CITY COUNCIL WORKSHOP MEETING MINUTES
March 4, 2026

The City Council met for a Workshop Meeting at 4:00 p.m.
City Hall
102 Butler St., Saugatuck, MI 49453.

Call to Order:
The meeting was called to order by Mayor Anderson at 4:00 p.m.

Attendance:
Present: Mayor Anderson, Mayor Pro Tem Clark and Councilmembers Dean, Gardner, Muncey, Stanton and Peterson.
Absent: None.
Others Present: City Manager Cummins, Attorney Cunningham, Engineer Moxey, Treasurer Bredeweg, DPW Admin/Project Coordinator Gibson and Clerk Wolters.

Agenda Changes: None.

Public Comment on Agenda Items Only: None.

Approval of Minutes:
Regular City Council Meeting Minutes – February 23, 2026:

Motion by Peterson, second by Dean to approve the minutes of the regular city council meeting from February 23, 2026, as presented. Via roll call vote, motion carried unanimously.

Discussion Items:
Mt. Baldhead Vegetation Restoration Proposal:

DPW Administrative Assistant/Project Coordinator Michelle Gibson presented a proposal regarding vegetation restoration at Mt. Baldhead. She explained that during the City's Strategic planning session, restoration of vegetation at Mt. Baldhead was identified as a priority due to damage caused by a previous herbicide application. The goal of the project is to restore vegetation, address erosion and runoff issues, and protect the dune ecosystem. Gibson noted that a scope of work was developed by the Parks and Public Works (PPW) Committee using information from a report prepared by the Land Conservancy of West Michigan. Several vendors were contacted to submit proposals. Proposals were received from the Outdoor Discovery Center (ODC) and the Kalamazoo Nature Center. Gibson reported that staff recommends selecting the Outdoor Discovery Center as the preferred vendor.

The proposed scope of work includes invasive species management, deer protection through temporary fencing and tree tubes, revegetation of exposed dune areas, informational signage, and supplemental native seeding. The proposal also includes the installation of four temporary fenced restoration areas, each measuring approximately 30 feet by 30 feet, located on the north side of the Mt. Baldhead stairs where herbicide damage and runoff are most visible. The total cost of the ODC proposal is $21,860. By comparison, the Nature Center proposal totaled $33,650 and did not include fencing or signage.

Council discussion included the content and branding of the proposed informational signage. Council generally agreed that the signage should communicate that restoration is in progress and that the area is a sensitive dune habitat that should be avoided by visitors. Coordination with DPW Superintendent Herbert was suggested to ensure the signage design and messaging are consistent with existing Dunes Natural Area signage.

The proposed restoration area is located on the north side of the Mt. Baldhead steps where vegetation loss and runoff have occurred. Gibson explained that the fencing would be temporary and removed once vegetation is successfully established.

Councilmember Gardner asked whether there had been any discussion regarding potential liability or recovering costs from the company responsible for the herbicide application. City Manager Ryan Cummins stated that there are currently no discussions or efforts underway to pursue cost recovery and that, given the amount of time that has passed, it would likely be difficult to recover funds. Councilmember Peterson recalled that at the time the damage occurred, Council chose not to pursue legal action.

<u>Village Square Courts – Selection of a Concept and Approval of Donation Agreement:</u>

Council discussed proposed improvements to the Village Square courts area following the City's receipt of a $150,000 Michigan DNR Passport Grant and a $100,000 private donation designated for upgrades to the basketball, tennis, and pickleball courts and surrounding park features. Engineers developed several design concepts, which were reviewed by the Parks and Public Works (PPW) Committee. PPW recommended Concept 6. Parks and Public Works Committee member Councilmember Stanton presented the committee's recommendation, which included two dedicated pickleball courts, removal of tennis from the park, checkerboard game tables to provide both gaming opportunities and casual picnic seating, additional benches, preservation of mature trees with the addition of new shade trees where possible, a pickleball paddle rack to help manage player rotation, and continued maintenance and enhancement of the rain garden. Stanton explained the rationale for the recommendation, noting that the school district may rehabilitate four tennis courts at the high school, allowing Village Square to focus on pickleball.

Several council members expressed support for maintaining tennis as part of the park through a multi-use court configuration similar to Concept 1 or a variation of it. They suggested maintaining one court lined for both sports with an adjustable net and adding a shuffleboard court. Some members also supported the possible addition of chess or checker tables if budget and space allow, as a compromise with the PPW committee's proposal. Concerns were raised about removing tennis entirely from Village Square, with some noting that while shared striping can occasionally be confusing, many facilities successfully use multi-use courts. Others expressed concern that eliminating tennis from the park would reduce convenient in-town access.

Noise associated with pickleball was also discussed. Possible mitigation strategies discussed included quieter paddles, sound-reducing court surfaces, fencing with sound panels, and potential hours-of-play signage if needed.

Several concepts were discussed during the meeting. Following discussion, general consensus among council members leaned toward Concept 1, which would maintain a shared tennis and pickleball court and include a shuffleboard court while preserving more green space and existing trees. Members acknowledged the thoughtful work completed by the PPW Committee even though the committee's preferred concept did not ultimately gain consensus. Council emphasized the importance of moving the project forward in order to utilize the DNR grant and private donation. Staff will prepare a motion for the next regular Council meeting to formally consider adoption of Concept 1. The project will also require review and approval by the Historic District Commission.

Public Speech Policy and Palette Sign Display Policy:

City Manager Ryan Cummins introduced two related policies for Council consideration: a Public Speech Policy and a Palette Sign Display Policy. Cummins explained that the Public Speech Policy is intended to formally classify City spaces, including digital spaces, into traditional public forums, designated public forums, non-public forums, and government speech spaces. The accompanying Palette Sign Display Policy would designate the City's palette sign as a government speech space and establish clearer procedures for displaying event banners.

City Attorney provided an overview of the legal framework, explaining that classifying the palette sign as government speech places it under a different First Amendment standard than private speech. Courts recognize that government entities must be able to control their own speech—such as content appearing on city websites, official signs, or flags—in order to function effectively. Formalizing this classification through policy aligns with current Supreme Court precedent and helps reduce potential legal risk by preventing a court from later determining that the sign functions as another type of forum with broader private speech rights.

Council also discussed possible operational adjustments, including the amount of time banners remain displayed. Current practice allows banners to be installed up to 15 days prior to an event. Some members suggested reducing this period to approximately seven days in order to reduce scheduling conflicts.

Overall, Council expressed general support for formalizing the City's public speech classifications and designating the palette sign as a government speech space, while acknowledging that the policy may require adjustments over time as practical issues arise. Members recognized that the framework would require Council to make determinations about which banner messages reflect the City's voice, while still allowing events to occur in public spaces through the standard permitting process.

Proposed Housing Bills in Legislature:

City Manager Ryan Cummins provided Council with an overview of several recently introduced housing bills in the Michigan Legislature intended to address housing affordability. Cummins explained that the proposed legislation would standardize or mandate certain zoning provisions statewide, including requirements related to accessory dwelling units (ADUs), minimum setbacks, minimum lot sizes, and minimum dwelling unit sizes. He noted that the primary concern with the bills is that they would preempt local zoning authority by imposing state-level requirements, limiting the ability of communities such as Saugatuck to regulate land use and density according to local conditions.

Cummins reported that the Michigan Municipal League (MML) and the Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) are both engaged in discussions regarding the legislation. MML has expressed concerns about the potential loss of local control and is encouraging communities to share feedback with legislators, while MAP has indicated general support for the intent of the legislation but has

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recommended modifications, including clearer language and narrower applicability. Cummins also noted that the City of Saugatuck has already taken proactive steps to address housing issues through existing zoning tools and is currently in the process of updating its master plan and zoning ordinance. Additional concerns raised included the potential impact on local infrastructure capacity, such as water, sewer, and roads, as well as possible conflicts with community character and locally established planning priorities.

Council discussed several options for responding, including taking no action, sending a letter, or adopting a formal resolution. Cummins stated that staff will prepare a draft resolution for Council consideration at the next regular meeting.

Public Comments: None.

Council Comments:
Councilmember Stanton said it was a good discussion on all topics, but especially on the Village Square courts and the Parks & Public Works work there. She acknowledged that the PPW Committee may be disappointed that their preferred concept wasn't chosen, but emphasized that once the new court is built—matching the fresh look of the new playground—people will be pleased.

Councilmember Muncey commented briefly that he thought all of the discussions during the meeting were very good and said he was simply happy to be there and part of the process.

Councilmember Dean reiterated his appreciation for the thorough discussion, particularly around the Village Square courts. He noted that although there were differing opinions and the consensus landed away from the PPW Committee's recommendation, everyone agrees that capturing the DNR grant and donor funds and moving the project forward is what matters. He stressed that, overall, it remains a positive outcome.

Councilmember Gardner agreed it was a good discussion and then raised two forward-looking items. First, he suggested that bathroom upgrades at Village Square be considered in conjunction with the current courts project, because once everything else looks new, the existing bathrooms will stand out if they're not improved. Second, he requested that council return soon, in a workshop, to discuss free Oval Beach passes for residents, noting it's been done before and costs roughly $8,000 per year in foregone revenue, but would be a strong goodwill gesture as taxes rise. He also asked for a future discussion about the city's operating millage and whether a small reduction could help ease residents' tax burden, reflecting concerns he's hearing from the community.

Mayor Pro Tem Clark asked that staff convey to the Parks & Public Works Committee how much the council appreciates their work and recognizes the difficulty of the decision. He described the choice among concepts as a bit of a "beauty contest" but emphasized that there are no winners or losers—the key point is that the city is moving in the right direction with the project.

Councilmember Peterson took a moment to step back and reflect on the overall workload and quality of preparation. She pointed out that, even on a "small" agenda, there is a huge amount of work behind the scenes from staff, attorneys, engineers, and others. She praised how everything comes together smoothly every week and expressed strong appreciation for staff's efforts and the quality of the conversations.

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Mayor Holly Anderson built on Peterson's remarks, thanking PPW, staff, engineers, legal counsel, and city committees for their extensive preparation and strong work on all the items—Mt. Baldhead vegetation, Village Square courts, planning and sign policies, and the housing bills. On ideas about millage and Oval Beach passes, she suggested those conversations likely make the most sense during budget season. She then called for a motion to adjourn, which was moved, seconded, and approved.

Adjournment:

Motion by Muncey, second by Garnder to adjourn the meeting. Upon voice vote, motion carried unanimously. Mayor Anderson adjourned the meeting at 5:04 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted

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Jamie Wolters, City Clerk

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