



**THIS WORK WOULDN'T HAPPEN
WITHOUT YOU!**

GROUNDWORK CENTER FOR RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

ANNUAL REPORT 2024

Hello, Groundwork friends,

I'm deeply honored to be writing to you as the new Executive Director of an organization that leads with such remarkable heart, strategic thought, and effective action.

2024 was a historic time for Groundwork as we navigated a leadership transition and approached our 30th birthday. This is a time of taking stock and, especially, assessing how the lessons of our legacy will inform our work in this moment of change in America.

I hope that you will feel as I do that the body of work covered in this report reveals that Groundwork's way of getting things done—the principles that have long guided us—will serve us well in the coming days and years. In 2024 we achieved success by securing support from both sides of the aisle, through deft and insightful coalition-building, and furthering projects built on the enduring practicality and wisdom embodied in sustainable solutions. Below are a few highlights from the past year. Discover far more inside!

- ☀️ Made major commitment to siting rural clean energy infrastructure, adding staff for community coalition-building, outreach, rural electric co-op board elections, and more.
- ☀️ Increased Great Lakes Business Network members to 228, in Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, New York, Minnesota, Ohio, and Ontario.
- ☀️ Held high-profile expert panel discussion about risks of Line 5 oil tunnel proposal.
- ☀️ Reached a total of 52 homes installing solar through Access MI Solar group-buy program.
- ☀️ Influential in state change removing obstacles to local food in schools. 10 Cents a Meal recipients may use 25% of funds for food labor and transportation.
- ☀️ Expanded local food economy in 16 counties along Lake Michigan coast. Strengthens food supply chain, security.
- ☀️ Completed fourth year of Building Resilient Communities, which improves access to locally grown food by funding infrastructure with \$2,000 micro-grants. Expanded statewide in select areas.
- ☀️ Launched Phase II study for the north-south passenger rail to determine infrastructure needs and business plan.
- ☀️ Assembled advisory group of city leaders and transit agencies along the proposed rail line.
- ☀️ Continued to serve in leadership role for Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers—state's lead passenger rail advocate.
- ☀️ Participated in statewide transportation policy efforts to expand transportation choices for Michigan residents.

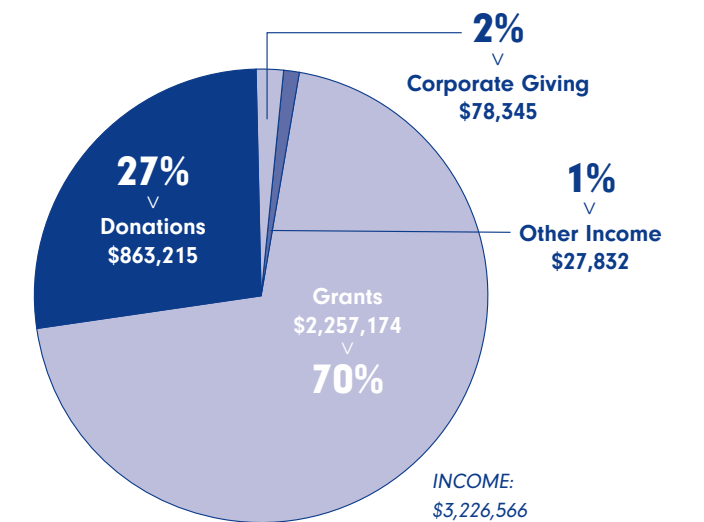
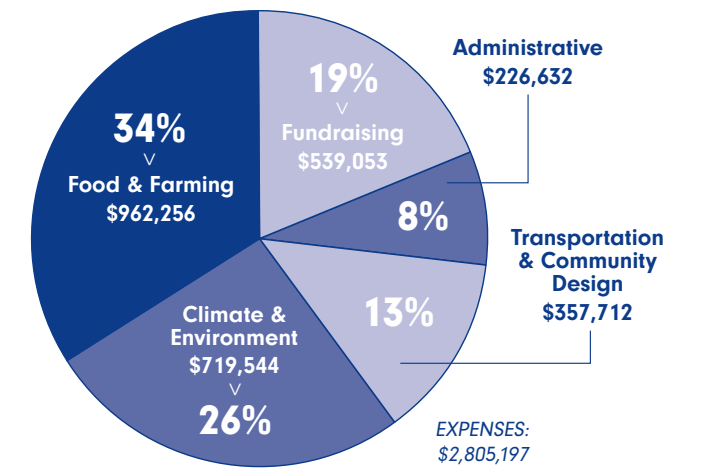


Elizabeth Palchak, Executive Director

WHERE GOOD CHANGE BEGINS AND KEEPS ON GOING.



This page:
 ^ Beehives at Bardenhagen Farm.
 <<< On the cover:
 Harvest at Loma Farm.
 — Photos by Beth Price



TREASURER'S STATEMENT

Throughout 2024, Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities maintained its financial stability, supported by the generosity of numerous individual donors, corporate sponsors, and family foundations. The broad financial support enabled Groundwork to sustain and deepen its work. The ongoing commitment from donors has facilitated the support of key programs in Food & Farming, Transportation & Community Design, and Climate & Environment. Your contributions have been instrumental in allowing Groundwork to concentrate on strategic initiatives of protecting the environment, strengthening the economy, and building community. We sincerely appreciate your ongoing support.

— Michael Lyman, Treasurer



PAIRING OF SUSTAINABLE VALUES AND STRATEGIC THOUGHT IS SEEN SO CLEARLY IN OUR INITIATIVES.

FOOD & FARMING

The pairing of sustainable values and strategic thought is seen so clearly in our initiatives that foster and expand the local food movement here and throughout the state. Rooted in helping family farms survive, our local food work began more than 20 years ago, and key to its success was expanding markets through local food access to schools, grocery stores, restaurants, institutions, food pantries, and more. When the pandemic revealed the frailty of long-distance food supply chains, the federal government discovered the resilience of local food too. USDA has recently been funding local food pilot programs in part for national food security. Groundwork is one of a few organizations nationally to be piloting that work.

2024 Achievement Highlights

- ☀️ Helped address some of the major barriers to receiving and processing local food in schools. Thanks to policy change we advocated for, 10 Cents a Meal grant recipients may use up to 25% of funds for food labor and transportation. The statewide program makes local food accessible in education settings to nearly 600,000 children, age 0 thru grade 12.
- ☀️ Continued to expand local food systems and access in 16 counties along the Lake Michigan coast. The USDA funds the work to, in part, improve food supply resilience after the collapse of long-distance supply chains during the pandemic.
- ☀️ Fourth year of Building Resilient Communities, which improves access to locally grown food by funding infrastructure with \$2,000 micro-grants. Forty-one sites have benefited thus far. Expanded to select regions statewide, with 48 new sites to be funded.
- ☀️ Refined and developed programming for the second year in the Esperance Community Teaching Kitchen. Groundwork became a member of the nationally respected Teaching Kitchen Collaborative.
- ☀️ Coordinated purchases of more than 130,000 pounds of locally grown food for over 70 food pantries and meal sites. Food purchases totaled \$334,710, from 23 farms and food businesses through the innovative Farm2Neighbor initiative, done in partnership with the Northwest Food Coalition and Goodwill Northern MI's Food Rescue.
- ☀️ Continued partnership with FoodCorps to build schoolwide cultures of health. We hosted two returning service members based in our Petoskey office—one in individual schools and one serving the Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District, influencing 18 public and private schools.
- ☀️ Helped five schools in the Emmet, Charlevoix, and Antrim County regions hire nutrition and garden educators. This continues work we began in 2016 to expand nutrition and garden education in the region.



OUR DEEP EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH RURAL COMMUNITIES WILL HELP US MOVE THE CLEAN ENERGY BUILD-OUT FORWARD.



Clean energy advocate and Traverse City Commissioner Tim Werner
at Heritage Sustainable Energy solar field.
— Photo by Beth Price

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

For Michigan to achieve its ambitious clean energy and climate goals, we must site a great deal of infrastructure in the countryside. Achieving that quickly while also practicing land stewardship and responding to local concerns presents great challenges. Groundwork has entered this space to help move the clean energy buildout forward by leveraging our experience in rural community-building and strong farmer relationships. Meanwhile, we continue to fight to shut down Line 5, America's most dangerous pipeline.

2024 Achievement Highlights

- ☀ Committed resources to staff new campaigns focused on rural clean energy siting, rural electric co-op board elections, clean energy education in rural schools, and more.
- ☀ Hosted "Tunnel Vision," an in-person and virtual panel aimed at raising awareness about the proposed Line 5 tunnel. The event highlighted perspectives from tribal partners, state legal representatives, and technical experts, and focused public and media attention on critical but ignored environmental and legal concerns.
- ☀ Engaged with 130+ potential residential and commercial solar customers through our Access MI Solar group-buy program. This year, 18 households subscribed, bringing nearly 100 kW of clean energy to northern Michigan.
- ☀ Increased Great Lakes Business Network members to 228, in all Great Lake states and Ontario.
- ☀ Hosted an inaugural GLBN D.C. fly-in. Five business leaders representing Michigan, Illinois, and Ohio met with members of Congress to express support for Great Lakes protection, clean energy, and the shutdown of Line 5.
- ☀ Influenced the clean energy narrative statewide with op-eds in the Detroit News, Detroit Free Press, Crain's Business Detroit, The Gander, Traverse City Record-Eagle, Bridge Michigan, Petoskey News Review, and Planet Detroit.
- ☀ Recruited and supported pro-clean-energy candidates running for rural electric co-op boards of directors.
- ☀ GLBN members participated in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Environmental Impact Statement review for the proposed Line 5 re-route. GLBN attorneys submitted technical and economic rationale for rejecting the re-route and shutting down the pipeline.
- ☀ Hosted a virtual "Solar on Schools Showcase," highlighting our engagement with student groups and unveiling three STEM kits featuring solar cars, solar ovens, and solar activities. These lessons were well received in seven area classrooms.



ADVOCATING FOR TRANSPORTATION SOLUTIONS THAT PRESERVE LANDSCAPE AND WALKABLE TOWNS.

TRANSPORTATION & COMMUNITY DESIGN

Since its earliest days, Groundwork staff and supporters have advocated for transportation solutions that preserve landscape and walkable towns, tame traffic and give people transit choices other than cars. 2024 saw those longstanding principles focused intently on the North-South Passenger Rail project as it enters the crucial Phase II study. The project is an outgrowth of the Grand Vision community planning process, the largest in the region's history, during which participants overwhelmingly listed passenger rail as the No. 1 desired piece of public infrastructure.

2024 Achievement Highlights

- ☀ Launched Phase II study for north-south passenger rail to determine equipment and infrastructure upgrades and develop a business plan. Researchers will fine-tune market and ridership forecasts and identify station towns and potential schedule of service.
- ☀ Assembled advisory group for passenger rail made up of city leaders and transit agencies along the proposed line. They will help with study process, draft reviews, and outreach.
- ☀ Continued to serve in leadership role and as northern voice for the Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers—the state's lead passenger rail advocate.
- ☀ Landed rail stories in media outlets including the Detroit Free Press, top Detroit radio shows, the Michigan Municipal League's Review Magazine, Traverse City Business News, and Crain's Grand Rapids.
- ☀ Helped form the Grand Traverse Safe Streets Alliance, a coalition advocating for safer streets for pedestrians and cyclists. A key goal: nonmotorized transportation corridors.
- ☀ Helped organize TC's 31st annual Smart Commute Week, which promotes forms of transportation that benefit personal health and environment.
- ☀ Participated in statewide transportation policy efforts in which transportation and environmental advocates joined to support expanding Michigan transportation choices.
- ☀ Collaborated with Detroit's Transportation Riders United on the "Friends of Transit" campaign. The group worked to convince entrepreneurs and economic development organizations to become transit champions. Campaign partners supported legislative efforts to increase non-road transportation funding by \$2 billion over the next decade.
- ☀ Presented at the 2024 Michigan Rail Conference, offering a project profile and update on the passenger rail project.

Carrie Thompson, Executive Director of Cadillac Wexford Transit Authority, and Groundwork Program Director Jim Bruckbauer at historic Cadillac train station.
— Photo by Beth Price



HELPING FARMERS SUCCEED AND COMMUNITY HEALTH RISE.



← Zac and Nicole Mezeske and their children, of Z and N Farm, Manistee County.
— Photo by Beth Price

BUILDING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES EXPANDS TO SELECT AREAS STATEWIDE

The Building Resilient Communities program benefits food insecure individuals and families by offering micro-grants of up to \$2,000 and staff support to increase the amount of nutritious food in schools, food pantries, community centers, and medical practices. BRC also equips farmers and food producers to be able to supply more nutritious food to those in need. When people have access to healthy food, they are able to increase the amount of nutrients they consume and can improve their health.

Since 2021, Groundwork has operated the BRC program primarily in Northwest Lower Michigan and has worked with 41 sites. In 2024, we expanded the program to the Grand Rapids area and Detroit, thanks to funding from the W. K. Kellogg foundation. And in late 2024 the Michigan Health Endowment Fund chose to fund expanding BRC to select areas statewide.

Eligible sites include schools, food pantries, community centers, farms, and even farm markets and concessions—any organization working to increase the amount of healthy food available in a community. Site coordinators are paired with a Groundwork employee, and program participants focus on factors that can

improve the ability to provide healthy food, like infrastructure and education. Sites also commit to adopting a longer term policy that supports healthier food environments and local food procurement beyond the project's one-year scope.

Past projects include a school cafeteria purchasing a food processor to cook meals from scratch, while prioritizing local options for fresh produce; a food pantry purchasing grocery store shelves to display fruits and vegetables, while adopting nutrition guidelines for food procurement; and a senior center purchasing a range, salad spinner, food sealer, educational materials, and healthy food signage, while committing to increase fruit and vegetable intake, reduced sodium, and homemade healthy meals for seniors.

In the long run, Building Resilient Communities aims to promote consumption of healthy, local foods; build agency of food service workers; lower the incidence of chronic diseases; contribute to strong local economies; and establish cross-sector relationships for vibrant, livable communities. We're showing how a \$2,000 investment can have outsized impacts when it comes to feeding those in the community healthy, local food.



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ELIZABETH PALCHAK'S FIRST ADDRESS TO THE GROUNDWORK COMMUNITY

An important part of Groundwork's leadership transition happened January 10, 2025, when we celebrated with a daylong fest christened the "Goodbye, Hans! Hello, Elizabeth!" party. A rich portion of the evening was an hour of comments by icons of the Groundwork legacy, including, of course, outgoing Executive Director Hans Voss and new Executive Director Elizabeth Palchak. Here we share a lightly edited transcript of Elizabeth's talk as she offers her first address to the community of Groundwork.

First, a huge thank you to Cheryl Hutchinson, our steadfast supporter and friend. We couldn't do any of what we do without our Board of Directors and Cheryl leads that team. I also want to give a shout out to my family—my brother and sister and mom—who traveled from Marshall to be here. They represent some of Groundwork's newest donors—thank you in advance.

What an exciting gathering! I realize that I am the last thing standing between you and a party, so I'll be brief. But I want to use this time to introduce myself and tell you a bit about where we're headed.

Many people have acknowledged Hans's leadership here tonight, and

over the last two months I've gotten a front row seat as we've traveled all over the state together, including a trip to Chicago, covering hundreds of miles and drinking hundreds of cups of coffee. He has done his best to impart his deep expertise and wisdom on all things, including fundraising, Michigan politics, organizational development, Lions offensive strategy, how to cuss like a sailor (though I'm pretty good at that already).

Several people over the last few months have mentioned that Hans leaves big shoes to fill. His legacy is big, no doubt. But Hans and I wear very different shoes. We have different styles.

I grew up in Michigan in the small town of Marshall. My dad was in the auto industry for 40 years, and Michigan's economy, and the importance of supporting local communities has been a dinner table theme for as long as I can remember. I have a diverse professional background and have lived all over the country, but sustainability and climate science has been a consistent thread.

In Jackson, Wyoming, I taught leadership and climate science as a faculty member in a graduate



program. I was Teton Science School's first sustainability coordinator and learned some difficult lessons about the politics of climate change in a very conservative state. I also learned that if you want people to come to your meetings, you should consider bringing snacks. After finishing my Ph.D. at the University of Vermont, I worked at VEIC, a sustainable energy company, and helped municipalities and utilities integrate insights from behavioral science into their programs to help nudge customers towards the use of renewable energy and increase equity.

Most recently, I was the Director of Sustainability at the University of Vermont, where I led our efforts to create the university's first strategic plan for sustainability, to increase the amount of local food we brought to campus from regional farms, increase the number of electric vehicles on campus, and set a path toward carbon neutrality by bringing geothermal energy to our buildings. So Groundwork feels a like natural fit.

Hans and I have different backgrounds, and different styles. But we agree on many key points.

Groundwork is rock solid.

Our staff is brimming with expertise

and talent—some of the best I have worked with in my career—and that's not hyperbole. If there's work to be done, this team shows up big with smart ideas, and deep devotion to what they do. Hans spent two years planning for his retirement, and that means that we have the internal infrastructure to make progress on our work in efficient and impactful ways.

Groundwork can get it done.

We have a record that speaks for itself. Our 10 cents a meal program continues to bring nourishing food from farmers to kids in schools all over the state. Last year the program served 600,000 kids, in early childcare centers and K-12 schools in Battle Creek, Grand Rapids, Detroit, and Petoskey, and so many places from the Ohio border to the western Upper Peninsula. Our work bringing food from farms to food pantries and schools is a model. No one does this better.

We're also a leader in getting solar panels on schools and educating kids about the benefits of renewable energy. We worked with seven schools in the Traverse City region last year to bring renewable energy curriculum into the classroom and help schools find funding and write policies to ▶

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support their sustainability goals. Through our Access My Solar Program last year we hit a milestone of supporting solar panels on 52 homes and small businesses in the region.

Among our highlights last year was also the very successful Blue Zones panel and discussion that was hosted right here at the Alluvion. Could Traverse City be a Blue Zone? Maybe. Groundwork posed the question and many of you are interested in the answer.

We are positioned to continue our leadership in Michigan, defending progress on environmental issues and finding new opportunities.

In a time of rampant misinformation, you can count on Groundwork to rely on science and evidence and bring thoughtful perspectives to the issues we engage with. We're going to do more to be a source that you can trust to decipher the news and keep you informed on issues. We'll be launching new partnerships and collaborations, including with the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems and the SEED Program at the University of Michigan. And speaking of U of M, soon you will be able to take a train from right around the corner to a Saturday football game at the Big House, all due to the tenacity and persistence of our Transportation team.

My highlights reel is just a sample. Groundwork is making a difference in Michigan in dozens of communities, with hundreds of small business owners and hundreds of thousands of school

children. We will also do everything possible to make your Wolverine train dreams come true very soon.

If you want to know about our Food and Farming work—talk to Jen Schaap, if you want to know more about our work on renewable energy, Line 5—talk to Ashley Rudzinski, and if you want to know about the train, chat with Jim Bruckbauer.

I said earlier than Hans and I agree on several fundamental points, including this one: Our work is more important than ever.

We are in an era of intense political polarization and immense uncertainty at the federal level. Our reputation for bipartisanship means that we can bring multiple perspectives to the table and help generate solutions that strengthen communities all over Michigan. It is foundational that both a family in Detroit and rural farmers in Michigan see themselves in our work. If you are concerned about threats to the environment from the new administration, changes in climate policy, or reduced funding for schools that could impact learning, Groundwork is an outstanding investment in your values. In Michigan. You can stand for what you believe in by standing with us. In the next year, we'll be closely watching policy developments and listening hard to people in the communities where we work.

Groundwork will be a source of reliable information, a convener, a nimble actor, a beacon of light.

OUR WORK IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER.



climate and environment

community garden

farm and farm market

farm to school

farmers support

food access

food and farming

food and health

grow solar

health and community center

mobility lab

passenger rail

school and early childcare

solar on schools

transportation and community

affordable solar systems

local food for kids

pro-environment, pro-business

make a difference here

access MI solar

GREAT LAKES BUSINESS NETWORK

Visit us at groundworkcenter.org to find out how you can volunteer.

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ENVIRONMENT. ECONOMY. COMMUNITY.



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