Community Engagement Focus Area

A thriving community is built on more than infrastructure; it's built on relationships, shared identity, and a sense of belonging. In Isabella County, strengthening community engagement is essential to enhancing quality of life, fostering trust, and helping residents feel connected to one another and to the future of the place they call home.

Stakeholders consistently described gaps in connection across groups, including those between rural and urban residents, the university and the broader community, and among generations. While Isabella County benefits from a strong nonprofit network and community assets like CMU, the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, and vibrant outdoor spaces, many residents still feel a lack of civic pride, limited representation, or few accessible ways to get involved.

Community leaders noted that young adults often feel disconnected and unsure how to plug in. At the same time, long-standing community members expressed concerns about declining volunteerism, mistrust in government, and the need for more inclusive placemaking efforts that celebrate local identity and create shared experiences. One common theme: people are more likely to stay and invest in a place when they feel like they belong.

Promoting community engagement in Isabella County is not only about participation—it's about restoring trust, building traditions, and creating space for residents of all backgrounds to see themselves in the life of the community. As a trusted convener and catalyst for local collaboration, the Mt. Pleasant Area Community Foundation is positioned to support efforts that build connection and foster belonging. Whether through funding, partnership, or amplifying local stories, the Foundation can play a vital role in helping make Isabella County a place where more people feel welcome, valued, and invested.

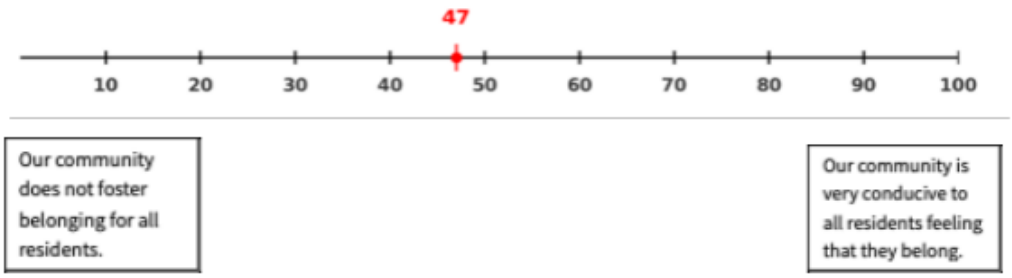
HOW WE GOT HERE

As part of its early strategic planning, the Mt. Pleasant Area Community Foundation gathered both data and community input to better understand needs and opportunities in Isabella County. This included public data, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and a cross-sector survey of local leaders. Insights were organized using a framework adapted from the OECD's Better Life Index, with a focus on four key areas: early care and education, basic needs and economy, health, and community engagement.



AN ISSUE OF BELONGING

Local leaders rated Isabella County's sense of belonging at just 47/100, reflecting concern about community connection gaps.



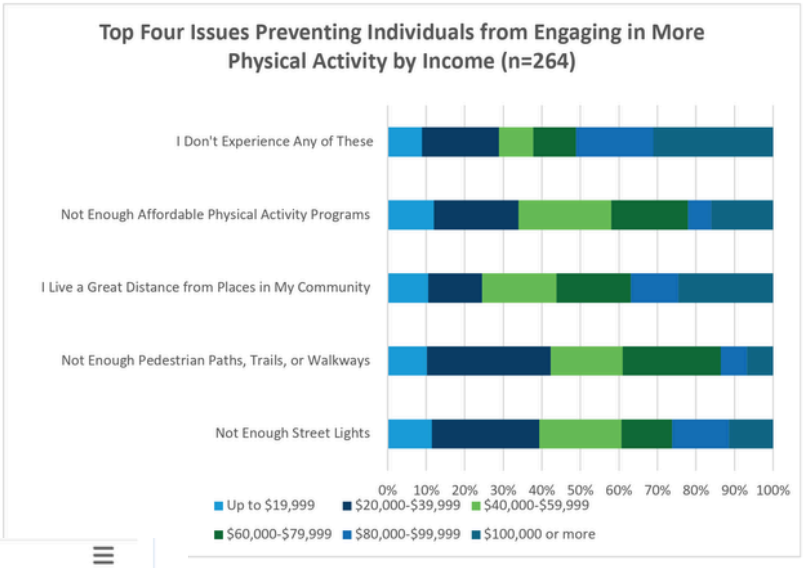
Leaders voiced concern that rural voices, young people, and newer residents are underrepresented in community initiatives. The divide between CMU students and the broader community was frequently cited as a missed opportunity for deeper civic ties.

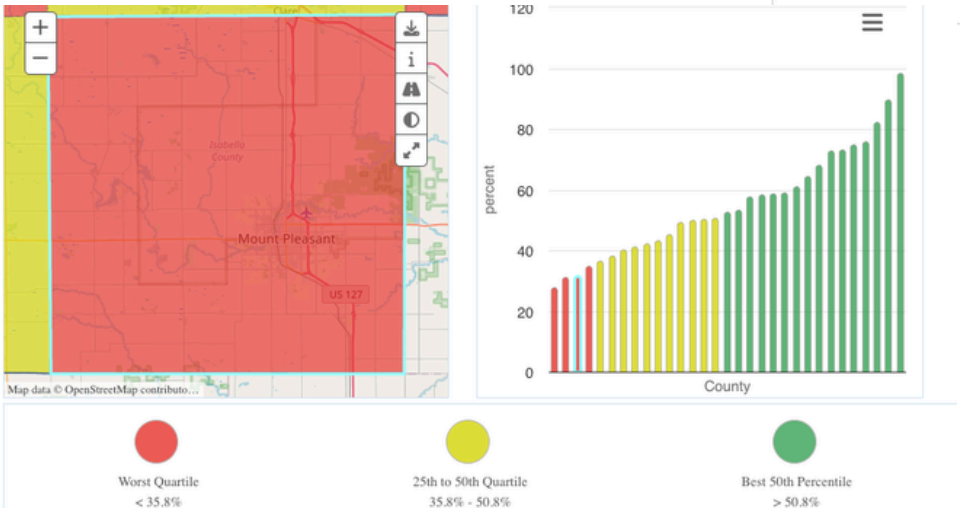
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Mt. Pleasant Area COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

GAPS IN PLACEMAKING AND COMMUNITY RECREATION

McLaren data show that Individuals with a yearly household income of $60,000-$79,999 are more likely to report that a lack of pedestrian paths, trails, or walkways prevents them from being more physically active in their community than to report the other top issues.





According to MiThrive data, while Isabella County is in the top 50% of counties with park access nationally, access in comparison to other Michigan counties is significantly lower with Isabella county ranking in the worst quartile. This indicator shows people living within a half mile of a publicly accessible park, highlighting a lack of rural access to parks in the county.

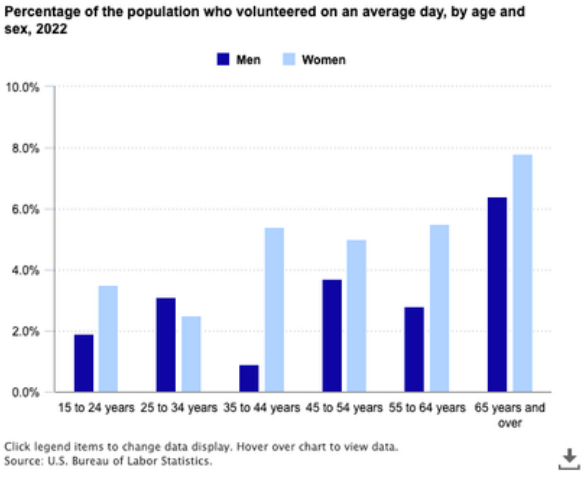
In a survey of cross-sector leaders, respondents ranked "Community Events" and "Beautification/Placemaking" as top investment priorities to improve local engagement

While Mt. Pleasant has strong assets like CMU, the Tribe, a vibrant parks system, and some community events, stakeholders described a lack of coordinated storytelling or community branding. Several noted the need for a clearinghouse or shared calendar, along with better marketing of community events. Others cited the need for a "shared narrative" that gives residents reasons to stay or return.

A LACK OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, COLLABORATION, AND VOLUNTEERISM

74TH PLACE

For the 2024 presidential election, Isabella county ranked **74th of 83** Michigan Counties for voter turnout with 74.1% of registered voters participating versus 89% in the top ranked county.



While the county has a strong nonprofit presence, stakeholders noted that volunteerism is declining, especially among younger residents and newer community members. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics shows similar national age data and noted an overall decrease in volunteerism from 5.8 percent in 2012 to 4.2 percent in 2022.

Mt. Pleasant Area COMMUNITY FOUNDATION