

CHARTER TOWNSHIP OF MERIDIAN
REGULAR MEETING ENVIRONMENTAL COMMISSION –**DRAFT**-
5151 Marsh Road, Okemos MI 48864-1198
517.853.4000, Township Hall Room
WEDNESDAY, MAY 7TH, 2025, 7:00PM

PRESENT: Commissioners Harrison Batten, Laura Belisle, Tom Frazier, John Sarver,
Richard Miksicek, Cynthia Peterson, Chair Bill McConnell and Trustee
Nickolas Lentz

ABSENT: Commissioner Yu Man Lee

STAFF: Deputy Township Manager Dan Opsommer, Project Engineer Jack Hughes

1. CALL MEETING TO ORDER

Chair McConnell called the May 7th, 2025, Township Environmental Commission meeting to order at 7:00 pm.

2. ROLL CALL

Project Engineer Hughes called the roll of the Commission.

3. PRESENTATION

Former Commissioner Val Lafferty and Gabi Mayer delivered a presentation from “Food Rescue US - Lansing Communities” on reducing perishable food waste in the community. The program's core function is to connect food donors (grocery stores and restaurants) directly with receiving agencies (such as soup kitchens, food banks, and homeless shelters) via a network of volunteer drivers.

In the last year and a half, the program has achieved significant results:

- 1,800 rescue deliveries.
- 300,000 pounds of food rescued, which would have otherwise been wasted.

The program currently has approximately 110 active volunteers, 41 registered food donors, and 36 receiving agencies. They emphasize the need for more food donors to match their volunteer capacity and the demand from receiving agencies. The two common concerns from potential food donors, particularly grocery stores, are Liability and Bureaucracy.

A federal law indemnifies businesses that donate food in good faith, protecting them from liability. The presenters note that many stores are unaware of this protection. Some larger chains face internal bureaucracy that prevents local managers from donating food, even when they wish to.

The presentation concludes with a call for community awareness and support, seeing townships and other local entities as potential partners to help build a more resilient and healthy food rescue system.

Refer to the Environmental Commission website for presentation slides.

4. CITIZENS ADDRESS AGENDA ITEMS AND NON-AGENDA ITEMS

No public comment.

5. COMMUNICATIONS

No communications to convey.

6. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Chair McConnell proposed to approve the agenda.

Commissioner Frazier brought a motion to amend the agenda to add an Item 9b. on Chair Succession.

Without objection, the adopted agenda was approved unanimously.

7. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

April 2nd 2025, Regular Meeting Minutes were approved as amended with a few minor typo corrections provided by Commissioner Frazier.

Without objection, the minutes for the April 2nd meeting, as amended, were approved unanimously.

8. NEW BUSINESS

A. Wetland Use Permit #25-01

Project Engineer Caycee Hart from Meridian Township introduced a proposed pathway project in the Sanctuary subdivision.

The project involves constructing a seven-foot-wide, off-road, non-motorized concrete pathway. This pathway will serve as a direct link between the Okemos Reserve neighborhood to the north and the Sanctuary subdivision to the south.

The project will result in a 0.03-acre impact on wetlands at the crossing of the Smith Consolidated Drain. To manage this, a 36-inch concrete culvert will be constructed to allow water to flow underneath the pathway, maintaining the existing drainage pattern.

To comply with the Township's mitigation ordinances, the project will compensate for this wetland loss in a previously established wetland mitigation area. This mitigation was performed as part of the *MSU to Lake Lansing Phase II* pathway project, where an existing wetland was expanded by 0.14 acres through the excavation of an upland area. This existing mitigation site will offset the wetland impacts from the Sanctuary Pathway Project.

Project Engineer Hart then introduced the Township Community Planning and Development Director, Tim Schmitt. Tim provided an overview of the project's wetland use permit. Unlike typical projects requiring a formal site plan and Planning Commission review, this pathway project falls under an exception in the Township's ordinance. Because it's a standalone

project not otherwise subject to Planning Commission oversight, it undergoes an administrative process:

- Wetland Delineation Verification: The project first goes to the Township's wetland consultant to confirm the wetland delineation.
- Environmental Commission Feedback: It then comes before the Environmental Commission for their input and recommendations.
- Public Hearing: A public hearing is held, similar to those for site plans after Planning Commission review.
- State Approval (EGLE): Crucially, the project has already received sign-off from the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE). This was done proactively to ensure state approval before proceeding further.

The project involves two types of impacts on wetlands:

- Direct Fill Impact: A very small impact of 0.03 acres due to filling.
 - Shoulder Impact: An impact of 129 cubic yards for the pathway's shoulder.
- While EGLE would not require mitigation for a project of this nature, Meridian Township's ordinance mandates it. The Township has exceeded its mitigation requirements by already having a mitigation site from a previous pathway project (*MSU to Lake Lansing Phase II*), where an existing wetland was expanded by 0.14 acres. This existing mitigation more than compensates for the current project's impacts.

Township staff and consultants have reviewed the project and have no major concerns. They acknowledge that some wetland crossing is unavoidable for the pathway but believe the chosen location is the most suitable. Importantly, the design largely avoids wetlands on a Consumers Energy site, which was initially a concern.

Staff confirms that the project meets all 11 criteria in the Township's ordinance for granting a permit. Therefore, they recommend issuing the permit, contingent upon the already established mitigation efforts.

Chair McConnell asked for a brief rundown of the differences in state and township regulations.

The state typically regulates wetlands that are two acres or greater in size or located within 500 feet of a water feature (lake, stream or drain). There's some ongoing change in the interpretation of "navigable waters" due to a recent Supreme Court case, which might affect man-made drains.

Meridian Township's regulations are generally more stringent. They regulate any wetland of any size. There are exceptions for "Non-Essential" Wetlands. In rare cases, a wetland might be deemed "non-essential" if it's of very poor quality or clearly man-made and provides minimal ecological function. However, this is uncommon and requires a rigorous determination process.

For any wetland impact, a wetland use permit is required. The Township's policy is "no net loss," generally requiring a minimum of 1.5 to 1 mitigation (meaning 1.5 acres of wetland creation/restoration for every 1 acre impacted).

Wetland setbacks are considered a zoning item, separate from the wetland use ordinance. Appeals for non-zoning wetland issues go to the Township Board and then Circuit Court, while zoning-related appeals go through the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) first.

Commissioner Sarver asked about the availability of future wetland use credits.

The township is able to cover small projects like this however should it take on a larger development similar in scope to the 'Okemos Road Pathway Bridge' there would need to be some serious evaluation of other potential sites, as they are quite limited.

Commissioner Belisle asked for a refresher on the overall scope of this project.

The Sanctuary Pathway Project is a crucial component of the Pathway Master Plan, aiming to connect to the Heart Trail (also known as the Second Memorial Trail), which runs east-west. The drain has historically been a significant barrier to this connection.

The pathway significantly enhances connectivity and mobility within the community. It provides a much safer and easier route to the high school for residents in neighborhoods north of the drain, allowing them to avoid main roads. It also improves accessibility for recreational users, such as local run clubs, who currently find it challenging to access this area of the trail system.

There are no viable alternative routes for this pathway. The long, narrow parcel of land owned by the Township is the only feasible way to extend the pathway northward.

Chair McConnell asked for clarification regarding a criteria to mitigate wetlands within the same watershed as a proposed development, as it does not seem to be the case here. At this time there are no other tracts of land available for mitigation but Project Engineer Hart noted she will look into the watershed.

Deputy Manager Opsommer provided an overview of the Township's Pathway Master Plan and context for how this project will fit in to the overall purpose of this plan.

Without objection, the motion to approve the Wetland Use Permit #25-01, was approved unanimously.

9. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

A. 2024 Climate Sustainability Funds

Project Engineer Hughes provided an overview on the 2024 Climate Sustainability Funds with a focus on implementation of bioswales at Marshall Park.

The Township Board allocated \$30,000 for environmental projects aligned with the Climate Sustainability Plan. Currently, \$5,362 has been spent, leaving approximately \$24,637 (with an additional \$1,000-\$2,000 pending for signage). The Township is seeking input from the Environmental Commission on how to best utilize the remaining funds.

The Township is proposing to use the funds to create bioswales alongside Marshall Park roads that are slated for restoration and resurfacing in 2027. Bioswales are enhanced ditches with native plantings, offering several advantages over traditional ditches such as:

- Creation of native habitats.
- Improved drainage and flood mitigation.
- Reduced maintenance and watering compared to turf grass.

While the road project could proceed with standard ditches without the special funding, the

Climate Sustainability Funds would enable the more eco-friendly bioswale option. If the Commission approves, the Township plans to engage the engineering firm Spaulding DeDecker for a more in-depth study of the proposed bioswales.

In response to Chair McConnell's inquiry last meeting, Project Engineer Hughes provided context for how the bioswale project directly aligns with two of the Climate Sustainability Plan's objectives.

Water and Green Infrastructure Management: It directly addresses the objective to "increase resiliency towards extremes of weather by continuing to upgrade green infrastructure and other best management practices to minimize stormwater runoff and flood vulnerability, while retaining enough surface water to mitigate drought damage." Bioswales are specifically mentioned as an example within this objective.

Water Conservation: Bioswales inherently require less water and maintenance than traditional landscaping, contributing to water conservation, particularly of treated water.

The Township believes this project is an appropriate and highly effective use of the funds, as it would significantly help alleviate severe flooding issues in the area while providing environmental benefits.

Deputy Manager Opsommer provided some additional context for this project.

The project focuses on the intersection of Lake Lansing and Columbia Street, where existing storm drains currently discharge directly into Lake Lansing. Since Lake Lansing is essentially a "large bathtub" with no natural inlet or outlet streams (its level is controlled by a man-made dam), maintaining water quality is paramount.

Bioswales offer a crucial solution by providing natural filtration of stormwater runoff before it enters the lake. This is the optimal approach to treating the water by preventing pollutants from entering the lake. Flooding, such as on Okemos Road, is often due to stormwater runoff overflowing the dam. Bioswales would help mitigate this by better managing stormwater at its source.

The bioswale project also presents a unique opportunity for collaboration among several groups: The Environmental Commission, The Park Commission (due to Marshall Park's involvement) and The Lake Lansing Advisory Board/Commission (which oversees the lake and its special assessment district for water quality maintenance). This collaboration aligns with the broader goals of the Township's Climate Sustainability Plan, bringing together different bodies to work on shared environmental objectives.

The current status of two other small projects where some of the climate sustainability funding had previously been allocated towards were then discussed.

The Township has purchased two compost bag dispensers to help a composting program grow and maintain momentum. While bags are currently available at both composting sites, the Township aims to make them more visible to the public by installing the new dispensers on walls or freestanding mounts. There's a minor issue with a missing rod for the bag rolls, which the Township is working with the vendor to resolve.

The ongoing services for the composting initiative, including emptying the bins and restocking bags, are now being covered by the Park Millage. This means these costs have been transferred off the Climate Sustainability Funds, freeing up those resources for other projects. The final cost to the Climate Sustainability Funds for this particular initiative was the purchase

of the bag dispensers themselves.

Commissioner Frazier raised a question about promoting the food composting program using the Township's communications department. This will be looked at for a future packet. He then asked if there were any developments regarding the purchasing of signage for the recycling center. There has not been at this time. The Commission would like to ensure there is enough funding to complete both the composting and signage projects before tackling the Marshall Park Bioswales. A quote was obtained by Trevor for 10 signs, 24"x36" with wire stakes which may or may not be feasible considering the limestone and gravel site.

Commissioner Sarver asked if the area delineated on the displayed map was going to be entirely allocated to bioswale development.

While the exact footprint and specific plantings are still in the design phase, the goal is to maximize its size to handle as much stormwater as possible. However, due to the volume of flood water in the area (with homes on Columbia Street seeing water against their foundations) the bioswale won't be able to store all the water. The intersection of Lake Street and Columbia Street is identified as the worst drainage area in the Township. Given that Lake Lansing lacks natural streams for inflow and outflow, stormwater quality is critical. The bioswales will naturally filter pollutants before discharge, which is vital for the lake's health.

While the Township has installed smaller-scale bioswales or rain gardens (a demonstration project on Shaw Street and another in Lake Lansing Park South), this Marshall Park project would be the largest comparable bioswale installation by the Township to date. This makes it a significant demonstration project for what bioswales can achieve, potentially setting a standard for drainage solutions around Lake Lansing, especially in areas where space is available and owned by the Township.

Beyond the bioswale, the Township plans to investigate diverting stormwater from alleys on the lakefront side of Columbia Street to construct additional swales. This aims to intercept water before it reaches the severely low-lying area at Columbia & Lake, thereby reducing the overall storage requirement for the main bioswale.

The Environmental Commission expressed general support for the project but cautioned about reserving sufficient funds for other already approved projects from the Climate Sustainability Funds.

B. Chair Succession

Chair McConnell opened the floor for nominations of chair.

Commissioner Sarver nominated Chair McConnell. Commissioner Frazier seconded.

Chair McConnell nominated Commissioner Lee for the position of Vice Chair.

Without objection, the motion carries unanimously.

10. REPORTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

A. Staff

Deputy Manager Opsommer provided an update on the Green Grant applications. This update covers two main topics regarding the Green Grant program: an application from the Mid Michigan Land Conservancy and an in-field meeting with the Cornell Woods Homeowners Association (HOA).

The Mid Michigan Land Conservancy submitted a new application for a tree planting project on Judy Lind's property (Piper Road), similar to their 2024 grant. The Green Grant Review Committee has requested a written update and documentation of the work completed under the 2024 grant. A committee meeting will be scheduled to review this late application

The Green Grant Committee met with the Cornell Woods HOA in the field to discuss their proposed project. The HOA affirmed their commitment to incorporating school and educational signage, which was a committee requirement. They expressed reluctance to implement a bioswale, and the committee observed no significant stormwater ponding during their visit, even after a recent rain event. The committee will revisit the decision on additional funding, as the HOA was initially approved for a minimum of \$5,000 but requested up to \$7,000.

Regardless of additional funding, the HOA will scale their native planting garden (approximately a quarter-acre) around four previously planted trees to accommodate the cost of the educational signage. This garden is intended to address existing issues, such as algae growth in a nearby pond, which was a part of their initial grant application. The committee requested a modification to their plan: avoiding planting mulch within a ten-foot radius of a culvert under the Township pathway to prevent mulch from washing into wetlands.

The committee is prepared to reconvene virtually to discuss both the Cornell Woods HOA's request for additional funding and the Mid Michigan Land Conservancy's late application. Their goal is to bring a final funding award recommendation to the Environmental Commission's June meeting.

B. Liaisons

Trustee Lentz provided an update from the Township Board.

The Township is launching a Youth Commission for 14- to 19-year-old students. This commission aims to gather opinions from young residents on local issues. Interested and "industrious young students" are encouraged to apply via the Township website; the commission will operate on a school-year basis.

A significant discussion recently took place at the April 15th Township Board meeting regarding a ballot proposal for a Senior Community Center. For detailed information, one can watch the HOMTV recording of the April 15th or April 3rd Board meetings, or review the extensive discussions held by the Senior Community Center Task Force over the past seven months. Trustee Lentz encouraged anyone interested in sharing their opinion on this matter to attend the upcoming Township Board meeting.

Relevant to the Environmental Commission, there was a presentation on the Red Cedar River Cleanup at a recent joint governmental commissions meeting. As a former member of the Ingham County Parks Commission, Trustee Lentz highly commends Meridian Township for acting as a fiduciary for this regional project, which benefits the entire area, not just the Township. As a kayaker, he personally values the accessibility and availability of the waterway for residents. He plans to obtain a digital copy of the presentation from the Parks

Department Director to share with the Environmental Commission.

Chair McConnell provided an update from the Planning Commission.

The Planning Commission considered and ultimately approved a revised Special Use Permit for a proposed car wash at the former Outback Steakhouse site on Marsh Road. Although there was some initial objection to a "passerby" business like a car wash replacing a destination like a restaurant, a major factor in its approval was the commitment to convert the existing eastern parking lot into green space. This move will increase green space and reduce impervious surfaces on the site, aligning with the Township's broader environmental goals.

The other main topic of discussion was a proposed revision of the Township's parking ordinance. This revision aims to reduce minimum parking requirements, giving developers more flexibility and preventing the creation of excess parking. It will also encourage landscaping within new parking areas. This landscaping is intended to provide environmental benefits such as water retention and heat reduction, directly supporting the Township's Climate Sustainability Plan and Master Plan.

As Commissioner Lee was absent the update from the Land Preservation Advisory Board was skipped.

Commissioner Sarver mentioned there would be a meeting the next day for the Brownfield Redevelopment Authority. He will share the details of that meeting at the next Environmental Commission meeting.

Commissioner Miksicek provided an update from the Parks Commission.

The Parks Commission is beginning strategic planning for the renewal of the Parks and Recreation millage, tentatively scheduled for the August 2026 ballot. A suggestion arose to create an advocacy group, "Friends of the Millage," to help develop literature and garner support for their priorities.

Director Wisinski reviewed the Parks and Recreation budgets for March and April 2025. The commission reached a consensus on approving an updated Historic Village Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and lease renewal for the Friends of Historic Meridian. Further details on these documents are available in the April 8th meeting package.

During that meeting Director Wisinski also mentioned the proposed bioswale project at the southeast corner of Marshall Park, intended to address recurring flooding issues. This project is now on the Parks Commission's agenda, and they are awaiting the Environmental Commission's decision (which was just given) to explore the costs and details involved.

The next Parks Commission meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, May 13th, at 4:30 PM.

C. Teams

Commissioner Sarver provided an update from the Energy Team.

A recent Solarize meeting saw a good turnout of about 30 people, with roughly half of them requesting on-site proposals for solar installations. These proposals have been issued, and individuals now have until June 14th to decide whether to proceed. Commissioner Sarver expects to provide an update at the next meeting on how many of these proposals have resulted in actual solar installations.

Commissioner Frazier provided an update from the Green Team.

The Green Team recently hosted a highly successful Spring Recycling Event. It saw significant participation and collection numbers:

- 57 volunteers (including two from the Environmental Commission)
- 495 vehicles processed
- 8,775 pounds of paint collected
- 144 appliances with coolant collected by Consumers Energy
- 13 Gaylords of documents for shredding
- Approximately 50 bicycles collected
- 30 cubic yards of heavy metal items collected
- Hundreds of egg cartons collected for reuse, primarily by Titus Farms

Their next public event is scheduled for May 17th, focusing on "Planting a Native Meridian."

An update from the Food Composting Team was skipped as the topic had been well covered by the earlier presentation.

Commissioner Frazier provided an update from the Green Burial Committee.

The Green Burial Committee is aiming to present to the Township Board in July. This timing is to ensure all three committee members can be present. Importantly, the committee is no longer pursuing the grant that was discussed last year. This change could potentially free up funds for the previously discussed bioswale project.

D. Haslett/Okemos High School

Commissioner Batten provided an update from the High Schools with input from Commissioner Peterson. April was a busy month for sustainability initiatives within the school district.

Middle schools hosted numerous Earth Month activities. While more challenging at the high school due to class schedules, students still participated in events like the recent recycling drive.

The District Sustainability Team held a productive meeting on April 16th, focusing on developing a mission and vision statement to create a unified focus. The group is bonding and working towards common goals.

There are discussions about expanding the "Green Michigan Schools" designation to a district-wide "Green District" status.

High school students from the Sustainability Club toured the local Recycling Center, including the surplus store and various processing areas. This tour provided inspiration for potential initiatives at their own school, with a compost setup being a "dream goal."

The Key Club, a volunteer organization, received a grant to revitalize the high school courtyard. This has historically been difficult to maintain, but cleanup efforts have begun, with more work planned.

The elementary school's Earth Club, a group for younger students, engaged in fun activities like tie-dye. The club is wrapping up its year with picnics and continues to maintain strong momentum and positive feedback from participants.

E. Other

No reports.

11. COMMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

No public comment.

12. OTHER MATTERS AND COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

Trustee Lentz clarified that the presentation on the Red Cedar River Cleanup is already available online. It can be found within the first ten pages of the agenda and packet for the April 29th meeting on the Township website.

Commissioner Frazier reminded that Meridian Township's participation in the Michigan Green Communities Challenge is approaching its May 15th deadline. Given recent staff transitions within the Environmental Commission, it's uncertain if this year's application has been submitted yet. Chair McConnell thanked him for the reminder.

13. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 8:46pm.