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fspp-webmaster@umich.edu

0:00:00.7 Stephanie Leiser: Good afternoon. Thank you so much for coming to our event, Democracy on the Front Lines: Lessons from Michigan Local Governments. My name is Stephanie Leiser. I'm the director of the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy, CLOSUP, here at the Ford School. At CLOSUP, our mission is to serve Michigan's communities across the whole state, from small townships in the UP to large cities in Southeast Michigan. And we do that through a variety of research projects, collaborative partnerships, and student engagement opportunities. In fact, this year, we're very excited to be celebrating the 25th anniversary of CLOSUP. So I'm going to do that as an applause line. This event is part of the University of Michigan's Year of Democracy, an initiative for democracy and civic empowerment. And we'd like to thank Jenna Bednar and the Democracy and Civic Empowerment team for their support in making this event possible. Our topic of conversation today is about democracy at the local level right here in Michigan. And we're so fortunate to have a panel of visitors that includes four local leaders from around the state. We have Shea Charles, City Manager of East Grand Rapids; Anne Marie Graham-Hudak, Supervisor of Canton Township; Megan Sellers, Deputy County Executive in Oakland County, and Tom Stephenson, Village President of Elk Rapids. So let's take a moment to welcome them with a round of applause.

[applause]

0:01:27.5 Stephanie Leiser: So the state of American democracy and what it means to be a participant in democracy has been top of mind in recent years. When we talk about democracy, we tend to talk a lot about the federal government, about what's going on in Congress and with the presidency. And we also tend to talk a lot about elections, about voter turnout, about gerrymandering and campaigns, the Electoral College, the horse race, all of that kind of stuff. But

today, we want to take a look at democracy from a different perspective. Not in faraway Washington, DC, but right here in our own backyard. And not just on Election Day, but every other day of the year. For our four panelists, carrying out the daily work of democracy is their job. Every day in jurisdictions across the state, local officials interact with their residents to help determine community priorities, to allocate funds for services, to solve problems, register voters, and in general, to do the daily, and I'm sure as they'll tell you, mostly unglamorous work of figuring out how we will work together to make our communities the kinds of places people want to live, work, and raise their families. So to set the stage for our discussion of local democracy and resident engagement strategies, I'd like to first introduce my colleague, Deborah Horner.

0:02:44.6 Stephanie Leiser: Deborah's the Senior Program Manager for the Michigan Public Policy Survey, or as we call it, the MPPS. Since 2009, CLOSUP has run the MPPS to gather insights and opinions of local officials around the state. And we regularly hear from over 1,300 of the 1,856 cities, villages, townships, and counties in Michigan. That's a 70, 70% response rate, which is unheard of in survey research, and we're very proud of that. In fact, we figured it out this summer, there are only three jurisdictions in the whole state that we've never heard from and 161 that we've heard from every single one of the 27 waves that the MPPS has been running. On the MPPS, we ask local officials about all kinds of different policy issues, and all the data's on our website if you're interested in taking a look. But one of the topics the MPPS focused on this last spring was resident engagement and the state of local democracy. So Deborah's going to start by walking us through some of our statewide findings from that 2025 data. Following Deborah's overview, we'll turn to our panel to discuss some of these issues in more depth, and then we'll end with audience Q&A. Take it away.

[applause]

0:04:01.4 Deborah Horner: Thank you, Stephanie. No, you can't tell. It's there.

0:04:09.0 Stephanie Leiser: It's right there. It's up.

0:04:10.4 Deborah Horner: Okay. We had technical difficulties just the other day, it was concerning, but look, I think we're okay. Thank you. Thank you, Stephanie. Before we get started on the discussion with our panelists about their communities, I want to share with you some of the insights that we've gathered from communities statewide on the Michigan Public Policy Survey from governments all across Michigan. So just for some background on the MPPS, because we are really excited about this program. So this is a census survey. It is all 1,856 counties, cities, villages, and townships in the state of Michigan. The respondents to the survey are the top elected and top appointed officials in each jurisdiction. So, for example, in a city, it would be the city manager or the mayor. In a township, it would be the township supervisor or the clerk, usually because very few townships in the state of Michigan have a formal manager. And so we usually take the township supervisor and clerk as respondents to the survey. If it's a county, it's the county board chair or the county exec. And in our villages, the village president or the village manager. People usually get an invitation to do the survey online with an email.

0:05:15.8 Deborah Horner: They click on a link and they take the survey on software online. But there are people in local jurisdictions across the state who do not have good internet access, don't have good broadband, may not have a great email address that they use for their work in the township or the village or the county, or they just don't prefer to do online surveys. So we actually send them a USPS hard copy questionnaire in the mail because we don't want to miss those jurisdictions. We work really hard to get to every single local jurisdiction in the state of Michigan.

And we have covered pretty much every topic you can imagine that touches on local government. We do a lot of work on finance and budgeting and how people spend their money and what kind of revenue they have. We do a lot of work on energy, roads, poverty, criminal justice. You name it, we've got data on it. So if you are interested in any of these policy areas, please get in touch with us so we can share with you all of this really great data from local governments across Michigan. As Stephanie mentioned, we have more than 1,300 jurisdictions every wave who participate in the survey.

0:06:15.9 Deborah Horner: So it lets us break down the data in really interesting ways. Small jurisdictions in southwest Michigan, counties in the UP. We can really look at the data in depth and be able to make a lot of really interesting comparisons between different kinds of jurisdictions. Today I'm going to mostly show you statewide data, but that does exist. And then we also provide all of our information online, our questionnaires, pre-run data tables, anything that doesn't involve individual responses from individual jurisdictions. Those we protect their anonymity. And then we also partner with the Michigan Association of Counties, the Michigan Municipal League, the Michigan Townships Association to make sure that we're asking relevant, actionable questions that our local government officials care about answering. And so we think that contributes to our really high response rate on the survey. All right. Let's talk a little bit about resident engagement and the functioning of democracy in local communities across Michigan. So the good news is that in 2025, statewide assessments of the general kind of functioning of local democracy really held strong compared to previous years. But assessments of things like resident engagement, local government officials' trust in their residents, the tone of discourse involving residents. All of those things were really trending worse, and it's worrisome to look at.

0:07:30.8 Deborah Horner: So let's start with the good news. How are local governments feeling about overall democracy in their local communities? So since 2020, every year the MPPS has asked local government officials to rate the health of democracy, the functioning of democracy on three levels: National, state, and local. The questionnaire is a pretty long question. I actually excerpted it here on the bottom of the screen because it's such a long question, because it really asks local officials to take into account, we specifically ask them to take into account things like an unbiased free press, balanced relationships between levels and branches of government, ethical and transparent governance, and an engaged citizenry. All of those, thinking about all of those things, how would you rate the health of democracy on a scale of one to 10, where one is a complete breakdown of democracy and 10 is perfectly functioning democracy? And you can see consistently, most local government leaders say that in their communities, they're high functioning. 83% say that they're 7 to 10 on a 10-point scale, and only about 2% statewide say that their local democracy is not functioning well. Compare this to just 27% of local government officials who think the US democracy is functioning in a high way... From 7 to 10 on the 10-point scale, and 43% who think it's in the tank.

0:08:48.8 Deborah Horner: So local government officials, the people who are experiencing that kind of democratic functioning in our local communities, feel really confident about it, which is the good news. But what about these assessments that I spoke about of resident engagement in their own communities? This seems to be an aspect of the functioning of democracy that seems to be suffering. So let me give you an example. We ask a general question, "Overall, how do you feel that your residents are engaged with your local government?" And the assessments of these resident engagements are down. So back in 2012, 65% of local government officials in Michigan said our residents are somewhat or very engaged. Then in 2016, it was down to 56%. Today, fewer than half statewide in 2025 say that their residents are either somewhat or very engaged. Compared to

counterparts in more urban communities, rural places are actually struggling with the lowest assessments of their resident engagement. Just 41% of rural places say that their residents are either somewhat or very engaged, and 13% say they're not engaged at all. On the other end of the spectrum, urban places are doing slightly better, but it's still only about 53% who say that their residents are somewhat or very engaged.

0:09:42.0 Deborah Horner: And nice thing is only 5% in urban places say they're not engaged at all. We also ask a really interesting question about trust. So lots of public opinion surveys out there ask individuals, "Do you trust the government to do what's right? Do you trust the government to do things right?" So we flip that question around and we ask local government officials, "Do you trust your residents to be good partners in public policy-making?" And unfortunately, that is also trending down as well. You can see just 40% of local government officials in the state say they trust their residents nearly always or most of the time to be good partners in policy-making. Meanwhile, 21% currently say that they almost or never trust their residents to participate responsibly. And these are the highest levels of distrust since we started tracking back in 2012. So we've been tracking this a long time, and unfortunately, the trend is definitely on the downward slope. Okay. This is a really busy slide. I am so sorry, but I just want to give you a sense of what this question is. We also, since 2012, five times have asked questions about the tone of discourse and civil civic engagement and discussion. And what we have found, we have asked it about local government officials within the jurisdiction, their conversation among themselves, about residents with local government officials, and then among residents themselves.

0:11:26.3 Deborah Horner: And these two graphs are the assessments of how is your dialogue and your tone of discussion among your residents, and then residents and elected officials together. And Michigan leaders are significantly less likely, again in 2025, to say discourse about local politics

among residents is primarily constructive. Just 30% say that. Compared to just three years earlier in 2022, when 42% said it was primarily constructive discourse. Meanwhile, about 18% right now think that discussions among their residents are mostly divisive. So that's one in five jurisdictions saying that really our residents aren't getting along very well. Now, the good news is that in 2025, about 59% of local government officials say when residents come to us and we are speaking with residents and we're engaging with residents, that's primarily constructive. We have some pretty good constructive dialogue with our residents, between us elected officials and the residents. However, this is again down since 2022, where 66% said, and in 2012, it was 70% said they had mostly constructive dialogue. So again, this tone of discussion is really on the downward slide as well. All right. Here's some... This is, again, a very busy slide. I'm sorry, my data analysis self has trouble giving up on any data that I can show you.

0:12:41.8 Deborah Horner: But I also, we did give local government officials a long list of possible problems that they might be having with resident engagement. And what's interesting is there's really one significant point that stands out on this list, and it's that 65% statewide say they're having problems that just attracting the same people come over and over again to whatever engagement they have. Which is okay, but that doesn't really tell us much. It seems like it's almost more of a symptom than a cause of the problem. So what else could be contributing to this low engagement? Well, 36% statewide, including a majority of cities, say they have problems with a small vocal minority that's scaring other people away. It's keeping other residents from engaging. And we also have widespread issues of problems with time and resources, which are two issues that are true of almost every policy area the MPPS looks at. Local government officials don't have a lot of time and they don't have a lot of resources to spend on pretty much any policy area you could ask about. Meanwhile, there's about 43% of cities and 45% of counties that say that state and national partisan politics is causing problems for their resident engagement. So that tends to be a larger

jurisdiction problem. The reason this is so small statewide is we have mostly small jurisdictions across the state.

0:14:01.8 Deborah Horner: All right. So next, let's talk about some ways that local governments say they try to promote their resident engagement. And I'm going to put another big slide up here. I'm so sorry. It's a gigantic list of possible strategies that local governments might be using. And the point here with this slide is that since 2012, when we asked last this question, local governments across the state report more widespread efforts in almost all of the different outreach activities that we asked about in 2012 and 2015. So despite the fact that they're seeing less resident engagement, they're offering more opportunities. So I want to just point out, obviously this is a huge list, but I just want to point out one of the key changes in increasing use of email and websites in order to try to engage residents. That's not surprising. Since 2012, we've made a lot of progress technologically.

0:14:49.2 Deborah Horner: So the use of e-newsletters and email and trying to engage with residents through the computer is up from 29% in 2012 to over half of jurisdictions. And again, remember, a lot of our places are small places. So even the smaller places are using email and social media to try to reach their residents. And additionally, there's 49% out there who are trying to use interactive features on their website to engage residents, such as performance dashboards or budget information that might be on the website to try to get people involved. Oh, that's this slide. So interestingly, local government officials only report one out of all of these, whatever, 12 different possible strategies they might be using for engagement, that's declining. And it's still a very commonly used strategy, but it's the use of informal one-on-one discussion as outreach. Right?

0:15:21.4 Deborah Horner: At the grocery store, I see you in line and I chat you up, right, as someone who's sitting on the township board. This actually decreased where in 2012, 60% of

people said this was a thing that local government officials were trying to do, and that dropped slightly down to 58% in 2024. And this might be linked back to some of those issues of trust and tone of engagement that I mentioned earlier. All right. So finally, we asked local officials what techniques they might be effective in their jurisdiction, in their community for encouraging some of the really high-demand types of engagement, like running for office or serving on a board, something that really requires a lot of their residents. And some of the most commonly cited things are, strangely, let's flip it around, word of mouth. We think word of mouth works. Now, I'm declining on the use of word of mouth, but I think word of mouth really might get people to come out and run for office. That's how I'm going to encourage people to encourage people to run, encourage people to serve. So we do have some hope for civic discourse in our communities. And then about half also say social media.

0:16:46.3 Deborah Horner: Again, social media is one of these ways that local governments are increasingly using to try to reach out. It's even more likely to be used in our larger communities, bigger jurisdictions over 10,000 residents. And then although only about 29% of local officials statewide say this partnership with local businesses, organizations, or with the schools is a good way to turn out high-demand positions for residents, this is really effective. Almost half of places with over 10,000 residents find that to be really useful as doing this partnership. So, yeah, that's just a very, very tiny toe dip into the data that we have since 2012 on all of these kinds of issues of democracy and resident engagement, of participation, of kind of health of democracy in our communities. So maybe now it's time to find out what our panelists are seeing and doing in their own communities. Thanks.

[applause]

0:17:47.1 Deborah Horner: Oh, you want to put this?

0:17:47.7 Stephanie Leiser: Yeah. Thank you.

0:17:48.8 Deborah Horner: But I want to show... Do you see the map of where they're from?

0:17:51.9 Stephanie Leiser: Oh, yeah. I'll leave that up for now. Wonderful. Thanks very much, Deborah. That wasn't always the greatest news. There's a lot that we're worried about with resident engagement and democracy at the local level. But I want to turn a little bit to some good news. We've invited all these panelists because in different ways, we think they're each doing something pretty remarkable with resident engagement in their communities. And so we wanted to bring them here so they can share. Not that it's not challenging and not that it has not been bumpy in so many ways, but we wanted to just highlight some bright spots and bring some people that we thought would have some lessons that we can all learn from. So I'm going to read your official bios and then I'll give you a chance to introduce yourselves.

0:18:49.2 Stephanie Leiser: So we'll go from your left to right or right to left, depending on which way you're standing. Shea Charles started as East Grand Rapids City Manager on February 1st, 2021. He has over 30 years of experience in local government management, most recently in the city of Howell, Michigan, where he served for 15 years. Mr. Charles has overseen several community engagement processes, including downtown design charrettes, master plan updates, and millage elections. While Howell City Manager, the community reconstructed 30% of its water, sewer, and street infrastructure. And for those of us in city government, that is no small feat. In 2018, Howell was also named Main Street of the Year in Michigan.

0:19:30.1 Stephanie Leiser: Anne Marie Graham-Hudak was elected as Canton Township's first woman supervisor in November 2020. You told us the story at lunch about how that happened. I hope you tell it again for this group. It's a pretty neat story. Canton Township is the ninth largest community in Michigan despite being a township. She's currently serving her second term. As the township's chief administrator, she is the CEO responsible for all township services across 36 square miles, serving 100,000 residents, 3,000 businesses, and about 800 employees. She works cooperatively with the Board of Trustees, Treasurer, Clerk, and District Court. And prior to becoming Canton Township Supervisor, she served as an elected Canton Trustee and Planning Commissioner for four years. Anne Marie has an extensive engineering background, having worked for the automotive industry for 26 years and the Federal Aviation Administration prior to that.

0:20:21.6 Stephanie Leiser: Megan C. Sellers serves as the Deputy County Executive for Oakland County Executive Dave Coulter. She oversees the Department of Public Communications, Older Adult Services, Community Engagement, is liaison to the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, and serves as Special Projects Advisor for the transformational multimillion-dollar Pontiac redevelopment project, helping with the county's relocation of its administration and employees to downtown Pontiac. She's held several key professional roles within Oakland County with the Board of Commissioners and the Water Resources Commissioner's Office, as well as private sector and nonprofit sectors.

0:21:06.0 Stephanie Leiser: And lastly, Tom Stephenson is the current Village President of Elk Rapids, going into his second year. A seasoned veteran of community affairs with over 20 years of experience collaborating with private business, regional governments, tribal nations, and local communities throughout the State of Michigan and the State of Texas, with a particular focus on broadband service and digital equity in rural areas. In addition to being the Village President of Elk

Rapids, Tom now works part-time as a strategic business consultant for the private sector, focusing on federal, state, and local grant funding strategies for clients of Millennium LLC, a national distributor of communication materials. He's also served as the president of the local Rotary Club and for four years with the Elk Rapids District Library Board. So we'll thank our panelists again.

[applause]

0:21:58.2 Stephanie Leiser: So before we begin with specific questions, I'd like to... I've done the official bios, but I'd like to give each of you an opportunity to say a few words of introduction beyond the official bio. Perhaps something about what drew you into local government and what keeps you there. So we can go ahead and start with Shea.

0:22:14.6 Shea Charles: Good afternoon and welcome. And just great conversation about community engagement. As noted in my bio, I've been part of the professional municipal management profession for the last 30 years. I'm actually a second-generation city manager, so I've been going to water main breaks since I was about eight. So we have wonderful dinner talk, as you can imagine. The work that we do is just so important on a day-in and day-out basis. People don't realize what we do until it's not working, until that sewer backs up or the roads don't get plowed. Our success is that people are not yelling at us every day. That's how we know we're doing a good job, which is a little kind of an unusual situation to have. East Grand Rapids, just for a little bit of background as we get into the conversation, is a community of 11,500. It is fairly affluent. We are a suburb of Grand Rapids. Just great community, highly educated community, which presents a whole different dynamic when you start to talk about community engagement.

0:23:22.4 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: Thank you. My name is Anne Marie. I'm Canton Township Supervisor. We have about... We're the ninth largest community in Michigan. And I think what got me involved in government, I've been with the League of Women Voters for about 30 years, and I think that really helped me. I did a lot of forum moderating and people running for office. And I belong to the interfaith community outreach. I joined a lot of organizations locally. That was really important to me to get to know my community and be an activist there. And of course, my mother was an activist during civil rights in our neighborhood also, so that helped. But I think that what really made me run for office was that I was at a board meeting, I attended a board meeting, and they were talking about outstanding warrants, about 150 that had not been processed, and they were domestic violence warrants. And it was really upsetting to me that 150 people did not feel secure during three years and they thought they had. So I went home, I remember, and I was very upset, and my husband said, "You know, you're there all the time. Why don't you just run for office?" So I did. I ran as a trustee while I still had my job at Ford Motor Company. And then I knew that it was important that we look forward to the future and get our communities ready for the technology, technology boom that we're really seeing accelerate right now.

0:24:34.2 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: And I remember saying to the supervisor at the time that, "We need to get our communities ready. Technology is coming, and if they're not ready, people are going to not have jobs or leave Michigan at a higher rate." And so he said to me, "Well, why don't you just go back to the East Coast?" Because I went to school there for a while. And I said, "You know, I'm going to run against you." And I did, and I won. But I was telling her earlier, that's why she said this, that I'm the first woman since 1834 in Canton Township.

0:25:02.2 Shea Charles: Wow.

0:25:03.3 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: And I think he kind of took that for granted. "Oh, she's a woman. She'll never win." I even had friends say to me, "Oh, you're a woman. Canton will never vote for a woman." I said, Oh, great friends."

0:25:12.1 Shea Charles: That's right.

0:25:14.6 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: But they did apologize afterwards. So I think that's what got... I never thought I'd come this way. I always thought I'd be working in the background on stuff and helping people with things, but just kind of just happened. And I think that's a great way to lead your life, too. Look for opportunities.

0:25:29.2 Stephanie Leiser: Great.

0:25:30.2 Megan Sellers: So thank you for sharing that. And it's a great segue to me piggybacking off what you said. So point-blank and simple, how I got into government was a divorce.

0:25:40.6 Shea Charles: See.

0:25:41.1 Tom Stephenson: Some man somewhere.

[laughter]

0:25:42.2 Megan Sellers: Never in a million years. Oh, you're absolutely right. Never in a million years had I ever thought that government would be where I would go. I went to school, started out in engineering, got exposed one summer when my internship did not work out, to public

engagement, to public relations, to community. And I then had to figure out how I was going to tell my parents I was changing my major and making sure that I did not have to cause them to spend any more money. Because we know parents are like, "Wait a minute, you're doing what? You've been training for engineering since sixth grade. You've gone to every camp in the world. What are you talking about?" So for me, that was my first initial experience with government. Life lifed, went through a divorce. As she stated in my bio, I was heavily in the hospitality management industry.

0:26:34.3 Megan Sellers: I was managing all different types of hotels, the last one being the Ritz-Carlton that was formerly in Dearborn. When I went through my divorce, I realized my three children needed me more frequently. And so at that point I said, "What can I do without going back to school to be a teacher that will be aligned with their actual school schedules?" I was like, "Hmm, government. Let's try that." This is legitimately how it happened. So unlike you all who are sitting here and going to school for this, I did not go to school for this. But I am operating right in my purpose and my why. And I am so thankful that I discovered my purpose on this journey through one of the most painful times of my life that I never anticipated. And now I'm helping to empower other people, thus the reason why I'm here, to really discover your why as you move forward to be the change that we all need to see in government. So I'm excited to be here.

0:27:26.9 Tom Stephenson: Well, for me, mine was just the opposite. I started out going to Central Michigan University. I went to their first program of local and state government center there. So I was one of the first graduates of that program and actually interned in the city of Mount Pleasant, and where I actually wrote their tree ordinance of all things. But then I spent my summers working in automotive, and automotive world just said, "We ought to have you for ramrod project management," things like that. So I switched. I went on into automotive and design project management for about 35 years. I got bored with that. It wasn't as satisfying anymore. And so I

went back and got my Master's degree at 50 years old, 55 years old, and had an opportunity and wanted to switch careers and do something I thought was productive. We had a place up in Elk Rapids. I was down here in Royal Oak at the time. And I went ahead and said, well... My wife says, "Find a job up north so we can move up there someday and live in the condo." Well, the condo was too small for us. We found out right away. And so we bought a big house on a lake. So with that, I started looking at organizations and wanted to put back into the community. I did get a job with the Michigan Public Service Commission on the Connect Michigan program.

0:28:43.8 Tom Stephenson: I started engaging with the communities, working on broadband, facilitating public-private partnerships, because broadband was the number one deterrent to economic expansion in Michigan, Northern Michigan. So I really enjoyed that. And so with that, I fed onto Rotary. Rotary, the local Rotary organization, was the guys that got the people, the guys and gals that got things done in our community. And I served as president for three years, the only one that ever did that. But then we wanted to build a new library in Elk Rapids. And my wife says, "You gotta fix that." I got a problem. It became internationally known as those people in Northern Michigan fighting over a stupid library. So even made the London Times, I guess, as I was told. So anyway, I fixed it, and we now are launching a brand new library expansion, we the community.

0:29:17.5 Tom Stephenson: The superintendent came to me and said, "You know, our kids' STEM skills and reading skills are dropping right off." Instead of a really poor community, and Elk Rapids is a really affluent community. And I was at a policy conference last week and they said we are down number 44th in the country, tied with four other states. So we could be number 40. But with that, my community became very passionate about what I'm doing, and so I decided to run for president. I saw the wheels falling off and, as you become part of a community, you see all these

great things that are happening. TART Trails, library, things like that. And things weren't getting done. So that's why I ran. That's why I'm here today. I think we're all overachievers, so.

0:30:24.5 Stephanie Leiser: And I don't think I've met a local official who had a straight route to where they ended up or where you are now. So I have some questions I want to ask about the specific communities. I want to start there and then ask some more general questions, and then we'll open it up for the audience. But I want to start with Shea Charles and ask about East Grand Rapids in particular. So East Grand Rapids has done a lot of resident engagement work around updating the city's master plan. Why do you think resident engagement is so important for that process in particular? And maybe you could talk a little bit about what is a master plan and what all that entails, and then what are some things you've learned along the way in doing your resident engagement?

0:31:04.7 Shea Charles: So we started updating our master plan two years ago. Master plan is basically our land use vision for the community, short version of a long story. State law requires that it be looked at every five years. You can either do a major update, look at it and say, "No, we're good," or what we're doing is just an amendment focusing on some target areas. Our downtown area, we refer to as Gaslight Village. We have a Catholic school that has closed, embedded in one of our neighborhoods. So we're trying to get ahead of that just to set that vision. In 2018, we completely rewrote our master plan. Full engagement, whatnot, totally changed the vision. And change the vision is a relative term for East Grand Rapids because we're 95% residential, small commercial district. We are built out but for two large parcels in our downtown.

0:31:56.6 Shea Charles: When we looked at the engagement process for this time, we really looked to meet our residents where they're at. So we did things such as simple as setting out signs in

neighborhoods with QR codes and handouts saying, "Hey, we want your input." So we did online surveys, got a tremendous amount of feedback, about 1,000 responses. And for a community of 11,500, that's an absolutely incredible rate. Our responses were all over the map. That engagement is so important because it just gives us a sense of where our community is at. We think we know what they're after or what's concerning them, but that gives that voice of what are those issues. Things that popped up for us that we kind of went, "Okay, didn't expect that," was speeding in our neighborhoods.

0:32:39.3 Shea Charles: We're a community that's all residential streets, basically. No street is faster than 25 miles within East Grand Rapids. We don't have any major highways, things of that nature. So very unique, very pedestrian-oriented community. And that engagement shared with us of, "Okay, here's some additional work that we need to do there beyond how do we want to see these neighborhoods redevelop and whatnot." And then when we got into the area-specific plans, we actually met with those neighborhoods. I talked a moment ago about the closed Catholic school. We held a neighborhood meeting. We had about 60 residents pop up. And some great things came out of that. That what we learned through that process is while that community didn't necessarily attend that church or have their kids go to that school, the neighborhood, excuse me, the playground, the basketball court that they have, was really viewed as a community asset. And the church was very generous in opening that up for the community.

0:33:22.0 Shea Charles: So it was something that we picked up on as we set our vision for that area, knowing that that's important to them, understanding that integration and relationship. Things that we wouldn't know looking on the outside. We just see, "Oh, it's a place that needs to be updated and boy, that basketball court really stinks." Well, it turns out it's a neighborhood gathering spot. The diocese was really good about letting the neighbors have community picnics, barbecues,

parties, things of that... Party's a relative term at a Catholic church. But that's really something that without that direct engagement with that neighborhood, we never would have known or never understood that dynamic. So they came out with, gave input in regards to, "Well, maybe we do tiny homes." "Oh, no, don't ever say that again." But they really were open to some great ideas. And I think the final plan, which is actually, there's a planning commission hearing this evening, that we're in the final phases of approving that plan.

0:34:33.2 Stephanie Leiser: Thanks. So we'll turn to Ms. Graham-Hudak next. So Canton Township seems to emphasize integrating resident engagement across many township, many, if not most township functions. So they have multiple citizen advisory boards, including a youth advisory council, historical society, senior advisory council, and on and on. Public input and volunteer opportunities, special events, all kinds of different things. I imagine this takes a lot of sustained effort and buy-in from your staff, from your community and partner organizations, and your residents. So how do you keep it a high priority for everyone, given how much work that is?

0:35:12.4 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: Well, one thing about a community, you have to keep remembering, sometimes people get stuck in their buildings and think these four walls are our community, and it's not. It's outside those walls. And democracy is local. It always is local. My treasurer, Diane Slavin, she was our state representative, and she says she gets more done on a local level than she did when she was a state representative. And that's important to remember because everything we do, we emphasize a culture where the residents are important. And I stay engaged with the communities I was with before, the League of Women Voters. I still go to the interfaith groups. We brought on a new something called a resident advocate. It was a new position that we started where the resident advocate. And now when people come in, they can go to a department and ask questions, but sometimes people get lost or not. And so she basically helps guide people

through the process. She started something called, we have an online survey, an online. If anybody has any questions or anything, they can go onto our website and they can ask a question. We also have a police dashboard, which shows the different arrests or stops that are made and the races of the people and the ages.

0:36:19.3 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: We make sure that we have... We have something called Canton Coalition for Inclusive Communities that the police run. And so the police bring everybody together, and we have all the different faith organizations. We have all our organizations come together and we do like a roundtable, and we find out what is the latest thing happening in your community, and we listen. We have coffee hours. So not only do we have the board meetings, but we go out and once a month, we have a coffee hour. We'll sit in a coffee restaurant and listen to people. At all of our events, we have Diwali events, Ramadan events. We have LGBTQ events. We have a monthly focus. So it's interesting because technology is important, but what we did find is there's a big group of people that aren't into technology. My mother's 86 years old. She still can't find things on her computer. So every month, we send out a newsletter to every single household and every single business in Canton. It's hard paper, and people like that. And people come in and say, "Hey, I read this in the Focus." Of course, social media is important. Every board meeting, one of our agenda items is board and commission reports.

0:37:24.8 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: So we ask people, "What's happening on this committee?" And so everybody gives a report out of that. Our sustainability committee, I have kids from high school on there. The youth advisory council that you talked about, we have youth that sit on our board, actually. They kind of sit at a separate desk, and they have to apply for the job, and they get elected by their peers, and they participate in the board meeting. So when we have an agenda event, I'll say, "Okay, any questions from the YAC committee?" And they will have written

questions, and they'll ask questions based on their own perspective as being young people. And they're always really interesting people. Sometimes it's uncomfortable. Sometimes they say something, "Oh, I wish they hadn't asked that," but they do. Our resident advocate also... In Canton Township, we have 250 HOAs. I mean, HOAs, that's a lot of HOAs. HOAs are interesting.

0:38:13.6 Shea Charles: Wow.

0:38:13.8 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: 250. And our resident advocate keeps in touch with them. She does email blasts to them. We have people call from the HOAs and say, "Hey, my HOA president is doing this," and she will sit and try to resolve the issues. I mean, and that's a lot of work, too, because if anyone's ever dealt with an HOA, you're dealing with community volunteers that sometimes don't get along with their neighbors. And she helps people with fence disputes and everything like that. We just have a lot going on, and sometimes you have to take it to them, right? Because sometimes you don't have people come to your board meetings, which sometimes that's good, right? You're thinking, "Okay, people aren't here. That means there's no issues," because if there's an issue, they are there. But we have taken our board meetings to faith houses. We've sat in the mosque, we've sat in the temples. We've said, "Okay, our board meeting today is at the Hindu temple. Okay, our board meeting today is at the HOA." I mean, of course, they're always open meetings. Anybody can come. But by taking it to the communities that might be a little timid about coming, that's helped a lot also, helped with communications.

0:39:16.4 Stephanie Leiser: Thank you. And so for Ms. Sellers in Oakland County, at the county level, I imagine resident engagement must look a lot different because you're providing different services than what a city or a township like Canton provides, and you're doing it over a much larger geography. And Oakland County, I know in particular, has a wide range of demographics, a wide

range of different types of communities, from fairly rural townships to, of course, large cities like Pontiac. So how do you think about resident engagement, how do you design your engagement strategies to encompass such variety?

0:39:53.3 Megan Sellers: Thank you for that question. So one of the things in Oakland County, we have 62 CVTs with one potential one looming we're hearing word of, but it hasn't been solidified yet.

0:40:04.8 Shea Charles: What's a CVT?

0:40:05.8 Megan Sellers: Yes. Cities, villages, and townships. Sorry, I always tell people the acronyms, please explain. So thank you for catching me on that. And so the executive branch, which is the branch that I work for with County Executive Coulter and our deputy team, we are in collaboration and partnership with our legislative branch of government, being the Board of Commissioners. As was shared in my bio, one of my roles is to be a bridge of communication between the legislative branch and the county executive branch, which it works well because prior to coming into my role as the deputy county executive, I actually worked for the Board of Commissioners for four years and had opportunity to know all the ins and outs, all the behind the scenes, and that has really been very beneficial in the role that I operate in now. In community engagement, we actually created, in partnership with the Board of Commissioners, a community engagement department. We have, as Anne Marie was stating, we have an email, we have a telephone number, a hotline number that residents can actually engage in and give us feedback on.

0:41:06.1 Megan Sellers: So we thought that that was very important to provide space and create space for residents to have direct access to our team that they can call, they can give kudos, they can

complain, they can just vent and talk, which a lot of them do, especially the older adults who are at home. They're like, "I just want to tell you about my garbage." So very unique things. But when you talk about the span of all these different cities, villages, and townships, obviously there are a plethora of needs in all of them. But actually creating a department like community engagement in partnership with our Board of Commissioners has really helped to create that space for people to share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions in a way that, good, bad, or indifferent, even people who call and complain, there's always somewhere there that we can bring a solution. And so just really having that common ground of that space has really helped to inform the types of services that we're able to then work to form policy around in working with our Board of Commissioners alongside the executive branch.

0:42:10.1 Stephanie Leiser: Thank you. And for Mr. Stephenson in Elk Rapids, one thing we hear a lot through the MPPS and through our work here at CLOSUP of small communities that they really struggle with capacity to provide basic services, much less do resident engagement or any kind of strategic planning. Yet Elk Rapids has managed to become a Michigan Main Street engaged level community. You participate in MEDC redevelopment ready communities and other programs. And so how do you make it work in a small community with limited resources?

0:42:42.7 Tom Stephenson: It's rather difficult. The program that they're talking about, the RAP program, that was our East Side Ames Street program, and it's been around for about 15 years. It's been redesigned about three times, put on the shelf, battles. So Elk Rapids is what I would call an affluent community, but we have a lot of retirees that are executives. And one thing you're going to learn real quick about having a community full of executives, you don't micromanage those people. So you have to learn to pull them together, pull the talents together. And once in a while, you'll just get the right people in the right time, right place to where you'll be able to launch some of these

things. And one of my jobs as president is to recognize this and protect that group. And so hopefully we're going to get three to five years out of them. And we got a couple other ideas we want to finish up, like a TART Trail, things like that.

0:43:37.8 Tom Stephenson: But it's, again, these communities are full of talent, and you have to be able to... The library, that was... We ended up putting $7 million down. They call it... We're calling it the Miracle on Ames Street. But that is a school superintendent and a former vice president of production for Midland Dow that ran that program and pulled the funding together. So finding that talent, working with it, and getting past the little petty politics was really key there. And the fact that I knew a lot of people at MEDC didn't help these too. So working with them, and you're also working with your state officials, you try to make them look good and you listen to what they need and what their needs are. And like now, MEDC's in trouble, so we're doing everything we can to brag about how good they've helped us. So. And that always comes back in benefits. So. But anyway, that's... So we're kind of overachievers, but then we have to try hard.

0:44:38.4 Stephanie Leiser: The relationships. The relationships.

0:44:40.0 Megan Sellers: Relationships are really important.

0:44:41.8 Stephanie Leiser: That's something I hear from all of you. So I have a question I just want to throw out there, and this is for whoever has thoughts about it. So in the results that Deborah looked at in our MPPS survey, it generally wasn't a whole lot of good news. We find that local leaders are becoming more pessimistic about engagement. They're trying a lot of things and not necessarily getting residents to take advantage of them, or maybe only a small group of vocal residents comes again and again. And I know that you have kind of described you live in

exceptional communities with exceptionally engaged residents, but I'm wondering what is your perspective on seeing some of these dynamics throughout the state? What do you think is driving it? What do you think are some of the misconceptions? And what would you recommend to your peers? So that's for whoever would like to take it. Yeah.

0:45:36.8 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: So in Canton, I think definitely, I think you're seeing negativity. It's funny because you'll put something on social media about somebody winning an award, and when you read the comments, you're like, "Wow." But however, you do see, I do find when I go through those, a lot of those are bots, unfortunately, and not even probably from your community. So that's the reason we have to keep communicating and telling what's... I have a group called Canton Ambassadors I pull together, and it's, every other week we meet. They usually have people that have access to the organizations in the community, and I tell them everything that's happening, and I say, "Is there anything that you're seeing out there?" because they kind of watch social media for me also, and they will tell me, and they kind of help go out there and help steer the conversations. It's helped a lot. Unfortunately, it seems to be getting more negative now, but I think that the big thing is communicating, continuing to communicate, and finding the relationships that will help you do that.

0:46:33.1 Stephanie Leiser: It's old-fashioned relationships and communication.

0:46:37.6 Shea Charles: And I've been reflecting on this question since they were sent to us. I don't know if the communication is or the negativity is any worse. It's just faster. And I provide that perspective because we're in the middle of final approvals of a planned unit development for our downtown area. 149 new housing units, 30,000 square feet of commercial space, five buildings, parking deck, about a $70 million project that will end up using some TIF funding as gap financing

to get it across the finish line. And we had a very small minority vocal group just absolutely slamming us at meetings. We had six-hour meetings in regards to that. The social media was just absolutely horrible. But I ended up finding a file from 2004 on the previous version of this project, a little bit smaller scale, 109 housing units, two seven-story buildings, a whole bunch of stuff. And I literally opened up the file, and I'm looking for the file for "were for it" or "were against it." For those against it, it's too much traffic, too much this, too much that, we're going to kill all the trees, we're going to kill all the eagles, we're going to...

0:47:51.4 Shea Charles: And as I compared that language and that perspective to what we were going through today, it was verbatim. It was absolutely verbatim, and it's 20 years later in regards to that. So as I think about this, I don't know if it's even if it's more negative, it just comes at us so much faster with social media. And that is the fundamental change that I've seen in the number of years that I've done that. Great article out there by a gentleman by the name of Ryan Kilpatrick. He's a housing advocate on the west side of the state. He did a substack article, "Delay, Deny," there's another word there, and he talks about community blowback on developments. And I sent it to my commission last April, and I got some really negative pushback from some of my commissioners of, "How dare you send this to us?" and whatnot. And if you go back and read that article and revisit what we've gone through through the last year, we've lived that article. We have absolutely lived that article. So is it any worse? I don't think it's any worse. I think it's just faster in regards to that. When it comes to some of this stuff. Social media makes it just the anonymous nature, and I can hide behind my keyboard and say mean and nasty things. That's fundamentally changed in the work that we do. But is it any worse than it was 20, 30 years ago? I keep reflecting upon that. So.

0:49:18.1 Megan Sellers: So I know, um, to your point, it not necessarily being worse, but like you mentioned, the media's pushing the negativity more. Right? They want to keep their jobs. Right? The more likes and clicks and attention and ratings that they get, the higher they go in their agenda as far as the media is concerned. And so I think keeping that in mind is important. And one of the things that we're doing intentionally, and that really is the keyword, being that much more intentional about flipping the narrative and putting out even more positive information about what we're doing in the spaces and places that we occupy. That's everything. And so Oakland County, it seems like Channel 7 has really taken a liking to us for a little while here, and it's like, "Okay, you know what? We're going to use this to our advantage." And now it has actually been that thorn in the side that has pushed us to want to really raise the banner and uplift all of the work that we're doing. Because as public servants, there's so much work that goes on behind the scenes. I call us the wizard behind the curtain.

0:50:26.8 Megan Sellers: And people just don't even know all that is being done or even understand, that's why even the people in this room and students, I commend you because you're taking the extra step to understand and learn and educate yourself about a system that is made up of people. People are like, "Oh, government, the system's broken." The system is people. And the more that we educate ourselves and uplift the information that we are doing in our CVTs, in our cities, villages, and townships, the more we quiet the voice of negativity. So I just encourage people, don't feed into the negativity, because a lot of times we get on the soapbox, like, "Oh, yeah, drama, let's go." No. The way that we combat it is by flipping it and actually focusing on all of the positive work that's being done to uplift and help residents in the communities that we oversee.

0:51:16.3 Tom Stephenson: Yeah. To segue into that, I always say democracy is messy. They've always said it's always messy. And to your point, we just passed in our budget, we decided to battle

all this social media, all this negativity. And so, like you said, it's coming at us faster. So we're putting out programs called Push, so our department heads and things like that, they can hit all the different social media sites with one clean message real quick. It's 15, 20 grand, but nobody wanted to do that, but it's like, this is what you gotta do. You gotta communicate. And you can bombard people. And I'm constantly working with our department heads and DDA says, "You've done a great job." Let's pushes, Let's talk about it. Let's push that story out, something positive. That Ames Street program with the RAP, I mean, businesses have taken right off. They've noticed once that was complete, all of a sudden sales started coming up 20%. Well, let's get out there, DDA. Let's get some records, let's get some notices out, let's get some quotes. So that's how you battle it. This stuff's always going to be here. You just, like I said, you're going to drown it in good news. I like that. And just understand, it's going to be messy. You're going to get beat up a little bit, but that's okay. You're going to end up with thick skins when it's all over with. But in the end, though, you're doing something good. So.

0:52:36.5 Stephanie Leiser: Thanks. That's actually a great segue to what I was going to ask next, and I'll ask this one and then we'll open it up. So Miriam and Veronica are going to come around with microphones, and please raise your hand if you have a question. So we're at the University of Michigan, obviously, most of our audience is students. And like you said, they're here, they're interested, they want to do the work. What advice do you have for them?

0:53:02.3 Megan Sellers: So I would start with something very simple, and this is a mantra that I live by, and I'm so thankful for this quote from Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change that you desire to see in the world." You all are already choosing to be that by being here at the university, going above and beyond high school and above and beyond Bachelor's. Right? It really boils down to if we as individuals take ownership of our space in society and we choose to adopt a mantra of "I'm

going to be the change that I desire to see in every space and place that I show up." How much better will the world be if we just own our own? Stop getting into the drama of looking at everybody else and comparison. There is no comparison. Everyone in this room is one of one, period. And if you begin to adopt that mindset and just really resonate on that, the reality is that real, true, transformational change can take place as a result.

0:53:54.5 Megan Sellers: And so for me, even in getting into government and climbing the ladder in government, per se, because again, as you heard earlier, I didn't come the conventional way of "I'm going to go to school and I'm going to get policy classes." That was not me. But when I found myself in government, I found my purpose and my why, and I went full force. I'm like, "If I'm going to be in this, I'm going full force and I'm going to be the change." If something bothers you, that's an indication that you may have the solution to bring to that situation instead of complaining about it. Flip it. I call it the flip-it method. Flip it and choose to use it to channel good-fueled energy in a positive direction to be the change that we desire to see in our communities.

0:54:42.2 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: Oh. Well, one thing is find where you want to live, right? If you find a community that you like, go there, join some of the local committees. The city of Northville, I think is a friend of mine, the mayor, it's like two miles. He says they have 29 committees. I said, "What is going on there?" Everybody wants to be in charge of Northville for some reason.

0:54:57.2 Tom Stephenson: There's too many committees.

0:54:58.9 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: But get involved in committees, get involved in the organizations, and find out what people, where you gravitate towards and help from the

background. And sometimes your path finds you there. It'll take you there. But I think that's important to understand what really moves you. And when you find it, you will feel it.

0:55:16.3 Megan Sellers: Yes.

0:55:16.8 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: You really will. It's just going to be, it won't feel like you're going to another day at work. I mean, my job, no two days, I've been doing this job now for almost six years. No two days have ever been alike, ever. And I enjoy that. I really do. Sometimes it's not good, sometimes it's really good. But that's okay. So really find what you like and talk to people. Listen to your elders, too. Being on a committee is great because you have people usually of all different ages and faiths and beliefs, and it's really important to listen to that, too. Because if you don't listen to each other, you can't live with your neighbors, you can't live in your community. So find what you like and then go with it. And I think by just starting small, joining a committee, joining another one, you'll find your way.

0:56:01.8 Shea Charles: Just a little bit different perspective as a professional manager. Start to figure out where do you want to work as far as size, community efforts, things of that nature. The work I do in a smaller community, throughout my career it's been smaller communities, and I've enjoyed that because I know the entire team. I can tell you the names of all of our public safety officers, our Public Works gang, Parks and Rec. I enjoy that. I'm involved, I won't say involved, I know what my team is doing on a day-in and day-out basis. That's a very different experience than the city manager of Grand Rapids. And Manager Washington is much higher level. He's operating at almost a pure executive level and has multiple assistants and things of that nature.

0:56:49.2 Shea Charles: So he's dealing with a very different world. He's very good at that job. It's something I kind of explored as I went through my career and went, "You know, I'm happy in this profession." So thinking about what size communities do I want to serve? That's something you can reflect upon. No, it's not the, "Ooh, I'm the city manager of Grand Rapids." No, East Grand Rapids, we're a community of 11,500. But the work we do on a day-in and day-out basis makes a difference in our residents' life, and it can be very fulfilling work. So something just to think about if you're thinking about the professional management world. If you are looking to get into it, join ICMA, International City/County Management Association. The Michigan Municipal Executives group has a student membership. Join that. There's some great opportunities there, too.

0:57:34.6 Tom Stephenson: Yeah. Being an agent of change is, I think has always been a satisfying thing for me. I can remember back in manufacturing, I brought in the computers onto the floor and things like that. And so the computerized machinery, and it was the devil's machine and things. But it was the way we survived. And honestly, my maintenance number for my mills on the floor was 666. So that was kind of thing, that's how it starts. But you gotta have thick skin. But again, in this position that I'm in right now, I've got so many opportunities to make things happen, to help make a difference in my community. And one thing I did learn through all this process of working in community, I think one of the smartest things I've ever heard was change is going to happen no matter what. So you got two choices. You can either be the victim or the architect of the change. So that's the thing you have to choose and have to have that attitude and just go forward. Like I said, it can be very frustrating, but it also can be very rewarding at the end of the day. So.

0:58:41.8 Stephanie Leiser: Thanks. We can take some audience questions now. Ashley.

0:58:51.3 Speaker 7: Thanks Dr. Leiser, can everyone hear me? Do I need a microphone?

0:58:53.8 Shea Charles: Yes.

0:58:54.8 Stephanie Leiser: Yeah. Because it'll catch on the recording.

0:58:56.8 Megan Sellers: For the recording.

0:58:57.7 Tom Stephenson: Yeah.

0:59:00.8 Speaker 7: Thank you. Hello, everyone. Ashley. Dr. Leiser knows me because I am a part of the inaugural online MPA program at the Ford School. Joe is one of my classmates here. So thank you all for being here today. Part of why I'm an online student is because I work full time. I'm actually the director of board operations for the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners. So, Megan, when I was hearing all of your job duties, I started to get anxious because I just do one of your jobs, and I'm anxious all the time. So one of the things that I think we're seeing in Washtenaw County specifically, and this is kind of a specific question, but resident engagement is really high around data centers at this moment. I don't know if any of you have data centers in your community, but it's mostly in our rural communities, and there's very high levels of engagement both on the township and the county level. So I was wondering, because it's such a nuanced, new, complicated issue, I was wondering how your townships or counties are dealing with data centers specifically in resident engagement? Thank you.

1:00:02.6 Megan Sellers: Good question.

1:00:06.0 Tom Stephenson: You want me to take it? Go ahead.

1:00:06.2 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: Well, we have a data center actually going into the township next to us, Van Buren Township, and they've signed NDAs. So there's a lot of mystery around that, and people are very upset. And actually, tonight we are having a vote for a moratorium on data centers so that we can study what it would do to our committees and it would do to our community, do to our zoning, what we need to do for that. But at the same time, when it's right on our border anyways, we're also going to study how's that going to affect us. Conference of Western Wayne, we're having a meeting on Friday, and we understand there's going to be a protest and a lot of people that are going to ask questions about that.

1:00:44.4 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: In Canton, we have something called study sessions. So in addition to the moratorium, every other board meeting is a study session where we study what it would do to our committee and how it affects us. And technology is important, as we know, for many reasons, health care, everything. And so this would affect that in a positive way. But of course, how does it affect us environmentally, moving forward with our electrical costs and everything like that? So study sessions, understanding it, doing moratoriums. Hopefully, it's going to pass tonight. My deputy right here, Deputy Joe, he helped write that out. So we're going to see. The board is nervous about it, so we're going to make sure that all of our ducks are in a row and then we educate, educate, educate and understand. That's important.

1:01:25.1 Megan Sellers: Yeah. And I'll piggyback off of that. Being in government and the pathway that I took, I was always a voice along the way that was on every committee and other thing that I could be on in order to help inform decision-making. And education was the thing that I preached in every single space that they were changing. If they were planning on changing employee health benefits, if they were... Data centers... I know in South Lyon there's one proposed

to be coming in. Whatever people don't understand or are not educated on, they fear. Right? And so we find that that's when they all really want to come out and talk about something. But how can we be more proactive? And I love the fact that you talked about having those study sessions, creating space so that people can come and express what they're going through and how they're feeling, but then also taking that same time to then flip it and educate them. Because as you all know, the more education you get, the better you understand something, the less fear that you have and it tends to subside. Right? So I know, again, I love the fact that other people are educating such that we can help our residents understand. Again, it doesn't mean that we're going to come out on the other side and be peachy and happy like, "Hey, we're all kumbaya." That doesn't mean that that's going to happen. But at least we can say that we did take the time to help create space to educate our residents.

1:02:42.6 Tom Stephenson: And I think it's important that people do get educated. I was, I think we had a little luncheon this afternoon, I was telling the students that I spent 35 years in automotive and the last since '94, we recognize the fact that my generation, the gray hairs right here, we are about 60% of the skilled labor force. So when we are now retiring, dying off, whatever, there's nobody taking our place and there's a lot fewer people. So I think manufacturing, I think we tried to respond, so we started developing these things called robots and started designing parts so they can be assembled easier because eventually, at some point, we weren't going to be able to put these parts together. And so naturally guide them together with the robot.

1:03:41.2 Tom Stephenson: So I'm looking at this and I do think you better study this. I know working in the communication field, it's taking up a lot of resources, a lot of water, and power is a big issue. And one of the things I am looking at or hearing about is that they're going to be putting these little mini nuclear reactors out there to fund these. And that's another issue we're going to have

to deal with. And some of these dams that people are buying, those are for AI because they want to generate... But so I'm in that field, but I said it should be educated, you should be studying this and looking at it and all the different factors, all the water it's going to use, how it's being processed. But again, once you get a little bit comfortable and control it too, because it's all brand new. So it's like the Wild Wild West right now. Believe me, it is the Wild Wild West. And so it's gotta be tamed, but we gotta educate ourselves on it.

1:04:27.7 Stephanie Leiser: That is a topic that will be appearing on the next MPPS survey, so you'll have a chance to weigh in on that again and we'll hopefully have some data that will help out.

1:04:36.9 Tom Stephenson: Yes.

1:04:38.5 Stephanie Leiser: Other questions?

1:04:42.1 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: We told them everything.

1:04:58.5 Speaker 8: Hello.

1:05:00.6 Megan Sellers: Hi.

1:05:00.7 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: Hello.

1:05:00.8 Shea Charles: Hello.

1:05:00.8 Tom Stephenson: Hi.

1:05:01.1 Speaker 8: So my question is, to what extent do you see the state preemption of local laws, like the preemption of local labor laws or whatever on development deals or whatever, as something that factors into local democracy for you all? Like the state taking away powers and consolidating it in the legislature. Do you think that impacts how your residents see local government and how they see the functionality of the local government's democracy?

1:05:27.5 Shea Charles: Yes. And short answer is the assault on local control in this state has been 20, 30 years. It really started picking up speed under Governor Engler is my own personal experience. But yeah, it does. It absolutely impacts it. Things as simple as doing cable television franchises, the standardized them to one-to-one state permit. So we get residents calling and saying, "I can't get channel so-and-so and so-and-so." 20 years ago, you used to be able to leverage some sort of influence over your franchise providers. That's gone. And so our residents get very frustrated. That's a very specific example. But you talk about preemption on labor laws, plastic bags, any number of things, and it is very frustrating for our communities. And it's tough to look at a resident and simply say, "Aghh." That's not an answer that we like to give.

1:06:24.8 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: Great. It's been very frustrating just even in the last couple years. And you call your legislators and you say, "My town is not like Elk Rapids, it's not like East Grand Rapids," and you can't put us all in the same pot here. And when you do that, you really hurt the residents. You do, because every community is different. Something that's good for my community might not be good for the community up north. And another thing, term limits doesn't help because what happens is then you have the lobbyists that are running this. Because they had the short-term rentals, I'll just do that example. My state senator called and she said, "They're

really putting a lot of heat on me to vote... To pass this short-term rental agreement for all the, just taking away our rights."

1:07:04.6 Shea Charles: Our rights.

1:07:05.6 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: And I said that I would listen to what you said, Anne Marie, because I... So she had them call me, this lobbyist call me about short-term rentals. And he kept the pressure on, "This is good for you and this is good for everybody." I said, "No, I'm not going to... " I don't believe the next town should do what we're doing if they don't want to. And so it's really been hard, very difficult, but we have to be very vocal on it. We have to continue to be vocal on it, but it really does hurt the local residents.

1:07:31.2 Megan Sellers: And to your point as well, as far as being vocal and making sure that we're collaborating and having those conversations amongst each other. Because again, the more voices that you have in collaboration, the stronger the impact of that collective voice is where you can actually make transformational change. The fact that your senator is reaching out to you and calling you. We can't work in silos when it comes to things like this. We have to actually talk. And a lot of times, we start to see these types of things to your question because people are working in silos and not reaching out and talking and saying, "Hey, it's not one size fits all." Elk Rapids is very dynamically different than a Pontiac, right? Because even like in the city of Pontiac, they did a moratorium a couple of weeks ago for the data center. So that communication is key and not operating in silos.

1:08:19.1 Tom Stephenson: Yeah. That's something we're dealing with constantly. One of the examples is they want to, well, they combined the services for the schools, and so they have to pick

between sporting programs and security officers. And the thought was that us rural areas, we didn't have any issues when it comes to security. And so I worked with our senator, and we had to go and talk to our police officer, and we took several redacted reports down to the legislators and actually took them hand to hand in showing that even Little Elk Rapids has problems, even Kalkaska has problems. And so, but they were making that decision like, "We don't need this anymore," taking away the safety of our children or make a choice on sports, too. And that's, it's just, again, you have to be very vocal, have to be very aggressive. I say aggressive because when those senators and state representatives come around, you better be hitting them up and talking to them, working, developing a relationship, and helping them out, too, so they understand what's going on. But it's a big assault on us right now.

1:09:30.1 Speaker 9: Is this on? Yeah. Okay. My question, I'm not exactly sure how to ask it, but it's about the impact of national partisan politics in communities. And I was really pleased to see the MPPS data that Deborah presented that most local leaders across the state, like yourselves, say that democracy within their communities is functioning pretty well. But one of the concerning signs was that civic discourse among the residents in their communities is getting worse. It's less civil. It's more divisive than it used to be. And I think there is another MPPS finding that asked a few years ago, maybe specifically about the impact of national partisan politics on local democracy. Nationally, of course, we're in a hyper-partisan environment. People are at each other's throats. I see that here in Ann Arbor. Ann Arbor is going under a land use master plan update, and online, the discussion, people are at, there's two camps and people are at each other's throats. It feels like everybody has an extremely short leash these days. And so my question, I guess, it's kind of broad. Are you seeing this among the residents in your communities? If you are, what are your thoughts about it as a local leader? How do you deal with it? Do you feel trained? Do you feel like you have the resources? Do you have the relationships to try to manage that? So it's just kind of a broad

question, but what's your reaction about the impact of national partisan politics within your communities?

1:10:58.8 Megan Sellers: So I know for us, as far as Oakland County, and I'm not speaking for everybody, but in general, finding that common ground and focusing on our why. As public servants, we're not here... And I'm going to say this lightly, we're not supposed to be here for our own agendas. The agenda is supposed to be serving the people, right? And having people at the table to remind others of that, that in and of itself is the thing that is the grounding mechanism that I believe we need more of in these spaces. Because the goal, I believe that the goal is if we can get everybody riled up and fighting, that's division. Division can get you nowhere but separated. Unity commands power, right? And the more that we can find those, as you mentioned, the ambassadors, right? Canton ambassadors. I think that's amazing. Find those people who can be a voice that will help ground folks and bring them back to the common ground. We might not agree on 100 things, but if we can find one thing that we agree on and start there and then begin to work our way into more. But again, somebody's got to start by being that change, right?

1:12:03.4 Megan Sellers: Because a lot of times in our communities, you're seeing a lot of, as you mentioned, the divisiveness, right? You have those loudmouths, those loud voices that other people just tend to sit back and scour back like, "I don't want the smoke or the drama," right? But it's important that someone stand up and choose to be the change. That's like my living mantra that we really need to see at the end of the day. And I truly believe that they're out there. But it's important that we as leaders are intentional about looking for those people and then pouring into them in a way that will help them to know that their voice is valued and it's important. I believe that's a lot of reason why so many people, as we see the decline based on the numbers, people don't feel that their

voices are valued. It's like, "What's the point? I've said to you how many times that we need this or that, but we just keep skating over it and it's not happening."

1:12:55.0 Megan Sellers: So they eventually feel like, "Well, I'm not talking anymore. I'm not coming to share." Because the louder voices at the public comment are the ones that are talking about whatever the hot topic is because maybe they want their five seconds of fame or whatever the case may be. Everybody has different purposes. But I believe, again, in summarization, is really focusing on our why. Our why being people, and that we are here to serve the people as public servants, and then finding that common ground and working together to move things forward in a unified fashion versus division.

1:13:23.8 Shea Charles: One of the things that's unique about local government is we don't deal with partisan issues per se. Do you pave the street or you don't pave the street? This is not a right-left issue. So just by the inherent work that we do, we don't tend to see, now, it flares. When I talked earlier about the downtown development project, yeah, we've got a vocal group that is out saying things that you just go, "Okay, not sure that's physically possible, but that's okay." But when you step back, and we have this conversation with our elected officials every so often is, what is your role? What is your role as a city commissioner? You have your own personal political beliefs, but at the end of the day, our job is deliver water, treat sewage, clear the streets, fire department shows up and whatnot. These are not right-left issues. Do you want clean water? Yes. No. Do you want your streets plowed? Yes. No. Service delivery models, things of that nature. And the point that was made earlier is having those champions, other than those positive voices, is important. But we do have a degree of insulation, and it doesn't mean it doesn't seep down.

1:14:36.8 Shea Charles: And when I joined East Grand Rapids, we have a neighborhood, our neighbors' Facebook page, and it is everything you would think it would be. We talked about HOAs earlier. It's like an HOA on steroids. And I'd watch our team come together and someone would see, "Oh, this resident said da, da, da, da, da, da." Well, then you watch the inevitable fight and whatnot, and you suddenly realize it's like, okay, there's like four people that are actually fighting about this. Are they showing up to the meetings? Are they really yelling at us, or are they just over in the corner squabbling with each other? So trying to filter through, okay, is this really an issue or not? And we pay attention to it. We have to. But we also pay attention to, "Oh, look, it's the same six people fighting again, saying the same exact six things and whatnot." How does that impact our decision? Are we going to pave that street or not? It doesn't. So.

1:15:30.9 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: When I came on board, on the board, we had different committees. And what would happen is the supervisor at the time would appoint who would be on those committees. So they were basically political appointees for every committee. And you would have the same people stay for many, many, many years. That really was stale. That did not answer what the residents' like. So we kind of approached the supervisor at the time and said, "This has to change. We want the community to be represented. We have a community of 100,000, and you've got the same 10 people running everything." So we, oh we said we need... We kind of were able to force him because we said we were going to just outvote you. So we have an interview committee now which consists of three board members and the supervisor. And we put it out there in the Focus and say, "This committee has an opening." And we had hundreds of people apply, and we kind of narrowed it down and we interview them. So we got the voices from everywhere. The master plan you spoke about, ours was due in 2021. And what we did is we set up an advisory committee, and we intentionally went out and picked people from different parts of the community that we knew believed differently.

1:16:35.6 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: Conservatives, liberals, younger people, older people. And for over a year and a half, that committee met together so that the community could see that there were representatives, their voices were there, and they made the decisions. And then we also took it out to the different events that we had and said, "Okay, this committee said this. Community, what do you think?" When we had the Liberty Fest, we had a booth and people could come and ask. So I think the thing is you have to be intentional. A lot of times, like you said, on Facebook, that noise is going to happen. But if you're intentional and make sure that you have the representatives from around you, from inside your community, I think that helps immensely. Because in the end, people can see, "Hey, even though I wasn't there, my voice was represented." I think that helped calm it down. And when we finally adopted the master plan, there wasn't a lot of noise because we were intentionally taking that time to have everybody be part of it.

1:17:27.5 Tom Stephenson: Yeah. I think taking to the point here that we look for common ground with everybody. And one of the nice things about all the shortages that are happening with all the funding is that everybody's got a need right now. There's a lot of common ground, a lot more common ground than what there was before. And so taking advantage of that. But actually, we also started a citizens' community for our committees and actually educating them on what is going on and what is government all about? Why are we here? What do these committees do? And what do you actually... What's your purpose? And it was actually kind of nice to see a dozen people. Our little town of 1,800, we had a dozen people, and then several are now on committees. And so they wanted to serve. And so giving people the opportunity, but also finding that common ground. I always said the UP, folks in the UP always get along better because they've got fewer resources, so they have to work together. But that's just kind of the attitude I like to have is finding that common

ground. And I think right now, if we want to get the sewers and water and things built and the streets paved, we've got to work together. So that's all there is to it. So.

1:18:38.4 Stephanie Leiser: I think we maybe have time for one more question. I know you've got the mic here, so I guess you get the last question.

1:18:44.8 Speaker 10: All right. No pressure.

1:18:46.6 Stephanie Leiser: Yeah.

1:18:47.4 Speaker 10: Thank you for being here. It's so great to have such a wide variety of perspectives and experiences that led you to this position today. My question is, coming from the outside of local government, oftentimes people don't really know exactly how the office is like, what your day-to-day looks like. And you talked a big part of that was education and communicating that to your residents and to the broader community. My question is, though, specifically in your career and your wide variety, what's something that surprised you about the job that you might have had expectations coming in to what it would look like and how your day-to-day and experience would be? But what about the role or the job has surprised you thus far?

1:19:47.0 Megan Sellers: So I'll jump in. The thing that surprises me the most, and it still surprises me every day, how many people actually don't understand government and its function. From city, I mean, we all... There's a vast array, as you mentioned here, right? County is different than city is different than township, all these different ones. And strong mayor versus... There's so many different forms of government. And especially those people that want to come in and speak in public comment but have no clue about how government works. And it's like, "No, that's actually

the city, not the county." And you want to tell them that, but you're like, "Okay, let's figure out a way on how to educate them." And like right now, I'm actually working to figure out how to do a podcast to actually educate people on the difference of branches of government and the role and all of those things. People don't know what a treasurer does. Just simple things that we think in school we might have been taught, but we weren't taught. And unless you're being intentional, like going to college and taking classes that teach you these things, you just don't know.

1:20:44.4 Megan Sellers: So for me, that's the thing that still is very interesting. I met with someone yesterday and they shared with me, this person said, "I ran for office to become the treasurer and had no idea how to be a treasurer, and I didn't have any background in finance." And I was like, "Wait a minute, what? Okay, you give me hope." Right? So again, it really is. And then they went on to say that they utilized, once they won, they utilized the opportunity to learn. And then coming out of it, they actually had a whole new skill set as a result of just jumping in and saying, "I want to be a part of the change." And at the time, it was during 2008 when it was the downturn and things of that sort. And so they just jumped right in and learned as they went. Right. And again, that was very inspiring. But for me, that's what I would say. It's very interesting to me, every day how many people truly don't understand government and the impact that it has in our everyday lives. You would think people would understand it more. So I'm on this quest to help educate people about government.

1:21:45.9 Shea Charles: So as I noted at the beginning, I grew up in this. So it was like, "Well, yeah, look what my dad told me was... "

1:21:52.8 Megan Sellers: It's related.

1:21:53.7 Shea Charles: Yeah. I was going to say. Well my dad told me it was true. They really are interesting dynamics. But the point of that, and we struggle with, and I still don't have the right answer for this, is the lack of information, that lack of basic knowledge of what does your local government do? And we've run, in previous communities, we've run citizen academies, multi-week citizen academies. And we follow kind of this normal pattern of the first three years, a lot of participation, and then no one wants to show up. And I think one of the challenges we have sometimes as local government officials, if we're doing our job really, really well, people don't care. They're busy with, "Where are the kids? I got to go to the grocery store. What's going on with my job? Did it snow today?" Did it...

1:22:38.7 Shea Charles: And ironically, that's the sign of a successful city. If you're not thinking about day-to-day, "Oh gee, what did my city do today? What did my county do? What did my township do?" That if the system's working properly, they're not going to know about us. And we strive to educate, we strive to engage. I have an argument that we actually send out too much communication on... And that's a debate we're having internally right now because there's so much coming at us from so many different places. But just reflect on that. And if you go through a day and go, "Okay, something didn't blow up," that means things are going well. Now, the chances of that happening are about that big. But it's still... And again, what are people talking about and things of that nature. So.

1:23:34.8 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: I think what surprised me most is... I mean, I worked for corporations for a long time. I worked for the federal government. But corporations, where you can get things done, you make a decision and you go and...

1:23:45.1 Shea Charles: Not answers to the voters.

1:23:46.1 Anne%20Marie Graham-Hudak: Yeah. The money. Yeah. So everything we do, it takes... You might say, "Okay, I want to get from A to B," but it's never a straight line. You have to go over here, then over here, then ask them for money. They say they're going to give you money, then they take your money away when the next president comes in. And so I think that's been the biggest surprise is. And you have to get people to agree, too. It's not just, "I've made a decision, I'm going to do it." It's like you have to get a consensus over here, then a consensus over here, then a consensus over here and negotiate. So I think the amount of time it takes, 'cause sometimes you'll have people come in, "Why don't you just do this?" Well, you can't just do this. And so, I think people have a hard time understanding that things are not a straight line. You have to...

1:24:25.0 Shea Charles: Well, and if you stop and think about this, and there's a wonderful professor at Eastern Michigan, Joe Ohren, I don't know if you knew Joe. And he always made this observation to us is, if you think about it from a business perspective, how we set up who's going to choose to run your business, who's going to be on your board of directors, is nuts. Don't you seek... You want to seek the most qualified people to come together and provide direction and whatnot. And Joe always made the argument that if you actually step back and go, "Wait, how do we choose our leaders?" You're going to have that person, that person, and you mentioned earlier about the treasurer who's never had financial experience and whatnot. People in the private sector start flinching, and understandably. But that's the key.

1:25:14.7 Shea Charles: That's the beauty of our democracy. That's why we see democracy at a local level. We eat, live, and breathe it every day. And yeah, I'll tell one last story. So we did have two new administrative assistants in our public works area. Both came from the private sector, both very bright, intelligent people. And they look at our team every so often and they go, "You do

what?" That's the world we have. So you ask the question of what surprise, in the private sector, you have the advantage of going, "I made a decision, we're going to do this. I'm going to have to answer to the shareholders." We make a decision, it's on the TV news, full room full of people and whatnot, and then, oh wait, there's an election. So it's just something to think about. But again, we are, and to maybe wrap this up is, we are on the front lines of democracy. We do this every day. And the work we do is so important. Not everybody realizes it, and it's not sexy sometimes. It's not, "Ooh, we get to do the big project." But what we do on a day-in and day-out basis serves our country and serves our residents.

1:26:21.1 Tom Stephenson: Yeah. That's what I like to see is an empty audience. That's when you know you're doing a good job and people quit showing up and they have confidence in you. One of my surprises, we had three brand new council people. I took over and I thought, "Oh my gosh, they knew nothing," but they did everything they could to educate themselves. And we finally got a good village manager in, and they come in and they go through the agenda and he takes the time to educate them, and they're doing fantastic. I'm really proud of them that they've actually stepped up, 'cause... People were scared, but that's who got elected. But they really stepped up and so they really saw the difference that they were making, that they could make, and talking to them. So I think that's probably one of the most pleasant surprises. Like I said too, when the audience isn't there, you know you're doing good. So they quit showing up at your board meetings, it's great. It's all empty out there, one, two people. That's fine.

[chuckle]

1:27:23.3 Stephanie Leiser: I think that's a good positive note to end on.

1:27:26.2 Tom Stephenson: Awesome.

1:27:26.3 Stephanie Leiser: So I want to thank everyone for coming and taking the time to engage with us and engage in this democratic process of talking to each other. I want to thank the panelists again for taking time out of their busy schedules to spend this time with us. So thanks, everyone.

[applause]