



MPPS Policy Brief

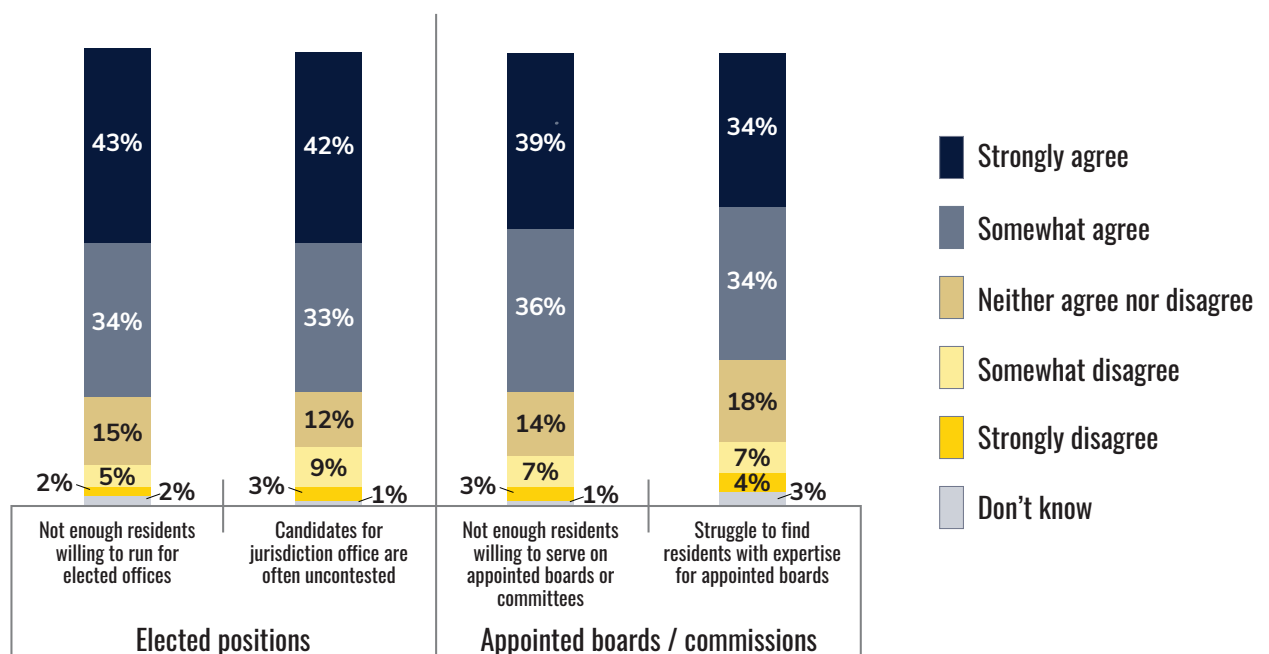
Many Michigan local governments struggle to find residents willing to run for office or serve on boards

By Natalie Fitzpatrick, Debra Horner, and Stephanie Leiser

The Spring 2025 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) asked local government officials a wide range of questions about resident engagement in their communities.¹ Across the state, Michigan local leaders report steep declines in engagement over more than a decade, despite increased outreach efforts to their residents.

One significant area of concern is resident representation on local elected and appointed boards. As shown in *Figure 1a*, local leaders from more than three-quarters of Michigan jurisdictions statewide agree that not enough residents are willing to run for local elected office in their jurisdiction (77%), and that candidacies are often uncontested (75%). Beyond elected offices, a similar proportion of local leaders also say not enough residents are willing to serve on the jurisdiction's appointed boards or committees (75%), such as planning commissions, zoning boards of appeals, downtown development authorities, or advisory boards on parks and recreation. In addition, 68% report that their jurisdiction struggles to find residents with the necessary skills or subject matter expertise for certain appointed boards.

Figure 1a
Percentage of local officials who agree or disagree with concerns over residents running for office or serving on boards



All four of these challenges are widely found in every jurisdiction type, from counties to townships. However, local leaders from the state’s smaller and more rural jurisdictions, particularly villages and townships, are more likely to express strong concerns about them. For example, while 19% of county leaders and 34% of city leaders strongly agree that not enough residents are willing to run for local elected office, that percentage rises to a majority of villages (51%) and nearly half of townships (45%) statewide (see *Figure 1b*). Similarly, approximately a quarter of local leaders from mostly urban and urban communities express significant concerns with resident recruitment to run for office or serve on appointed boards, compared with around twice that percentage in Michigan’s rural communities (see *Figure 1c*).

Figure 1b

Percentage of local officials who “somewhat” or “strongly” agree with not enough residents running for office or serving on boards, by jurisdiction type

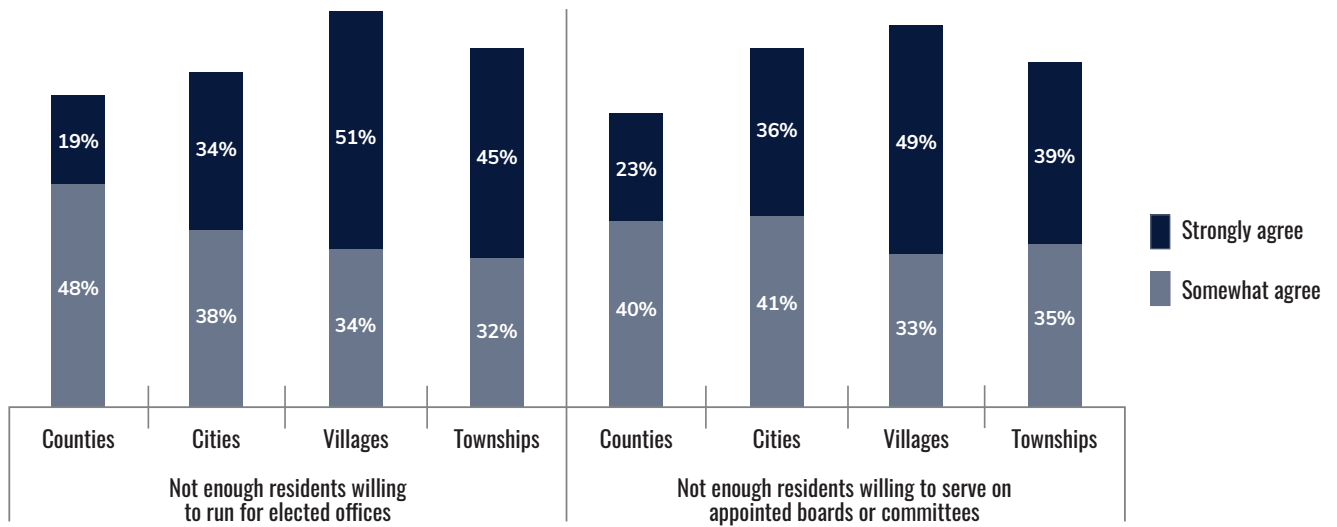
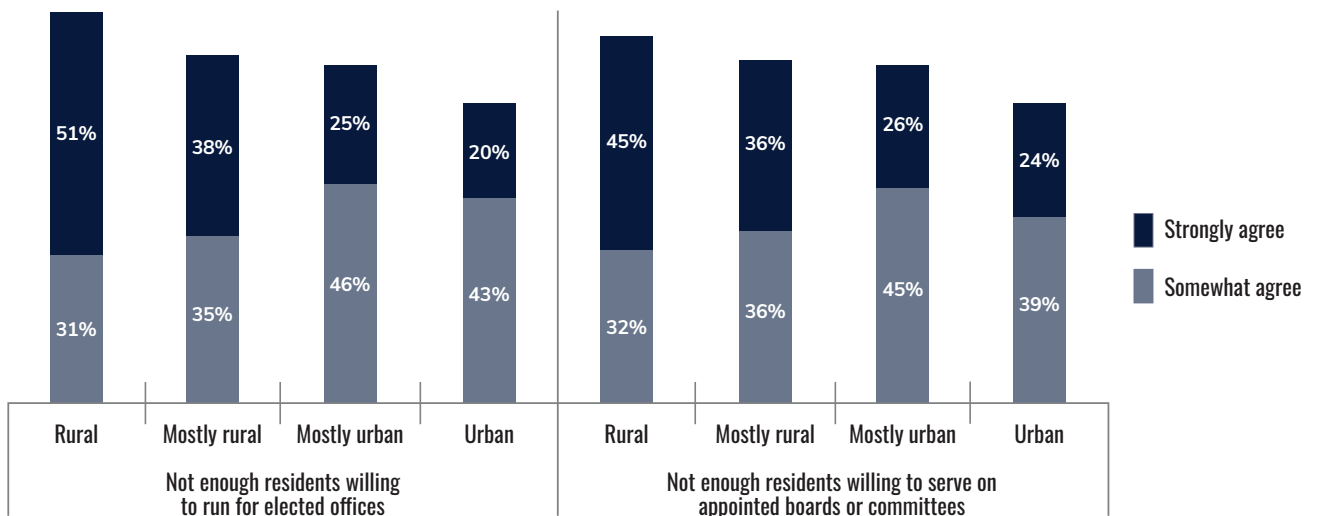


Figure 1c

Percentage of local officials who “somewhat” or “strongly” agree with not enough residents running for office or serving on boards, by rural-urban self-assessment

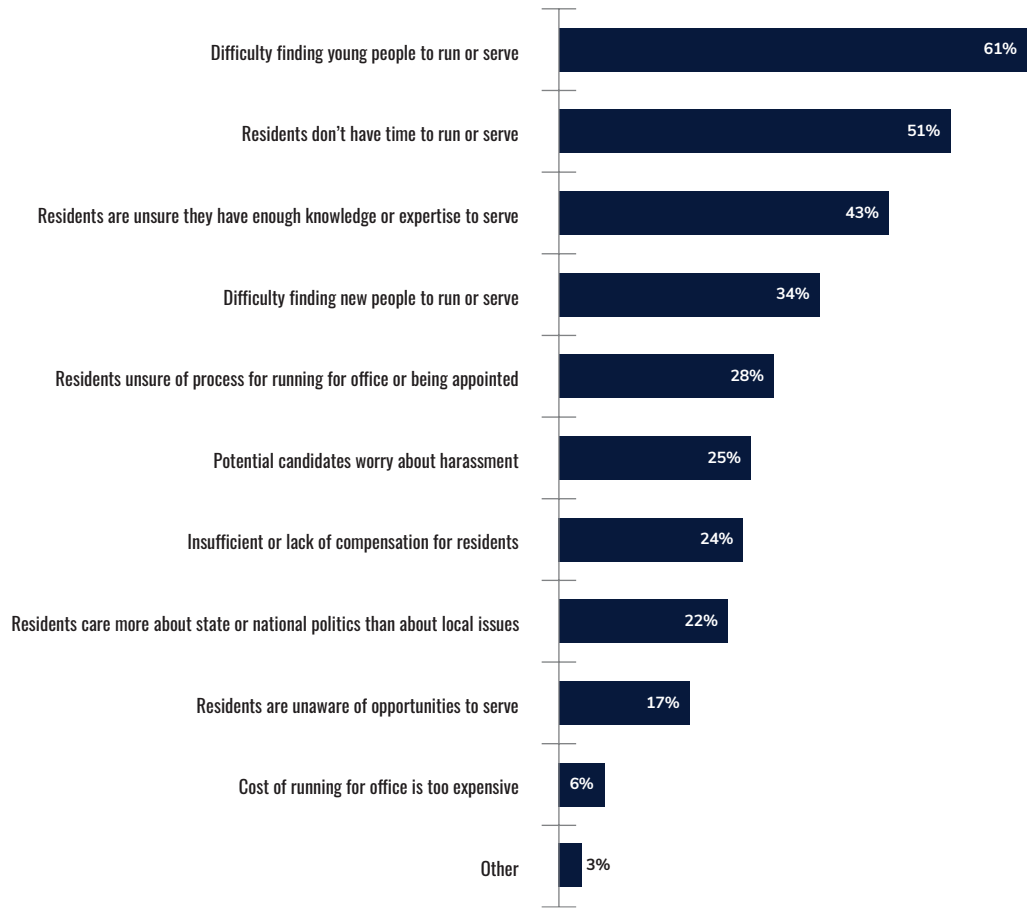


Local leaders worry about finding young people to run or serve, believe residents don't have time

When asked about specific challenges related to finding residents to run for office or serve on appointed boards, 61% of local officials statewide say it's difficult for their jurisdiction to find young people to run or serve, and 34% say they can't find new people in general (see *Figure 2*). About half feel their jurisdiction's residents don't have time to run or serve, and 43% believe their residents feel unsure that they have enough knowledge or expertise to serve on boards. One quarter believe their residents are deterred from running because of potential harassment, which reflects [earlier MPPS findings from 2022](#) that 47% of local officials say they personally experienced online or in-person harassment while serving in their role in local government.²

As shown in *Appendix A*, local leaders who characterize their community as “mostly urban” are more likely to cite problems in several areas compared with officials from either rural or urban places, including residents not having time to run or serve (63%), resident concerns about harassment (44%), difficulty finding new people to run or serve (44%), and residents caring more about state or national politics (38%).

Figure 2
Percentage identifying specific problems related to finding residents to run for office and/or serve on appointed boards

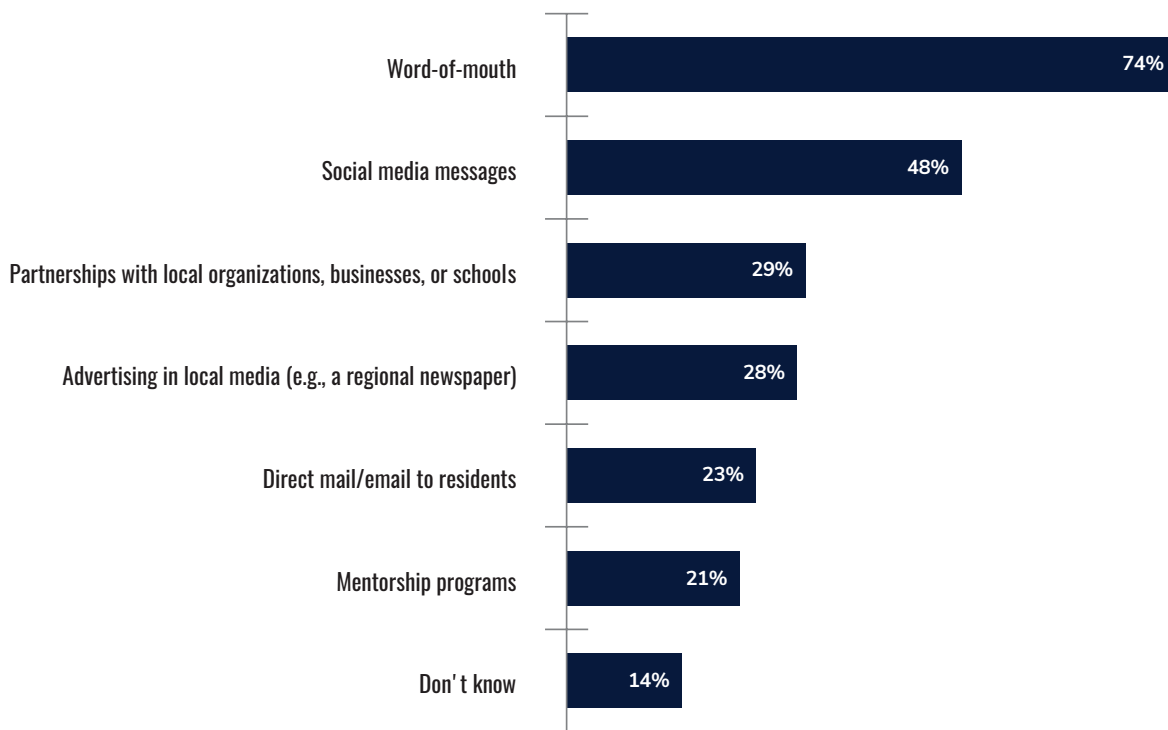


Word-of-mouth seen as the most effective approach to overcoming recruitment problems

The MPPS also asked local officials what kinds of outreach methods are, or could be, most effective for encouraging residents to run for office or serve on appointed boards. By far the most commonly cited outreach method is simple word-of-mouth, which 74% of local leaders endorse (see *Figure 3*). Almost half of officials (48%) say social media is, or could be, effective in resident recruitment, reflecting broader trends in increased use of social media for resident outreach and engagement. Currently, over half (51%) of local governments say they use social media accounts for some types of resident outreach, compared with just 18% who were doing so in 2012.³ Local leaders in urban (70%) and mostly urban (68%) communities are especially likely to recommend social media as a strategy to recruit residents (see *Appendix B*).

Other than for social media, there are few significant differences among officials along the rural-urban spectrum on what they believe could be effective in boosting resident recruitment.

Figure 3
Percentage identifying outreach methods most effective in their jurisdiction for encouraging residents to run for office or serve on appointed boards





The MPPS also asked local government officials to describe the ways in which things were either going well or going poorly with their resident engagement, and many included comments about their recruitment of residents to run for office or serve on appointed boards. These comments cite many of the same problems noted in the results above, particularly the cost of running for office and the lack of compensation for serving and volunteering time.

Voices Across Michigan

Quotes from local leaders about successes or concerns with resident recruitment to run or serve:

“We need more time and more resources. Board positions are publicly understood to be part-time, 10-15 hours per week. In reality, it is a full-time job paid at only \$21,000/year. So, no one will run, but the public expects the results of a full-time professional in elected positions.”

“All our rural townships have the same problems recruiting new or young people to get involved. It’s mostly the rate of pay.”

“One of the most significant barriers we’ve encountered in encouraging younger participation is compensation. Many younger residents are balancing multiple jobs or family obligations, and unfortunately, our township simply doesn’t have the budget to offer competitive wages for committee work or part-time township positions. State and federal funding cuts have only made that more difficult.”

“As Supervisor, if I have a specific need on a Board or Commission for a candidate with expertise in a particular area (wastewater, assessing, public safety, etc.) I have formed an advisory board (of community leaders) to seek out a list of candidates to ensure that no one person can hand-pick who they want to serve. It allows for the best person for the position to fill it.”

“If we can predict a vacancy, we discuss with appropriate individuals the need for their participation, and it is generally well received.”

“I think it is an overall problem with residents not having enough time, who have young families and are already juggling other duties.”

“The divisiveness in the community keeps good people from running or offering to serve on boards, as they do not want in be harassed.”

“[Running for local office] is largely a closed-door society. If you do not have an in, you likely will not be viewed as a credible candidate... It’s too tough to break in within a large town without large money and a large cast of supportive politicians.”

“More engaged residents could see that serving is a noble cause. It is very rewarding even in today’s fragmented climate.”

Appendix A

Percentage identifying specific problems related to finding residents to run for office and/or serve on appointed boards, by rural-urban self-identification

	Rural	Mostly Rural	Mostly Urban	Urban	Total
Residents are unaware of opportunities to serve	14%	20%	20%	25%	17%
Residents unsure of process/procedures for running for office or being appointed	27%	34%	26%	23%	28%
Residents don't have time to run or serve	50%	50%	63%	57%	51%
Residents are unsure they have enough knowledge/expertise to serve	43%	44%	42%	41%	43%
Insufficient or lack of compensation for residents to run or serve	27%	22%	20%	24%	24%
Cost of running for office is too expensive	3%	5%	14%	16%	6%
Potential candidates worry about harassment	21%	27%	44%	28%	25%
Residents care more about state or national politics than about local issues	19%	24%	38%	28%	23%
Difficulty finding new people to run or serve	32%	36%	44%	28%	34%
Difficulty finding young people to run or serve	63%	62%	69%	43%	62%
Jurisdiction faces other problems in finding residents to run or serve	4%	2%	2%	5%	3%

Appendix B

Percentage identifying outreach methods most effective in their jurisdiction for encouraging residents to run for office or serve on appointed boards, by rural-urban self-identification

	Rural	Mostly Rural	Mostly Urban	Urban	Total
Word-of-mouth could encourage residents to run or serve	72%	78%	83%	75%	74%
Social media messages could encourage residents to run or serve	41%	52%	68%	70%	48%
Advertising in local media could encourage residents to run or serve	26%	29%	33%	25%	27%
Direct mail/email to residents could encourage residents to run or serve	21%	24%	29%	27%	23%
Partnership w/ local orgs/bus/school could encourage residents to run or	22%	36%	43%	41%	29%
Mentorship programs could encourage residents to run or serve	18%	23%	31%	34%	21%

Notes

1. Fitzpatrick, N., Horner, D., and Leiser, S. (October 2025). *Michigan local leaders report alarming declines in resident 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/137/mpps-michigan-local-leaders-report-alarming-declines-resident-engagement>

2. Fitzpatrick, N., Horner, D., and Ivacko, T. (September 2022). *Statewide survey finds a majority of Michigan local governments experiencing harassment or other abuse*. 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/103/mpps-policy-brief-statewide-survey-finds-majority-michigan-local-governments-experiencing-harassment-abuse>

3. Fitzpatrick, N., Horner, D., and Leiser, S. (October 2025).

Survey Background and Methodology

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) at the University of Michigan's Gerald R Ford School of Public Policy. The program is a partnership with Michigan's local government associations. The Spring 2025 wave was conducted April 7 – June 12, 2025. Respondents 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 jurisdictions across the state, resulting in a 72% response rate by unit. More information is available at <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-2025-spring>

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 community characteristics, are available at <http://mpps.umich.edu>.

The survey responses presented here are those of local Michigan officials, while further analysis represents the views of the authors. Neither necessarily reflects the views of the University of Michigan, or of other partners in the MPPS.