A number of folks have expressed to me that they wonder where the first half of the year went and I’m no different. It has been extra-ordinarily busy this year and my Digest schedule has lagged. My goal is to become quite regular again and this is the first installment in getting the Digest back on track.

**UNFUNDED MANDATES**

You might recall the Seinfeld "Bizzaro" Episode and that was my experience when TV 13 News contacted me and wanted to do a story on unfunded mandates. Obviously, I was glad to comply and thought it must be an extra-ordinarily slow news day. We have coveted news coverage of the mandates issue for years without much success in making that happen. Then, Alex Shabad spent about an hour with me really digging into the details of the issue.

The following link will take you to the story, which aired on May 12. I encourage local government leaders to try to develop these story opportunities on unfunded mandates. We hope that the Michigan Association of Counties sponsored legislation on mandates will become law and media exposure of the issue can only help.

[County Leaders Upset with Unfunded Mandates](#)

**OTTAWA ECONOMIC INDICATORS**

Ottawa County still has the lowest unemployment rate of Michigan counties and the rest of West Michigan trails closely behind. Kent, Ottawa, Allegan and Montcalm also saw the most job growth as of April. See the two linked articles below for more information.

[West Michigan led state in job growth during April](#)

[Ottawa County jobless rate still lowest in Michigan](#)
NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS OTTAWA ACCOMPLISHMENT

Researchers found that children from poor families are more likely to achieve higher wages as adults if they are raised in Ottawa County, which was cited the top county in Michigan and better than 91% in the nation in this area.

“Location matters” — enormously. If you’re poor and live in the Grand Rapids area, it’s better to be in Ottawa County than in Kent County or Muskegon County. Not only that, the younger you are when you move to Ottawa, the better you will do on average. Children who move at earlier ages are less likely to become single parents, more likely to go to college and more likely to earn more.

But even Ottawa County is below the national average. Every year a poor child spends in Ottawa County adds about $210 to his or her annual household income at age 26, compared with a childhood spent in the average American county. Over the course of a full childhood, which is up to age 20 for the purposes of this analysis, the difference adds up to about $4,200, or 16 percent, more in average income as a young adult.”

Follow this link (The Best and Worst Places to Grow Up: How Your Area Compares) to see the entire article which includes maps, rankings of other counties and graphics.

One response to this was concern that Ottawa will become a beacon for indigent families. Not much chance of that when our housing market does not produce affordable housing even for young engineers moving to Ottawa County that make $55,000 per year.

Instead, I think that that this article and ranking shows the incredible value in the partnerships between the County, the faith community, the non-profit social services community, the Courts, DHHS and other community partners.

The Ottawa County Way culture has produced results that are simply amazing.

Perhaps the State will take notice and realize why we are so frustrated when “leveling” occurs. “Leveling occurs when the State “fixes” a problem that they observe somewhere in Michigan but by applying one size fits all solutions statewide, they actually drag down the areas that are already doing a fantastic job and thus “leveling” occurs.

Our residents have come to expect and experience excellence in service provision and deserve the best. Not leveling.

LIVABILITY BLOG NAMES HOLLAND 3RD BEST PLACE TO LIVE

The Livability Blog issues its top ten places to live in the US and Holland made #3 on the list.

To read the story follow this link: 10 Best Cities for Families
Congrats to the City of Holland and all those who make it such an outstanding place to live!

WEST MICHIGAN ISSUES & IMPACT

Follow the link for the latest edition of West Michigan Issues and Impacts. Co-Host Shannon Felgner and I interview Mr. Frank Peterson, City Manager for the City of Muskegon.

DEPUTY MCDUFFEE AWARDED FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

Ottawa County extends its congratulations to Deputy Rachel McDuffee who was selected to receive the Outstanding Customer Service Award for the first quarter of 2015. McDuffee is a Road Patrol Deputy for the Ottawa County Sheriff’s Office.

It’s not often that a traffic officer receives accolades from a ticketed driver, but in Ottawa County, good customer service is practiced in every situation. This past winter, Deputy McDuffee stopped a vehicle for a vision obstruction. In this case, the windows of the car were covered with snow. Deputy McDuffee scraped all windows of the vehicle before letting the driver proceed. And, despite the citation, the driver was appreciative of the gesture. Meet Rachel McDuffee at http://bit.ly/cs-award.

"I want to thank Deputy Rachel McDuffee for her commitment to customer service in the community we serve," Captain Valerie Weiss said. “In law enforcement, we encounter some customers, like those being stopped for a traffic violation, who do not desire our services. McDuffee’s actions demonstrate that kindness and respect are essential in any interaction.”

PARKS AND RECREATION UPDATES (Jessica VanGinhoven)

Save the Date!

Macatawa Greenway Trail Dedication at the Upper Macatawa Natural Area • June 25, 4:00 - 7:00 PM

Join us at the Upper Macatawa Natural Area for a dedication of the Macatawa Greenway Trail. The newly completed section of paved bike path provides a key link in the expanding regional trail system.
The long awaited non-motorized trail will run through the park and connect the Fred Meijer Kenowa Trail, a 10-mile bike path running along Byron Road east through Jamestown Township, with existing bike path on Adams Street developed by Zeeland and Holland Townships. The new trail, combined with an existing half mile of paved trail will provide nearly 3 miles of trail meandering through the forests, grassland, and wetlands of the park and will include three large ravine bridges plus a bridge over the Macatawa River. Preserved lands and connecting pathways have been the vision of the Macatawa Greenway for a core group of volunteers, non-profits, and government staff that have been working toward this goal for nearly 15 years.

The approximate $1.8 million project was funded with assistance from a $941,268 grant from the Michigan Department of Transportation through the Federal Transportation Alternatives Program. Other partners have helped make key improvements to the site. A $20,000 grant from the West MI Trails & Greenways Coalition through the Zeeland Community Foundation helped to fund trailhead amenities at the 84th Avenue entrance, such as drinking fountains, lighting, and an improved parking area.

Also new for park visitors and available at the event, are the technically-challenging, low-impact mountain bike trails with loops through park’s scenic ravines. These loops become progressively more difficult and were designed and built by volunteers with the Michigan Edge Mountain Bike Association (MEMBA) who have donated over 1,000 hours to the project.

Guests are invited to walk the trails or to try them out on a bike! VeloCity Cycle of Holland will be at the event with wheels available for use. Though trails are strictly for non-motorized vehicles, Ottawa County Parks will have golf carts at the event to provide rides for elderly or disabled guests who would like to travel the paved trail.

Refreshments will be provided by the Friends of Ottawa County Parks.

Address and Directions: Upper Macatawa Natural Area, 1300 84th Avenue, Zeeland, MI 49464. From US-31, travel east on 16th (Adams) to 84th. Travel north on 84th a half mile to the west entrance.

**Black Lake Boardwalk Dedication & Pump House Preview**

On Thursday, May 28, 2015 Ottawa County Parks and hundreds of guests celebrated the completion of the Black Lake Boardwalk. The Black Lake Boardwalk provides nearly a half-mile of waterfront...
walkway along Lake Macatawa. The final 1,300 foot segment connects Black Lake Board Walk East and West and provides a path to the historic pump house. It is an already popular place for visitors to walk, jog, relax, and fish. Along the way, visitors can learn about the rich history of the area by reading the interpretative signage.

A $300,000 grant from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF), administered through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Grants Management Section, assisted in funding the $600,000 project. The remainder of funds came from the Ottawa County Parks millage.

The dedication also celebrated renovations made to the historic pump house building. The pump house is the last remaining building associated with the Ottawa Beach Hotel. It sat for many decades in terrible condition. Ottawa County Parks and the nonprofit organization, the Historical Ottawa Beach Society (HOBS) split the approximately $300,000 renovation. The dedication event was the public’s first opportunity ever to view the interior of the building.

HOBS will continue to raise additional funds to develop and operate a seasonal museum and learning center in the building, with a goal of interpreting the history of Ottawa Beach and other nearby beach communities. For now, the walls of the building are adorned with historic graphics coordinated by Valerie van Heest of Lafferty van Heest and Associates.

Speakers at the event, including Park Township Supervisor, Jerry Hunsburger, Ottawa County Commissioner, Stu Visser, Parks Commission President, Bobbi Jones-Sabine, HOBS Board Member, Nancy Gillette, and Ottawa County Parks Director, John Scholtz all echoed the appreciation of the multi-year cooperation in completing this project, but also the utmost importance of preserving the history of the area. Mr. Visser summed it up nicely stating, “What is special about this particular site is the splendid history that has been preserved and publicized because of this development. The story of the Ottawa Beach Hotel was largely unknown and risked being lost. I am happy to see this story will now live on be shared with future generations.”

The event garnered a lot of positive attention for the Ottawa County including articles in the Holland Sentinel & Grand Rapids Press as well as a story on WZZM-13. You can view them online at the links below:

http://www.hollandsentinel.com/article/20150601/NEWS/150609987
Project History and Funding

The Black Lake Boardwalk and the historic pump house are located in Park 3, one of 12 park parcels that make up Historic Ottawa Beach Parks, also known as Park 12. The 58-acres of park land were established as part of the West Michigan Park subdivision when platted in 1886. After decades of dispute over ownership of the park parcels, Ottawa County and the West Michigan Park Association, along with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Park Township, reached an agreement in 2005. The agreement, which was endorsed by Ottawa County Circuit Court, identified how the park parcels would be used and managed. The basis for the agreement was a park master plan that was developed with extensive public input and approved in 2004.

The Black Lake Boardwalk Waterfront Walkway and pump house improvements, along with bike path improvement and the Mount Pisgah dune stairs, were all identified in the 2004 park master plan. These projects were completed over a 10-year period with funding assistance as outlined below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Project Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Source of Funding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Black Lake Boardwalk East</td>
<td>$230,000</td>
<td>100% Ottawa County Parks millage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Bike path through park parcels</td>
<td>$110,000</td>
<td>Park Township funded 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Black Lake Boardwalk Phase II</td>
<td>$147,500</td>
<td>100% Ottawa County Parks millage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Mount Pisgah Dune Stairs</td>
<td>$408,500</td>
<td>MNRTF grant of $216,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Holland Harbor Fishing Docks</td>
<td>$650,000</td>
<td>$500,000 Great Lakes Fishery Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Black Lake Boardwalk completed</td>
<td>$600,000</td>
<td>MNRTF grant of $300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Pump house renovation</td>
<td>$300,000</td>
<td>50% from Historical Ottawa Beach Society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ottawa County Parks extended a special thank you to the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund for their support throughout the project.
Pump house before and after:

Black Lake Boardwalk:

Prescribed Fires in Ottawa County Parks

Each year Ottawa County Parks utilizes prescribed fires to help preserve native and rare habitats and

Burn boss lighting the grassland at the Nature Education Center on April 26, 2015
encourage the growth of wildflowers, grasses, forbs, and broadleaf plants. Prescribed burns are a cost-effective tool to control invasives such as spotted knapweed, reed canary grass, white sweetclover, and black locust.

On April 26, 2015 Ottawa County Parks conducted prescribed fires at Hemlock Crossing Park, Robinson Forest Open Space, and Hiawatha Forest, with the four following goals:

1) **Stimulate the growth of the native wildflowers**

Native plants are adapted to fire and fire reduces competition. Plants that are adapted re-grow and thrive following a fire and those that are not “lose”. Fire stimulates native plants and wildflowers that are adapted to the area by releasing nutrients into the soil, acting as fertilizer.

The planted grassland at Hemlock Crossing has improved over the years in part due to the significant reduction of spotted knapweed. However, the spring burn will help stimulate the native forbs and broadleaf plants.

2) **Reduce non-native weeds (invasive plants), thus increasing biodiversity**

Invasive plants are usually introduced accidentally through human activity, often in contaminated crops or soil. They prohibit the growth of native plants in many ways, some release chemicals into the soil, prohibiting the growth of other species. They also benefit from living free of predators as they do not provide food for native insects and other wildlife, resulting in an overabundance of the species and a reduction of biodiversity. Elimination of invasive plants creates more spaces for natives that provide food for wildlife. Promoting their growth of native results in more diversity following a fire.

3) **Inhibit the growth of encroaching woody species**

The coastal plain marsh pockets at Hiawatha Forest were becoming dominated by native woody species such as red maple, oaks and spirea. These pockets of coastal plain are one of the rarest ecosystems in the state. The name is misleading because one thinks of the Lake Michigan coast, but they are actually habitats from the Atlantic coast, created by migrating water fowl. The plant species that make up these ecosystems would not be considered invasive because migrating birds dispersing seeds is a natural phenomenon. Also, these ecosystems provide a very positive habitat for local wildlife.

Robinson Forest is dominated by oaks, cherries, and hazelnuts that have germinated from the seed bank. Many of these are too large at this point to kill with fire alone, but Ottawa County Parks used a burn as one part of a larger suppression strategy. The goal of suppressing these species is to better
create a mosaic of ecosystems. Some forest is good, but open areas are also important. Open areas benefit wildlife that need that habitat to survive. If we allow the area to return to forest, it becomes a much more common habitat and we would lose the open land species, many of which are threatened in the state of Michigan. Open space land is also good for human recreation, specifically hunting.

Native prairie plants shown below

4) Release native wildflower and grass seeds from the seed bank

Seed banks contain the seeds that are waiting in the soil for the opportunity to germinate. For various reasons, those seeds don’t germinate – invasive species are out competing them, there is too much shade, etc. Both Robinson Forest and Hiawatha Forest are remnants with a healthy seed banks.

The timing of the controlled burn is considered in order to stimulate different types of species in a seed bank as well as create less air pollution and smoke. As a general rule, spring and fall burns favor grasses, but spring burns create less smoke. Weighing all of the considerations, Ottawa County Parks opted for a spring burn for all three sites.

Educating the public about controlled burns

Understandably, fire has a bad reputation. When the general public imagines a fire they think of destruction. Ottawa County Parks works hard to publicize prescribed fires to better educate the general public about the many benefits of using this method to fight invasive plants. Other than a natural fear of fire, residents are also often concerned about air pollution, wildlife living in the burn zone, and aesthetics. We were thrilled to have Brody Carter of Fox 17 on-site at Hemlock Crossing to pick up footage of the fire. He interviewed both Melanie Manion, the Ottawa County Parks Natural Resources Management Supervisor and Burn Boss, David Mindell who both spoke to the public’s various concerns. You can watch the interview online: http://fox17online.com/2015/04/26/fire-in-3-ottawa-county-parks-finding-new-life-in-the-ashes/.

The burn sites were also open to the public this year. At Hemlock Crossing there was a crowd gathered to watch the show. Parks Naturalists created a few visualizations to help describe the root systems of invasive plants and why a fire would be effective in that particular ecosystem. It was a great
opportunity to better educate parks users on how exactly we manage our natural resources.

OTTAWA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH UPDATES (Kristina Wieghmink)

Food council needs donations from gardeners

Plant a Row for the Hungry, coordinated locally by the Ottawa County Food Policy Council, is a program for gardeners to donate a designated row of their garden to food banks and soup kitchens. Gardeners grow produce as they have in the past; and when they harvest, at various points in the growing season, they bag up the designated produce and bring it to a local food resource center. Pledge to Plant a Row for the Hungry and find participating locations at www.OttawaFood.org/plant-a-row or call (616) 393-5799.

“According to the Feeding America Ottawa County Hunger Study, 60% of pantries said fresh fruits and vegetables are too expensive to purchase. The Plant a Row program is a way for pantries to get fresh, locally-grown produce at NO cost” said Amy Sheele, Health Educator at Ottawa County Department of Public Health.

It’s Tick Season - Watch out for the bite!

Lyme disease is caused by the bacterium *Borrelia burgdorferi* and is transmitted to humans through the bite of infected blacklegged ticks. Typical symptoms include fever, headache, fatigue, and a characteristic skin rash called erythema migrans. If left untreated, infection can spread to joints, the heart, and the nervous system. Lyme disease is diagnosed based on symptoms, physical findings (e.g., rash), and the possibility of exposure to infected ticks. Laboratory testing is helpful if used correctly and performed with validated methods. Most cases of Lyme disease can be treated successfully with a few weeks of antibiotics. Steps to prevent Lyme disease include using insect repellent, removing ticks promptly, applying pesticides, and reducing tick habitat. The ticks that transmit Lyme disease can occasionally transmit other tickborne diseases as well. (source: www.cdc.gov/lyme)

GVMC WEEKLY UPDATE (John Weiss)

Click here for the most recent updates.
Ottawa Housing Next

**Vision:** Working together to ensure everyone has a place to call home.

**Mission:** Ottawa Housing Next will create and implement a cross-sector, long-term and regional strategy that influences leverage points in the system to ensure affordable, accessible and safe housing is available to all.

On March 20th, the second in a series of community meetings was held to discuss the lack of affordable housing in Ottawa County. More than 100 people attended the meeting designed to update the community on the work being done to address the need for housing and to gather input from the larger community.

After a community meeting in May 2014, a Design Team made up of leaders in the government, non-profit, and business sectors was convened for the first time in August 2014. Over the course of the last six months the Design Team finalized an Ottawa Housing Next document making the case for more affordable housing in Ottawa County and discussed strategies. Through this document, and to put the conversation in context, attendees were introduced to ALICE - A Study of Financial Hardship conducted by United Way and research partner Rutgers University. ALICE has many faces, and no one has been hit harder by the most recent recession than ALICE, an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed - those among us who are working, often at more than one job, yet still falling behind. No matter how hard these Michiganders try they can't get ahead and we all ultimately pay a price for that.

The Ottawa Housing Next document includes data supporting the need for affordable housing and a link to that document will be available on the Greater Ottawa County United Way website soon. For hard copies of the Ottawa Housing Next document contact Lyn Raymond at housingnext@ottawaunitedway.org.

To open the work portion of the meeting, five strategies, identified by the Design Team as possible solutions to the lack of affordable housing, were described by local experts and others from around the region. Those strategies were Private/Non-Profit Partnerships, Inclusionary Zoning, Housing Trust Fund, Tax Credits, and Housing Case Management. Because this is community driven process, a group of attendees also saw a need to focus on Income Supports. Attendees gathered around the six strategies and discussed in depth possible implementations, potential roadblocks and first steps. At the end of the community conversation, attendees had the opportunity to commit to join a work group focusing on one of the strategies.

The Ottawa Housing Next Design Team will be meeting later this month to determine next steps. Stay tuned for more information and opportunities to be involved.

**All Media and Presentation Requests:** E-mail Lyn Raymond at housingnext@ottawaunitedway.org.
Two New Board Members
At our May meeting two new members joined the GVMC Board of Directors. Nancy Clarey the new Township Supervisor of Algoma Township and Duane Weeks of the Village of Middleville joined our BOD. We welcome our two new members and look forward to working with them.

Federal Highway Administration Reports Results of Recertification Audit
Rachel Tupica of the Federal Highway Administration presented the results of their recertification audit of the GVMC Metropolitan Planning Organization. The recertification process is conducted every 4 years and we received our best review ever. GVMC also received 3 specific commendations for our Metropolitan Transportation Plan, our Policies and Practices for Programming Projects and our Safety Planning Process. We truly appreciate the results of this audit and the group of state and national transportation experts that spent several days reviewing GVMC. Their comments and recommendations along with their familiarity with national “best practices” was very helpful. We are very proud of our 3 commendations and look forward to continuing as our region’s MPO.

GVMC Environmental Programs Receives Wege Grant to Enhance Community Engagement
Our Lower Grand River Organizations of Watersheds (LGROW) recently received a grant from the Wege Foundation to continue to enhance our community engagement process. LGROW serves an area of 1.8 million acres in 10 counties. Over 2,900 square miles are served and the group includes 48 public and private members including a collaboration of 22 units of government and the six campuses of Grand Valley State University. Working with sub-watershed groups this grant will allow us to provide enhanced support and communication as part of our environmental coordination and education efforts.

Board of Directors Supports River Restoration Project
GVMC has unanimously adopted a resolution in support of the Grand River Restoration Project and signed an agreement for our Environmental Programs Department to work with Grand Rapids Whitewater. Our participation will include reaching out to upstream and downstream communities. Our goal will be to enhance regional collaboration on the project and promote communication and education for other municipalities. We will work with communities to personalize communication, explain the project’s impacts, and explore opportunities to leverage the project in other areas while enhancing collaboration.

We will also assist by coordinating meetings and sharing information with numerous federal, state and local agencies involved in the project.
Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds Celebrates 12th Annual Spring Forum

The 12th Annual Spring Forum for the Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds (LGROW) was held on May 1, 2015, at the Grand Rapids Downtown Market. The event offered 100 attendees a regional perspective on emerging issues and accomplishments from around the watershed.

This year’s keynote speaker was Former Senator Patty Birkholz (League of Conservation Voters). She discussed agricultural partnerships and connections to water resources. John Weiss, Wendy Ogilvie (GVMC) and Kelly Goward (Macatawa Area Coordinating Council) presented on the Regional Prosperity Initiative and Jim Smalligan (Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr & Huber) provided an update on the Grand River restoration project. Joanna Allerhand from GVSU (Groundswell) spoke about place-based education, and Dale Robertson (GR Public Museum) presented proposed renovations to the Grand Rapids Public Museum. Students from two schools involved with the Groundswell program attended the forum to showcase their work. Students from Kent Innovation High (KIH) announced the upcoming LGROW 5K run which will focus on the topics of water pollution, community responsibility, protecting and preserving water quality and bringing awareness to LGROW. Forum participants were wowed by a live rap written and performed by two KIH students.

Students from CA Frost (Grand Rapids Public Schools) presented the materials they developed for their neighborhood stormwater showcase. These students have taken an active role educating their neighbors on how to reduce stormwater runoff and protect and improve Indian Mill Creek.

For more information on how you can get involved, or to view the slides from the Forum presentations, visit www.lgrow.org.