

Grand River Greenway
SECCHIA GRAND CONNECTION
Entering Kent County

2024 YEAR IN REVIEW

BY THE KENT COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS



A MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD CHAIR & COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Dear Community Members,

As we reflect on the past year, we are filled with gratitude and pride for our county's progress. 2024 has been a remarkable year of growth, resilience, and collaboration. Together, we have navigated challenges, celebrated milestones, and laid the groundwork for an even brighter future.

This year presented unique trials, including the complexities of an election period that, at times, tested our unity. Yet, through it all, we remained steadfast in our commitment to serving the community. By focusing on what truly matters—propelling and advancing the well-being of our residents—we found common ground and moved forward with purpose.

Our accomplishments would not have been possible without the dedication and expertise of our county

Sincerely,



Stan Stek

Chair, Kent County Board
of Commissioners



Al Vanderberg

Administrator/Controller,
Kent County

staff. Their hard work in researching, planning, and implementing key initiatives has driven our success, and we extend our deepest gratitude for that. They have been instrumental in turning vision into reality, and their efforts have made a difference in the lives of those we serve.

As we look ahead to 2025, we are excited about the opportunities. We are committed to continuing this momentum, building on the past year's successes, and striving for excellence in all we do. We encourage you to review this report and take pride in the incredible achievements of 2024.

Thank you for your support and dedication. Together, we will continue to make a positive impact and create a thriving community for all.



Special Note from the Board Chair

Serving as Chair of the Board of Commissioners over the past three years has been one of the greatest honors of my career. The opportunity to work alongside my fellow commissioners, the County Administrator, and staff to collaborate on thoughtful decisions that propel our county forward has been deeply fulfilling. I am immensely proud of what we have accomplished together.

From tackling complex challenges to celebrating our successes, each moment has been a testament to the strength of our teamwork and shared vision. I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my fellow Commissioners for their trust in me and the camaraderie and friendships we have built.

As we look to the future, I am confident Kent County will continue to set the standard as a model of excellence. Together, we will achieve even greater heights and further enhance the quality of life for all our residents.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as Board Chair. I look forward to seeing all that we will accomplish together in the future.

Warm regards,

Stan Stek

37 Work Sessions & Informational Meetings	12 Executive Committee Meetings	15 Legislative & Human Resources Committee Meetings	19 Finance & Physical Resources Meetings	22 Board of Commissioners Meetings
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FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY DRIVES INVESTMENTS IN SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS

The Board **approved a balanced Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 budget**, underscoring its commitment to fiscal responsibility and strategic investments that improve service delivery.

Public safety remained a central focus, with \$1.7 million allocated to complete **the hiring of 20 additional corrections officers** and another \$0.9 million to support **14 new patrol officers**. The remainder of the funding was sourced through contractual agreements with local government units.

The County's dedication to **maintaining its Triple-A credit** rating played a vital role in these efforts. This top-tier rating, sometimes the subject of good-natured jabs from community partners, keeps borrowing costs low, enabling the County to allocate more funds toward facilities and service improvements.

This fiscal prudence is crucial as the **County moves forward with its facilities plan**. The Board approved constructing a new administration building on the Fuller Avenue campus, financed through bonds.

The building will provide easier access for residents with free parking, less congestion, and proximity to a Rapid bus line while consolidating public-facing County services in one convenient location.

The County will also maintain a strong downtown presence, with court-related services relocating to the current administration building at 300 Monroe. Additionally, 82 Ionia will be sold and returned to the tax rolls. Plans are underway to develop a new Medical Examiner's Office to enhance the quality of the space and improve operational efficiency.



First Kent County Day at the Capitol

In March, several Commissioners and County staff visited the Capitol for the first Kent County Day at the Capitol. They met with Speaker of the House Joe Tate, Senate Majority Leader Winnie Brinks, the Kent County Legislative Delegation, and Michigan Association of Counties leaders.

The visit included productive discussions about the Board's legislative priorities and opportunities to collaborate on initiatives that benefit our residents. This event highlighted the County's commitment to working with state leaders to address key issues and enhance community services.



Lodging Tax Funds Transformational Community Projects

The Board approved significant amendments to the Lodging Excise Tax Ordinance, setting the stage for future investments in community projects that will benefit residents, businesses and visitors alike.

One of the key updates is an **increase in the lodging excise tax** from 5% to 8%, effective January 1, 2025. This tax, which applies to hotels and motels for stays under 30 days, has been set at 5% since 1989. The increase is expected to generate an additional \$8 million annually to support transformational projects. These changes follow the passage of House Bill 5048, which granted Kent County the authority to increase the tax and expand the list of eligible projects. Voters approved this measure in the August 2024 primary election.

As part of these initiatives, the Board **approved two agreements** with the City of Grand Rapids to use lodging tax funds to cover principal and interest payments on a \$27.5 million bond **for the Acrisure Amphitheater** and a \$100 million bond for the **Amway Soccer Stadium**. The agreements were finalized regarding operations of these venues in partnership with the Grand Rapids-Kent County Convention Arena Authority.



THE BOARD RESTRUCTURES GOVERNANCE AND EXPANDS STRATEGIC PLANNING

The Board approved a **significant restructuring of its standing committees** to strengthen oversight and governance. This marks the Board's first major restructuring in two decades and reflects its commitment to better addressing the community's diverse needs and ensuring all areas of county operations receive proper attention.

Previously organized under a two-committee structure, the Board is **transitioning to a new three-committee model**.

The updated structure includes:

- **Finance Committee:** This committee oversees the county's financial policies, budgets, and resource allocation, ensuring fiscal responsibility and transparency in managing public funds.
- **Operations and Policy Committee:** This committee is critical to maintaining seamless county services. It is dedicated to evaluating operational efficiencies, developing legislative priorities, and approving policies that guide the county's day-to-day functions.
- **Community, Health, and Safety Committee:** This committee addresses resident well-being and oversees public health, community services, and safety initiatives to ensure the county remains a vibrant and safe place to live.

In tandem with these changes, the Board **approved a strategic plan** in December. This plan outlines key priorities to advance the community, including economic development, public safety enhancements, and addressing environmental health issues. To ensure transparency and accountability, the County is **developing a public dashboard** that will provide residents with **real-time updates on the progress of these initiatives**.



Tackling Complex Issues With Community Convening

Addressing key challenges through collaboration has been a cornerstone of our success this year:

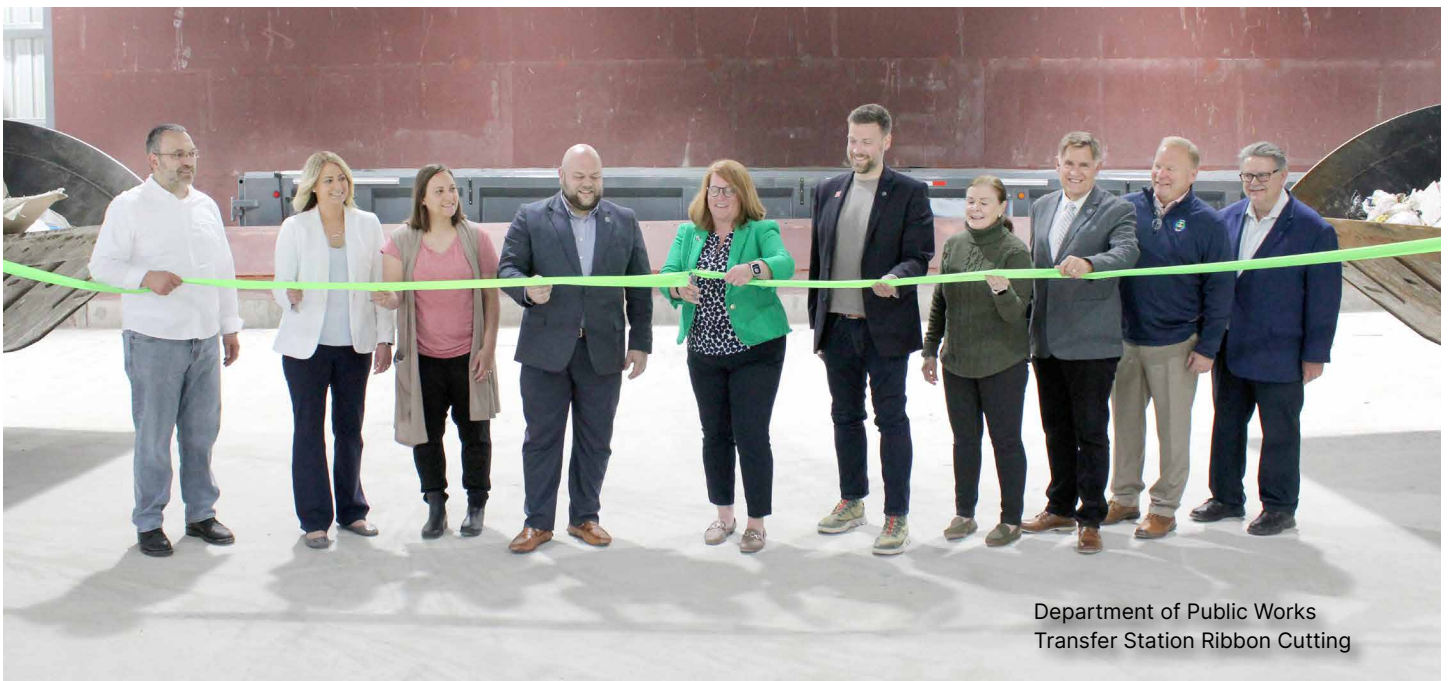
- In June, the **Kent County Mobility Task Force** began its work, bringing stakeholders together to evaluate and recommend solutions for the county's mobility needs.
- In September, the Kent County **Childcare Task Force** convened to assess childcare needs and develop strategies to address service gaps. The initiative builds on the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage, which was approved by the Board and passed by voters in August. It supports programs improving the health and school readiness of Kent County children ages five and younger.
- Kent County partnered with the Kent County Road Commission, local units of government, and Grand Valley State University to conduct **county-wide deer population research** and develop recommendations for **reducing deer related vehicle collisions and community concerns**.

Board Took Another Step Toward Sustainable Waste Management

The Board **approved a countywide flow control ordinance** and **revamped the Board of Public Works governance structure**. This strategy aims to divert organic and recyclable materials from landfills and eliminate the need for a new landfill. It also aligns with Michigan's updated recycling standards while advancing planning and infrastructure development for future tenants at the Sustainable Business Park.

While Commissioners discussed potential impacts on costs and market dynamics, the ordinance reflects a commitment to addressing solid waste challenges.

Over the next year, the Department of Public Works will implement the ordinance in a phased approach and develop a comprehensive waste management plan to meet statewide recycling goals.



Department of Public Works
Transfer Station Ribbon Cutting

NEW 10-YEAR MASTER PLAN FOR JOHN BALL ZOO ACCEPTED

In early December, the Board **approved a 10-year master plan** for the **John Ball Zoo**, paving the way for exciting updates and developments. The plan features an expanded Africa section with giraffes, a revived sea lion habitat, and a South American forest exhibit showcasing capybaras, jaguars, free-flying birds, and a 30-foot waterfall. A new 400-person event center is also planned to host weddings, conferences, and other events. The plan also emphasizes environmental stewardship by preserving green space and large trees whenever possible, addressing some concerns raised by neighboring residents.

The master plan thoughtfully balances community needs and the zoo's mission, demonstrating a commitment to meaningful improvements that will benefit residents and visitors alike.



PARKS AND TRAILS MASTER PLAN FOCUSES ON CONNECTIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

In March, the **Board approved the Kent County Parks, Trails, and Natural Areas Master Plan**, setting ambitious goals for the next five years. Based on extensive public input, the plan emphasizes developing high-quality parks and creating safe, accessible trails like the Grand River Greenway.

The **Board allocated \$10 million** to complete a **23-mile segment of the Greenway Trail** through Plainfield, Cascade, Cannon, Ada, and Lowell townships. This **key section of a 76-mile trail will connect to Ottawa County's Greenway system and extend to Lake Michigan.**

Construction begins in 2025, with the first half of the trail expected to be completed by 2026. Highlights include nine miles of new trail, a tunnel under Northland Drive, a pedestrian bridge over the Grand River on Knapp Street, and a signature bridge linking Roselle Park to Chief Hazy Cloud Park.

New Office of the Public Defender Established

We established a new Office of the Public Defender to enhance the criminal defense system for indigent adults facing criminal charges.

Since 2013, Michigan's Indigent Defense Commission (MIDC) has overseen defense services for indigent adults, delegating implementation responsibilities to court funding units like counties that receive most operating funds from the state. The County contracted with external organizations and private attorneys for six years to provide representation. However, a 2024 National Association for Public Defense report recommended creating an internal county Office of the Public Defender to improve services. Following this recommendation, the Board approved the County Administrator's new department proposal.

The first step in forming the office was hiring Julia Kelly as Public Defender and Department Director. Kelly oversees the office's efforts to provide high-quality legal representation to indigent adults, manages a team of administrative and legal staff, and coordinates a roster of private defense counsel.

The office officially began operations this month, taking over responsibilities previously managed by external entities. This marks a significant step in ensuring equitable access to justice for all residents.



Changes in the Judicial Structure

In 2024 and heading into 2025, Kent County will see significant changes to its judicial system:

- **New 63rd District Court Judge:** Due to population growth, Kent County successfully advocated for a new district judge position in state law. The Board approved this effort, and voters elected Daniel O'Hara as the new judge this November; he will begin serving on January 1, 2025.
- **Honoring Judge Sara Smolinski:** Judge Smolinski retired in July after 34 years of distinguished service, bringing professionalism and humor to the courtroom while serving the residents of Kent County.
- **Welcoming Judge Kirsten Holz:** In October, Kent County celebrated Kirsten Holz's investiture as the newest judge in the 63rd District Court, replacing Judge Sara Smolenski.
- **Celebrating Judge Mark A. Trusock:** At the end of December, Judge Trusock will retire after a successful 40-year career in the court system, including 18 years on the bench and 22 years in private practice.



Board Approves Opioid Settlement Spending Plan

In July, the Board **approved a plan to spend the first two years of the opioid settlement funds** allocated to Kent County. This plan outlines strategies to combat the opioid crisis and creates a framework for future investments.

The funds are part of a national lawsuit against opioid manufacturers, distributors, and retailers. Kent County is expected to receive \$19 million in payments through 2038. These funds will support initiatives to reduce overdose rates and address the crisis's long-term impact.

The Kent County Opioid Task Force, composed of leaders from health, law enforcement, harm reduction, treatment, and prevention sectors, will work with the Health Department to implement these initiatives. The Task Force will monitor progress and recommend future funding to ensure effective crisis response.

Key funding allocations in the two-year plan include:

- **Recovery Coach Services:** \$200,000 annually to assist individuals at high risk of overdose.
- **Jail-Based Treatment Programs:** \$400,000 annually to expand treatment for incarcerated individuals and reduce post-release overdoses.
- **Naloxone Distribution:** \$30,000 annually to increase access to overdose reversal tools.
- **Harm Reduction Tools:** \$10,000 annually for resources like fentanyl test strips.
- **Prevention Curricula:** \$125,000 in year two to expand programs for middle and high school students.



Kent County Health Department Staff,
Opioid Task Force and Commissioners

TRANSFORMATIONAL IMPACT OF ARPA FUNDING THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) continues to drive transformational change across Kent County, funding critical projects that address pressing community needs and enhance residents' quality of life. From behavioral health initiatives to affordable housing solutions, ARPA allocations have enabled the County to invest in programs that make a tangible difference.

One of the most impactful ARPA-funded projects this year was **opening the Network 180/Trinity Health Grand Rapids Behavioral Health Crisis Center** on Trinity's downtown Grand Rapids campus. This first-of-its-kind facility in Michigan provides 24/7 walk-in and drop-off services for individuals experiencing behavioral health or substance use crises, revolutionizing mental health response in Kent County.

In July, the County launched its 10th specialty court—a **Domestic Violence Specialty Court**—funded with \$4 million in ARPA allocations. This court addresses the root causes of violent behavior, minimizes harm to families and children, and fosters long-term, sustainable change in addressing domestic violence cases.

The **Sheriff's Office** also utilized \$2.8 million in ARPA funds to **establish Michigan's first county-wide school safety radio network**. This system enhances communication between schools, law enforcement, and emergency dispatch during crises, significantly improving response capabilities and security in educational settings.

Other ARPA-supported initiatives include **expanding the West Michigan Construction Institute**, which received \$1 million to add trade programs and increase workforce credentialing capacity. Additionally, a **new**

12,000-square-foot CSNIP Veterinary Clinic in Walker, set to open in 2025, will merge three existing facilities and provide expanded, reduced-cost veterinary services for financially challenged pet owners.

In addition to these efforts, Kent County has made significant strides in **addressing the affordable housing shortage** through its ARPA-funded Kent County Affordable Housing Loan Fund. With an initial investment of \$17.5 million, the County partnered with IFF to leverage the fund into a \$58.3 million resource, enabling transformational housing projects.

This year, Commissioners celebrated milestones such as groundbreakings for significant minority-owned housing development in Grand Rapids' 3rd Ward, projects addressing senior housing needs, and initiatives supporting home purchases for low-income earners and the "missing middle." Other developments included multi-family and mixed-use projects to enhance neighborhood infrastructure and accessibility.

The **revolving loan fund has deployed nearly \$16 million** toward housing projects to date, demonstrating the power of collaboration and our commitment to tackling affordable housing challenges.

Building on these efforts, the Board voted to establish a countywide Brownfield Redevelopment Authority, further enhancing the County's ability to tackle housing shortages. A recent amendment to the state Brownfield Redevelopment Financing Act now includes "housing development activities" as eligible for tax increment financing incentives. This provides local governments with streamlined access to incentives, supporting innovative housing and redevelopment projects.

ARPA PROJECTS

Project	Allocation
1. 2022 Food Establishment Licensing Fee Waiver	\$1,300,000
2. ARPA Consultant Support (Guidehouse)	\$397,000
3. Behavioral Health Crisis Center (Network 180)	\$3,923,356
4. Boston Square Community Hub (Amplify GR)	\$4,000,000
5. Broadband Initiative Consultant Support (Guidehouse & Merit)	\$375,000
6. CDFI funds for Kent County's African American Community (Urban League of West Michigan)	\$4,000,000
7. Community, Economic and Workforce Development in Kent County's Hispanic community (The Hispanic Center of Western Michigan)	\$2,000,000
8. COVID-19 Overtime Expenses (Kent County Sheriff's Office)	\$737,000
9. Education Container Classrooms & Otter Habitat (John Ball Zoo)	\$6,000,000
10. Fallasburg Dam Renovation	\$4,000,000
11. Four Star Theatre Renovation	\$500,000
12. Fuel the Movement: Innovative Workforce Development for Economic Mobility (The Center for Community Transformation)	\$1,000,000
13. Fuller Campus Clinic Modification	\$3,900,000
14. Grand Rapids Public Museum West Entry and Gathering Space	\$1,000,000
15. Health Department COVID Response (Outreach, Vaccines, & Testing)	\$234,129
16. Heroes for Life: Sickle Cell Disease Blood Donors Initiative (Grand Rapids African American Health Institute)	\$1,000,000



Project	Allocation
17. Internal Administrative Management of ARPA Funds	\$237,302
18. Isolation shelter for COVID positive people who are unhoused (Mel Trotter Ministries)	\$254,703
19. Kent County Convention and Arena Authority Revenue Loss	\$511,934
20. Kent County Domestic Violence Action Network (Domestic Violence Community Coordinated Response Team)	\$4,000,000
21. Kent County Equitable Housing Initiative (Housing Next)	\$500,000
22. Kent County Inclusion Strategic Plan	\$55,000
23. Kent County Parks/Greenway	\$15,000,000
24. Kent County Revolving Housing Fund (IFF)	\$17,500,000
25. Knapp Corner Drain Project	\$2,000,000
26. Krause Memorial Library Expansion (City of Rockford)	\$2,000,000
27. Lead Remediation - Paint, Pipe and Training (Kent County Health Department)	\$3,800,000
28. Live. Work. Thrive. (AYA Youth Collective)	\$2,000,000
29. Lowell & Walker Senior Centers (Senior Neighbors)	\$220,808
30. Medical Examiner Facility	\$10,519,075
31. Meijer Sports Complex (The West Michigan Sports Commission)	\$1,000,000
32. Nourish Tomorrow Advancement Campaign (Feeding America West Michigan)	\$2,000,000
33. Organizational Improvement and Kent County Employee Wellbeing & Development	\$1,000,000
34. PFAS Remediation: Water Main Extension in Cascade Township	\$3,000,000
35. Preventative Animal Control by Increasing Pet Owner Access to Veterinary Care (C-SNIP)	\$1,000,000
36. School Safety Radio Network (Kent County Sheriff's Office)	\$2,837,500
37. SMB & Workforce development, support, and training (Wyoming Kentwood Chamber of Commerce)	\$138,000
38. The Grand Agricultural Center of West Michigan, Raising Barns, Building Youth Campaign (Kent County Youth Agricultural Association)	\$6,000,000
39. The Junior Achievement Free Enterprise Center: "Building Futures...Inspiring Dreams"	\$1,000,000
40. Transforming Kent County's Road Network (Kent County Road Commission)	\$8,500,000
41. United Methodist Community House 900	\$1,000,000
42. West Michigan Construction Institute Phase II Expansion	\$1,000,000
43. Winter emergency shelter to accommodate social distancing (Mel Trotter Ministries)	\$165,000
44. Wyoming City Center Bridge and Trail Activation	\$6,000,000

Looking Into 2025

As we enter 2025, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to our outgoing County Commissioners for their dedicated service: **Tom Antor** (District 2), **Tony Baker** (District 17), **Emily P. Brieve** (District 10), **Ivan Diaz** (District 20), and **Stephen Wooden** (District 18). Their leadership and commitment have significantly contributed to advancing our goals, improving services, and fostering collaboration across the community. We sincerely appreciate their hard work and their lasting impact on our County.

We will also warmly welcome new members to the Board: **Elizabeth (Liz) Morse** (District 2), **Robin Halstead** (District 10), **Robert S. Womack** (District 17), **Steve Faber** (District 18), and **Nancy L. Morales** (District 20). Their fresh perspectives and dedication will help shape our collective future.

New Board leadership will be selected at the organizational meeting on January 3, 2025, setting the stage for a productive year ahead.

Key Priorities:

- **Kent County 2050 Plan:** This plan continues and will be implemented in the long-range regional vision initiated in September 2023, reflecting the community's collective aspirations for Kent County's future.
- **Museum/Zoo Millage:** Preparing for the renewal process, as the millage expires at the end of 2026. The Commission will likely vote on a suggested millage structure at the end of 2025.
- **Facilities Plan:** Finalize and advance the county's facilities plan to improve service delivery and operational efficiency.
- **Task Force Recommendations:** Review the recommendations from the Mobility and Childcare Task Forces to address key service gaps and meet community needs.

As new challenges emerge, we remain confident in our ability to address them with a steadfast focus on collaboration, community, and progress. These priorities represent only a portion of our work, and we look forward to a year of innovation and growth for Kent County.





