MICHIGAN GREEN COMMUNITIES

Kalamazoo

Community Sustainability Profile

An installment in the Michigan Green Communities Community Sustainability Profile Series

Sustainability in Kalamazoo: A Brief History

The city of Kalamazoo is a hub of industry, education, and culture in Southwest Michigan. As a regional leader, city leadership has recognized the impacts of climate change to their community. In 2019, the Kalamazoo City Commission declared a climate emergency, urging the community to act promptly to address rising temperatures. This spurred the creation of a Community Sustainability Plan, bringing together community partners and residents to outline a strategy for climate action. The plan was finalized in spring 2022 and is now being implemented. Kalamazoo, as an industrial community, will have a path to sustainability that looks different than many other Michigan communities. Industry generates nearly 70 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) in Kalamazoo, meaning that municipal, residential, and commercial emissions (plus those associated with Western Michigan University's power plant) comprise the remaining 30 percent. Additionally, the City of Kalamazoo's wastewater treatment plant serves all of Kalamazoo County. The City's role in addressing the climate crisis is focused on actions within its scope: reducing municipal energy use and encouraging residents and businesses to reduce their energy use.

> *"How do we plant more trees in areas that don't have enough? How do we get more renewable energy investments? Who else can we partner with to do this work because the City can't do it all? There needs to be a joint effort between the City, the county, and all the surrounding communities."*
>
> – Kalamazoo Commissioner Qianna Decker

Kalamazoo, MI

Population (2020 Census): 73,598
Governance: Commission-Manager
Location: Southwest Michigan, Kalamazoo County

Key Takeaways:

- Develop a community sustainability plan to set short- and long-term goals, engage your community, and establish timelines and potential funding sources to direct project implementation.
- Sustainability planning will look different in every community—customize your plan to the unique features and priorities of your community.
- Establish baselines to help visualize your community's starting point and track the progress you make towards your goals.
- Build and maintain relationships across departments to successfully implement projects. Sustainability projects often involve staff across Public Works, Solid Waste, Planning, etc.
- Take advantage of free technical assistance opportunities, like the Catalyst Leadership Circle Fellowship program and MGC's Accelerator Cohort.

Community Sustainability Plan & Implementation

Kalamazoo's Community Sustainability Plan (CSP) lays out actionable steps across four categories: Accessible Connected Network, Affordable Efficient City, Healthy Prepared Community, and Green Circular Economy. Preparation of the plan involved extensive community engagement through events, surveys, and focus groups. The plan has a focus on deepening urban resilience and protecting the natural environment. It advocates for creating more green spaces, especially in areas where there are vacant lots; planting trees; and improving connectivity for alternative modes of transportation (like biking, walking, and public transportation).

To guide the implementation of their CSP, the City of Kalamazoo hired its first Sustainability Planner, Justin Gish, in 2023. Gish emphasizes how important having a plan in place is for justifying and allocating funding towards sustainability projects. The CSP will also inform Imagine Kalamazoo 2035, the City's upcoming master plan.



Setting Baselines & Renewable Energy Purchasing

As Kalamazoo works toward a goal of carbon neutrality by 2050, establishing reference points to track progress is key. One action the CSP refers to is creating two baseline reports: one on municipal emissions and another on total emissions in city limits. In 2023, Kalamazoo completed these two initial Greenhouse Gas Inventory Reports, looking at emissions across Scopes 1, 2, and 3. Scope 1 emissions are those coming directly from city activity, Scope 2 represent indirect emissions produced by purchased electricity, and Scope 3 are those tied to a City activity but owned or controlled by a separate entity The report on municipal emissions found that 58 percent of municipal emissions fell into Scope 2. These emissions primarily result from waste and wastewater treatment operations, solid waste facilities, municipal buildings and facilities, street lights and traffic signals, and the City's vehicle fleet.

One strategy for reducing Scope 2 emissions that is present throughout the CSP is to implement community solar projects. Because community solar is not yet a possibility for much of Michigan (at the time of writing this piece), the City is turning to other options to reduce Scope 2 emissions. On September 16, 2024, Kalamazoo's City Commission voted unanimously to enter a 20-year renewable energy contract with Consumers Energy to power municipal activities entirely on renewable energy. Doing so could save the City over $6 million in the next 20 years, depending on future renewable energy costs. Purchasing 100 percent renewable energy from Consumers Energy demonstrates that Kalamazoo is dedicated to achieving the energy goals it has outlined in the CSP.

Participation in MGC & Catalyst Leadership Circle Fellowship (CLCF) Program

Beyond internal sustainability work, Kalamazoo officials also contribute their knowledge and expertise to the Michigan Green Communities network. The City has been participating in Michigan Green Communities since 2016, reaching Gold Certification for the first time in the 2023 Challenge. For Gish, engaging with the program has allowed Kalamazoo to connect with other municipal staff doing similar work and share knowledge.

> *"Everyone's essentially dealing with the same problems, just different geographies. So, making those connections, bringing folks like me who are doing this work together, that's very valuable."*
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> *– Justin Gish, Kalamazoo Sustainability Coordinator*

Looking Ahead

Every community's path to sustainability looks different. A local government's approach toward sustainability should be tailored to the individual community and its unique features. For Kalamazoo, they have all the essential pieces in place, like their community plan and sustainability vision.

With their goals laid out, Kalamazoo is continuing to work through implementation and determining how to fund projects. Since Kalamazoo's CSP was finalized in 2022, Kalamazoo has been awarded millions of dollars in federal grant funding for projects that will help meet the plan's goals: $25 million through the RAISE (Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity) grant for traffic calming will build safer streets and lower air pollution, and the USDA Urban & Community Forestry grant is allocating $1 million for tree planting.

In an evolving world where emerging technology, new local government examples, and federal opportunities are constantly changing the landscape, Gish believes that Kalamazoo has what it takes to "go all the way."

Michigan Green Communities (MGC) is a statewide network of local and state government staff and officials, and higher education institution staff that collaborate with one another, through peer learning and information sharing, to promote innovative sustainability, climate change, and environmental justice solutions at the local, state, regional, national, and international levels. The core component of the MGC program is the MGC Challenge, an annual sustainability benchmarking program.