



Focus on **Agriculture**

Enhance. Support. Protect.

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Ottawa County agriculture generates \$506 million annually in market value of products sold (2017 Ag Census). Ottawa is the third highest producing county behind Huron and Allegan counties. Our robust farming industry creates resiliency in food security during times of crisis. It anchors our rural character and beautiful landscapes. Agricultural land has ecological and financial benefits to the communities it is located in. And it is worthy of economic development efforts just as manufacturing, tourism, and other primary industries receive. From 2012 to 2017, Ottawa County experienced the loss of 17% of our farms and an 8% decrease in the amount of land in farms. Continued losses of this magnitude will negatively impact Ottawa County's economy.

The purpose of this document is to establish a local economic development action plan that targets some of the challenges our agriculture industry is experiencing in order to slow the loss of farms and farmland. The basis of this plan is a survey of agricultural landowners that was administered in early 2019, with the partnership of the Ottawa County Farm Bureau. The survey was designed to gather the perspectives of Ottawa County agricultural landowners and producers about how best to protect farmland in Ottawa County and, by extension, our local farming industry. The results and recommendations derived from the survey responses are available at miottawa.org/farmland. This plan also helps to achieve certain outcomes set forth in the 2022-2023 Ottawa County Board of Commissioners Strategic Business Plan, specifically Objectives 1 and 3 of Goal 2, available at www.miottawa.org/boc.

Focus areas, identified through the survey, are included in this plan. Each of the four focus areas offers specific actions that the County, with the help of partners, can undertake that will help curtail the loss of farms, farmers, and farmland. This plan is a multi-year, adaptive guidance document. It is intended to be administered by the Ottawa County Economic Development Coordinator through the Department of Strategic Impact (DSI) and supported by other County staff, agencies, non-profits, and the private sector. The original version of this plan was adopted in 2020. Accomplishments from the first three years of implementing the plan are included in Exhibit A, which also summarizes potential revisions for proposed action items that have been made in this current version which was revised in late 2023. A final update of accomplishments is included in Exhibit C.

Support for this plan has been secured from Ottawa County agencies and farmers, as shown in the Memorandum of Support for the original plan attached as Exhibit B. Progress will be tracked as a part of the Ottawa County Economic Development Coordinator's Annual Performance Measures and summarized in an Annual Report provided to the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners.

Click the Focus Area below to go directly to that section:

[SUCCESSION PLANNING](#)

[COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE VISION](#)

[ECONOMIC VIABILITY](#)

[AGRICULTURAL EASEMENTS](#)

Focus Area 1: SUCCESSION PLANNING

78% of Ottawa County Survey respondents agreed that succession planning efforts can help preserve farmland that is essential to Ottawa County's agriculture industry

A. Technical Assistance

Serving as one of two designated Michigan Land Transfer Navigators, a program launched in 2023 and delivered by American Farmland Trust with funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the County Economic Development Coordinator will:

- Develop an Action Plan describing actions the County can take to promote farm transfer and succession strategies with producers
- Expand County staff skillset in succession planning by attending training events
- Deliver information, direct technical assistance, and/or coaching to 120 or more farmers, ranchers and/or landowners over the next four years

B. Private Sector Partnerships

Many of the currently available succession planning resources for farmers originate from governmental agencies or academia, such as USDA, MDARD, MSUE, etc. Creating stronger partnerships with private sector service providers who value agriculture creates a more direct link between the farmers and the services they require for succession planning. This can be achieved by soliciting their participation in and sponsorship of events and/or including them on our County resource page, which was transferred to the new [MiFarmLink website's resource page](#) in 2021, making them easier to access on this statewide platform. Ottawa County's Economic Development Coordinator serves on the Advisory Committee for MiFarmLink and monitors progress for this plan element. Below are a few of the service providers that the County currently partners with:

- McShane & Bowie PLC
- Varnum Law
- DeBoer, Baumann & Company PLC
- Peoples Company

C. Incentivize Succession Planning

Succession planning is challenging for any individual or organization and is arguably more challenging for a family farm operation. To help motivate farmers to create their succession plan, the County will:

- Prioritize farmland that is included in a farm succession plan when selecting properties to be permanently preserved
- Offer stipends for attendance at regional succession planning workshops and/or host workshop(s) locally

Focus Area 2: COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE VISION

88% of Ottawa County Survey respondents agreed that improved planning and zoning efforts can make farming less challenging

A. Viable Ag Lands Mapping

Prioritizing existing ag land can help with selecting parcels for permanent preservation as well as for deciding which parcels might be sited for development that will inevitably occur in the County. This [mapping tool](#) was developed by DSI as a part of the first version of the Focus on Ag Plan. Enhancements to this map and other mapping improvements can include:

- Refined land use cover change data to measure development pressure at the township level
- Conduct an internal needs assessment with the Ag Preservation Board to improve our ag preservation prioritization process
- An interactive tool/layer(s) that can be used by developers to help them not only to avoid key agricultural preservation zones, but assist them in finding in-fill areas and/or areas with existing infrastructure and services
- Interactive layers that identify critical areas for groundwater recharge and where alternative irrigation water sources need to be secured
- Continued development of the Countywide Future Land Use Vision, a tool to inform decisions made at the local level

B. Cost of Community Services Analysis

Studies of numerous communities across the US revealed that in nearly all cases, farmland was shown to generate a fiscal surplus that helped to offset the cost of the higher residential demand for public services. To our knowledge, Ottawa County has not had such an analysis performed in the past. This information could be used to help local leaders see the value of leaving acreage in agriculture, largely considered an 'interim' use, rather than rezoning it for development for a perceived highest and best use. DSI staff could facilitate this by:

- Seeking grant funding to hire a consultant to perform a Cost of Community Services Analysis for Ottawa County
- Sharing study results with local unit planners, elected officials, and related associations

C. Brownfield Redevelopment and Land Bank Authorities

The reutilization of vacant, blighted, or functionally obsolete structures in urbanized areas where infrastructure already exists can help reduce urban sprawl, thereby protecting farmland and open spaces. The County is proactive in this regard and can enhance those efforts by:

- Supporting the Ottawa County Brownfield Redevelopment Authority's increased use of a variety of brownfield redevelopment tools, e.g. federal and state grants and loan programs, local incentive funds, and development of a local brownfield revolving loan fund
- Provide staff capacity to the Ottawa County Land Bank Authority in order to take advantage of statutorily authorized tools to redevelop blighted/underutilized properties in the County, particularly to increase workforce housing inventory

Focus Area 3: ECONOMIC VIABILITY

88% of Ottawa County Survey respondents agreed addressing barriers to the economic viability of farming is important

A. Tax Advantages

Profit margins in farming are thin if not non-existent. Only 43.6% of farms had a positive net cash farm income in the 2017 AgCensus. The State of Michigan currently has offers programs that can help farms cashflow and will be promoted to farmers who are not already taking advantage of this low hanging fruit, including:

- Farmland Development Rights Agreements
- Qualified Ag Tax Exemption

B. Farm Viability

Other states offer programs that Michigan does not, aimed at improving farm viability. Ottawa County and/or the State of Michigan could explore the potential for implementation of such programs, engaging with Ottawa County Farm Bureau, Michigan Farm Bureau, and Michigan Agribusiness Association to advocate for enabling legislation for establishment of programs similar to:

- [Farm Viability Enhancement Program](#), modeled after Massachusetts
- [Modernizing Agricultural and Manufacturing Bonds Act](#) (aggie bonds) supports beginning farmers with low interest loans, modeled after sixteen other states

C. Energy and Climate

When achieving farm profitability becomes challenging, farmers look for ways to diversify income and reduce costs. With the passage of the Michigan Healthy Climate Plan and the America the Beautiful 30x30 Initiative, more programs and incentives are available for renewable energy, greenhouse gas reduction, and carbon sequestration efforts. County staff can provide access and technical assistance for a number of energy and climate related tools that can enhance economic viability for farmers, including:

- Property Assessed Clean Energy loans
- Resources for solar installations and/or agrivoltaics
- State and federal grants for renewable energy and energy efficient improvements
- Tracking local opportunities to take advantage of carbon markets

D. Broadband Expansion/Improvement

The 2017 Ag Census indicates that 15% of farms do not have access to the internet. That does not account for the farms that do not have connections that are adequate for the significant data downloads and uploads required for farming operations with a variety of digital needs. A 2019 study by the USDA estimated that a potential \$47 billion dollar benefit (nationwide) could be realized if broadband and related precision ag-technologies were fully deployed. \$18 billion of that is dependent upon having adequate access to the internet. The County's Digital Inclusion Strategy to extend acceptable service levels to rural areas includes:

- A commitment of \$7.5 million dollars from the County's ARPA fund

Focus on Agriculture

A plan to enhance and support the ag industry in Ottawa County

- Securing a \$14 million dollar broadband infrastructure grant
- Construction of 400 miles of new fiber
- Construction of new towers to enhance wireless coverage
- Adding a Project Manager to DSI to oversee this large scale project

E. Workforce Development

Statistically, a person living in Ottawa County is more likely to work in agriculture than in any other County in the State. But even so, most farmers struggle to find a dependable workforce, particularly those that rely on seasonal labor and must comply with requirements such as Adverse Effect Wage Rate. While there are no quick or easy fixes to this problem, Ottawa County staff are actively engaging in career exploration and workforce training efforts through the West Michigan Agribusiness Talent Council, and other entities, that will hopefully have a positive impact in the future, including:

- Planning an agribusiness sector at MiCareerQuest
- Offering training and education for farm and food processing workers through Specialty Crop Block Grants and Going Pro Talent funds
- Promoting mentorship opportunities and taking a leadership role in Statewide beginning farmer support efforts
- Partnering with Careerline Tech Center, Critter Barn, Ottawa County Farm Bureau, and Michigan State University Extension to plan and host educational events

Focus Area 4: AGRICULTURAL EASEMENTS

63% of Ottawa County Survey respondents agreed that preserving farmland through easements is an important farmland preservation tool

A. Local PDR Program Participation

DSI staff will provide information and assistance to the remaining seven townships that have not yet adopted a resolution of support. Townships will receive priority as follows: Port Sheldon, Grand Haven, Holland, Allendale, and Georgetown. Actions will include:

- Offer informational presentations to the board(s) of each township
- Attend Michigan Township Association local chapter meetings to update all local units on program impacts
- Engage with the Macatawa Area Coordinating County, Michigan Association of Planners, and Michigan Association of Counties to explore opportunities to present to those bodies and/or include articles in publications
- Maintaining strong communication with current participating townships

B. Federal, State, and Non-Governmental Organization Funding for Easements

DSI staff will seek to secure higher levels of funding for easements by:

- Applying for additional easement funds through RCPP in 2025
- Apply and advocate for additional funding from and for the Michigan Agricultural Preservation Fund
- Utilizing County lobbyist to promote strengthening of these the program(s) by legislators
- Utilizing partners like American Farmland Trust, Heart of the Lakes, and land conservancies to increase advocacy impact
- Pursue easement funding from local and regional community foundations

C. Local Fundraising

While securing agricultural easements is costly, it is a permanent and quantifiable method of farmland preservation that can be effective when used in concert with well thought out zoning and land use plans. Therefore, significant efforts must be made to generate the funds needed to sustain the program. Current efforts have been successful, but have the capacity to grow in the following ways:

- Identify ways to increase the financial impact of the signature Farms Are the Tapas event
- Implement a consistent but manageable Year End Campaign beginning in 2024
- Encourage participating townships to contribute funds to projects in their jurisdictions

D. Non-contiguous Planned Unit Development Ordinance

Due to the fact that Transfer of Development Rights programs do not allow for multi-jurisdictional sending and receiving areas under current Michigan statute, non-contiguous planned unit development ordinances can be an effectuate a similar land use management result. Kent County has modeled such an ordinance which could be piloted here in Ottawa County. Feasibility and implementation steps could include:

- Direct outreach to potential host communities
- Development of draft ordinance

Exhibit A

MEMORANDUM

November 18, 2020

To: Ottawa County Board of Commissioners
Re: Support for the Ottawa County Focus on Agriculture Plan
From: Advocates for the agriculture industry in Ottawa County (listed on page 2 of this memo)

In 2008, the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners recognized the need to protect the farmland that its agriculture industry needs to thrive, and established the Farmland Preservation Program. In 2019, as part of an effort to evaluate the efficacy of this program in 2019, the County's Planning and Performance Improvement Department conducted a survey of all of its agricultural landowners. The results revealed that not only should the Farmland Preservation Program be continued, but the County should also focus on enhancing the economic viability of farming, ensuring that planning and zoning efforts complement agriculture, and that retiring farmers have a successor to take over their operations. Therefore, the County has developed the Focus on Agriculture plan (Exhibit A), which enumerates specific actions that the County, with assistance from key public and private partners, can take to help curtail the loss of farmers, farms, and farmland in Ottawa County. The individuals named on this memo recognize that a productive, versatile, and resilient farming industry is a cornerstone of not only our economy in Ottawa County, but also our way of life, and hereby support the activation of this plan by Ottawa County and its partners.

The agriculture industry in the County generates over \$506M in value of the agricultural products raised, ranking us third statewide by county¹. People who live in Ottawa County are 73% more likely to work in agriculture than if they lived somewhere else in the state². Yet, from 2012 to 2017, the County lost 17% of its farms, and 8% of its farmland¹. This poses a significant threat not just to our economy, but also to our quality of life. In addition to the economic benefits that our diminishing farmland provides, it also offers access to local food, water infiltration and recharge, scenic beauty, wildlife corridors, and

¹ USDA- NASS Census of Agriculture

² Statistical Atlas

Exhibit A

positive local property tax revenue over cost of services used. For these reasons, we believe that the agricultural industry should be not only included in, but also prioritized in economic development planning activities; just as traditional, non-ag industry sectors have been for years.

- ✓ **Please add my name to this memo to the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners, signifying my support for the agriculture industry in Ottawa County:**

Jennifer Owens, President, Lakeshore Advantage

Gary McDowell, Director, Michigan Department of Ag and Rural Development

Adam Dietrich, Partner, Homestead Orchards LLC

Focus on Agriculture

Summary of Accomplishments from March 2020-March 2023



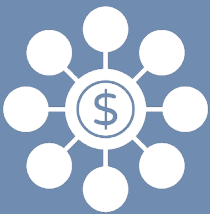
Focus Area 1: Succession Planning

- 79 attended a succession planning educational event held in Ottawa County on November 10, 2021
- 8 Ottawa County farmers' fees were paid with grant funds, allowing them to attend the Taking Root succession planning event hosted by the Farm Bureau in Grand Rapids on February 18, 2022
- 22% of resources on www.mifarmlink.org are private sector service providers



Focus Area 2: Comprehensive Land Use Vision

- Developed and launched an interactive map with multiple data layers that shows existing ag land to help with prioritizing parcels for permanent preservation as well as for deciding which parcels might be best for development purposes
- Outreach provided to local units and assessors highlighting the impact of planning and zoning on farmland



Focus Area 3: Economic Viability

- Served on the Agribusiness Talent Council and the Career Line Tech Center's Advisory Board for the Agriculture and Animal Science Program
- 26 PDR Program applicants were encouraged to enroll their land in the State's Farmland Development Rights program to receive income tax credit in exchange for farmland preservation efforts
- Advocated for smart solar options, agrovoltatics, and acceptance of wind turbines on permanently preserved farmland



Focus Area 4: Agricultural Easements

- \$500,000 committed in Regional Conservation Partnership Program funding
- \$750,390 in State and federal grants paid to landowners
- \$55,000 in private sector funds raised through Farms are the Tapas
- 3 additional townships adopted resolutions of support for the County's PDR Program
- \$1,000,000 in County Initiatives funding committed

Focus on Agriculture

Accomplishments from March 2020-March 2023

This document summarizes the objectives from the Focus on Agriculture plan and also highlights the accomplishments during the 3-year period from March 2020 through March 2023. The document is organized by the 4 focus areas included in the plan. COVID-19 impacted many of the timelines included in the original plan and affected some of the accomplishments.



Focus Area 1: Succession Planning

OBJECTIVES

A. Incentive Pilot

Pilot a succession planning incentive program to increase the number of current farmers who have a succession plan in place.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

An incentive program for completing a succession plan was executed and piloted as part of the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) grant. One farmer participated in this pilot and received the incentive.

B. Private Sector Partnerships

Create stronger engagement with private sector service providers who value ag by soliciting their participation and sponsorship at events and/or including them on the County resource page.

The resources page that was located on the County web page has been relocated to www.mifarmlink.org, a land locator website that was created under the BFRDP grant. There are currently 51 resources listed on the resource page at www.mifarmlink.org, with 11 of those being private sector. The balance of resources is government or non-profit.

C. Succession Planning Event(s) in Ottawa County

Host succession planning educational events in Ottawa County.

A succession planning educational event, funded by the BFRDP grant, was held in Ottawa County on November 10, 2021. A total of 79 participants attended the event, with some attendees residing outside of the county. In addition, 8 Ottawa County farmers' fees were paid which allowed them to attend the Taking Root succession planning event hosted by the Farm Bureau in Grand Rapids on February 18, 2022.

Focus Area 2: Comprehensive Land Use Vision

OBJECTIVES

A. Viable Ag Land Maps

Develop a mapping tool that shows existing ag land to help with prioritizing parcels for permanent preservation as well as for deciding which parcels might be best for development purposes.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

An [interactive map](#) with multiple data layers was launched in August 2022. The map will continue to be improved until it's ready for use by local units, developers, and other stakeholders.

B. Baseline Agricultural Acreage Assessments

Design and develop a full assessment of land that is currently or has the ability to be farmed, based on zoning, future land use, qualified ag exemption status, and other farmland agreements/enrollments.

Internal discussions with the Ottawa County Equalization Department have occurred. Due to capacity limitations, this objective will either be tabled or carryover into the next reporting period.

C. Cost of Community Services Analysis

Seek grant funding to hire a consultant to perform this analysis for the County.

Grant funding has not been secured to-date. This objective will carryover into the next reporting period.

Focus Area 3: Economic Viability

OBJECTIVES

A. Farmland Development Rights Agreements

Promote enrollment in the State's program that offers income tax credit in exchange for agreeing not to develop farmland for a term of 10 to 99 years. Educate tax preparers about the State's program.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

All County PDR Program outreach includes information about this State program. In addition, applicants to the County's PDR Program are encouraged to enroll their land in this State program. This equates to 26 applicants and numerous other inquirers between 2020 and 2023. Direct outreach to tax preparers has not occurred; however, the county will work with DeBoer Baumann to determine the right fit for sharing this information.

B. Income Diversification

Advocate for and facilitate income diversification methods such as solar arrays, wind turbines, cell towers, specialty crops, sharing economy, and agritourism.

The County is currently working on a number of income diversification initiatives. These include learning how to plan for farming and income diversification and value added options; working with Ottawa Food and other organizations to promote local sourcing; and advocating for smart solar options and siting, agrovoltatics, and acceptance of wind turbines (where locally permissible) at the federal level on permanently preserved farmland.

C. Michigan Qualified Ag Property Tax Exemption

Promote this State tool to groups such as assessors, tax practitioners, succession/estate planners, and beginning farmers.

All County PDR Program outreach includes information about this State tool. Information about this tax exemption is also included on the resource page at www.mifarmlink.org.

D. Broadband Expansion/Improvement

Advocate for the development of a State Office of Digital Empowerment to address the rural divide. Continue current countywide efforts to accurately identify areas of critical need, and methods to supply broadband to those areas based on priority.

Michigan established the Office of High Speed Internet in 2021. At the county level, agriculture is represented on the advisory committee that oversees broadband efforts. And Ottawa County leads the state in efforts to improve access to broadband, investing \$7.5 million in ARPA funds for planning and implementation to address the broadband deficit.

E. Workforce Development

Promote, educate, and encourage agricultural experiences through the Agribusiness Talent Council, MSU Institute of AgTech, and the Careerline Tech Center's Agriculture and Animal Science Program.

Ottawa County has served on the Agribusiness Talent Council since its inception in 2019. As an active participant in the group's activities, it promotes farming and food production careers in West Michigan. The MSU Institute of AgTech took on management and operation of the Food, Agriculture, Research, and Manufacturing (FARM) Incubator in Muskegon in 2021, and also deployed their Mobile Food Processing Lab in 2021. Ottawa County has supported and collaborated with MSU on these efforts through grant support letters and outreach events as a way to benefit Ottawa County and the region. Finally, Ottawa County staff continues to serve on the Careerline Tech Center's advisory board, coaches FFA students for their Skills Contests, and serves as a judge for the FFA Skills Contests and Michigan Farm Bureau's Young Farmer discussion meet.

F. Development and Adoption of Ag-Technologies

Support ACRE AgTech as a partner in ag related events. Provide assistance to farms to pilot new technologies. Seek grant funding to find innovative solutions to on-farm problems.

ACRE AgTech has ceased operations. Opportunities to support this objective in a substantive way are limited. As a result, this objective item will be removed from the plan in the next reporting period.

Focus Area 4: Agricultural Easements

OBJECTIVES

A. Local PDR Program Participation

Fill the vacant Ag Preservation Board seat reserved for local government. Provide information and assistance to townships that have not adopted a resolution of support.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The local government seat has been filled, with the board now pursuing a Youth Member to fill a vacant seat. Several outreach opportunities have occurred, resulting in 3 townships adopting resolutions of support. In addition. Other high quality outreach opportunities to promote the program in Ottawa County and statewide occurred, including Pollinate Women in Ag series, Great Lakes Crop Summit, and the Ottawa County Assessors Association.

B. Federal, State, and NGO Funding for Easements

Secure high levels of funding for farmland preservation programs through ACEP-ALE funds through RCPP, utilizing county lobbyists, and partners such as American Farmland Trust, Heart of the Lakes, and land conservancies.

The County successfully secured over \$2.2 million dollars of funding for agricultural easements from State and federal sources in the three year period being evaluated. Although the County lobbyists have not been used to promote the program, a different tactic will be deployed to increase appropriation of State and Federal funding for easements. Ottawa County staff have been very active with American Farmland Trust advocacy efforts. Partnerships with conservancies will be maintained but pursuing them as funding partners is not an effective use of staff time.

C. Local Fundraising

Increase the financial impact of the signature Farms are the Tapas event and deploy a consistent and manageable Year End Campaign.

Limitations on staff capacity has not allowed for significant expansion of the current and very successful Farms are the Tapas fundraiser or the development of an effective year end fundraising campaign, however this are still important objectives that will remain in the Plan.

D. Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) Pilot

Explore the possibility of a multi-jurisdictional TDR program. Examine the cost-benefit relationship with administering a TDR program. Research if a TDR can be used to preserve natural lands and ag land.

While there is still value in this objective item, it no longer rises to the priority level of being included in this section and should be a longer term objective under Focus Area 2 and the aim will be piloting density bonus programs to developers in exchange for contributions to a "Development Credits" bank, similar to wetland mitigation banking.



Focus on Agriculture

Summary of Accomplishments from March 2023-March 2026



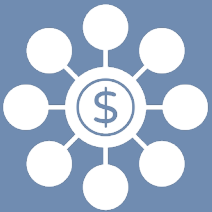
Focus Area 1: Succession Planning

- 220 farmers attended succession planning educational events hosted by Ottawa County and its partners
- 5 farmers have received direct technical assistance
- 1 farm was awarded LTN grant funding to complete their succession plan
- MiFarmLink now hosts the Land Transfer Navigator program on its website
- Professional Service Provider referral list has grown to 22



Focus Area 2: Comprehensive Land Use Vision

- Land use cover change and groundwater maps being updated
- Infill opportunities are being defined
- Countywide future land use application is in development
- Secured over \$1M in brownfield assessment and blight elimination funds to facilitate in-fill development and prevent farmland conversion



Focus Area 3: Economic Viability

- Serves on the Agribusiness Talent Council and the CareerLine Tech Center's Advisory Board for the Agriculture and Animal Science Program
- Led successful effort to amend PA116 tax credit program legislation
- Supported local communities in navigating renewable energy siting projects and the impact on farmland
- Secured additional funding to close gaps in access to adequate internet access for farmers



Focus Area 4: Agricultural Easements

- Exceeded acre and dollar targets for preserving land through RCPP (168.8 acres and \$550,000)
- \$1.5M in state and federal grants paid to landowners
- \$219,485 in private sector funds raised
- 2 additional townships adopted resolutions of support for the County's PDR Program
- Serving as Secretary for Agricultural Preserve Boards of Michigan
- Serving on Advisory Committee for MiFarmLink and Agricultural Preserve Boards of Michigan

Focus on Agriculture

Accomplishments from March 2023-March 2026



This document summarizes the objectives from the Focus on Agriculture plan and also highlights the accomplishments during the 3-year period from March 2023 through March 2026. The document is organized by the 4 focus areas included in the plan.

Focus Area 1: Succession Planning

OBJECTIVES

A. Technical Assistance

Create and implement an Action Plan for promotion of and technical assistance for succession planning and land transfer.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Land Transfer Navigator (LTN) program has been successfully implemented over all three period years, reaching hundreds of farmers in a variety of ways on the topic of succession planning and transfer.

B. Private Sector Partnerships

Create stronger engagement with private sector service providers who value ag by soliciting their participation and sponsorship at events and/or including them on the County resource page.

The number of private sector partners on the LTN referral list has grown four-fold and serves as a direct resource list for farmers seeking assistance with their succession and transfer plans. Partners have participated in and presented for four LTN sponsored workshops.

C. Incentivize Succession Planning

Host succession planning educational events in Ottawa County and prioritize farms with succession plans in permanent preservation selection process.

As a part of the LTN program, Ottawa County launched a highly successful series of succession planning events entitled Farming Forward, offering the same content in different locations and times of year to educate farmers on the succession planning process and provide a binder of resources to get them started.

Focus Area 2: Comprehensive Land Use Vision

OBJECTIVES

A. Viable Ag Lands Mapping

Design and develop a full assessment of land that is currently or has the ability to be farmed, based on zoning, future land use, qualified ag exemption status, and other farmland agreements/enrollments.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The local groundwater data set is growing and being incorporated into mapping systems to inform land use decisions. Land use cover change is being updated to support a more robust ag land prioritization process. Construction of housing in in-fill areas is being promoted countywide.

B. Cost of Community Services Analysis

A case study approach that measures the fiscal contribution of existing land uses—residential, commercial/industrial, and agricultural/open space—by comparing the public revenues they generate to the costs of services they require.

One estimate to perform the study was received to give an idea of cost for the scope, however until funding can be identified for this objective, a request for proposals will not be released.

C. Brownfield Redevelopment and Land Banks

Catalyze the redevelopment and reuse of existing infrastructure and reduce development on greenfields.

Modifications to state law in 2023 have accelerated the construction of new housing units across the County, helping to ease the conversion of farmland loss to housing. Blight elimination efforts have helped prepare infill sites for repurposing.

Focus Area 3: Economic Viability

OBJECTIVES

A. Tax Advantages

Promote enrollment in the State's program that offers income tax credit in exchange for agreeing not to develop farmland for a term of 10 to 99 years. Educate tax preparers about the State's program.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As a part of LTN efforts, staff has added three accounting firms serving the ag industry to its list of professional service providers. Staff also worked closely with Michigan Farm Bureau to identify the legislative remedy to a significant problem with an administrative program change that would have negatively impacted preserved landowners. The legislation was signed in December 2025.

B. Farm Viability

Partner with other ag advocacy entities to encourage the authorization of established farm viability tools and resources used in other states.

Staff participates in a statewide beginning farmer working groups and the MiFarmLink Advisory Committee. Through these, discussions have been held with MDARD staff regarding the opportunity to authorize legislation that would enable additional tools to support farm viability in the State. The County is involved in solar siting and best practices, providing outreach and information to local units of government and farmers.

C. Energy and Climate

Utilize energy and climate specific programs, grants and policies, such as the Michigan Healthy Climate Plan, to reduce costs and increase resiliency.

PACE financing for renewable/efficient energy improvements on farm are available but not widely used through out the County. The County has delivered education to local units and constituents. Carbon credits have not gotten traction and will not be included in future efforts.

D. Broadband Expansion/Improvement

Implementation of the County's Digital Inclusion Strategy to improve access speeds for farmers and connect farmers who do not have internet access at all.

In addition to the previous \$7.5 million investment of ARPA funds for planning and implementation to address the broadband deficit, in 2025 the County secured a federal broadband grant to add 2,500 address to receive access to internet service. To reach areas where fiber is not feasible, the County is coordinating the installation of fixed wireless towers.

E. Workforce Development

Engage in career exploration, workforce training, and outreach efforts to support a pipeline of workers for the ag and food industry.

As a part of the County's participation in the West Michigan Works! Agribusiness Talent Council, staff has helped significantly raise awareness of the career opportunities in the ag and food industry. Examples include but are not limited to annually participating in the ag sector of the MiCareerQuest events, reading ag accurate books to students, staffing career exploration events, supporting the agtech programs and Future Farmers of America activities.

Focus Area 4: Agricultural Easements

OBJECTIVES

A. Local PDR Program Participation

Provide information and assistance to townships that have not adopted a resolution of support.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Port Sheldon and Georgetown Townships passed resolutions to participate. Letters of accomplishments were sent to all local units of government in the County in 2025.

B. Federal, State, and NGO Funding for Easements

Secure high levels of funding for farmland preservation programs through ACEP-ALE funds RCPP, and the Michigan Ag Preservation Fund, utilizing county lobbyists, and partners such as American Farmland Trust, Heart of the Lakes, land conservancies, and foundations.

The County successfully secured over \$1.7 million dollars of funding for agricultural easements from State and federal sources in the three year period being evaluated. The County's strong partnership with Michigan Farm Bureau has paved the way to increasing funds available through the Michigan Ag Preservation Fund. Partnerships with have been strengthened through a shared challenge related to the PA116 program. Foundation funds that were applied for but was not successful.

C. Local Fundraising

Increase the financial impact of the signature Farms are the Tapas event and deploy a consistent and manageable Year End Campaign.

Limitations on staff capacity has not allowed for significant expansion of the current and very successful Farms are the Tapas fundraiser. Despite that limitation, this event continues to grow each year. The year-end campaign has not yet been implemented.

D. Non-contiguous Planned Unit Development

Explore the possibility of a multi-jurisdictional TDR program. Examine the cost-benefit relationship with administering a TDR program. Research if a TDR can be used to preserve natural lands and ag land.

While there is still value in this objective item, it is a longer-term objective and the aim will be piloting density bonus programs to developers in exchange for contributions to a "Development Credits" bank, similar to wetland mitigation banking. No timeline for this effort has been established.



Ottawa County

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