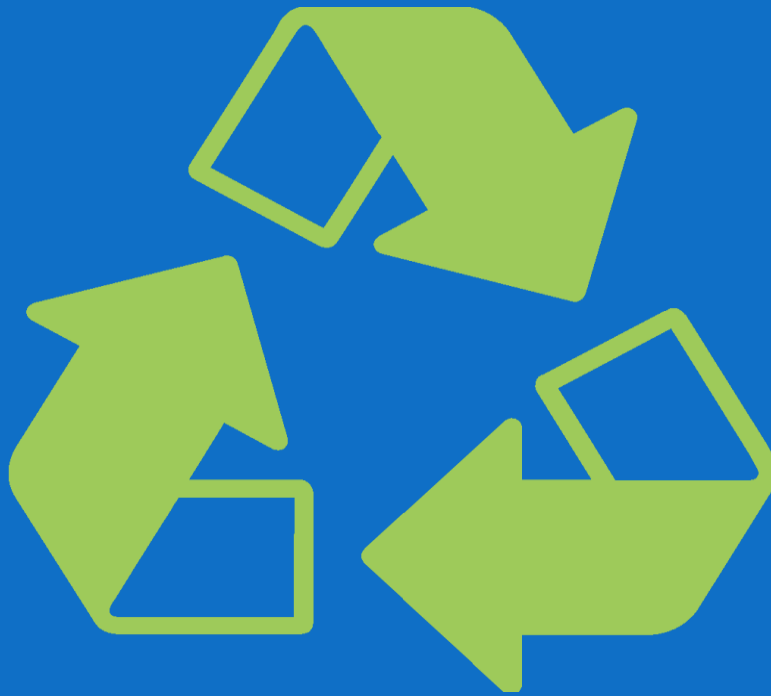


# SUSTAINABLE HORIZONS:

## A PROMISING FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR IMPROVING RECYCLING IN MUSKEGON COUNTY



Produced by West Michigan Environmental Action Council  
with funds from the Michigan Department of Environment, Energy and Great Lakes.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

In response to strong demand from local residents for enhanced recycling programs in Muskegon County, West Michigan Environmental Action Council (WMEAC) took the initiative in the spring of 2021 to convene a coalition of elected municipal officials, community leaders, and business partners, with support from the Community Foundation for Muskegon County and Howmet Aerospace, to initiate constructive dialogues and devise effective strategies for evaluating and implementing new recycling services and programs.

We have a wide range of partners and participating organizations that collaborate with us. These include the cities of North Muskegon, Whitehall, Montague, Roosevelt Park, Muskegon, and Muskegon Heights, along with Cedar Creek, White River, Laketon, Egelston, Sullivan, Dalton, Muskegon, and Ravenna townships and the villages of Fruitport and Casnovia, and the County of Muskegon.

Our participating organizations also consist of the White Lake Area Solid Waste Authority, West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission, Muskegon Conservation District, Muskegon Area Intermediate School District, Muskegon Rotary, West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, and Sierra Club Michigan Chapter.

Furthermore, we are pleased to have the active involvement of Goodwill Industries of West Michigan and PADNOS among our business participants. Together, this group, which we are informally calling the Muskegon County Recycling Network, is working towards achieving our common goals and making a positive impact on the community.

The group engaged in both virtual and in-person meetings and information sessions to address the county's recycling status and explore potential advancements. Following these discussions, WMEAC and its partners received encouragement from the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) to seek and receive a grant for conducting a feasibility study. The study, begun in 2022, aims to build upon and expand existing successful recycling initiatives in local municipalities within Muskegon County, while also developing innovative methods suitable for both rural and urban areas to reduce waste sent to landfills.

The timing of this study is particularly relevant due to recent changes in Pt. 115, Michigan's law regulating solid waste management and recycling. These updates, enacted in December 2022 and officially enforced in March 2023, set requirements for Michigan counties to achieve benchmark recycling standards. The goal is to increase the state's recycling rate from 19% to 30% by 2029, with a further target of 45% thereafter. This study presents a vision that can guide and support the efforts of Muskegon County government as it begins taking steps to meet Pt. 115 requirements and advance sustainable waste management practices. It will serve as a robust foundation for Muskegon County recycling planning, leading to enhanced recycling efforts, increased diversion of recyclable materials

from landfills, and the promotion of a circular economy for recyclables and compostable organics. These elements are crucial in fostering sustainable waste management practices.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

As environmental sustainability becomes more widely recognized, numerous municipal government bodies, community groups, and enterprises continue to adopt recycling initiatives. While recycling services and programs are available to Muskegon County residents, the absence of a cohesive countywide recycling infrastructure has led to fragmented and underutilized existing facilities and services. Furthermore, a consistent educational message regarding recycling is currently limited.

This feasibility study fills gaps in information about residential recycling services and facilities in Muskegon County. It builds upon a 2017 recycling study by the County of Muskegon, which noted the residential recycling rate at approximately 12%. The need to enhance recycling efforts and optimize waste management practices is especially important for two reasons. One, to help ensure adequate landfill capacity in the county, as the Muskegon County landfill, nearing its maximum capacity, is slated for expansion sometime in 2023. Once operational, the expansion is projected to provide enough capacity to last approximately 20 years, according to Muskegon County Public Works, but keeping recyclable materials out of the landfill will preserve space for nonrecyclable materials. And second, the changes in state solid waste management law, Pt. 115, requiring counties to meet state standards for recycling, necessitate a comprehensive feasibility study, so this work is timely.

## METHODOLOGY

The recycling feasibility study employed partner and stakeholder outreach and interviews and discussions, and collection and analysis of local recycling infrastructure information, in addition to the gathering of information on state programs and funding and successful recycling programs in Michigan counties.

## KEY FINDINGS

The following list highlights the pivotal outcomes derived from our comprehensive recycling feasibility study. These findings underscore the viability and potential impact of implementing recycling initiatives within our community, shedding light on the practical steps that can drive sustainable waste management practices and foster environmental stewardship.

The following recommendations are proposed:

- 1) Establishing a Leadership Team of local elected officials and representatives of community organizations and businesses to guide and support a vision for improved recycling,
- 2) Establishing strategic partnerships between municipalities to facilitate collaborative initiatives,
- 3) Implementing targeted public awareness campaigns to encourage recycling participation,
- 4) Exploring a plan for countywide coverage that includes a central collection facility and drop off centers (hub and spoke),

- 5) Requiring trash and recycling hauler licensing,
- 6) Exploring funding opportunities through grants and public-private partnerships to support initial setup costs,
- 7) and encouraging and supporting the development of economic opportunities for recyclable materials.

## CONCLUSIONS

The feasibility study indicates that implementing a countywide recycling program in Muskegon County is both viable and beneficial. There has been significant participation of municipal officials, community organizations, businesses, and educators in this study and there is robust local political willingness to expand existing recycling programs and initiate and support new services and facilities. Finally, this study is timely, as there is broad-based acknowledgement of the inadequacies of the present state of recycling in Muskegon County, as well as the need for substantial improvements and the benefits of working collaboratively.

By embracing the suggested approaches, Muskegon County can enhance its environmental sustainability, promote resource conservation, and strengthen its position as a leader in waste management. This feasibility study is also essential as a vision and comprehensive foundation for initiating the necessary work to implement the requirements of Pt. 115.