



# Michigan Built Environment Assessment

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
FEBRUARY 2025**

**MICHIGAN HEALTH  
ENDOWMENT FUND**



**HEALTHY  
PLACES  
BY DESIGN**

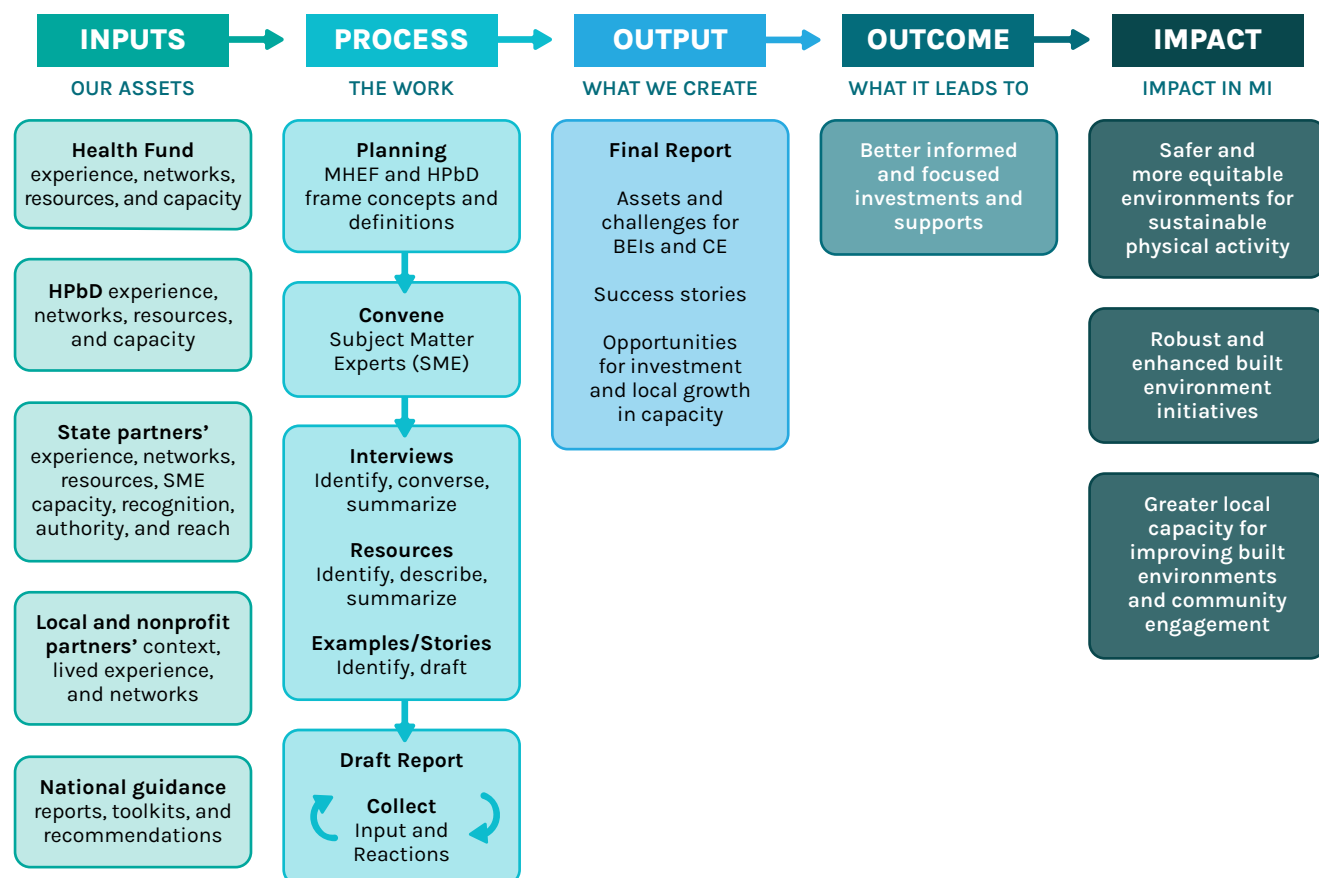
# BACKGROUND

The Michigan Health Endowment Fund (Health Fund)’s investments in the health of Michiganders have evolved in recent years to leverage the rich environments and community assets present across the state to increase walking, bicycling, and other forms of physical activity in shared community settings. As part of this, the Health Fund collaborated with Healthy Places by Design (HPbD) in a formal assessment process to identify assets and challenges in Michigan related to built environment initiatives (BEIs), as well as practices to support successful community engagement (CE). This summary highlights themes from this work, which was informed by 19 key informants from Michigan and 12 secondary source reviews.

**Access the full assessment report at:**

<https://mihealthfund.org/news/publications>

## BUILT ENVIRONMENT ASSESSMENT PROCESS



## Initiative Assets

### FUNDING AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

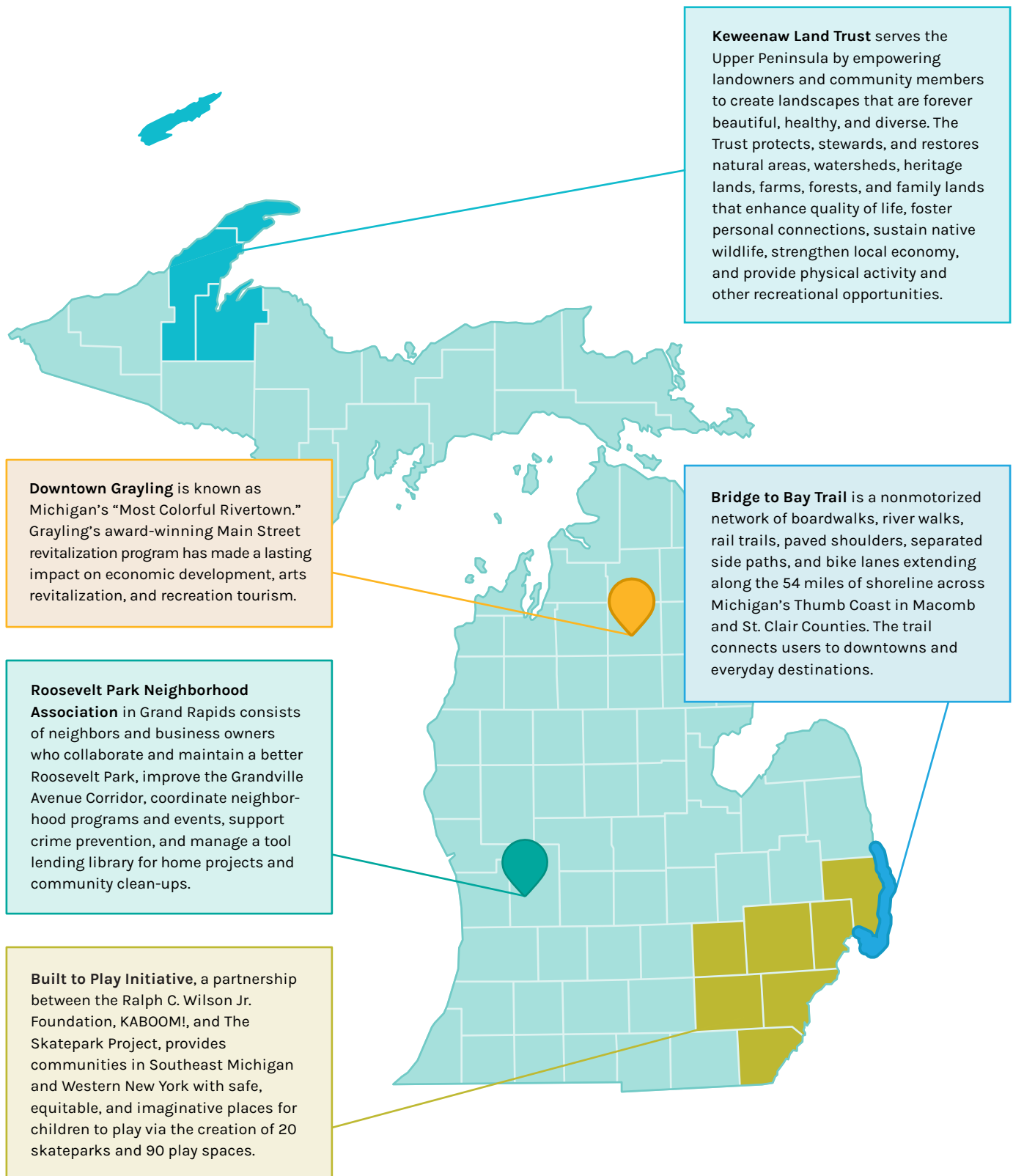
Built environment initiatives (BEIs) are supported throughout Michigan at every level of government.

- **State agencies** influence community environments through policy and long-range plans, training, technical support, grant programs, and other funding mechanisms. These include the Departments of Transportation, Natural Resources, Health and Human Services, Labor and Economic Opportunity, and the Economic Development Commission.
- **Regional Planning Commissions** and **Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs)** determine, prioritize, plan, and fund environments related to active transportation.
- **Local governments** envision, approve, finance, construct, and maintain safe streets, pathways, parks, and other spaces for physical activity.
- **Nonprofits**, such as the Michigan Fitness Foundation, Heart of the Lakes, and Michigan Recreation & Parks Association (mParks), provide local communities with training, technical support, network building, and leveraged resources.
- **Philanthropies** help fill critical gaps in state and local funding, covering expenses for planning, community engagement, and other processes. The Health Fund and Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation are significant funders in this area.

**"We live and vacation in our parks. Great states have great parks."**

State Interviewee

# COMMUNITY EXAMPLES



## Initiative Challenges

Some state funding and match requirements create steep barriers to financing physical activity infrastructure and pose additional compliance burdens for local agencies. Ongoing costs related to sustainability and maintenance of BEIs cause added worries for local government agencies.

Michiganders may find it difficult to access parks and recreation facilities using public transportation, especially away from city centers. It is important to connect transit and street networks to better accommodate the “first and last mile” beyond a transit stop, and ensure that existing sidewalks, parks, and other infrastructure feels safe for community members to use.

While rural communities in Michigan are abundant with beautiful natural areas, they have less built infrastructure in place and may lack the capacity and political will to generate community support, secure funding, and implement BEIs. Government leaders are often challenged to satisfy standard match requirements for funding opportunities. Rural communities in Northern Michigan and in the Upper Peninsula commonly feel isolated from more urbanized regions of Lower Michigan and are challenged to create similar robust BEIs.

**“Most rural local governments have limited capacity to plan proactively for projects that grant funding could support, and to apply for or administer grants. Grant applications are completed in administrators’ ‘spare time’ and compete with more urgent priorities.”**

Michigan’s Roadmap  
to Rural Prosperity



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## Assets

Regional Planning Commissions and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) routinely conduct public hearings for community engagement. Local partners may complement this engagement through community events to reach people who are not able or inclined to attend planning meetings. Organizers gather input on future projects and conduct surveys at outdoor movie nights, county fairs, festivals, holiday events, block parties, and other well attended events. Some conduct surveys, learning exercises, and walk audits in schools to get youth input on planning initiatives. *Who* conducts engagement steps is important to ensure that opportunities to participate are meaningful to community members, and to build trust and assurance that BEIs will address their needs. Established community-based organizations can play an important intermediary role.

**“Meet people where they are at so they can contribute. Can we provide childcare and maybe food, and do those things that really show value in other people's time coming to participate in the planning process?”**

State Interviewee

## Challenges

Although actions to prioritize community engagement in state and federal funding processes are improving, many local governments do not routinely conduct meaningful community engagement activities due to limited capacity and resources. Requirements should be complemented with guidance to local planners and government leaders about how to engage community members who are most impacted by health inequities.

**“Really effective community engagement is done, at the very least, in strong partnership with groups that are rooted in place. They include community development corporations, block clubs, and neighborhood development organizations.”**

Local Interviewee

Marginalization remains present in communities and residents may be unlikely to trust government entities and affiliates leading outreach and neighborhood planning processes. Placing greater emphasis and expectations around community engagement may help repair breaches in trust between government and community members.

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## Community Engagement in Built Environment Initiatives

LOW

E N G A G E M E N T

### TRADITIONAL METHODS

Public hearings, public comments accepted at government buildings (e.g., city hall, MPOs, council meetings)

### CITIZEN BOARDS

Input from advisory boards (e.g., parks, planning, transportation, etc.)

### SURVEYS

Conducted during planning processes

### TABLE DISPLAYS

At community events such as festivals, street closures, and block parties

### PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENTS

Projects like walking audits and Photovoice that include youth and adults

### TRUSTED INTERMEDIARIES

Working with partners such as community organizations

### PARTICIPATORY ACTIVATION

Events in the built environment like Better Block, resident-informed redesign of public spaces, and pop-up projects

HIGH

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendations for Built Environment Initiative Funders

- 1 Explore ways for small rural communities (i.e., Northern Michigan, Upper Peninsula) to better compete with larger cities for limited funding.
- 2 Incentivize meaningful community engagement as part of BEIs.
- 3 Be flexible and be willing to pay for expenses that other funders cannot.
- 4 Reduce the burden of reporting and applying for financial support.
- 5 Exercise patience with grantees and allow for longer grant periods.
- 6 Fund intermediaries and fiduciaries to assist smaller groups and community-based organizations with grant management.
- 7 Consider different terminology for the built environment.
- 8 Collaborate with external funders to fund BEIs, leverage projects, and scale greater impact across communities.
- 9 Fund communities' ability to establish official local plans that incorporate community voices and priorities.
- 10 Keep public health agencies involved in the overall body of built environment work.
- 11 Embody a culture of learning and humility to better understand community contexts, needs, and opportunities.
- 12 Utilize complementary approaches to advance healthy and equitable development beyond direct investments.



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