



Top: Michigan farm (Canva); Owosso solar farm (Graham Sustainability Institute); Constantine, MI (Chris Light, Wikimedia Commons).
Bottom: Gratiot wind farm (Graham Sustainability Institute).

MICHIGAN RURAL PROSPERITY VISION

In November 2023, the Center for EmPowering Communities, with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation, hosted a gathering of applied researchers and practitioners united by an understanding and respect for rural people and places.

Participants aligned around a vision of rural prosperity, mapped existing initiatives that support the vision, and identified enabling activities needed to advance it. This summary captures the major outcomes of the session, reflecting participants' shared pursuit of empowering rural communities and fostering their prosperity.

Co-Developing a Vision

Before the session, organizers gathered feedback on an initial draft vision for rural prosperity. Participants highlighted aspects that excited them, areas needing clarity, and elements that were missing. This prework was grounded in an understanding of the clean energy transition and upcoming renewable energy development in rural areas, setting the stage for the entire session.

During the event, participants collectively refined the vision, achieving clarity and resonance. They then contextualized this vision within Michigan's unique circumstances. The group explored past, present, and planned projects aligned with the vision, offering insights into existing initiatives and opportunities for collaboration. Additionally, participants brainstormed potential enabling efforts and activities, identifying key collaborators and funding sources to support these initiatives. The session concluded with a focus on ongoing collaboration and collective action essential for realizing the shared vision of rural prosperity.

Vision for Rural Prosperity

Partners, resources, and policy support a planning process that centers on community values, goals, and needs to evaluate rural development options and realize rural prosperity.

Realizing the Vision

Participants generated numerous ideas to advance the vision, which coalesced around several themes outlined below. While examples of elements of this vision are evident across Michigan and the country, bringing it to fruition will necessitate investment in strengthening and connecting these components, establishing a supportive network, and developing the necessary tools and infrastructure to ensure success.

Participants prioritized enabling efforts tailored to Michigan's unique context. These efforts would expand planning resources, foster regional collaboration, enhance workforce development, and improve decision-making processes. Additionally, there is a call for supportive state leadership and policy to unify efforts statewide and address long-standing challenges. The top opportunities are summarized below.



Images by the Center for EmPowering Communities.

- **Expand planning resources and build local capacity—** Most rural Michigan communities have limited capacity for the planning and community development efforts critical to their ability to prosper. It is essential to expand planning resources and capacity in communities and, critically, the regional organizations that serve them. This includes additional funding for staff to handle planning and visioning work, continuing education on topics like project management and tax policy, creating templates and tools to assess development options, cultivating trusted facilitators, and enhancing collaboration and resource-sharing across agencies and localities, such as with a cohort model of interested communities supported by relevant partner organizations.
- **Develop supportive state leadership and policy—** State support is essential to lead, strengthen, and connect efforts statewide. Participants endorsed the Office of Rural Prosperity's approach, which connects rural communities with resources to advance their priorities and build internal capacity. However, additional resources are needed to expand the Office's capacity and provide further capacity-building support. Other top priorities include establishing and funding a statewide planning office with the capacity to lead statewide initiatives and promote planning resources and support, as well as securing state funding for a community development professional in every county. On the policy side, it is crucial to streamline grant processes and reduce administrative burdens, enabling communities to better overcome capacity limitations and access funding. Ultimately, long-term structural solutions are needed to address chronic local government revenue shortfalls, which underlie capacity challenges and hinder communities' ability to plan and implement projects locally.

Energy Infrastructure Opportunities

Given the substantial anticipated investment in energy infrastructure over the coming decades, energy development is becoming increasingly pertinent for rural communities.

Effective planning enables rural communities to navigate evolving realities, assess various development options—including energy projects—evaluate how these options align with community goals and values, and chart a viable path toward prosperity. Energy infrastructure projects that align with and support community objectives should naturally integrate into the community's trajectory. Conversely, when projects do not align, it signals a need to reconsider aspects of the project design or its potential impacts.

Changes in Michigan's and other states' energy policy landscapes are prompting questions about local communities' authority in shaping energy projects. Comprehensive planning is essential to clarify how potential energy projects could affect community goals and to inform project design and more supportive state policies.

- **Enable urban-rural regional approaches**—Urban and rural communities are interconnected and both have valuable insights to share. Examples of successful past collaborations include rural counties around Grand Rapids contributing to regional economic development strategies, connections between Detroit and the Upper Peninsula in food systems, and policymaker tours leading to discussions on farmland preservation. Participants called for research and policymaking around new regional development approaches, including the establishment of a Rural Michigan Policy Commission. This commission would bring senior-level policymakers to rural communities and perform a comprehensive policy analysis of rural Michigan.



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- **Foster information-sharing and sound decision-making**—Communities need better information about the impacts of development choices, including the option of taking no action, in relation to their goals. Cataloging and evaluating project outcomes and community benefits can help communities understand their options and explore new possibilities. Beyond information, new facilitation processes are needed to help communities fairly and accurately weigh tradeoffs among development options. Additionally, we should model public engagement processes that require developers to incorporate community feedback where possible.
- **Emphasize workforce development**—Addressing rural Michigan's workforce challenges requires a comprehensive effort. As part of that, workshop participants stressed the importance of community-driven efforts that reflect the skills and jobs the community desires and engagement with younger people. Ideas generated included a Rural Action Corps that provides incentives for younger people to live and work in rural communities and the fostering of social enterprise movements.
- **Crafting and sharing the story**—Enhance communication within and among communities statewide. This involves gathering success stories from rural communities, identifying effective patterns, and widely sharing these insights as a valuable "Reimagining Rural" resource. State policymakers also play a crucial role in shaping and implementing this narrative. We need to convene them to envision and plan for Michigan's future 30 years from now.

Michigan's Office of Rural Prosperity is a cross-agency connector and liaison that works across sectors to foster strategic and coordinated investments in people and places, with an intentional focus on building the capacity and resources necessary to meet complex rural needs. Its Rural Readiness Program offers a multi-pronged approach to capacity-building, readiness, funding, and networking in and among Michigan's rural communities, and it incorporates many of the strategies and opportunities workshop participants identified. There was strong support among participants for the office and advocacy for its expansion.

Participants

Participants came from a variety of sectors, backgrounds, and geographies. The session was facilitated by Ann Verhey-Henke and Carlotta Pham.

Maggie Allan, *University of Michigan, Graham Sustainability Institute*

Paige Brann, *University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research*

Liesl Clark, *University of Michigan, School for Environment & Sustainability*

Chuck Donaldson, *Michigan Economic Development Corporation*

Jim Hamilton, *The Nuclear Decommissioning Collaborative*

Mary Catherine Hannah, *Alpena County*

Jean Hardy, *Michigan State University, Rural Computing Research Consortium*

Sarah Lucas, *Michigan Office of Rural Prosperity*

Sarah Mills, *University of Michigan, Graham Sustainability Institute*

Tony Pipa, *Brookings, Center for Sustainable Development*

Mary Reilly, *Michigan State University Extension*

Terry Watt, *Terrell Watt Planning Consultants*

Dahvi Wilson, *Siting Clean LLC*

Mark Wyckoff, *Planning & Zoning Center and Land Policy Institute (retired)*

Additional support was provided by Graham Sustainability Institute staff including: Alexandra Haddad, Madeleine Krol, Sarah Lee, and Hayley Sakwa.

We purposefully convened individuals with a variety of perspectives and insights. Recognizing the diversity of perspectives present, it is important to emphasize that not all ideas offered here reflect consensus or agreement among the entire group. Thus, this document aims to reflect the breadth of discussion that took place, rather than provide an endorsement of those ideas. At the same time, we acknowledge that there are still numerous voices missing and eagerly welcome input to make the ideas stronger and more impactful.



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