

SUSTAINABILITY & ENERGY COMMISSION

GRAND HAVEN CITY HALL

519 WASHINGTON STREET

March 13, 2025

6:00 PM

A regular meeting of the Sustainability & Energy Commission (SEC) was held Thursday, March 13th, 2025, at 6 pm in the Council Chambers of City Hall, Grand Haven, MI.

Roll call: Chairperson Dan Small, Pam Blough, Jean Madden, Ryan Cotton, Brittany Goode (until 6:45 pm), James Hagen (arrived at 6:10 PM), Jim Matthews, John Kinch, Patti Nelsen, Nancy O'Neill, Adrei Skelly.

Staff in Attendance: Eric Law

Call to the Audience: Two people were in audience. The new owner of an Art Gallery downtown and Jan O'Connell from the Sierra Club. Jan asked about Inflation Reduction Act funding available for environmental projects in the City of Grand Haven. Eric Law said he would ask City Manager Ashley Latsch.

Minutes from January: Dan Small said since there was no quorum at the last meeting, the minutes from January remain to be formally approved. Dan Small asked that a sentence regarding the number of deer be stricken and the group concurred. With that change included on the top of page two, Dan Small moved, supported by Pam Blough. The vote was unanimous.

Minutes from February: Dan Small moved to accept as written, Brittany Goode supported. The vote was unanimous.

1. Presentation on Ottawa County Groundwater by Paul Sachs, Director of Department of Strategic Impact, Ottawa County: Paul Sachs thanked Nancy O'Neill for her invitation to speak on water use and ground water issues in Ottawa County. Paul Sachs explained that his department is in in charge of groundwater, strategic planning, etc. environmental issues in the County. Nancy had contacted him regarding water-conscious landscape design.

One of four of 115,000 homes in the County is on a domestic well. Bedrock aquifer wells comprise an enormous number of wells in Ottawa County, versus much of the rest of the state. Only a thin glacial layer exists in Ottawa County. Often, the only source of water is in the bedrock due to the glacial aquifer lacking the availability of fresh water. Given our high growth rates, water use is becoming challenging.

Allendale had to run water lines to a new subdivision because of lack of groundwater. The Polkton area experienced soybeans being “burned to a crisp” due to high degree of saltwater in the irrigation system. Further, what is not commonly known is domestic water demands are more than agricultural use.

As more wells go in, the water level drops and wells start to “sputter.” The well drillers then need to come in and go deeper. Worse, the water pumped out is not being recharged once it is used on the surface and runs off or evaporates. Significantly, the water being pumped up and lost is “ancient glacial water that has been capped and sealed for eons.” This is one of the biggest issues facing the County.

As the glacial water level drops, there is some “salinity upwelling.” This is because in ancient times, we were a shallow saltwater sea where the Marshall Sandstone now exists. Domestic is 300 gallons per day year round, including 3 billion gallons for just lawn irrigation, as compared to farmers who only use water for three months out of the year.

Over 4,000 new homes are expected; each of which will be “well-dependent” and must use the Marshall due to no public water supply.

Changes needed in our long-term thinking and planning. The Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO’s) could be used for better data for planning and smarter economic growth, for example:

- Land use planning and regulation,
- Site development standards, and
- Water use priorities

This is a challenge due to 24 units of government, each with a multitude of different departments and functions (utilities, zoning, etc.) and all decisions are usually made in “silos.”

More education is needed. Residents can convert turfgrass to native plantings. It is costly to maintain the traditional lawn. Paul Sachs showed beautiful pictures of options in a built up office complex. The County also completed an example of best practices at the Fillmore Turf Replacement project as a demonstration site. One acre of turf conversion saves 270 gallons and \$6,000 in maintenance costs. People need to understand more about native plants and “not equate them to weeds.”

Jean Madden shared that her lawn is entirely native. She uses signs to help people understand and more people are doing so, unlike ten years ago when a person was cited for milkweed on Grand Avenue.

Pam Blough pointed out there is a middle ground between turf and native when using low-water use plants. There is a range of turf grass alternatives that can be explored. She suggested avoiding polarization.

Zoning was suggested as the best tool to follow up with after education. The SEC members expressed support to assist in a coalition of those who might be able to influence countywide outcomes going forward.

- 2. Forest Management Update and Next Steps Post MDNR Meeting:** Jean Madden said the City staff and Subcommittee got together with the MDNR to discuss. Jean reported that October to January is the best time for deer management and no later than March. They are looking at Fall, 2026. She noted that MDNR does not participate or compensate local communities for deer management.

Drones typically undercount the number of deer according to the MDNR. Their response to our numbers was that it is very hard to get accurate counts. A better approach is to set a goal... like cull when we no longer have native plants on the forest floor. There are three plant species that are not eaten unless deer are desperate for food, for example. This becomes a litmus test as to where to take actions. They go into backyards to get enough food to maintain and grow their population. An alternative is deer/car collisions. Meridian Township is the model for the state to emulate. The city's questions were about their reproduction.

Deer typically follow the same patterns so, significantly, it takes a long time for deer to migrate into an area where they have been culled from so this provides time for plant species to recover. In other words, a major culling in the City does not mean that deer will automatically be pulled in from the Township.

Eric Law said the next step is Ashley Latsch is looking for a good date for a City Council work session discussion in May. Ashley Latsch is juggling the work session priorities, including a potential public safety millage proposal, etc. Money for deer management is in the budget for it this fall/winter of 2025. The idea is to put this decision-making in the hands of city administrations based on some trigger points. Jean Madden will work on and coordinate a draft resolution. It was understood that it is endorsed by the SEC.

- 3. Mulligan's Hollow Trail System Grant Submission:** Jean Madden inquired, yet Eric Law did not have an update. Jean Madden said she will send a question to Ashley regarding the grant writing status.
- 4. Energy Task Force Update:** Eric Law said Ashley Latsch will take this to the City Council in April. (Note: Subsequent to the meeting the target date was established as April 14th). Eric Law said a presentation is not needed as it is expected to be on

the Consent Agenda. Ferrysburg has it on their agenda for March 17th. (Subsequent to the SEC meeting, Ferrysburg accepted the Northwest Ottawa Community Energy Plan. Grand Haven Township will discuss on Monday, March 24th. (Subsequent to the SEC meeting, GHT decided to schedule a future work session to amend the plan.)

5. Strategic Planning: Jean Madden provided an update. There was general agreement to continue the strategic planning prioritization process based on the SEC Mission Vision Goals 2025.docx. Pam Blough moved to adopt it as presented. Dan said he did not have a chance to review and would prefer to not do so tonight. Jean Madden said we do not need a vote on the strategic priorities tonight; rather she just wanted to start the discussion on the priorities. Jean asked if the SEC is comfortable in moving ahead with that understanding. The consensus was that Jean Madden will send out the remaining subject matter surveys and a formal a vote was not necessary at this time.

Other Business: Chairperson Small called for any other matters. Ryan Cotton brought up two considerations for future meetings. The first was review of the existing Tree Removal Policy. Ryan Cotton moved, and Nancy supported to make a recommendation to the City Manager to request help to the Sustainability and Energy Commission to understand the tree removal policy. Discussion was held regarding reasons for removal, safety, rotting, documentation that might exist, and selective trimming alternatives. Motion was approved (I do not recall the vote).

Ryan Cotton also suggested it might be good to invite Brian Urquhart be here to be present to hear some of the topics. The presentation tonight on groundwater was a good example, especially when it came to possible code revisions on this and other topics. The group generally agreed that we should invite staff from the Department when there are relevant subjects to talk about on the SEC Agenda.

Final Call to Audience: No public in the audience.

ADJOURNMENT: There being no further business, Chairperson Small called for adjournment at 8:10 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Ryan Cotton (my turn as rotating minutes taker.