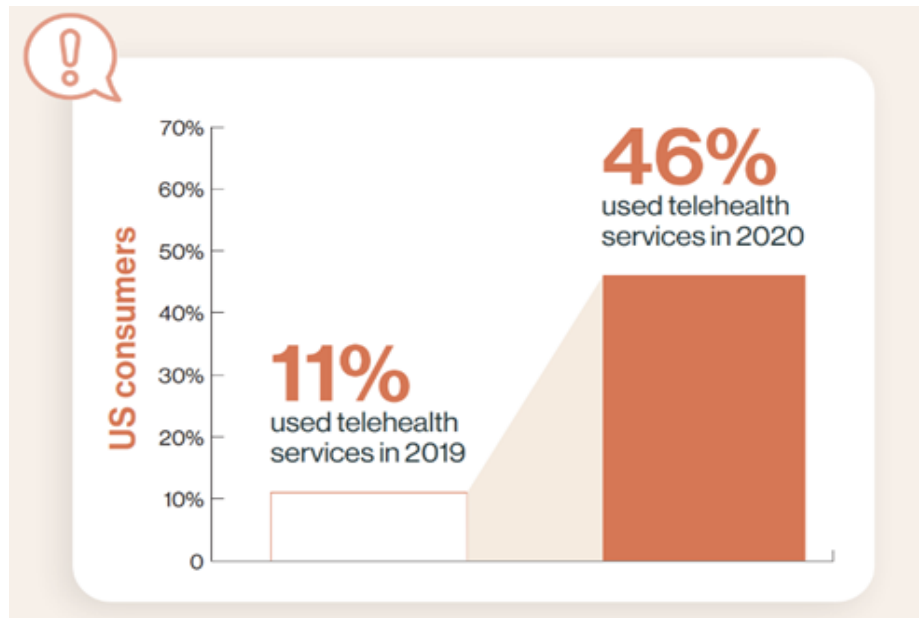


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Southwest Michigan's Broadband Navigator

Since 2013, the SWMPC has been engaged in understanding, and solving the gaps in broadband infrastructure in southwest Michigan. We were decidedly ahead of the curve back then. First, in seeing that broadband was an essential resource, and second, in recognizing that solutions can't come until we have the best possible understanding of existing conditions. Fast forward to 2022 when the issue reached critical mass for the state and federal governments. In anticipation of this, we had already connected ourselves to some of the most influential voices and organizations in the larger broadband conversation. We positioned ourselves to receive otherwise unavailable geographic data on the location of middle-mile infrastructure through carefully crafted non-disclosure agreements. We were awarded "Broadband Navigator" status by the state and remain a primary regional contact point for leaders at the state and national level.

The first major, post-COVID funding for broadband infrastructure was the state's Realizing Opportunities with Broadband Infrastructure Networks (ROBIN) funding to be awarded in 2023. Because of our aggressive engagement leading up to this critical inflection point, the SWMPC was well positioned to be a helpful voice when called upon by our communities. ROBIN for southwest Michigan proved to be a stunning success as a significant portion of a \$25.25 M award to Midwest Energy and Communication went to our three counties. Certainly, the SWMPC cannot take credit for this amazing accomplishment. But, this is another example of downstream success that can be tied back to considerable upstream work from the SWMPC.



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Materials Management

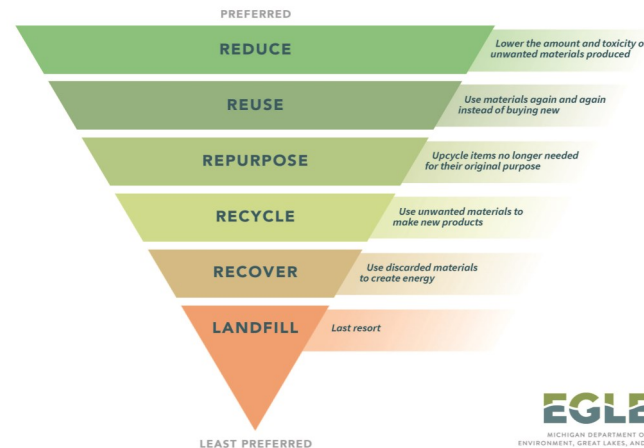
On March 29, 2023, the State of Michigan reimagined Part 115 of the Solid Waste Statute to refocus on Materials Management with a goal of increasing sustainable practices such as recycling and composting. The SWMPC has facilitated understanding of the new statute’s requirements, emphasized the advantages of a multi-county plan, and ensured adherence to statutory deadlines for Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties. By the end of 2023, the three counties reached a consensus to work collaboratively on one Materials Management Plan and appoint the SWMPC as the Designated Planning Agency for the new plan.

The planning process for the new plan commences mid-2024 and spans over a three-year period. During this time, the SWMPC will identify existing materials management infrastructure, project future capacity, and strategize for meeting recycling and organics targets. Concurrently, it will facilitate the Materials Management Planning Committee, while retaining its pivotal role as the primary source of knowledge for the planning process and new statute regulations.

The SWMPC is excited to take on this new endeavor and is committed to working collectively with the counties for a more sustainable future. As the project progresses, their focus remains on fostering collaboration and implementing sustainable solutions for the benefit of their communities and the environment.

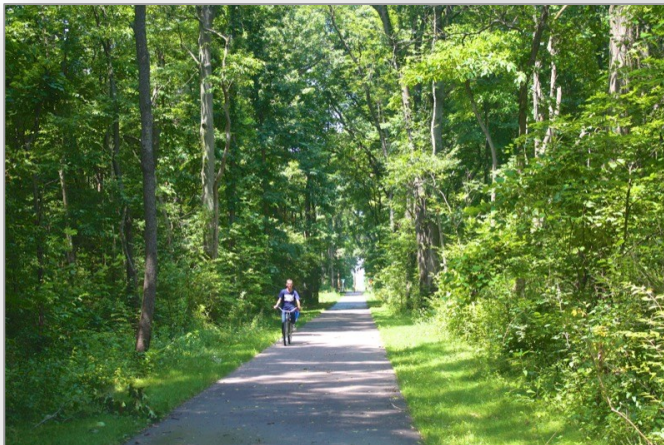


SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS MANAGEMENT



Michigan Infrastructure Office Partnership

In 2023, the Michigan Infrastructure Office (MIO) created its Technical Assistance Center designed to provide technical assistance to communities to access Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding. MIO would contract with third party consultants to provide technical assistance directly to communities, with the potential for match funding to be provided as well. Next, MIO then contracted with regional planning organizations to cultivate projects and project ideas within their communities and submit them back to MIO. The SWMPC has stayed engaged with MIO throughout the development this new program, even helping MIO develop their guidelines. The SWMPC reached out to communities across the region for projects, filtered them based on their fit with IIJA funding opportunities, and submitted three that appeared to match, on to MIO. All three were awarded— one for Riverview Drive in Benton Harbor, another for Berrien County trails projects, and another for an Amtrak connection for the Pere Marquette passenger rail in New Buffalo Township.



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Mapping & GIS

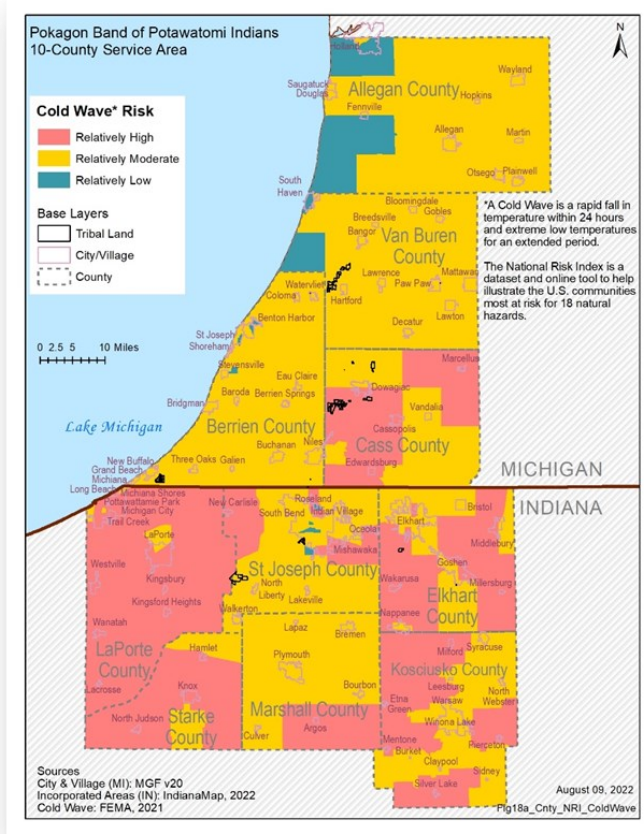
Pokagon Band Hazard Mitigation Plan

Mapping Hazard Mitigation Plan - The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians

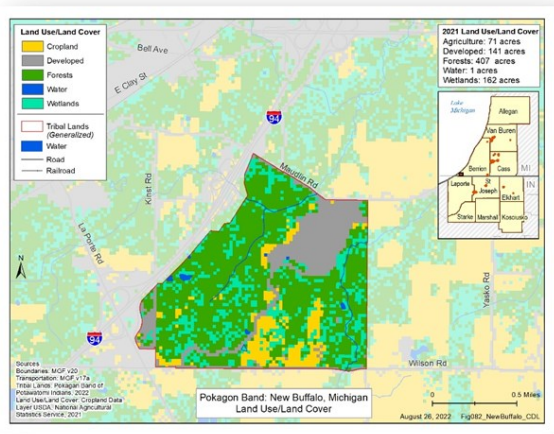
The role of mapping is vital for a hazard mitigation plan. To heighten awareness of hazards, risks, and vulnerabilities, to pinpoint actions for risk reduction, and to concentrate local resources on the most significant risks while conveying priorities to state and federal authorities, detailed maps are a necessity.

The task of updating the Hazard Mitigation Plan for the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, had unique mapping components as the Pokagon Band's reach encompasses tribal services across ten counties. These include Allegan, Berrien, Van Buren, and Cass in Michigan, and La Porte, St. Joseph, Elkhart, Starke, Marshall, and Kosciusko in Indiana.

An initial step in crafting the plan involves assessing risks. It's crucial to grasp which geographic areas each hazard could affect and which people, properties, or assets might be vulnerable. This assessment requires comprehensive mapping at both the county-wide and more granular levels. Thirty-seven maps were created, each presenting various types of information, ranging from asset inventories to risk indices for natural hazards.



2022 Cold Wave Risk map illustrating the areas most at risk of rapid fall in temperature for an extended period



2021 Land Use/Land Cover map for Pokagon Band in New Buffalo

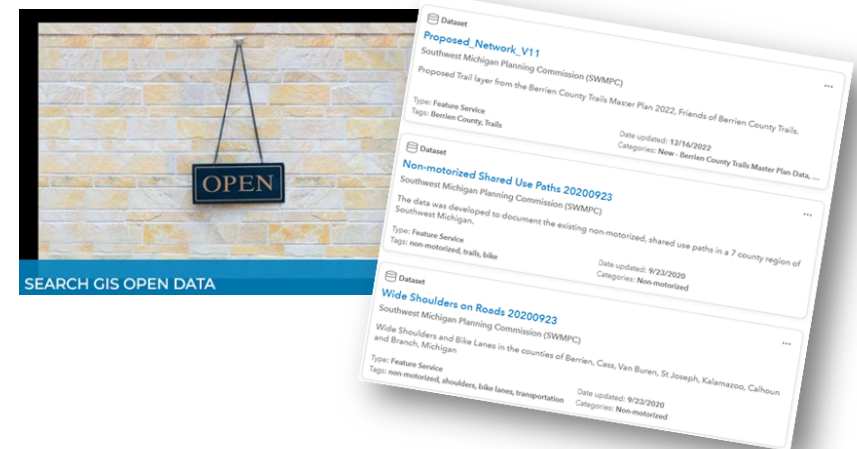
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Map Gallery

Explore the Transportation category within the SWMPC Map Gallery to discover a wealth of information about the region. From Average Annual Traffic Counts to Road Ownership, Census Urban Boundaries, and Pavement Conditions, there's plenty to delve into. Additionally, check out other categories such as the Social Vulnerability Index, which leverages 16 U.S. census variables to assist local officials in pinpointing communities that might require aid before, during, or after disasters. Many of these map layers can be visualized as tables, downloaded, or seamlessly integrated into your own maps using ESRI ArcGIS Online accounts.



For direct access to geo-spatial data, navigate to the SWMPC Open Data platform. Here, you not only have the option to download data directly but also to engage with it in various ways. Browse and filter through tables, or craft your own customized maps tailored to your specific needs. Collaboration lies at the heart of SWMPC's endeavors, and within this platform, you'll discover datasets crucial to the region's development and planning. SWMPC continuously uploads distinctive and tailored datasets sourced from the region onto the Open Data site, ensuring a comprehensive and dynamic resource hub for stakeholders and enthusiasts alike.



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Awards

Graham Woodhouse Award - Berrien County Trails Master Plan

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission presented the 2023 Graham Woodhouse Intergovernmental Effort award at its Board meeting held on December 19, 2023, to the Berrien County Trails Master Plan. The award is presented annually for projects that exemplify cooperation between and among governments, non-profits, and private entities. It was established to recognize and reward the partners who execute complex, regional problem solving that optimizes the use of limited resources. The partners involved were deemed deserving for their resourcefulness, dedication, and persistence. The 2023 Graham Woodhouse award was given to twenty project partner organizations, twenty-six separate funders (public, private, and non-profit), and thirty-two resolutions of support from units of government within the county. The project is a testament to the emerging currency of trails and the value of connectivity. The leaders involved see the opportunities possible through a well-conceived, interconnected network of non-motorized trails. In addition to obvious connectivity, other key goals of the Master Plan include safety, health, economic impact, talent attraction, and equitable access.



Welch Lackey Award - Gail Patterson-Gladney

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission selected Van Buren County Commissioner Gail Patterson-Gladney to be honored with the 2023 Welch-Lackey Leadership Award by the SWMPC Board during their meeting held on February 20, 2024. Berrien County Commissioner and SWMPC Chair, Roseann Marchetti presented the honor to Commissioner Patterson-Gladney.

The SWMPC presents the Welch-Lackey Leadership Award each year in honor of former Commissioners George A. Welch and William F. Lackey. These men served the Commission in times of great personal difficulties, yet continued throughout to represent the spirit of public service and to further the goals of intergovernmental cooperation. Their contribution to the communities they served embodies the leadership qualities essential to the preservation of our citizen form of government. Board members vote using a ballot containing nominees of current members with exemplary qualities.



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