



Michigan local leaders report alarming declines in resident engagement

By Natalie Fitzpatrick, Debra Horner, and Stephanie Leiser

This report presents Michigan local government leaders' views on resident engagement with their local governments, including assessments of the opportunities their local governments provide for engagement, residents' overall levels of engagement, and challenges to their engagement efforts. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the spring 2025 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) with comparisons to 2012 and 2016 survey waves.

The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) is an ongoing census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted since 2009 by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP). Respondents for the Spring 2025 wave of the MPPS include county administrators, board chairs, and clerks; city mayors, managers, and clerks; village presidents, managers, and clerks; and township supervisors, managers, and clerks from 1,328 local jurisdictions across the state



Key Findings

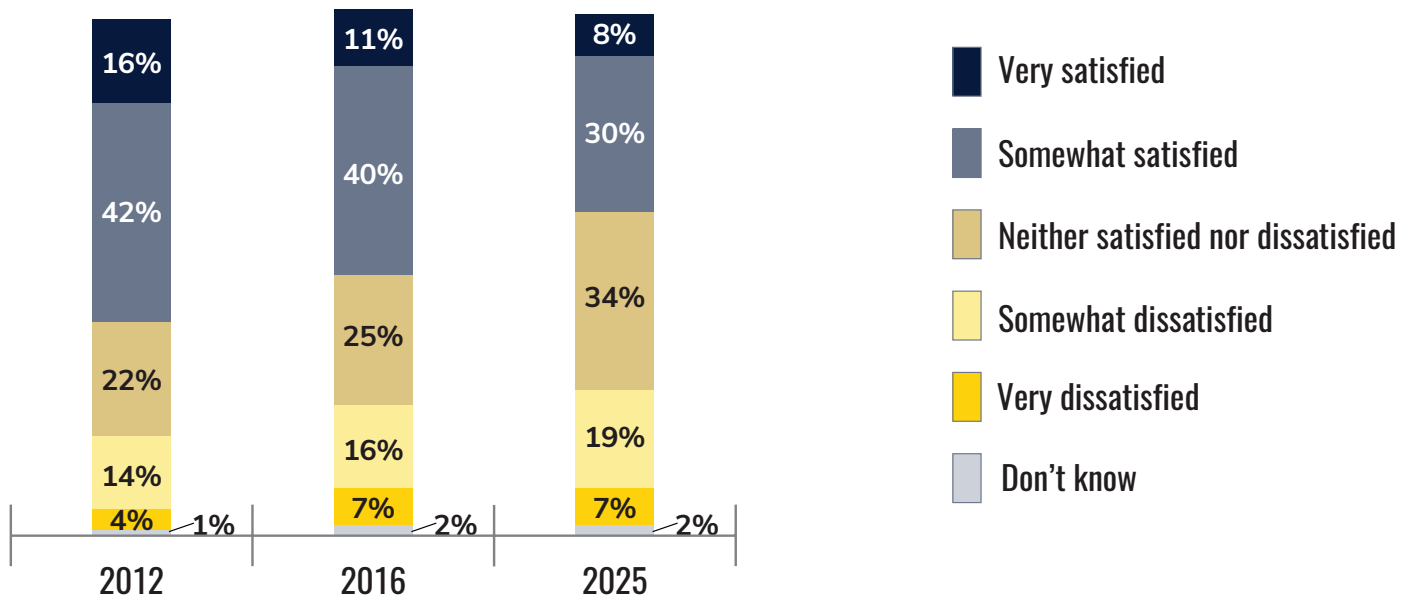
- Local officials' satisfaction with their residents' overall engagement with their local governments has plummeted, from 58% in 2012 to 38% in 2025.
 - » Fewer than half of city (43%) and township (40%) officials say they are somewhat or very satisfied with resident engagement, but this is higher than either county (36%) or village (23%) officials.
- Even though local governments have increased their outreach and engagement activities, just 46% of local governments statewide say their residents are somewhat or very engaged, a drop from 65% who said the same in 2012.
 - » Even in jurisdictions that report they offer “a great deal” of engagement opportunities, the percentage saying their residents are either somewhat or very engaged has slipped from 75% in 2012 to 54% in 2025.
 - » Local leaders from rural communities struggle the most with low resident engagement, with just 41% saying their residents are at least somewhat engaged, compared with communities that are mostly rural (52%), mostly urban (53%), or urban (64%). In rural communities, 13% say their residents are not engaged at all.
- Two-thirds (65%) of jurisdictions statewide say they are having problems with their engagement efforts attracting the same people over and over, and a majority of cities (52%) say they have problems with a small vocal minority of residents negatively affecting overall engagement.
- Meanwhile, 43% of cities and 45% of counties say state or national partisan politics is a problem for resident engagement.
- Local leaders point to social media and other online tools as ways they have successfully increased resident engagement, along with more traditional methods such as community meetings and events, and more innovative practices such as resident academies.

Overall satisfaction with resident engagement in decline

The MPPS has periodically asked local government leaders about their residents’ engagement with their jurisdiction’s policymaking and implementation processes. Examples of resident engagement include contacting officials, attending meetings, participating on boards/commissions, and more.

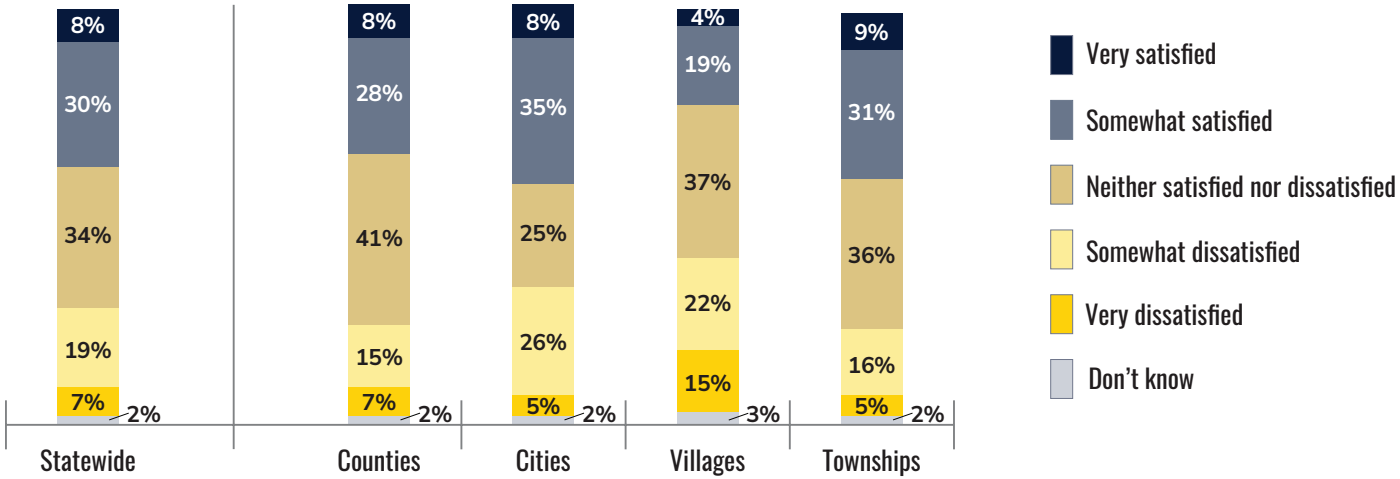
Overall, satisfaction with resident engagement has dropped significantly since it was first measured thirteen years ago (see *Figure 1a*). In 2012, 58% of local leaders were satisfied with resident engagement.¹ By 2016, that percentage had declined to 51%, but still a majority.² Today, just 38% of local leaders are somewhat (30%) or very (8%) satisfied with their residents’ local political engagement. Meanwhile, more than a quarter (26%) in 2025 express dissatisfaction with resident engagement, continuing to rise from 18% in 2012 and 23% in 2016.

Figure 1a
Local leaders’ overall satisfaction with residents’ engagement in their jurisdiction’s policymaking or operations, 2012-2025



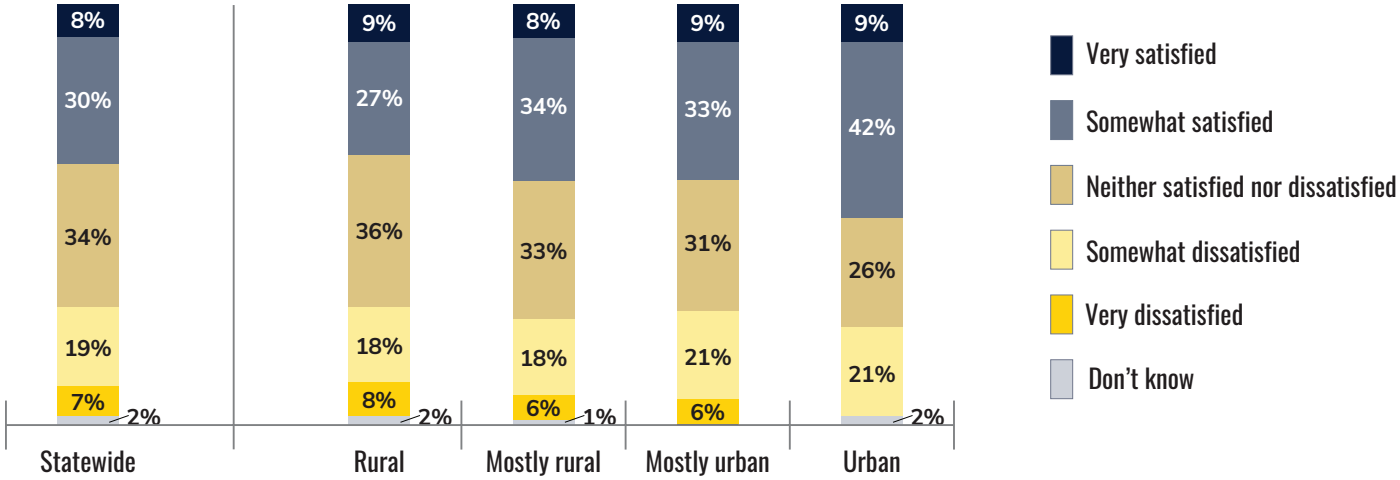
Breaking down the results by jurisdiction type, in 2025, city (43%) and township (40%) officials are the most likely to report overall satisfaction with resident engagement (see *Figure 1b*). Meanwhile, village officials are the least likely, with less than a quarter (23%) expressing satisfaction and significantly more (37%) saying they are dissatisfied.

Figure 1b
Local leaders' overall satisfaction with residents' engagement in their jurisdiction's policymaking or operations, 2025, by jurisdiction type



Levels of satisfaction with resident engagement also vary between urban and rural communities. Officials from self-described rural communities report the lowest levels of satisfaction, with just over a third (36%) saying they are somewhat (27%) or very (9%) satisfied with resident engagement (see *Figure 1c*). By contrast, 51% of leaders from urban communities are satisfied with their residents' engagement.

Figure 1c
Local leaders' overall satisfaction with residents' engagement in their jurisdiction's policymaking or operations, 2025, by rural-urban self-identification



Communities report expanded opportunities for resident engagement, especially online

The MPPS asked local officials how they try to engage their residents, whether by one-way communication, such as email newsletters and streaming government meetings online, or by a range of more participatory practices including focus groups, strategic “visioning” sessions, or giving residents formal seats on boards or committees.

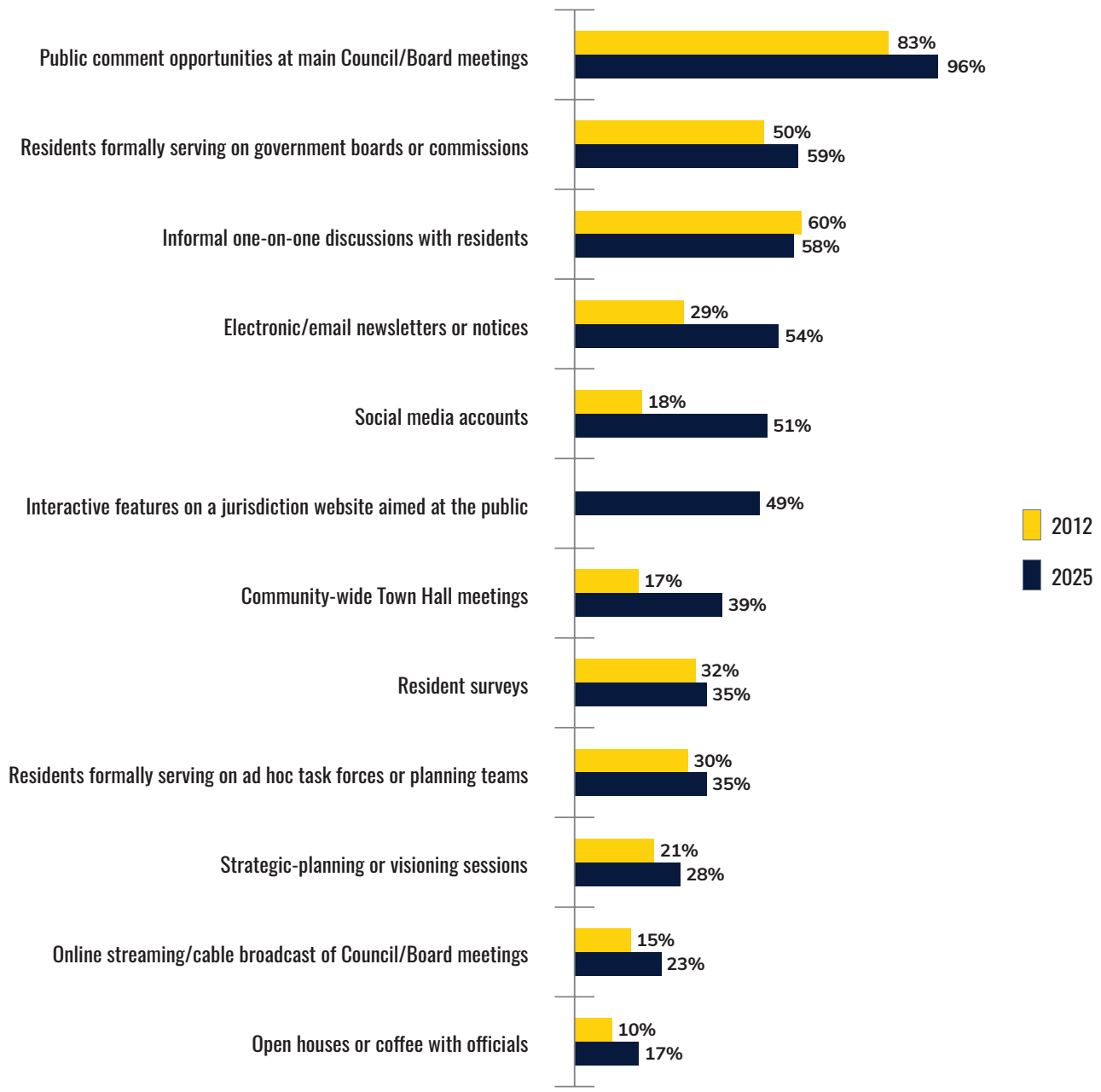
Since 2012, local governments across the state have reported widespread use of a variety of outreach and engagement activities available to residents. Overall, among the 11 engagement strategies asked about in both 2012 and 2025, local leaders selected an average of 5.0 strategies in 2025, up from 3.8 in 2012.

As shown in *Figure 2*, almost all (96%) use public comment opportunities at main council/board meetings (up from 83% in 2012), and more than half invite resident participation on formal government boards or commissions (59%). The least common engagement strategies include online streaming of local meetings (23%) and open houses or coffee with officials (17%).

Compared to 2012, local leaders are significantly more likely to report use of online methods including e-newsletters or notices, up from 29% in 2012 to 54% in 2025, and social media, up from 18% to 51%. Additionally, 49% report using interactive features on their website to engage with residents, such as local government performance dashboards or budget information.

Interestingly, local officials report declining use of only one engagement strategy mentioned in the survey. While still a common strategy, the use of informal one-on-one discussions decreased slightly, from 60% in 2012 to 58% in 2025.

Figure 2
Percent of Michigan jurisdictions reporting use of various approaches for engaging residents, 2012 vs. 2025



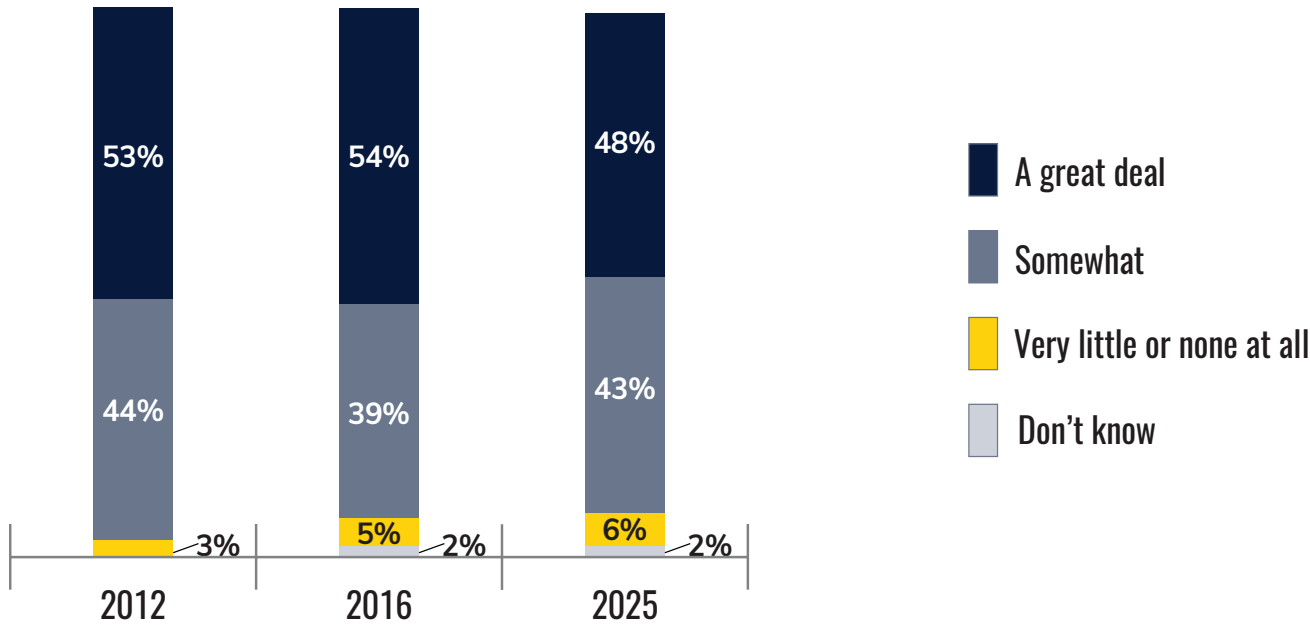
Note: The questionnaire item on interactive features on jurisdiction website was not asked in 2012.

See *Appendix A* for breakdown of various approaches to engaging residents by jurisdiction type and by rural-urban self-identification. Generally, cities and counties, as well as mostly urban and urban jurisdictions are significantly more likely to report using each of the engagement methods.

Despite expanding opportunities, Michigan local leaders less likely to believe their jurisdictions offer “a great deal” of engagement

Even though higher percentages of local governments report using a variety of outreach and engagement activities, local leaders don’t consider the scope of these efforts to be as wide as it once was. The percentage of local officials who say they offer “a great deal” of opportunities for resident engagement declined from 54% in 2016 to less than a majority (48%) in 2025 (see *Figure 3a*).

Figure 3a
Local leaders’ assessments of the extent of resident engagement opportunities offered by their jurisdictions, 2012-2025



Note: For 2016 and 2025, this figure combines responses to two points on the scale, “very little” and “none at all”. In 2012, the final point on the scale read “little, if any.”

Cities, villages, and urban communities most likely to say they have many opportunities for resident engagement

In 2025, around half of cities (55%), villages (51%) and townships (48%) say they offer “a great deal” of engagement opportunities, compared with just 30% of counties (see *Figure 3b*). In fact, 12% of county officials report their county government offers very little or no opportunities for resident engagement.

Meanwhile, looking at the responses by urban-rural self-identification, officials in urban jurisdictions (56%) are the most likely to believe their governments offer “a great deal” of engagement opportunities (see *Figure 3c*).

Figure 3b
Local leaders' assessments of the extent of resident engagement opportunities offered by their jurisdictions, 2025, by jurisdiction type

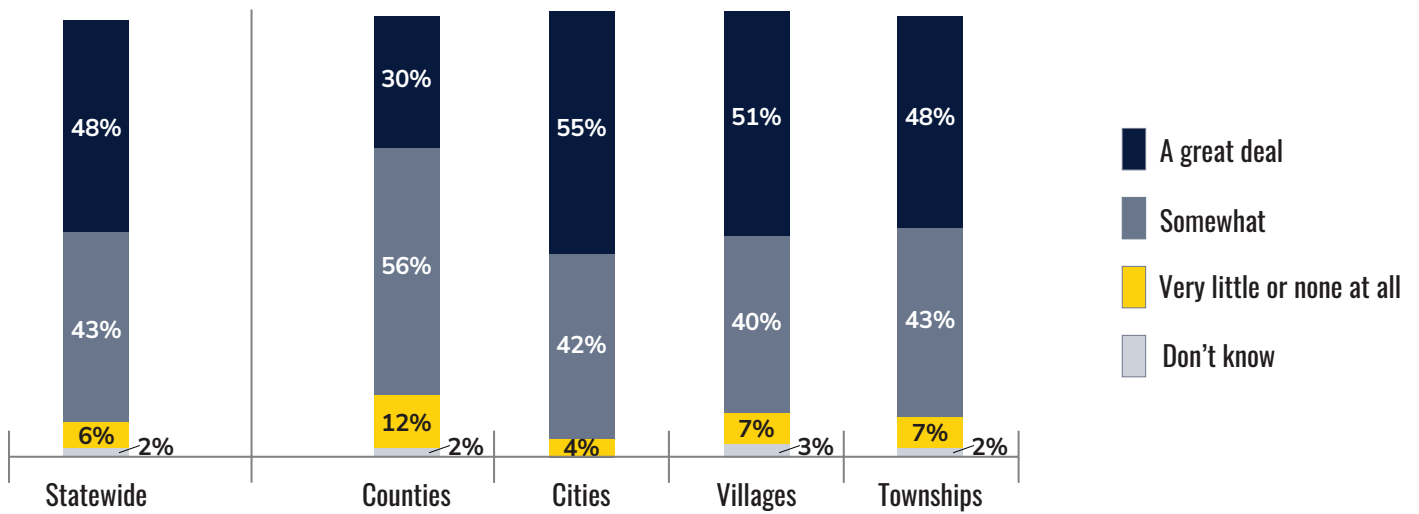
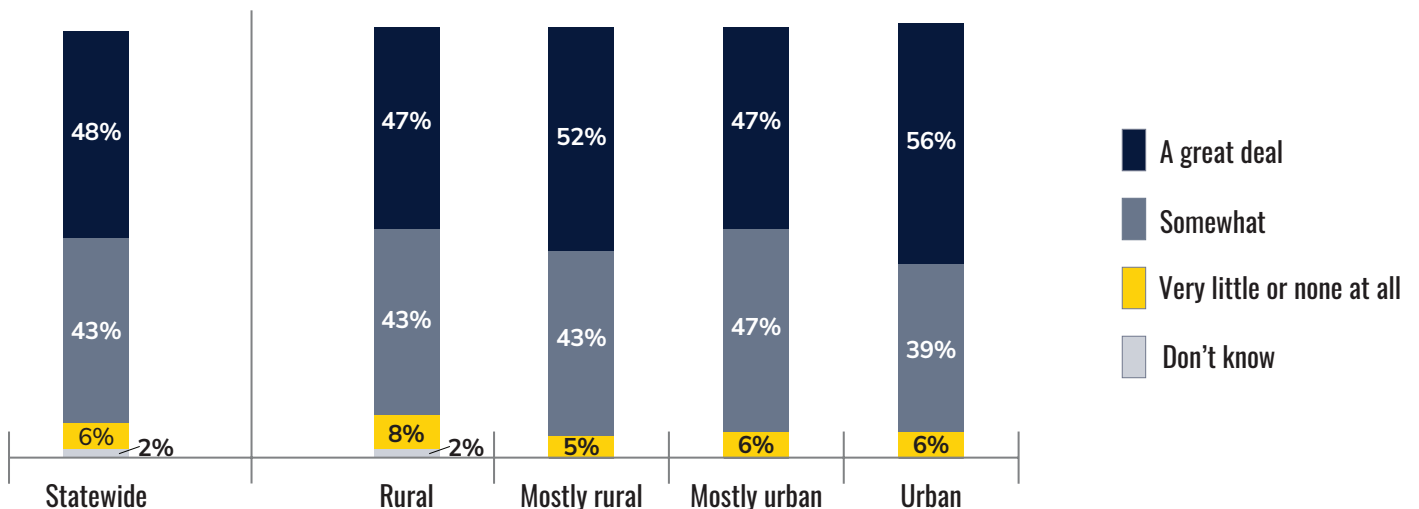


Figure 3c
Local leaders' assessments of the extent of resident engagement opportunities offered by their jurisdictions, 2025, by rural-urban self-identification



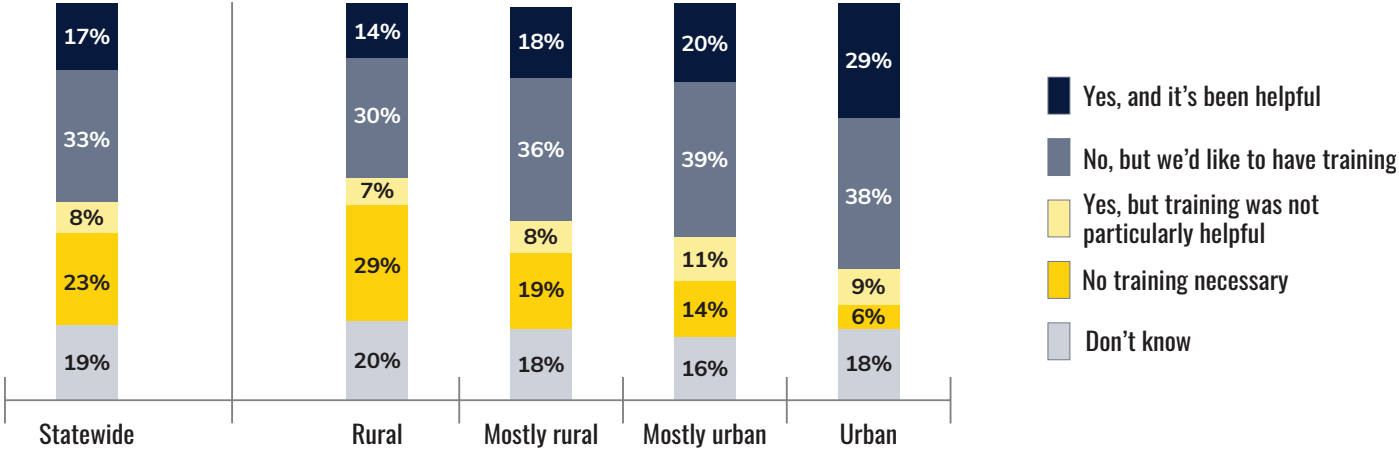
Around one quarter of jurisdictions have received formal training in engagement

As shown in *Figure 4*, 25% of jurisdictions statewide report that jurisdiction staff or elected officials have formal training in promoting or managing resident engagement and outreach. Of the jurisdictions who have opted for formal training, about two-thirds found it helpful while one-third did not find it particularly helpful.

Another 33% have not had any formal training, but would like to, while just under a quarter (23%) don't believe any training on engagement is necessary for their staff or elected officials. Meanwhile, nearly one in five (19%) are unsure if members of their government have received any formal training on engagement.

Officials from rural jurisdictions are the least enthusiastic about formal engagement training, with almost a third saying that it is not necessary, while over three quarters of officials from urban areas say their governments have either already had or would like training on resident engagement.

Figure 4
Percent of jurisdictions getting formal training in promoting or managing resident engagement, 2025, by rural-urban self-identification



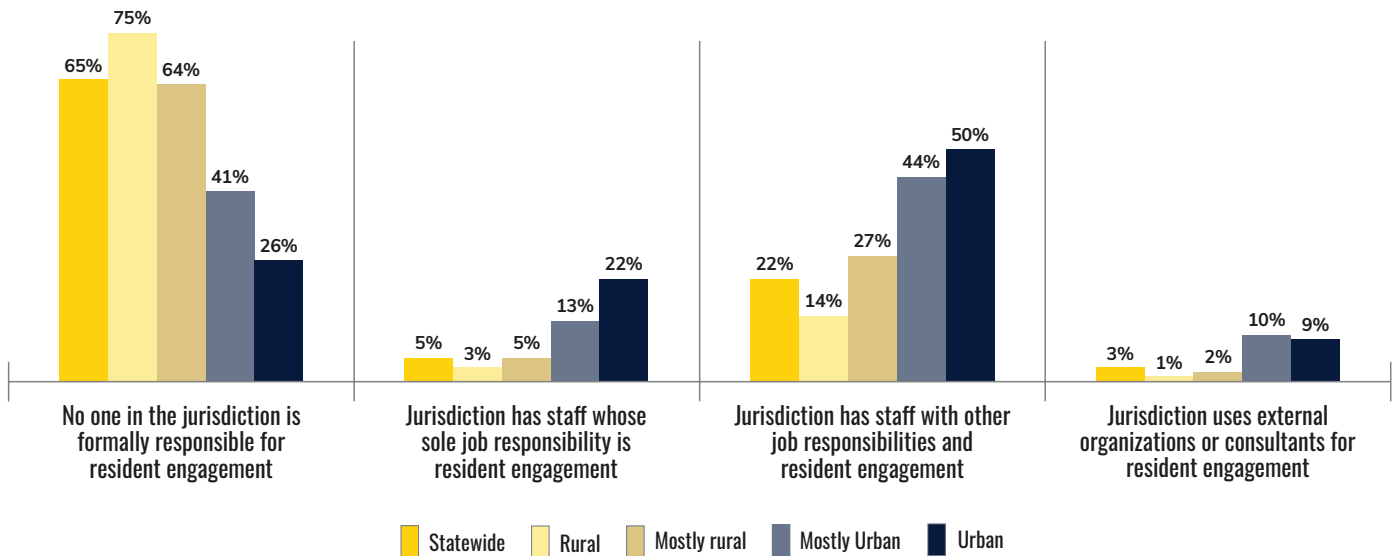
Few rural jurisdictions have leaders specifically responsible for engagement efforts, but more urban communities do

Rural efforts at resident engagement may be impeded by not having particular individuals who are assigned responsibility for promoting or managing resident engagement. While 75% of rural and 64% of mostly rural communities have no officials or staff devoted to resident engagement, just 41% of mostly urban and 26% of urban jurisdictions say the same (see *Figure 5*). In fact, 22% of urban jurisdictions have staff whose sole job responsibility is resident engagement, compared with just 3–5% of rural and mostly rural communities.

In addition, 3% of local governments statewide say they use external organizations or consultants for resident engagement, including 10% of mostly urban and 9% of urban jurisdictions.

And among the 39% of jurisdictions that indicate they have either some staff or external consultants working on engagement, 62% agree that the resources devoted to resident engagement have been a worthwhile investment, while just 5% disagree (results not shown).

Figure 5
Percent of jurisdictions with someone specifically responsible for promoting or managing resident engagement, 2025, by rural-urban self-identification



Dramatic declines in residents taking advantage of opportunities for engagement

Even though Michigan governments have expanded outreach efforts – from email newsletters and social media contacts to town hall meetings and visioning sessions – fewer than half (46%) of local governments statewide say their residents are somewhat (39%) or very (7%) engaged (see *Figure 6a*). This is down dramatically from the 65% who reported positive resident engagement in 2012.

Even among jurisdictions that say they offer “a great deal” of opportunities, resident engagement has reportedly dropped significantly since 2012. Back then, 75% of these jurisdictions reported their residents were somewhat (57%) or very (18%) engaged. This year, just over half (54%) of jurisdictions where leaders believe they offer a great deal of engagement opportunities report that their residents are somewhat (43%) or very (11%) engaged (see *Figure 6b*).

Despite declining engagement across the board, local officials still say residents are more engaged in jurisdictions that offer more opportunities.

Figure 6a
Local leaders' assessments of the level of resident engagement in their jurisdictions, 2012-2025

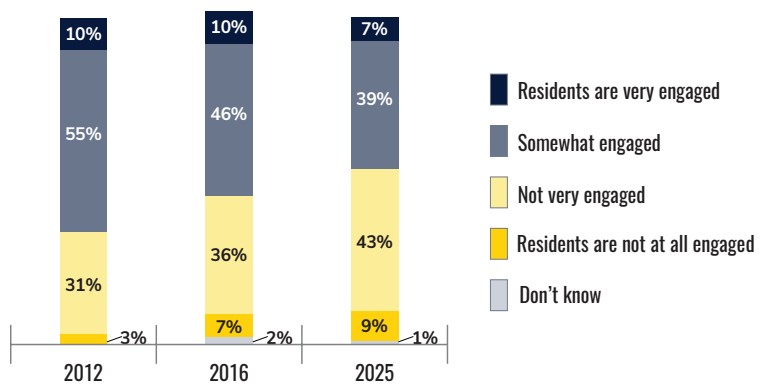
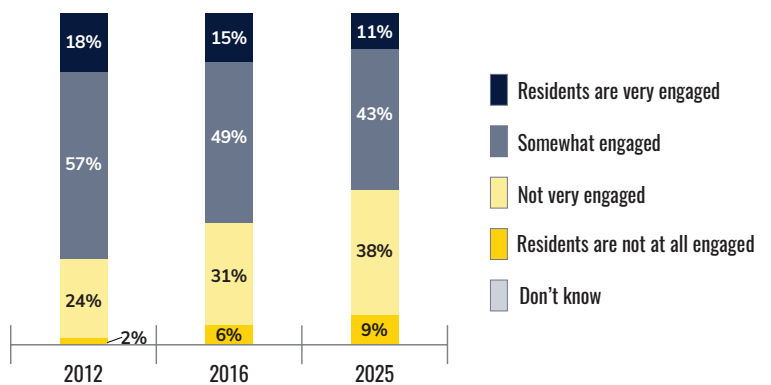
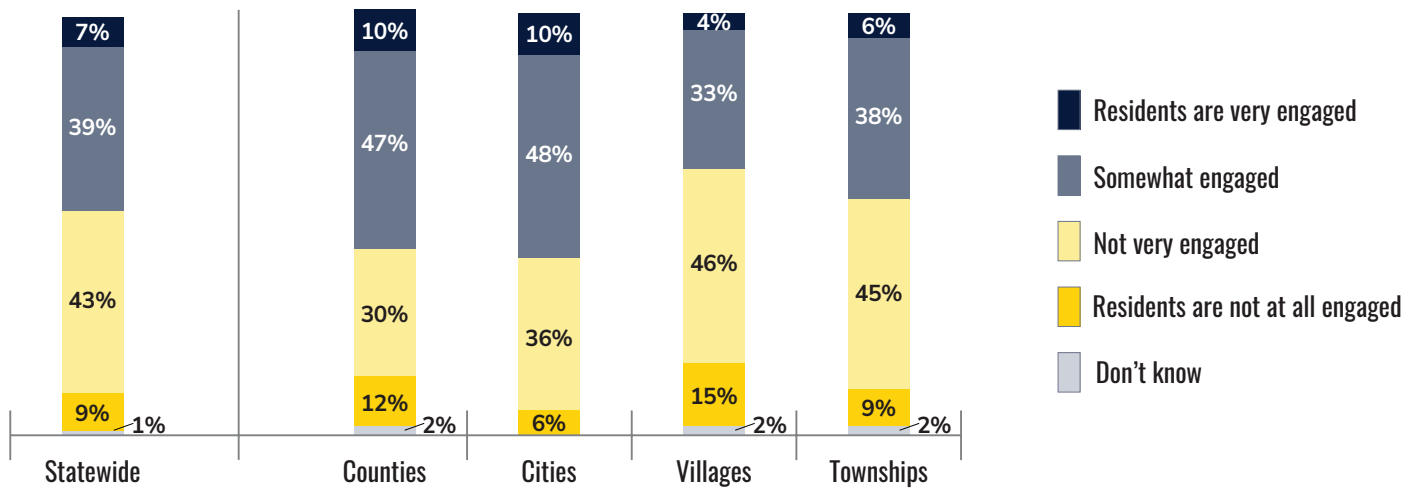


Figure 6b
Local leaders' assessments of the level of resident engagement in jurisdictions with “a great deal” of opportunities, 2012-2025



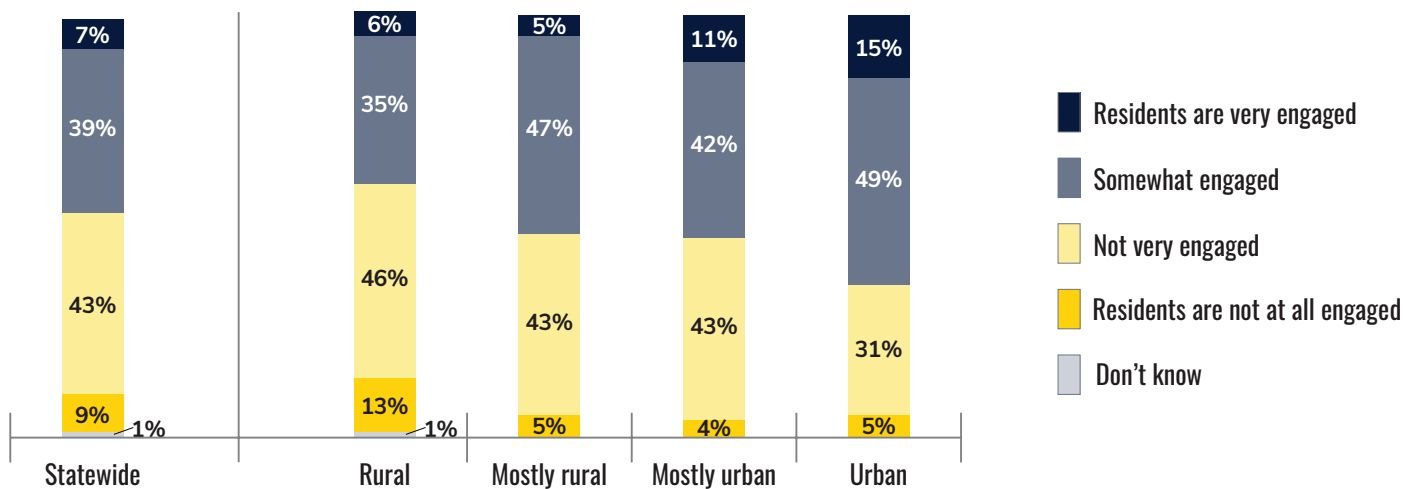
Compared to townships and villages, city (58%) and county (57%) officials are more likely to believe their residents are at least somewhat engaged—even though county officials were the least likely to say their governments offered a great deal of engagement opportunities (see *Figure 6c*). Just 37% of village officials report that their residents are at least somewhat engaged, and 15% say they are not engaged at all.

Figure 6c
Local leaders' assessments of the level of resident engagement in their jurisdictions, 2025, by jurisdiction type



Compared to their counterparts in more urban communities, rural communities struggle the most with low resident engagement, with just 41% saying their residents are at least somewhat engaged, and 13% saying their residents are not engaged at all (see *Figure 6d*). At the other end of the spectrum, 53% of urban communities report that residents are somewhat or very engaged and only 5% report that residents are not engaged at all.

Figure 6d
Local leaders' assessments of the level of resident engagement in their jurisdictions, 2025, by rural-urban self-identification



Local officials who expressed dissatisfaction with resident engagement were asked to share what they wish was different. Many respondents wish for a larger variety of people to attend meetings, for residents to engage on issues earlier in the policy-making process, and for engagement on routine issues rather than only weighing in on controversial issues. Local leaders also express frustrations with misinformation on social media and a desire for more separation of local vs. national politics in residents' minds. Others wanted more resources to expand their engagement efforts (e.g., training), or to make engagement more convenient for residents.

Voices Across Michigan

Quotes from local leaders about what they wish was going better with their jurisdiction's engagement efforts:

- "I wish more Village residents and business owners would take an active interest in the goings on in with the Village. It would be so much better if they would engage during processes rather than after, or when there is a complaint."
- "I think it would be extremely helpful if residents did not heavily promote federal level political stances in local operations. The high-level talking points have skewed the ability to operate a nonpartisan local government that addresses the needs of its community and the limitations that are present."
- "I wish more people would show up other than the few negative nasty residents. Their voices are a lot louder when they are the only ones."
- "I wish people would be more involved with the issues that come up. We are currently working on getting social media platforms set up so it will be easier to do so. Also more events at our local park."
- "I wish residents would be more informed about policy procedures so they can understand why things operate the way they do. Understand mandates and how they affect the budgeting process."
- "I wish there were more trainings for staff regarding best practices and ways to formally engage while adhering to the law in terms of the OMA and transparency. There's a lack of proven trainings/consultants in West Michigan that are affordable."
- "Our Township Hall is located outside of our population center making it very difficult for our constituents to participate. I would like to relocate the Township Hall to a more centralized location in the Township."
- "...Often, resident concerns are looked at as "complaints" rather than as curiosity from the residents."
- "We have a small group that is very active. However, there is a general mistrust of local government, if not all government. They have their own agenda and promote their agenda with misinformation and bullying tactics. I have had elected officials decline to run for office because they didn't want to deal with the harassment that was based on misinformation."
- "We hold several different types of community engagement include virtual Community chats, town halls, workshops. These are either attended by 1-2 people or no one other than staff. We recently did hold a "trash talk" workshop that generated interested from 16 residents many of which have not attended events in the past so hopefully we have hit upon the secret recipe for community engagement."

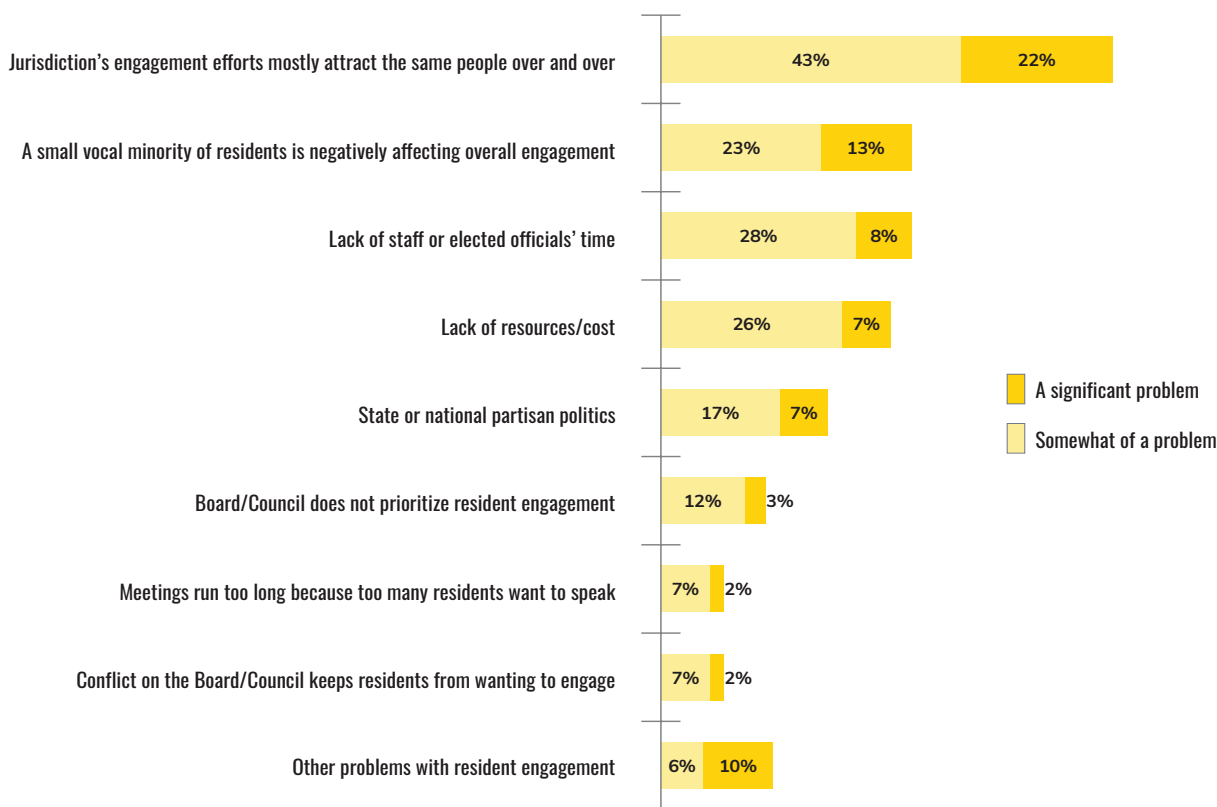
Most common problem cited is the lack of breadth in resident participation

Michigan local officials report experiencing a variety of problems with resident engagement efforts. By far the most common problem is that the jurisdiction’s engagement efforts mostly attract the same people over and over, with 65% saying this is somewhat of a problem (43%) or a significant (22%) problem (see *Figure 7*). This problem appears to be most common in more urban areas and cities, with 80% of cities reporting that engagement efforts mostly attract the same people over and over, compared to 73% of villages, 70% of counties and 58% of townships that report the same problem.

A possibly related problem reported by 36% of communities is that a small vocal minority of residents is negatively affecting overall engagement. Again, reports of this problem are more prevalent in cities (52%), compared to townships (29%). Other common problems include that staff or elected officials do not have enough time (36%), and that communities lack resources or struggle with costs (33%).

Statewide, one in four jurisdictions also say that state or national partisan politics is problem with resident engagement, but these percentages jump to 43% for cities and 45% for counties. In addition, 23% of urban jurisdictions say conflict on the Board/Council keeps residents from wanting to engage.

Figure 7
Percent of jurisdictions reporting various problems with resident engagement, 2025



See *Appendix B* for full breakdown of various problems with engaging residents by jurisdiction type and by rural-urban self-identification.

No shortage of innovative ideas for resident engagement

Despite these challenges, 38% of local officials are at least somewhat satisfied with their residents' engagement. In an open-end survey question, the MPPS asked these leaders for examples of approaches their jurisdictions have taken to engage residents which they feel are particularly effective or innovative. Effective approaches discussed by local officials include:

Frequent communication in many modes: reaching out through weekly press releases, weekly e-newsletters, quarterly mailed newsletters, daily Facebook/social media postings, daily website updates, open office hours twice a month, or podcasting.

Encourage online participation in meetings: using zoom and allowing remote participants to comment; posting meeting materials online in advance.

Tried and true analog methods: recognizing the value of soliciting input in person or posting information on physical bulletin boards in local businesses, restaurants, or other public places.

Share results of resident surveys: conducting and sharing surveys helps community members feel included and understand other perspectives; when residents see general consensus for an idea, they may be more likely to step up and volunteer to help.

Plan ahead and use an iterative process: starting the engagement process well in advance and allowing for a few rounds of feedback so residents can see how their ideas are being discussed and incorporated along the way.

Engage residents on topics they are interested in: highlighting topics such as road repairs, zoning, or other resonant issues can spark resident interest in government operations.

Find partners: partnering with local nonprofit organizations to provide new opportunities for residents to engage with the government; other local governments can be partners as well.

Always be recruiting: keeping a list of people you meet who may be a good fit for a future role; providing opportunities for young people to intern and learn about how your government works.

Don't forget employees: employees can be a valuable source of input, so be sure to include them in surveys or engagement activities.

Try a citizen academy: a more intensive option is to recruit residents to a multi-session academy or weekend workshop where they can dig into the details of your government's operations; single-session educational events can also engage residents.



Conclusion

This latest Michigan Public Policy Survey wave shows the challenges that local governments face in engaging their residents in local policymaking. Despite local officials' efforts to diversify engagement opportunities, including greater use of technology, they report that levels of resident engagement have declined sharply since 2012. This year, just 38% of local officials report being satisfied with resident engagement, down from 58% in 2012, with especially acute challenges in rural communities and among villages.

The findings suggest that expanding the number and variety of engagement opportunities has not, on its own, translated into broader or deeper resident participation. Barriers remain, such as engagement efforts repeatedly attracting the same individuals, the outsized influence of small but vocal groups, resource and staffing constraints, and the increasing intrusion of state and national political polarization into local discussions. Rural governments, in particular, struggle with limited staff capacity and lower resident engagement.

Yet, there are signs of promise and pockets of effective practice. Some local leaders identify social media, online participation tools, resident surveys, and innovative initiatives like resident academies as helpful for reaching wider audiences and encouraging meaningful involvement. There is substantial interest in formal training on engagement, especially in urban areas, suggesting that resources to help build capacity and expertise might help address growing challenges.

Notes

1. Ivacko, T. & Horner, D. (May 2013). *Citizen engagement in the view of Michigan's local government leaders*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/24/citizen-engagement-in-the-view-of-michigans-local-government-leaders>
2. Fitzpatrick, N., Ivacko, T. & Horner, D. (July 2017). *Michigan local leaders want their citizens to play a larger role in policymaking, but report declining engagement*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/63/michigan-local-leaders-want-their-citizens-to-play-a-larger-role-in-policymaking-but-report-declining-engagement>

Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is an ongoing survey program, interviewing the leaders of Michigan’s 1,856 units of general-purpose local government, conducted by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan in partnership with the Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Townships Association, and Michigan Association of Counties. Surveys are conducted each spring (and prior to 2018, were also conducted each fall). The program has covered a wide range of policy topics and includes longitudinal tracking data on “core” fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and is designed to build up a multi-year time series.

In the Spring 2025 iteration, surveys were sent by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) via email and hardcopy to top elected and appointed officials (including county administrators and board chairs; city mayors and managers; village presidents, clerks, and managers; and township supervisors, clerks, and managers) from all 83 counties, 280 cities, 253 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan. More information is available at <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-2025-spring>.

The Spring 2025 wave was conducted from April 7 – June 12, 2025. A total of 1,328 local jurisdictions returned valid surveys (72 counties, 208 cities, 162 villages, and 886 townships), resulting in a 72% response rate by unit. Quantitative data are weighted to account for non-response. Missing responses are not included in the tabulations unless otherwise specified. Some report figures may not add to 100% due to rounding within response categories. “Voices Across Michigan” verbatim responses, when included, may have been edited for grammar and brevity.

See CLOSUP’s website for the full question text on the survey questionnaire. Detailed tables of the data in this report, including breakdowns by various jurisdiction characteristics such as community population size, region, and jurisdiction type, will be available soon at <http://mpps.umich.edu>.

Appendix A

Percent of Michigan jurisdictions reporting use of various approaches for engaging residents, 2025, by jurisdiction type

	Counties	Townships	Cities	Villages	Statewide total
Use of public comment opportunities at main Council/Board meetings	98%	96%	99%	95%	96%
Use of electronic/email newsletters or notices	51%	47%	82%	53%	54%
Use of Interactive features on a jurisdiction website aimed at the public	69%	42%	72%	52%	49%
Use of social media accounts	63%	36%	92%	66%	51%
Use of online streaming/cable broadcast of Council/Board meetings	66%	12%	57%	17%	23%
Use of resident surveys	20%	29%	61%	37%	35%
Use of informal one-on-one discussions with residents	53%	56%	69%	57%	58%
Use of open houses or coffee with officials	18%	13%	36%	13%	17%
Use of community-wide Town Hall meetings	25%	42%	43%	29%	39%
Use of strategic-planning or visioning sessions	21%	20%	63%	30%	28%
Use of citizen participation on ad hoc task forces or planning teams	56%	28%	55%	32%	35%
Use of citizen participation on formal government boards or commissions	82%	51%	87%	52%	59%
Don't know what approaches jurisdiction uses for resident engagement	2%	2%	1%	3%	2%

Percent of Michigan jurisdictions reporting use of various approaches for engaging residents, 2025, by rural-urban self-identification

	Rural	Mostly rural	Mostly urban	Urban	Statewide total
Use of public comment opportunities at main Council/Board meetings	96%	99%	98%	100%	96%
Use of electronic/email newsletters or notices	43%	62%	80%	83%	54%
Use of Interactive features on a jurisdiction website aimed at the public	43%	53%	72%	75%	49%

Use of social media accounts	39%	56%	88%	94%	51%
Use of online streaming/cable broadcast of Council/Board meetings	10%	27%	54%	77%	23%
Use of resident surveys	26%	43%	55%	58%	35%
Use of informal one-on-one discussions with residents	53%	63%	73%	74%	58%
Use of open houses or coffee with officials	11%	21%	33%	40%	17%
Use of community-wide Town Hall meetings	37%	39%	50%	53%	39%
Use of strategic-planning or visioning sessions	16%	36%	59%	64%	28%
Use of citizen participation on ad hoc task forces or planning teams	27%	40%	56%	59%	35%
Use of citizen participation on formal government boards or commissions	49%	68%	85%	89%	59%
Don't know what approaches jurisdiction uses for resident engagement	1%	0%	1%	0%	2%

Appendix B

Percent of Michigan jurisdictions reporting various issues with engaging residents are a “somewhat or significant” problem, 2025, by jurisdiction type

	Counties	Townships	Cities	Villages	Statewide total
Jurisdiction's engagement efforts mostly attract the same people over and over	70%	58%	80%	73%	65%
A small vocal minority of residents is negatively affecting overall engagement	47%	29%	53%	44%	36%
Lack of staff or elected officials' time	46%	32%	47%	43%	36%
Lack of resources/cost	43%	28%	40%	44%	33%
State or national partisan politics	45%	17%	43%	22%	24%
Board/Council does not prioritize resident engagement	9%	15%	13%	22%	15%
Meetings run too long because too many residents want to speak	8%	10%	7%	10%	9%
Conflict on the Board/Council keeps residents from wanting to engage	10%	8%	13%	12%	9%
Other problems with resident engagement	0%	13%	40%	9%	16%

Percent of Michigan jurisdictions reporting various issues with engaging residents are a “somewhat or significant” problem, 2025, by rural-urban self-identification

	Rural	Mostly rural	Mostly urban	Urban	Statewide total
Jurisdiction's engagement efforts mostly attract the same people over and over	61%	68%	81%	73%	65%
A small vocal minority of residents is negatively affecting overall engagement	34%	37%	46%	50%	36%
Lack of staff or elected officials' time	34%	36%	45%	40%	36%
Lack of resources/cost	33%	28%	43%	39%	33%
State or national partisan politics	18%	25%	37%	44%	24%
Board/Council does not prioritize resident engagement	16%	15%	18%	9%	15%
Meetings run too long because too many residents want to speak	10%	8%	6%	13%	9%
Conflict on the Board/Council keeps residents from wanting to engage	7%	10%	12%	23%	9%
Other problems with resident engagement	12%	22%	24%	28%	16%

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The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), housed at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, conducts and supports applied policy research designed to inform state, local, and urban policy issues. Through integrated research, teaching, and outreach involving academic researchers, students, policymakers and practitioners, CLOSUP seeks to foster understanding of today's state and local policy problems, and to find effective solutions to those problems.

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