



## Saugatuck Township

### Community Sustainability Profile

*An installment in the Michigan Green Communities Community Sustainability Profile Series*

#### **Why is sustainability important to Saugatuck Township?**

As a coastal community, Saugatuck Township naturally has an interest in protecting its most valuable resources—its land and water. The Kalamazoo River runs directly through the township, which borders Lake Michigan. Along with these prominent natural features, the presence of wetlands, dunes, and forests are reasons why conservation and outdoor recreation are central to the identity of the area.

Saugatuck Township surrounds the cities of Saugatuck and Douglas, while hosting the majority of the area's population. The "Tri Community Area," as it's known, is very interconnected due to its physical, economic, and geographic similarities. With a renewed sense of collaboration, the municipalities have coordinated on regional initiatives, including recycling, transportation, and more.

#### **Lack of Clarity around Recycling Leads to Opportunity for Regional Partnership**

In 2020, the township began more explicit discussions about sustainability, starting with recycling. Residents were confused by the two different recycling systems used in Saugatuck Township and the City of Saugatuck. In the township, the hauler used "yellow bags" to pick up recycling, while the same hauler was using physical receptacles for recycling in the city. To figure out what was going on, Saugatuck Township and the cities of Saugatuck and Douglas joined together to form the Tri Community Recycling Partnership. After some research, they discovered that the materials recovered from the yellow bags had a much lower recycling rate than the physical receptacles. This initiated conversations about improving transparency and community engagement around recycling.

#### **Saugatuck Township, MI**

**Population** (2020 Census): 3,443

**Governance:** Board-Manager

**Location:** West Michigan, Allegan County

#### Key Takeaways:

- Work in partnership with neighbors. Especially for smaller communities, this strategy can help address regional challenges and improve the experience of residents and visitors.
- Participate in the [Michigan Green Communities program](#) to connect with other communities working on similar sustainability projects.
- Update zoning ordinances regularly to adapt to community priorities and prepare for the future. Rely on best practice guides for renewable energy zoning (like [MSU's guide for solar](#)).
- Provide clear, consistent communication and opportunities for resident feedback. Community engagement is key to successful zoning ordinance updates.
- Focus on the everyday experience of residents and visitors in your community—this is central to their relationship to place.



Daniel DeFranco, Saugatuck Township's manager since 2022, and a previous member of the township's planning commission, cites this partnership as a catalyst for increased collaboration between the regions. DeFranco explains that the partnership works because the cities, Saugatuck and Douglas, bring visibility to the program, while the township brings more population. The township's participation is critical to expanding the potential for regional impact.

This is all accompanied by a growing expectation among the communities that the municipalities will work together more in the future. For residents, the political boundaries separating each municipality don't mean much, and for visitors even less. The municipalities recognize that to move the region forward, they must capitalize on their interdependencies and shift to this more regional, "borderless" perspective. Cultivating these partnerships is critical to improving the residents' quality of life and the experience of visitors in the area.

### **New Zoning Ordinance Strengthens Environmental Protections**

Beyond prioritizing recycling, Saugatuck Township also updated its zoning ordinance in March 2024. The new ordinance includes sections on new residential and utility solar policies, tree preservation, sustainable development practices, and EV charging stations. The zoning ordinance update was four years in the making. Around 2020, the township recognized that the public's expectations of the ordinance were misaligned with the actual content of the ordinance. The township board showed interest in identifying gaps in the ordinance and formed subcommittees.

An early success of the new ordinance was that it ensured the protection of a creek and wetland running through a proposed housing unit. Because of the new ordinance requirements, the township was able to require the developer to not disturb the creek and wetland, while still adding new housing to the community.

#### **Case Study Highlight:**

*Through the zoning ordinance revision process, Saugatuck Township's board focused on applying best practices to the new zoning ordinance, relying heavily on MSU's 2021 solar zoning guide for updating utility solar policies ("[Planning & Zoning for Solar Energy Systems: A Guide for Michigan Local Governments](#)"). For example, the township removed height limitations on solar to allow for the potential of agrivoltaics. Agrivoltaics is an emerging practice that allows for agricultural production or livestock grazing beneath or next to solar panels. Because of the value residents place on natural features in the area, preservation was also bolstered in the zoning ordinance by adding setbacks and tree protection provisions.*

### **How does participation in MGC help support Saugatuck Township on its sustainability journey?**

Through the Michigan Green Communities program, Saugatuck Township has connected with peers prioritizing sustainability. DeFranco first came across Michigan Green Communities around the time the township began partnering with the Outdoor Discovery Center. He also represented Saugatuck Township through participation in the Michigan Green Communities' Materials Management Accelerator Cohort in Fall 2023. Through participation in this cohort, the township was able to connect with their neighboring community of Fennville and start a conversation about how they might introduce composting as a community service in the future.



## What's next for Saugatuck Township?

DeFranco has ambitious goals for what a sustainable future for Saugatuck Township might look like. He envisions the township as a place that will be regarded as innovative and willing to try new things. He would also like to see the township implement a land conservation goal to protect 20 to 30 percent of land. Along with this conservation goal, the township plans to continue its regional partnerships and pursue more conservation projects, like expanding habitat restoration along the Kalamazoo River. They are also planning to build more non-motorized trails, primarily completing a section of the Blue Star Trail that will eventually connect Saugatuck and South Haven.

*“So many people visit that we have a real platform for pushing some innovative ideas that people could come here and see and be inspired, then go back and think about how they might implement them in their own communities. We have a framework for bringing us into the future.”*

- Daniel DeFranco, Saugatuck Township Manager

More than two million people visit the Saugatuck area each year. For DeFranco, this represents an opportunity for the township to positively impact people. He elaborates, “so many people visit that we have a real platform for pushing some innovative ideas that people could come here and see and be inspired, then go back and think about how they might implement them in their own communities. We have a framework for bringing us into the future.” He hopes that the Saugatuck area can inspire the next generation of residents and visitors.



*Michigan Green Communities (MGC) is a statewide network of local and state government staff and officials, and higher education institution staff that collaborate with one another, through peer learning and information sharing, to promote innovative sustainability, climate change, and environmental justice solutions at the local, state, regional, national, and international levels. The core component of the MGC program is the MGC Challenge, an annual sustainability benchmarking program.*



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