

Agenda
Executive Transition Committee
West Olive Administration Building – Board Room and YouTube
12220 Fillmore Street, West Olive, Michigan 49460
Friday, November 25, 2024 9:00 AM

Approval of Agenda

Consent Resolutions

Public Comment

- I. Approval of the Proposed Minutes from the [November 21, 2024](#) Executive Transition Committee meeting.

Agenda and Action Requests:

- I. [Press Release Reading by Chairman Moss and Vice Chairwoman Miedema](#)

Public Comment

Adjournment at Call of the Chairperson

Note: Public Comments on the day's business are to be limited to three (3) minutes.

EXECUTIVE TRANSITION COMMITTEE

Proposed Minutes

DATE: November 21, 2024

TIME: 9:02 a.m.

PLACE: Fillmore Street Complex

PRESENT: Roger Belknap, Sylvia Rhodea-via zoom (Allendale), Joe Moss, and Allison Miedema. (4)

ABSENT: Gretchen Cosby. (1)

SUBJECT: APPROVAL OF AGENDA

ETC 24-016 Motion: To approve the agenda of today.
Moved by: Miedema UNANIMOUS

SUBJECT: CONSENT RESOLUTIONS

ETC 24-017 Motion: To approve the Proposed Minutes from the November 19, 2024, Executive Transition Committee meeting.
Moved by: Miedema UNANIMOUS

SUBJECT: PUBLIC COMMENT

1. Sheila Dettloff-Holland Township

Discussion took place by each committee member on who they feel should move to second-round interviews.

SUBJECT: AGENDA AND ACTION REQUESTS-ADVANCEMENT TO SECOND-ROUND INTERVIEW

ETC 24-018 Motion: To select James Freed and James Lower to advance to second-round interviews for County Administrator at the Executive Transition Committee Meeting tomorrow, November 22nd.
Moved by: Belknap

The motion passed by the following votes: Yeas: Roger Belknap, Sylvia Rhodea, Allison Miedema, Joe Moss. (4)

SUBJECT: PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

The Chairperson called for adjournment at 9:15 a.m.



Ottawa County
Where Freedom Rings

**Executive Transition
Committee**

**12220 Fillmore Street
West Olive, MI 49460**

www.miottawa.org

For Immediate Release

November 25, 2024

9:00 AM

The Search for the Next Permanent Ottawa County Administrator

West Olive, Michigan – Ottawa County is a beautiful county with a bright future! We are cultivating a county Where Freedom Rings, businesses flourish, and families thrive.

The Ottawa County Board of Commissioners (BOC) is given the statutory responsibility to appoint a County Administrator to oversee county government. When we were elected, we committed to return Ottawa County to the priorities and protection of the people after living under the unconstitutional local government overreach by Ottawa County in 2020-2022. Hiring an excellent County Administrator is an important step in creating a beautiful future for Ottawa County and future generations.

Earlier this year, we intentionally waited until after the August primary election to begin searching for a new permanent County Administrator, so that the County Administrator candidates would know the makeup of the next Board prior to applying for the position.

On September 24, 2024, the Executive Transition Committee was appointed by the BOC and tasked with searching for a full-time county administrator. With the successful recruitment help of W Talent Solutions, which included input from some of the key staff who interact with the county administrator on a daily basis, 19 resumes have been received, representing a tremendous pool of talent and experience! Thank you to each person who demonstrated a desire to serve in Ottawa County.

All resumes are available to the public on the county website at miottawa.org.

The Interview Process

The Executive Transition Committee reviewed applicant resumes for evidence of strong leadership, depth of knowledge, relevant experience, education, and the ability to lead complex teams. Ottawa County is blessed to have outstanding individuals applying for the County Administrator position!

The committee voted on November 15, 2024, to move four applicants forward for public interviews:

1. Christopher Estes
2. James Freed
3. Patrick Jordan
4. James Lower

Interviews took place on Tuesday, November 19, 2024. The interviews were livestreamed and video recorded for the public.

We invited all current county commissioners, constituents, staff, and recently elected county commissioners to watch the interviews and contact us to share their perspectives on which candidates they believed should 1) move forward for the second round of interviews, and 2) which candidate should ultimately be presented to be the permanent County Administrator.

The committee reconvened last week Thursday, November 21, 2024, to choose two final candidates to interview. James Freed and Jim Lower both received unanimous votes from members of the Executive Transition Committee to proceed to final round interviews on Friday, November 22. (Friday's meeting was canceled due to illness of the Interim Administrator and subcommittee board members.)

Both candidates demonstrated a great depth of knowledge and leadership experience in working with local government in the State of Michigan.

On Thursday, November 21, 2024, James Freed withdrew from the candidate pool and sent a warm letter to the Board of Commissioners.



Office of the City Manager, Chief Administrative Officer

Phone: 810-984-9740 Fax: 810-985-0179

www.porthuron.org

November 21, 2024

Ottawa County
Board of Commissioners
1220 Filmore Street
West Olive, MI 49460

Re: County Administrator

Chairperson Moss and Board of Commissioners,

I want to thank you for the distinct honor of being invited to interview for the position of County Administrator for the County of Ottawa. I was humbled to be informed this morning that I have been advanced in the process to the final stage.

This process has ignited a great moment of personal reflection for my wife and I. In this moment, we stepped back to take stock in what our family currently has in life, and our deepest hopes and desires for the future.

I have been a municipal executive for more than 17 years, almost 11 of those years were serving in my current position as City Manager for the City of Port Huron. These 17 years have brought moments I could not foresee and will not forget. They have shaped who I am as a person and my worldview.

My tenure in Port Huron has been marked by remarkable challenges and by a community working together to overcome those challenges.

During this struggle, one of which our shared future was to be shaped, an irrevocable bond has been forged between the residents of Port Huron and my heart. Our hopes and dreams for our families and our future is now and forever interwoven and forged together by time and love.

Here in Port Huron, we are home. This is where we want to raise our two little girls. No raise or promotion can change that fact. Furthermore, I believe that God has placed us here for such a time as this.

Considering this, it would be unfair to your organization and your residents to continue in the process to become your next County Administrator.

Ottawa is one of Michigan's premier counties. It is why it's one of the fastest growing counties in Michigan and why this search has yielded you such a deep pool of talent to choose from.



During this period of our lives I prayed that God would be a light unto our feet and give us straight paths. Today, I pray that same prayer for you and your organization.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James R. Freed", written over a horizontal line.

James R. Freed
City Manager
Chief Administrative Officer

James Freed has since called Jim Lower and communicated his support for his candidacy and belief Ottawa County would be in good hands under his leadership. Jim Lower is a standout candidate for the role of our next county administrator based on his merit and excellence in his field.

Based on conversations we have had, there is much evidence that many people believe that both James Freed and Jim Lower are qualified to be our next county administrator.

We have chatted with incoming commissioners, current commissioners, and other elected officials, both within this county building and throughout the county.

Many people have shared positive comments about both final candidates and stated that our process was transparent, detailed, and well done.

Some of the incoming commissioners and current commissioners critiqued the process - mentioning that if we waited until next year, there would be a different pool of potential candidates. However, when asked to provide feedback on both James Freed and Jim Lower, we didn't hear any negativity from any of them, except that Freed and Lower were being considered by the current board.

Here is some of the feedback we received from other elected officials within our county:

- Jim Lower is a stand out candidate for the role of our next county administrator based on his merit and excellence in his field.
- From observing the interview of Jim, he is qualified to do the job, has vast experience, leadership skills, will seek the board's vision, accept responsibility, values effective communication, understands and desires staff feedback and builds administration based on building trust.
- From observing the interview process, Jim Lower demonstrates vast experiences at multiple levels and positions in governmental units. Jim referenced having an organization chart, building trust, having an open door policy, teamwork and collaboration, obtaining feedback from the team, making himself accessible by going to staff, has a sense of humor, mentioned avoiding wasting time and money, driven to reflect that he wants to make a difference, an out of the box thinker, not afraid to let people go who are having a negative impact on the team,
- Mr. Lower certainly has a lot of experience on both sides of governing. I would think his experiences as an elected official give him a good perspective as to what it's like to be "in your shoes." I also appreciate his efforts on behalf of landscape companies during covid.
- Jim Lower seems to be a more well-rounded candidate with experience in municipal government and experience in state legislature. Working for a smaller municipality still involves working with people, budgets (more outside the box solutions on budget problems). He seemed very personable and likable. If that's who you end up hiring, I am sure he will do a good job.
- I watched Mr. Lower's first interview. I thought his answers were impressive.
- Jim stands out and is a good candidate.

I would personally add that Jim desired for us to get to know him as a person as well. At the end of his interview, he went back to share more about his personal life. This demonstrated the relational aspect of Jim that he wanted to bring to Ottawa County.

Good Governance & Intimidation

After James Freed withdrew his candidacy on Thursday of last week, Jim Lower became publicly known as the final candidate to be considered for permanent county administrator.

Jim Lower shared with us that once this happened, he began receiving intimidating phone calls from John Teeples and Jacob Bonnema.

For perspective, we have been informed by incoming commissioners that John Teeples will likely be the Chair and Commissioner Bonnema may be Vice Chair of the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners in 2025.

In light of these events, Jim Lower released the following statement this morning.

To Whom It May Concern,

I was honored to be recruited by W Talent Solutions to apply for the Ottawa County Administrator position. From the beginning, the prospect of leaving my current position was a difficult one. However, I have always welcomed new challenges and sought opportunities to give back to the community.

Given the challenges facing Ottawa County, I believed I was uniquely qualified to help bridge the political divide that has caused so much turmoil. Throughout this process, I have been encouraged by many individuals—both inside and outside the Ottawa County organization—to strongly consider taking on this role. Following a positive interview, I was selected as a top-two candidate and soon became the sole candidate under consideration.

It was at this point that members of the incoming board majority began reaching out to me, both directly and indirectly, to express that I would not be given a fair opportunity to succeed in this role. They explained that, regardless of my qualifications or efforts, they were committed to terminating or otherwise forcing out whoever is hired. This would be the case even if it resulted in significant costs to taxpayers through severance payments, search fees, and renewed turmoil. While I was assured this was “not personal,” it would undoubtedly impact my family and career.

At this moment, I believe it is time for someone to take an off ramp. As such, I am withdrawing my name from consideration for this position. I do not wish to cost Ottawa County taxpayers additional money or be placed in a role set up for failure, thereby contributing further to division in the community.

I wish the outgoing and incoming Board of Commissioners, the other elected officials, staff, and the people of Ottawa County all the best.

I look forward to continuing my work with the Village of Sparta. We have exciting opportunities ahead, and I am grateful to remain part of this vibrant community.

Sincerely,

Jim Lower
Village Manager
Village of Sparta

Today we were supposed to interview the final candidate in the search, but as we just heard from Jim's statement, he has withdrawn after being intimidated by Teeples and Bonnema, not because he did not have the proper qualifications to be County Administrator, but because he participated in a transparent and public search process by the current board.

The current board is acting in the best interest of the county in the search for a permanent administrator.

It is unfortunate to find someone that is supported by the community that feels he must withdraw due to the intimidation he's received. Jim has confirmed he would greatly like to serve in this position to serve the people of Ottawa County.

The treatment Jim and his family received was unfair, unethical, and unjust.

This behavior is also creating a toxic environment for the transition between two boards.

It should be noted that when the current board was elected in 2022, no meaningful transition process occurred leading up to 8 out of 11 new commissioners being seated. This put the new board at a serious disadvantage in January of 2023, and harmed the people of Ottawa County. Unlike the prior and the future board, this board is committed to working for the best interests of the people and a smooth transition plan.

Unless something changes, it's unfortunate that the county now sits at a standstill for yet another 6-12 months before hiring a permanent administrator.

It's also important to note that the current board has statutory authority to offer a one-year contract for any administrator that they feel would best serve the citizens of Ottawa County.

Our county stands in need of a strong leader in the role of the permanent county administrator. We have been without a strong leader in this permanent role for the past couple of years. When I campaigned again this season, I was asked why we weren't moving forward yet with hiring someone. From my perspective, Jon Anderson was bringing about needed stability in his role as interim and during a busy budget season.

Most importantly, I wanted future applicants to know who the county commissioners would be in 2025. I have shared for months with constituents that my hope was to begin interviews once the August elections were done, and that is what we did (beginning preliminary groundwork this past summer) .

I had shared that if the hiring process was delayed further, that would mean quite a few more months or possibly another year with no administrator. By taking the time to go through this process now, I

was hopeful that we could dig into the real work of the county as we began afresh with a new County board make up next year.

There is much work to be done, and I am hopeful we can work collaboratively together. I have been working on building connections with incoming board members and listening to many voices and perspectives in our community. I will continue to do so.

Regardless of whether we appoint someone now or sometime next year, it's important that our county has a strong permanent administrator.

Besides meeting the job requirements, traits I hope all commissioners would look for is someone of high integrity, honesty, a good track record, someone who is humble, a hard worker, an encourager, someone who possesses excellent communication skills, and is impartial.

I would also like to recognize and thank all the staff members that have been involved throughout this process in finding our next permanent county administrator. Many hours were invested by you and we thank you for your input and time.

More information will be shared as it is available.

Joe Moss

Chair

Executive Transition Committee

Allison Miedema

Vice Chair

Executive Transition Committee