



# BLUE ZONES®

## ACTIVATE BARRY COUNTY

### 5 YEAR REPORT

### Blue Zones in Barry County

In September 2019, Barry County launched Blue Zones Activate, to transform their community into an environment where healthy behaviors are encouraged and supported. Community leaders were actively engaged and worked in collaboration with members of the Blue Zones national team and Blue Zones national experts in the built environment, food systems, and community engagement strategies. Together, they identified areas of opportunity for systemic transformation of Barry County's existing policies, programs, and infrastructure.

Leveraging the 4-D process of Discover, Develop, Design, and Deploy, Blue Zones experts uncovered strengths, challenges, and opportunities supporting Barry County's goals for making the healthy choice the easy choice. In addition, various engagement strategies were executed to strengthen personal commitments to improve well-being and to bring residents of the community together around a common purpose of a healthier Barry County.

Over the last five years, Blue Zones Activate has guided and supported community leaders in implementing key policy changes — permanent and semi-permanent — for broad and lasting impact. Blue Zones Activate initiatives prioritized, adopted, and implemented key policy changes; inspired citizen awareness and engagement; attracted additional resources; and raised the community profile.



## THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS...

We are so grateful for the ongoing support of our generous sponsors for making Blue Zones Activate Barry County a reality. Thank you to the MTC Family Foundation, Hastings Fiberglass, DeCamp Family Foundation, Corewell Health Pennock Foundation, and the Barry Community Foundation.

### STEERING COMMITTEE LIST

Throughout the term of this work, the Blue Zones Activate team has been guided by incredible community leaders. We thank each of the following champions for their service and commitment.

<b>SHERYL LEWIS BLAKE</b>	CHAIR, RETIRED CEO SPECTRUM HEALTH PENNOCK
<b>BERNIE JORE</b>	CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, COREWELL HEALTH PENNOCK
<b>JANINE DALMAN</b>	FOUNDATION DIRECTOR, COREWELL HEALTH PENNOCK
<b>JIM DECAMP</b>	COMMUNITY LIAISON, DECAMP FAMILY FOUNDATION
<b>LANI FORBES</b>	EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BARRY COUNTY UNITED WAY
<b>SCOTT KORPAK</b>	DIRECTOR, MSU EXTENSION DISTRICT 7
<b>MICHAEL BROWN</b>	FORMER BARRY COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR
<b>KIM NORRIS</b>	CREEKSIDE OPHTHAMOLOGY
<b>COLETTE SCRIMGER</b>	HEALTH OFFICER, BARRY EATON DISTRICT HEALTH DEPARTMENT
<b>MILEA BURGSTAHLER</b>	BARRY EATON DISTRICT HEALTH DEPARTMENT
<b>TAMMY PENNINGTON</b>	RETIRED DIRECTOR, COMMISSION ON AGING
<b>MICHELLE SKEDGELL</b>	EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PIERCE CEDAR CREEK INSTITUTE
<b>JENNIFER HEINZMAN</b>	PRESIDENT/CEO, BARRY COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE
<b>BONNIE GETTYS</b>	PRESIDENT/CEO, BARRY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
<b>SARAH MOYER-CALE</b>	HASTINGS CITY MANAGER
<b>F O R M E R   M E M B E R S</b>	
<b>ERIN MOORE</b>	FORMER DIRECTOR, MSU EXTENSION DISTRICT 7
<b>JERRY CZARNECKI</b>	FORMER HASTINGS CITY MANAGER
<b>EMILY MATER</b>	BARRY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION BOARD MEMBER, NASHVILLE RESIDENT
<b>ANNE BARNA</b>	PLANNING AND HEALTH PROMOTION DIRECTOR, BARRY EATON DISTRICT HEALTH DEPARTMENT
<b>BOB GILBERT</b>	DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, PIERCE CEDAR CREEK INSTITUTE
<b>MARK KOLANOWSKI</b>	PRESIDENT, HIGHPOINT COMMUNITY BANK

# Leveraging the Power of Blue Zones 4D Process

## **DISCOVER:**

The local lead and national experts in both the built environment and food systems spent multiple days with community leaders and stakeholders to learn about the community through interviews, focus groups, and site visits, in addition to conducting background research and policy scans.

## **DEVELOP:**

Findings from the Discover phase were compiled and analyzed, resulting in a detailed Discovery Report that outlined priorities, strengths, challenges and opportunities in the community.

## **DESIGN:**

Building on recommendations in the Discovery Report, community leaders and stakeholders collaborated during multiple design sessions to identify the most effective and feasible policies and projects to implement and to design an action plan.

## **DEPLOY:**

Once the action plan was completed, the community team with support from the Blue Zone team and national experts spent the remainder of the contract term implementing the action plan items. Through this deployment phase, community-wide improvements in the built and food environment were achieved.



# COVID 19 Impact

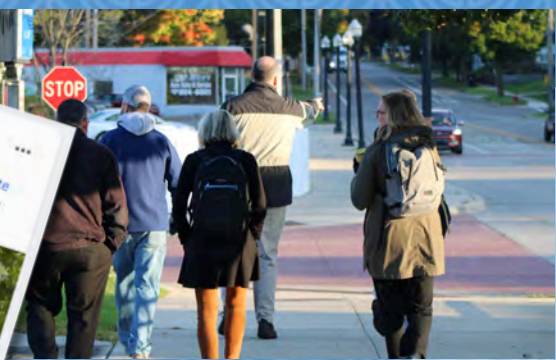
When the Barry County Activate Initiative began in September 2019, no one could have anticipated the complete life shift the COVID-19 pandemic would bring in March 2020. The Barry County team was fortunately able to complete the Discovery phase of the process within the first six months; hosting both built environment and food systems experts in the community for multi-day exploration visits, where they met with local stakeholders and went on countywide tours to see assets throughout the community.

In March 2020, the team took a sharp turn and began conducting all work remotely for the Develop and Design phases. The local team and community champions demonstrated incredible resilience and persistence by showing up for the work via Zoom and safely continuing to work in outdoor settings to provide pandemic relief services. The team found creative ways to still connect with the community at a distance, through social media, giveaway mailboxes, and online events. The strength and perseverance of the community members in Barry County never faltered. The team pressed on with the work and developed the action plan through remote design sessions. Attended by more than 70 members of the community, the remote sessions provided a space for them to provide input and vote to solidify which initiatives should be prioritized for deployment. A live celebratory kick-off event typically held for residents of a Blue Zones Activate community was not possible during the pandemic. An online kick-off was held instead, with more than 80 people participating. The kick-off included fun, prizes, a little learning, and some community bonding. It was the highest-attended online event in the county during that time!

Thankfully in the third year of Barry County Activate, things began to open back up and the team was able to engage more with community members in person.

# 2023 -2024 Two Year Extension

As the world began to return to normal, the team was pleased to see the continued enthusiasm from community members and champions throughout the county. For this reason, Blue Zones felt that the Barry County community needed a two-year extension to properly reap the rewards and truly experience the benefits of the Blue Zone way of living.





**BUILT ENVIRONMENT**



**FOOD SYSTEMS**



**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**



**LIVING BETTER LONGER**



## Built Environment

Over the last 60 years, American cities and counties have focused on policies on auto-centric street and land-use practices which have led to sprawl and resulted in many unintended negative effects on individual and community health, economic vitality, social connectedness, and overall well-being.

Over the last five years, Blue Zones Activate worked with community partners to advocate for policies, principles, and best practices that bring back natural movement and choice in how people access their community. Enhancing the built environment promotes active transportation, social connectedness, and overall well-being.

Community infrastructure like trails, roads, sidewalks, bike lanes, parks, and other public spaces affect our ability to connect socially and remain active. Creating healthier built environments is not solely the business of planners and engineers. Public officials, city planners, transportation decision-makers, architects, landscape architects, builders, real estate developers, members of the public, healthcare professionals, business leaders, and school and service professionals all have a role to play in addressing community design challenges.



**Mark Fenton -  
Built Environment &  
Walkability Expert**

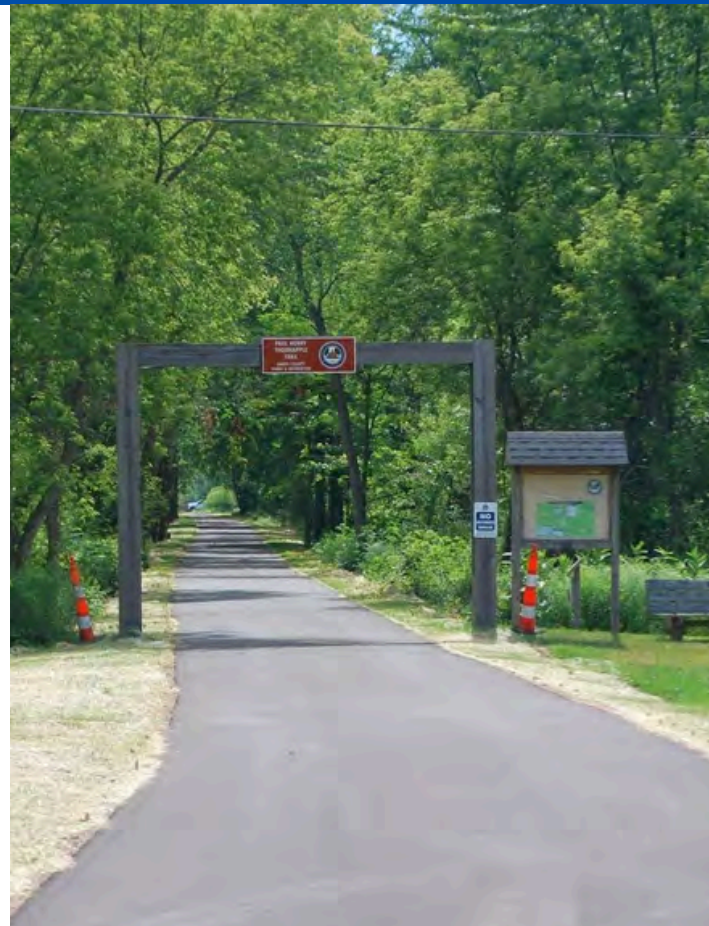
Mark Fenton is a public health, land use, and transportation expert who combines a public health perspective with engineering expertise. He studied biomechanics at MIT, did research at the U.S. Olympic Training Center's Sports Science Laboratory in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and was a research engineer at Reebok's Human Performance Laboratory. He is the former host of the PBS series, America's Walking, and is now an adjunct associate professor at Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science & Policy. He has worked with communities across North America and has consulted for AARP, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the University of North Carolina Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center.

# Countywide Trail Plan

The development of the Barry County Trails Master Plan has been a comprehensive, multi-year initiative aimed at enhancing the county's trail network and improving access to recreational opportunities.

2020 marked the beginning of the effort, with stakeholders recognizing the importance of trails for community health and connectivity. Initial discussions highlighted the need for a comprehensive plan that outlined key trail routes, local connectors, and on-street facilities. A stakeholder advisory group was proposed to guide the process, with an anticipated completion timeline of 18 to 24 months.

In 2021, the Barry County Parks and Recreation Commission partnered with Wightman Associates to develop the plan, supported by local organizations. Community engagement began at the Barry County Fair, where attendees mapped favorite trails and suggested new routes. An online Trail User Survey was launched to gather further input on trail usage and desired connections. This revealed a strong community interest in safety, connectivity, and amenities.



✓ **Nearly 12 miles of missing connections have been routed and are prioritized for acquisition and engineering.**

✓ **Over 25 sites have been noted for improvements, including six trailhead/signage locations, and 17 crosswalk enhancements.**

✓ **Priority routes will connect two schools within the county to the trail, creating further potential for Safe Routes to School programming.**

✓ **The plan will be incorporated into the County Wide Master Plan, opening up the opportunity to apply for grant funding.**

2022 saw the formation of a dedicated Trail Plan Committee, co-chaired by Barry County Commissioner Catherine Getty and West Michigan Trails Program and Development Director Jennifer Antel. The committee worked on drafting a user-friendly and comprehensive Trails Master Plan, gathering public input through surveys and community forums. Key themes included completing the Paul Henry – Thornapple Trail and enhancing connections to local destinations. Specific goals were established, focusing on safety, signage, and promoting the trail system as a recreational and economic asset.

The plan culminated in July 2023, when the Barry County Board of Commissioners officially adopted the Barry County Trails Master Plan into the County Master Plan. This adoption signified a commitment to trail development and outlined priority areas for implementation and funding, including routing for the Paul Henry – Thornapple Trail and improvements for safety and amenities.



## Safe Routes to Schools

Out of the Discover phase, Safe Routes to School (SRTS) became a focus for Maple Valley Schools in Nashville, Michigan. Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs make it easier to walk or bike to school through street and sidewalk improvements, enforcement, safety education, and incentives. SRTS initiatives increase physical activity for students and improve safety and congestion on streets during morning rush hour. The Maple Valley Schools SRTS Team was formed at the beginning of the Activate Barry County work in 2020.

In October 2021, Maple Valley Schools applied for and received an SRTS mini-grant for \$30,000 in funding from the Michigan Fitness Foundation. The school district used the grant to collect data to prepare for the major grant cycle and to form programs at three schools: Fuller Elementary, Maplewood Elementary, and Maple Valley Jr./Sr. High School. A Windshield tour of the three school areas with Blue Zones built environment expert Mark Fenton took place in January 2022. The schools also held walking activities with students to teach them about sidewalk safety and community parks.



## Complete Streets

Complete Streets initiatives aim to modernize streetscapes to accommodate multiple users beyond just motorists. These include pedestrians, children, seniors, and transit riders. This approach to planning, design, and maintenance prioritizes safe access for all users and incorporates features like bike lanes, curb bump-outs, and pedestrian amenities. The initiatives help communities plan for the future, encouraging smart growth beneficial for public health, local businesses, and aesthetics.

In May and June of 2021, two Middleville workshops identified Complete Streets as a community priority. With an existing Complete Streets policy, Middleville positioned itself as a model for the county, with future workshops planned for wider outreach. Blue Zones provided technical assistance to aid Middleville in implementing its policy and acted as a neutral facilitator for countywide efforts. The goal was to maintain the county's rural feel while promoting walkable and enjoyable spaces in downtown areas to support the local economy. During the May 26 workshop, Jeff Keesler from AARP emphasized the importance of livable communities that offer diverse transportation options beyond cars, addressing the needs of individuals who may outlive their driving abilities.





Follow-up meetings were organized to align with the town council on implementation and funding strategies. In early 2022, Blue Zones expert Mark Fenton collaborated with Middleville to ensure alignment with countywide goals. At the Middleville Heritage Days event in August 2022, Blue Zones demonstrated the Complete Streets concept by transforming parking spaces into a popular parklet with seating and shade.

In December 2023, Fenton returned to Barry County for workshops with planning commissions in Middleville and Hastings, focusing on the benefits of Complete Streets. He conducted a walking audit with local officials to assess traffic patterns and student safety. His presentations highlighted the public health and economic advantages of Complete Streets and provided recommendations for traffic calming strategies on Clinton, Green, and State streets. Fenton also provided a summary of the M43/Riverwalk crossing traffic data collected in November and proposed a temporary pedestrian island solution to improve safety at the crossing.



## City of Hastings Ordinance Audit

During the two-year extension, the City of Hastings expressed a desire to audit its outdated subdivision and land division ordinances for best practices in creating more sustainable development practices supporting the creation of active, healthy, and connected neighborhoods. Blue Zones Activate partnered with Urban Planning expert Betty Drake, president of Drake & Associates, to conduct a comprehensive review of the city's current ordinances and planning documents, then provided a report and recommendations to guide future updates to city ordinances and development standards.





# Built Environment Projects

## ***PEDESTRIAN ISLAND DEMONSTRATION PROJECT ALONG THE HASTINGS RIVERWALK/M43/TYDEN PARK CROSSING***

Blue Zones Activate Barry County partnered with the City of Hastings and the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) to establish a temporary pedestrian refuge island at the intersection with M43 where the Hastings Riverwalk/Paul Henry –Thornapple Trail crosses the three-lane highway. Many pedestrians avoided crossing M43 in this area due to the extremely wide crossing distance and traffic speed.



MDOT recommended conducting a thorough collection of data on vehicle speed, traffic volume, turning movements, and pedestrian activity at the trail crossing. Volunteers from the Hastings High School, the City of Hastings, and Blue Zones recorded the number of vehicles, their speeds, vehicle turns, as well as all pedestrian activity to support the City's MDOT application to install the pedestrian island. Blue Zones expert Mark Fenton spearheaded the design of the data collection methodology and oversaw the consolidation of the findings.



With the support of Blue Zones, the City of Hastings installed the temporary pedestrian refuge island in the spring of 2024, just in time for the popular Very Barry event held annually at Tyden Park. Stakeholders from MDOT, the City of Hastings, and Blue Zones met in July 2024 to review the installation and success of the island. Everyone agreed the new island has increased crossing safety for trail users and should remain. The island is designed to be removed during winter months.

## ***THORNAPPLE MANOR SENIOR CAMPUS - PLANNING FOR AN ACTIVE SENIOR CAMPUS***

In late 2023, Blue Zones Activate convened a workshop led by Blue Zones expert Mark Fenton to identify priority campus connections and barriers to those connections. The goal was to develop a senior campus conceptual plan that will guide future campus improvements that encourage activity regardless of physical ability.

Following the campus tour, the group of 13 participants broke up into three groups and brainstormed the most important pedestrian routes needed to connect all buildings to each other and the park as well as the future Commission on Aging facility to be constructed in late 2024/2025. The group also identified future amenities such as recreational facilities, amphitheater, walking trails, additional senior housing, senior community gardens, and businesses to support the growing residential population.

Recognizing the importance of creating a safe and walkable campus, Thornapple Manor staff went to work quickly implementing workshop feedback by closing one of the entrances, painting pathways between buildings to encourage staff and residents to feel safe walking between the various facilities, and setting up a picnic area for outdoor breaks.



During the summer of 2024, Thornapple Manor also installed a section of missing sidewalk from its skilled nursing facility to the pedestrian crosswalk leading to McKeown Bridge Park. The park and bridge are a favorite destination for residents and their families to visit.



**THORNAPPLE**  
MANOR



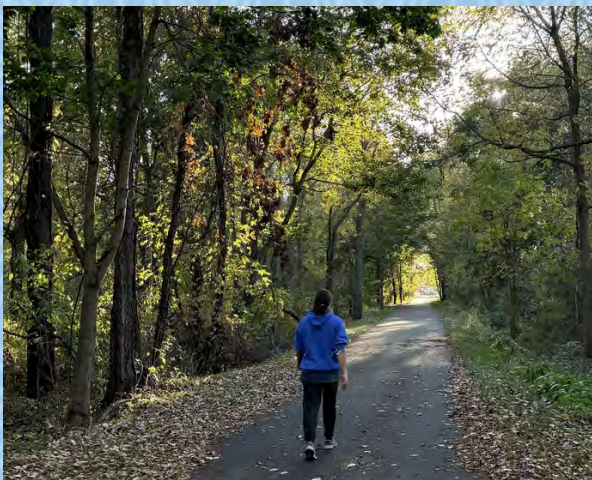
### ***PAUL HENRY - THORNAPPLE TRAIL IMPROVEMENTS IN THE VILLAGE OF NASHVILLE & MCKEOWN PARK/THORNAPPLE MANOR AREA***

In 2024, Barry County constructed almost two miles of trail in the Village of Nashville and adjacent to Thornapple Manor and Barry County Christian School. The improvements were funded by over one million dollars in County ARPA funds as well as support from the Thornapple Trail Association. This project is the largest section of trail development of the county-owned trail and was supported by the Trail Master Plan.

Trail improvements include the addition of approximately two miles of a 10-foot wide multi-use paved and crushed asphalt pathway in Hastings Charter Township and the Village of Nashville. Approximately one mile of fully accessible multi-use pathway was added running through the Thornapple Manor/Harvest Pointe/Commission on Aging senior campus and Barry County Christian School.

An additional one-mile asphalt paved pathway was built through the heart of the Village of Nashville's residential neighborhoods connecting residents to the downtown, village parks, and multiple schools. The newly paved trail includes a trailhead along M66 at the VFW Hall, and crosswalks at Sherman and Reed Streets. Barry County improvements connect directly to the Eaton County section of the Paul Henry — Thornapple Trail where Eaton County plans to pave the remaining 1.2 miles of pathway from Curtis Road to Mason Road in the near future. Once the Eaton County section is completed, there will be a fully paved, multi-use pathway from the Village of Vermontville to Nashville.

Projects like this are supported by the Barry County Trails Master Plan and will enable more trail development, eventually creating a cohesive and fully accessible trail network throughout Barry County promoting healthy lifestyles and economic vitality.



## COMPLETE STREETS POP-UP DEMONSTRATION EVENTS 2021 & 2022

Pop-up demonstrations are a way for the community to experience what a variety of types of complete street modifications might look and feel like without any permanent changes. Community members get to see what they think about amenities like bike lanes, crosswalks, and even a mini roundabout or a shaded sitting area with benches in a very tangible way.

Pop-up demonstrations were held in the Village of Middleville in 2021 and 2022 during the Annual Heritage Day festival.

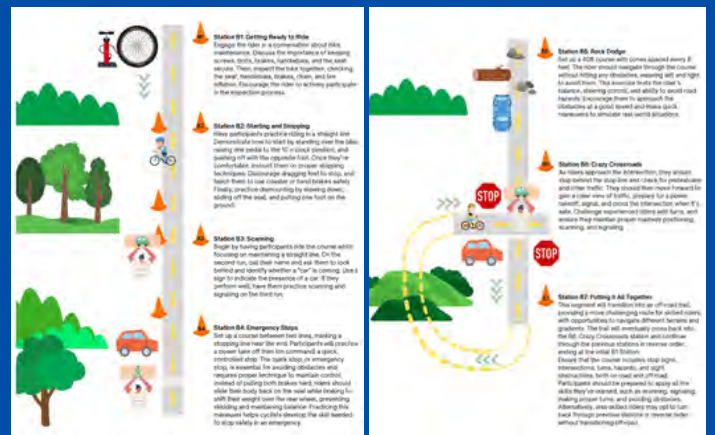
In 2021, Blue Zones Activate created a pop-up demonstration along Russell Street that runs perpendicular to Main Street. The demonstration included temporary bike lanes and a colorful crosswalk as well as a survey to gauge community interest in Complete Street improvements.



A parklet was installed the following year in the Village of Middleville to show how easy and low-cost it can be to turn parking spaces into places where people can congregate and socialize with their fellow community members. This parklet — created using outdoor grass carpet, Adirondack chairs, and umbrellas — was installed in conjunction with Heritage Days and provided a great space for people to enjoy food and drink while spending time downtown. The parklet was very well received by the community.

## BIKE RODEO AND OUTDOOR YOUTH DAY 2024

Blue Zones Activate partnered with the Barry Conservation District to add a Bike Rodeo event to the 2024 Barry County Outdoor Youth Day at Charlton Park Recreation Area. The annual event attracted more than 500 visitors who wanted to learn about fun ways to enjoy the outdoors. The bike rodeo featured seven skill stations designed to introduce riders to the basic biking skills necessary to ride a bike safely. The event included a helmet giveaway sponsored by Corewell Health and loaner bikes provided by the Barry County YMCA.



# Food Systems

Blue Zones' work in food systems revolves around providing those in the community with healthier food options in places where they work, learn, and play; helping them develop healthy food habits; and also ensuring everyone has access to healthy food. Blue Zones work in this area includes developing a local food culture and food infrastructure.

As one of the most diverse food-growing areas of the U.S., Barry County has a lot to offer its residents in terms of locally produced food. For this reason, Blue Zones Activate has worked to establish farmers' markets and farm stands to encourage people to eat local foods. Blue Zones has also assisted in the development of community gardens to help establish a food environment outside of large farms. In addition, healthy food preparation classes and school programs are helping develop a food culture where people of all ages are encouraged to choose healthy options for themselves and their families.



**Dr. Maggi Adamek -  
Blue Zones Food  
Policy Expert**

Dr. Margaret Adamek works with Blue Zones Activate communities to identify and achieve policy and systems changes that move the dial on healthy eating. With over 25 years of food systems experience, Maggi is a national leader and content expert working at the intersection of food, health, and agriculture to improve the American food supply. She worked for nearly two decades at the University of Minnesota, most recently as the Local Food Systems Research Fellow.

Maggi has chaired a national, decade-long initiative to improve the quality and sustainability of the American food supply sponsored by the WK Kellogg Foundation that involved over 120 research universities and agricultural colleges. She has developed food hubs, statewide food systems initiatives, and university degree programs in food systems, and also conducts food systems training and development for major foundations; large scale, cross-sector partnerships; tribal nations; and units of government across the United States and Canada.

Blue Zones' work in the food environment has focused on four areas:

- ✓ **Food Skills** - How do community members acquire the skills needed to prepare healthy foods?
- ✓ **Food Environments** - Comparatively, to what extent are healthy and unhealthy options available in the places where people spend their time?
- ✓ **Food Culture** - What is the current level of food culture and identity?
- ✓ **Food Infrastructure** - To what extent and how sustainable is the current community structure for gardening, farmers' markets, local food production, aggregation and distribution, and hunger relief?

Barry County takes great pride in its agriculture and its local businesses. Farmers' markets are held in three county locations: Hastings, Middleville, and Yankee Springs. Besides these markets, there are numerous farm stands throughout the community where farmers sell their goods.



# Community Food Center

## FEASIBILITY STUDY

With community stakeholder support, Blue Zones Activate partnered with New Venture Advisors to explore the feasibility of a community food center in Hastings. New Venture Advisors guided the local action team members to research the project and its goals, exploring if it was a viable business for the community, and if there was a financially feasible model that the community could support. During the feasibility study, the local action team, in partnership with the New Venture Advisors team:

- ✓ Completed a market study from interviews with community members, organizations, and stakeholders; and a survey of local community members
- ✓ Identified and analyzed potential sites
- ✓ Identified potential operators, partners, and tenants
- ✓ Developed an operating model
- ✓ Developed a building program to define physical space with visualizations
- ✓ Built financial tools including a project cost model, capacity model, and break-even proforma
- ✓ Held community engagement events to refine, inform, and shape plans for moving forward
- ✓ Worked in partnership with MSU to gather feedback on all models and information
- ✓ Assessed risk/economic impact and prepared a final Feasibility Study report

The work culminated with the Advisory Committee voting to proceed and deciding on next steps.



## WHY BUILD A COMMUNITY FOOD CENTER?

### COMMUNITY ACCESS, ECONOMIC IMPACT & BENEFITS



- Offer small businesses and farmers needed access to infrastructure that supports growth and individual income development.



- Creates a "hub" to centralize food and nutrition-based programs, opportunities, events, and business within a region.



- Bolsters local and regional economies and prevent local dollars from leaking into surrounding urban areas.



- Increases affordability and access to healthy, locally grown food options (across all levels of spending)



- Improves health outcomes via education, programming, and healthy food options.



- Creates jobs (direct – at facility, indirect – via businesses supported)



*Arvus FarmStop, Ann Arbor MI*

## **RETAIL MARKET ANALYSIS**

The Retail Market analysis identified that 60% of household spending on groceries and food services is leaving Barry County, resulting in a retail gap of \$83.9 million in food and beverage categories. These findings underscore the potential for the community food center model to capture fresh food dollars and better serve local consumers.

Blue Zones Activate partnered with New Venture Advisors (NVA) to conduct an eight-month feasibility study, which highlighted the county's strong agricultural potential and need for a centralized hub to improve food access and support local producers. In 2022, the Barry County Commissioners allocated \$100,000 in ARPA funding for ongoing research, capital campaign development, and partnerships with organizations like MSU Extension and Sprout BC to enhance opportunities for farmers.

The community has secured a prime location adjacent to a large, multi-family development on the site of the old Royal Coach property across from the Thornapple Plaza. The site offers convenient access to downtown Hastings to maximize accessibility for residents and beautiful views of the Thornapple River. The Community Food Center is set to become a premier facility for promoting local food systems and enhancing the community's food environment.





Final modeling for the food center includes a local foods consignment-style grocery store featuring regionally grown products with a cafe modeled after the Argus FarmStop in Ann Arbor.

The FarmStop model combines the best elements of a traditional farmers' market with fresh, local produce directly from farmers with the convenience of an everyday shopping experience with high-quality refrigeration and displays. Farmers own their own produce, set their prices, and receive the majority of the sale price. This model is spreading across the country, expanding markets for local farmers to reach consumers without the time-consuming days of staffing booths at farmers' markets.

The center will also include a commercial and teaching kitchen providing space for local food entrepreneurs to grow their small food/catering businesses with access to an in-house market to sell their products on consignment. The teaching kitchen will enable Hastings High School culinary students additional space to grow their program and provide space for MSU Extension and other healthy food instructional classes. An outdoor market area could be used for special market events.

The center will also provide a warehouse, refrigerator, and freezer space for the aggregation of local products.

The food center will focus on providing convenient, equitable access to fresh, locally sourced foods to all residents in Barry County. Funding support for the community food center comes from federal and state grants as well as local community supporters.

The center will also feature a full-service daycare center for infants through preschool-aged children, another much-needed community amenity.

The original Community Food Center Action team transitioned into the current Governance Board in early 2024.



# Blue Zones Mobile Markets

Blue Zones Activate conducted a Landscape Gap Analysis in 2020, which revealed significant gaps in residents' access to food assistance services in Assyria and Johnstown Townships. Consequently, the analysis concluded that a mobile pantry service would greatly benefit these high-need areas.

Blue Zones Activate launched the Johnstown and Assyria Township's Mobile Market Program in 2021, in partnership with the South Michigan Food Bank and the Barry County United Way. Since then, the mobile markets have successfully provided fresh produce boxes monthly in July, August, September, and October to 125 households each month. The distributions helped to reduce grocery costs and needs and increased fruit and vegetable consumption for families which had previously lacked a food access program. The distributions are supported by dedicated community volunteers and council members.



# Community Gardens

## DELTON

The Community Garden Action Team was established to support the Delton Kellogg Community Group in enhancing its school and community garden initiatives. Blue Zones Activate secured grants from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation and the WK Kellogg Foundation to expand food production and develop a school curriculum in partnership with local educators. The committee connected with local farmers practicing natural growing techniques and facilitated a "Grow it, Try it, Like it" class for children, which engaged an average of 22 kids weekly in learning about growing and sampling fresh produce.

In 2022, part of the grant funding was allocated to provide the Delton School Garden with new supplies, including a storage shed and irrigation materials, and resources to create garden curriculum bins for teachers. These efforts not only provided educational materials, they enhanced food access and fostered strong community connections, as residents collaborated in the gardening process.





By early 2023, curriculum bins were used by multiple classrooms, benefiting over 85 students weekly during the summer. Each school year, the program culminated in a Harvest Celebration featuring garden produce. The garden curriculum is used for a 6-week spring semester class, summer school classes, school daycare, yoga classes, art projects, and more. In total, over 800 students participated in the garden every year. Surplus produce is distributed to The Shack in Delton. The public is encouraged to harvest from the garden all summer by picking fresh veggies including tomatoes, squash, greens, herbs, melons, and berries. A Delton Kellogg high school class is constructing a veggie stand to promote surplus produce distribution to the community and bring more awareness to the garden. Future garden plans include enhancing the educational area by adding ADA pathways, teaching areas, raised beds, and picnic tables to ensure all students have the opportunity to participate in the garden curriculum.



## DELTON SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY GARDEN CONCEPTUAL MASTER PLAN



The success of the Delton Community and School Garden inspired two new community gardens in Barry County: Johnstown Township Community Garden and Nashville Community Garden.

### **JOHNSTOWN TOWNSHIP COMMUNITY GARDEN**

Johnstown Township trustees continued activating their campus with the addition of a community garden in 2024. Township officials also received \$7,000 in funding from the Barry Community Foundation Healthy Communities grant to purchase supplies to create a community garden adjacent to their new playground, pavilion, and multi-use pathway. In the first year, Johnstown trustees created a compact and prolific garden with raised beds and a new shed. Residents enjoyed picking a variety of squash, tomatoes, herbs, and cucumbers.



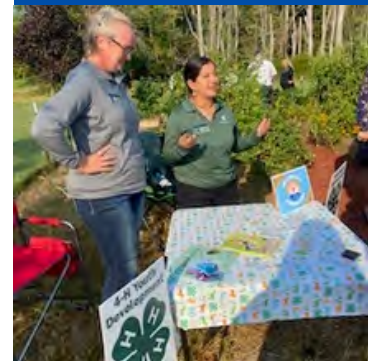
### NASHVILLE COMMUNITY GARDEN

In late 2023, Blue Zones Activate was asked to help build a new community garden in the Village of Nashville. Many village residents were interested in growing gardens but lacked the space and sunlight on their small lots to achieve much success. The Village Council gave permission to use a 30-foot by 80-foot grassy space adjacent to the Village playgrounds and ballfields as well as use of the Village water.

Blue Zones Activate partnered with MSU Extension 4-H educators to begin assisting over 15 village residents in creating a new community garden. The committee met monthly throughout the fall and winter to plan the garden. The group’s aim was to help provide fresh produce for not just their own families but also community members, with surplus produce to be donated to the local food shelter.

Blue Zones Activate secured start-up funding for the garden with a \$7,000 Healthy Communities Grant from the Barry Community Foundation. This funding allowed the community garden committee to buy a garden shed, fencing, raised beds, garden soil, and gardening equipment.

MSU Extension and Blue Zones Activate sponsored an event on September 4th 2024, to celebrate the first year of the Nashville Community Garden. Over 30 people attended the event, which featured a series of four educational stations that highlighted the significant role community gardens play in promoting health, nutrition, local engagement, and social connections.



The garden not only provides produce for the garden committee, but it is also open to the public and donates fresh vegetables to the Maple Valley Community Center of Hope.



During the summer of 2024, the Putnam District Library partnered with MSE Extension educators to provide Adventures in Gardening, focusing on literacy and stem-based gardening activities.





## Food Policy Council

The B. Healthy Food Council in Barry County was established with support from Blue Zones Activate Barry County, focusing on creating a structured planning process to enhance community food systems. Led by national food policy expert Dr. Margaret Adamek, planning sessions in 2021 and 2022 resulted in a defined governance structure, mission, vision, and priorities, emphasizing food access, agricultural support, and future farmer development. In 2023, the council received a \$5,000 grant from the Michigan Local Food Council Network to create marketing materials to promote awareness and engage the community.

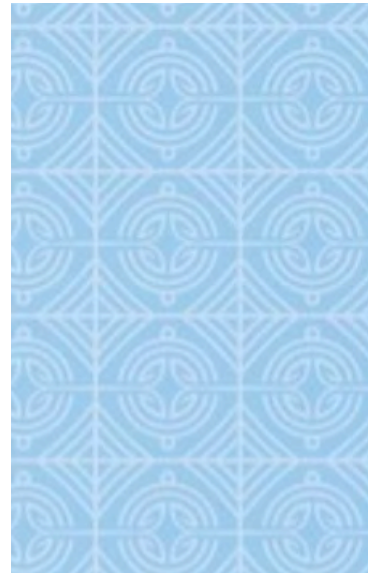
The council focuses on three key priorities to guide their efforts; Increasing Access to Healthy Food, Agricultural Support and Opportunity, and Growing a New Generation of Farmers. The council aims to increase visibility and resources for healthy food access in Barry County, focusing on values of accessibility, collaboration, and sustainability.

## Food Systems Projects

### FARMERS WORKSHOP SERIES



The Blue Zones Community Food Center Action Team and MSU Extension partnered to present a series of four workshops for local farmers to provide them with resources to grow their businesses. The series was presented by Garrett Ziegler, MSU Extension Community Food Systems and Sustainable Tourism Educator.



### HOME GARDENING/COOKING DEMONSTRATIONS

Activate Barry County partnered with MSU Extension Food Educator Kellie Jordan to present two workshops to educate area residents on how to safely preserve fresh fruits and vegetables. The first workshop on preserving summer harvests was held in September 2023 at the Hastings Public Library, and the second workshop on preserving pumpkin and squash was held in November at the Delton VFW.

## FREE FOOD BOXES - POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

The YMCA of Barry County and Blue Zones Activate teamed up in 2020 and again in 2021 to distribute USDA Farm to Families Free Food Boxes. In the summer of 2020, the YMCA of Barry County and Blue Zones Activate distributed 208,000 lb. of fresh produce to Barry County residents at 11 locations across the county over the course of five weeks. The Hastings Band Boosters then continued the program for an additional three weeks. These distributions were so highly attended that partnered organizations decided to do another distribution to the Barry County community, but this time in the cold of winter. Volunteers came out from across the community to help make this distribution across six sites throughout the county a success. In total, over a five-week period, 313,000 lb. of food was distributed. Local partners included the Hastings Baptist Church, City of Hastings, Hastings Mutual, Barry County Lumber, Delton Shack and DK Schools, Middleville United Methodist Church, Nashville Assembly of God Church, Johnstown Township, Assyria Township, and the Serenity Club. This effort was a true testament to the statement, "Many hands make light work."



## Community Engagement

### COMMUNITY EVENT BOOTHS AND SUPPORT

Activate Barry County has made it a priority to show up to community events throughout the lifetime of the initiative. Activate Barry County has participated in various events, from the annual business expo to youth day. For the past couple of years and through a generous donation from the United Way and bike assembly volunteers from TerraTrike, we were able to give away well over 100 kids' bikes at our community events. Riding for Ryan provided safety flags to keep riders visible and safe as they enjoyed being active on their new bikes.



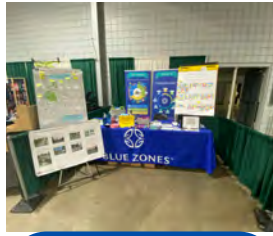
**EVENTS ACTIVATE BARRY COUNTY HAS REGULARLY PARTICIPATED IN OVER THE YEARS:**



**VERY BARRY**



**HEALTH FAIRS AT FLEXFAB AND HASTINGS FIBERGLASS**



**BARRY COUNTY FAIR**



**FAIRGROUNDS FESTIVAL**



**BACK TO SCHOOL BASH 2024**



**DELTON FOUNDERS DAY**



**MIDDLEVILLE HERITAGE DAYS**



**BARRY COUNTY OUTDOOR YOUTH DAY AND BIKE RODEO**



**BARRY INDOOR MARKET DAYS**



**PIERCE CEDAR CREEK INSTITUTE NEW YEAR NEW YOU**



**HASTINGS LIBRARY PROGRAM**



**HASTINGS SUMMERFEST**



**HASTINGS SANTA DASH 5K**



**YANKEE SPRINGS TOWNSHIP PARK DAY**



**BARRY COUNTY BUSINESS EXPO**

**2023 COMMUNITY EVENT**

In 2023, Blue Zones Activate Barry County prioritized community engagement by hosting a long-awaited in-person event on June 14, themed "Around the World's Blue Zones." This gathering aimed to celebrate the project's extension and reconnect residents after the pandemic. Attendees explored stations representing the five original blue zones regions – Sardinia, Okinawa, Nicoya, Loma Linda, and Ikaria – each offering activities that highlighted the Power 9<sup>®</sup> Principles of healthy living. The Barry County station provided updates on local Blue Zones Activate initiatives. The event began with speeches from key figures, including Blue Zones Activate Barry County Executive Director Catherine Getty and Blue Zones Co-founder Nick Buettner, and concluded with prize drawings. Over 400 community members attended, supported by more than 20 volunteers, marking the event as a great success.





## WALKING GROUPS

The walking groups and challenges in Barry County have fostered community connection and physical activity, especially during the pandemic.

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- In **2021**, the initiative allowed participants to safely gather outdoors twice a week, with one walk on sidewalks and another on a local nature trail. Over 90 participants joined the challenge, tracking their walks using provided calendars filled with tips to help meet their goals.
- In **2022**, the groups focused on encouraging a routine of walking at least 30 minutes twice a week, aligning with Blue Zones' Power 9<sup>®</sup> Principles for better health. The partnership with Corewell Health Pennock Wellness Center facilitated these groups for 10 weeks during the summer months.
- By **2023**, the walking challenge expanded to include Blue Zones Walking Groups throughout five communities: Middleville, Hastings, Nashville, Delton, and Yankee Springs, with 72 participants. Groups varied in their routes, with some exploring new paths and others walking familiar trails.
- In **2024**, 46 registered walkers participated in groups across Hastings, Middleville, Delton, and Yankee Springs, continuing the momentum of community engagement and physical activity.

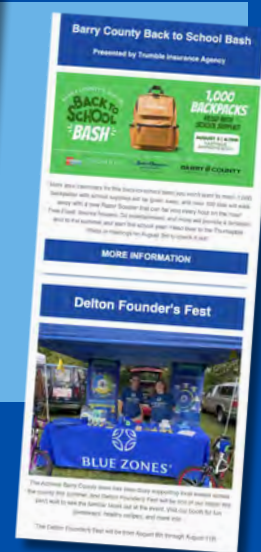
## NEWSLETTERS & ARTICLES

Blue Zones Activate Barry County continued to spread community news, Blue Zones information, warm messaging, recipes, and so much more through an E-newsletter, as well as regular articles in the Hastings Reminder. Over the lifetime of Blue Zones Activate, over 40 E-newsletters were published, and the newsletter accumulated over 1,200 subscribers in the County.



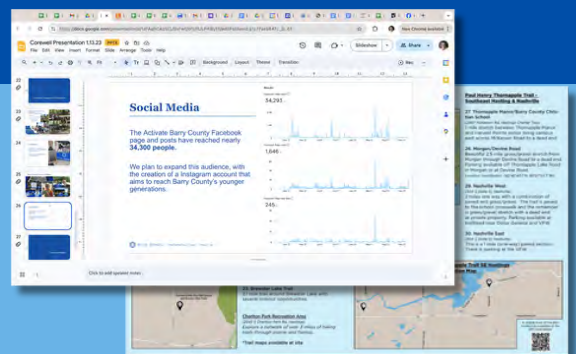
## PODCAST

Blue Zones Activate Barry County was featured in a Barry County Conservation District podcast in May of 2024.



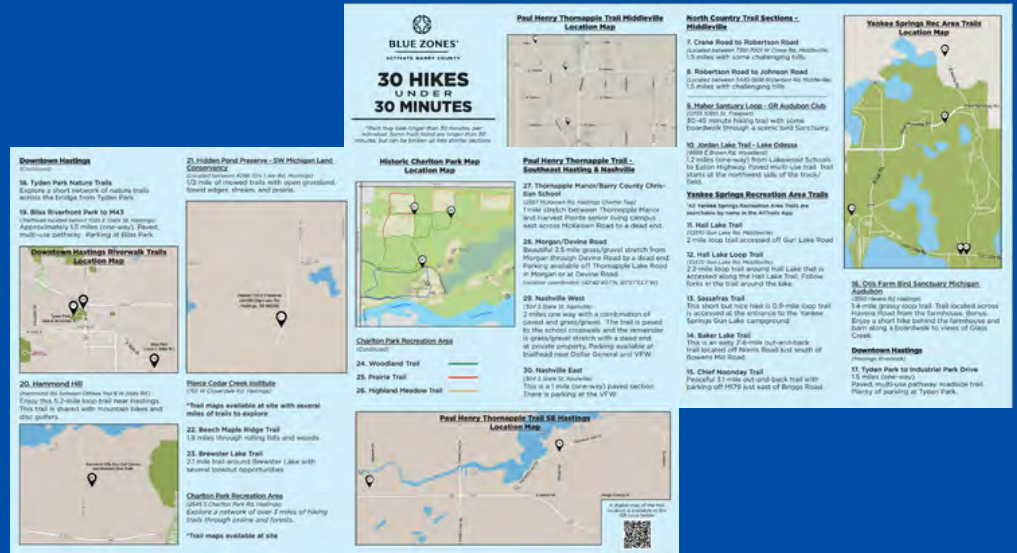
## FACEBOOK

Activate Barry County utilized Facebook as a social media platform to spread updates and news regarding our work, as well as to connect with community champions and organizations. Over the course of Activate Barry County, the page accrued 972 likes and over 1.2K followers.



## THIRTY 30-MINUTE HIKES IN BARRY COUNTY

Additionally, Blue Zones created a brochure featuring thirty 30-minute hikes across Barry County, promoting walking and hiking as part of a healthy lifestyle. The brochure features a variety of hikes throughout the county and a QR link to Google Maps with directions to each location.



## MAILBOXES

Mailboxes have been a way for Blue Zones Activate to reach residents throughout the county, especially during the pandemic. Blue Zones-themed boxes located at libraries in Freeport, Delton, Dowling, Hastings, Nashville and Thornapple Township Hall were filled with treasures including recipes, vegetable seeds, wooden spoons, measuring spoons, pollinator seed packets, and more.



## FARMERS MARKET APPEARANCES

Activate Barry County attended farmers' markets across the county on numerous occasions to pass out recipe samples and cards, provide information on Blue Zones initiatives, and promote local food and farmers. Plant-based recipe samples were provided to give market shoppers inspiration for how to utilize the farmers' products. In 2024, Activate Barry County designed and provided totes for the farmers' markets in Hastings and Middleville, as well as sponsored the indoor markets at Barry Community Foundation in March and April.



## Conclusion

Blue Zones Activate Barry County has been a community-driven process since the beginning and could not be successful without the support and volunteerism of the residents, local leaders, champions, and sponsors. We want to extend a special thanks to our steering committee, and all who participate in sub-committees, and action teams, or have volunteered with us over the lifetime of the initiative. We would not have been able to move the needle on health and wellness in Barry County without your efforts. Please see the extensive list for all who touch Blue Zones Activate Barry County, whether big or small.

### **THANK YOU TO ALL INDIVIDUALS IN THE BARRY COUNTY COMMUNITY WHO SUPPORTED BLUE ZONES ALL ALONG THE WAY**

*Every attempt was made to identify and list the individuals who have contributed to Blue Zones Activate Barry County. Please forgive us if your name was inadvertently left out, in no way was this intentional and please know we are no less grateful.*

Sarah Alden, Travis Alden, Laura Anderson, Jon Anderson, Jennifer Antel, Lily Rose Arriaga, Sheri Babcock, Ben Baker, Carol Balkon, Anne Barna, Dave Baum, Susie Baum, Mike Beachnau, Tracey Beachnau, Amy Beck, Kevin Beck, Dave Bee, Dan Belson, Katherine Bertolini, Daniel Beyer, Micky Bittner, Jim Blake, Michelle Boudreau, Dale Boulter, Arin Bowen, Cheryl Bower, Mike Bremer, Lyn Briel, Michael Brown, Mike Brown, Fabiana Brownell, Milea Burgstahler, Jenna Burns, Christina Bush, Katherine Bussard, Sarah Moyer Cale, Michael Callton, Andrea Carbine, Shari Carney, Larry Case, Dillon Catlett, Derek Chandler, Rachel Chandler, Kathryn Christie, Ivan Christopher, Janice Cleary, Maggie Coleman, Betsy Colgan, Ariana Correa, Bridgett Czarnecki, Jerry Czarnecki, Janine Dalman, Josh DeBruyn, Doug DeCamp, Jim DeCamp, Margaret DeCamp, Scott Decker, Sherry DeGraaf, Rebecca DeHaan, Steve DeLong, Johnny DeMaagd, Tom DeVries, Yvonne DeVries, Mike Diamond, Angie Ditmar, Randall Dobbertien, Ed Domke, Michelle Duits, Mike Duits, Barb Earl, Diane Ebaugh, Sarah Edelman, Andrea Ellens, Anne Ellis, Bud Elliston, Michal Ann Enders, Alana England, Charlie Farnum, Kendal Farnum, Amanda Feighner, Bryce Feighner, Frank Fiala, Jayne Flannigan, Emily Flessner, Lani Forbes, Kathy Forsyth, Chelsey Foster, Tina Frank, Lucas Galaviz, Bonnie Gettys, Bob Gilbert, Nancy Goodin, Gloria Goodner, Brian Green, Michelle Guthrie, Art Hackett, Caryn Hansen, Aaron Hartman, Trent Harvey, Dave Hatfield, Ginny Hawkins, Barb Haywood, Jenny Haywood, Matt Haywood, Deanna Hedlund, Jennifer Heinzman, Peggy Hemerling, Allison Hinton, Jeff Hodge, Tannett Hodge, Bill Hoefer, Michael Hoskins, Jim James, Joseph Jandernoa, Debbie Jensen, Andru Jevicks, Morgan Johnson, Bruce Jones, Bernie Jore, Marsha Keefer, Tyler Kent, Jeff Kessler, Marge Kesler, Dan King, Brad Knobloch, Tess Knobloch, Wes Knollenberg, Mark Kolankowski, Scott Korpak, Cynthia Krupp, Theresa Lancaster, Megan Lavell, Sheryl Lewis Blake, Kay Loftus, Jay Logsdon, Rhonda Lundquist, Nichole Lyke, Shannon Maier, Crystal Malenski, Jeff Mansfield, Emily Mater, Tom Mawson, Laurel McCamman, Gina McMahan, Jim McManus, Julie McMillen, Lauren Metcalfe, Sydney Miller, Erin Moore, Rick Moore, Belinda Morgan, Kim Moser, Matt Moser, Becky Newton, Karmen Nickerson, Jane Norton, Kim Nyugen, Dan Patton, Tammy Pennington, Jodi Pessell, Jessica Phillips, Larry Phillips, Quentin Phillips, Alyssa Piccone, Sandi Podolan, Amy Poholski, Deanna Powerll, Pat Powers, Sarah Price, Ali Quilitsch, Mary Rebert, Kelly Rickard, Ryan Rosin, Cheyanne Roush, Don Shils, Julie Schils, Katherine Schmidt, Colette Scrimger, Savannah Sears, Jill Sell, Chuck Schira, Mary Schira, Michelle Skedgell, Leah Smith, Alexis Snyder, Dave Solmes, Jon Sporer, Chris Stafford, Kerri Steward, Justin Straub, Carol Svihl, Ed Szumowski, Marcia Szumowski, Bobbie Taffee, Amber Terhaar, Deb Timmerman, Brian Urquhart, Peter Vogel, Nick wells, Ron Welton, Bonnie White, Landon Wilkes, Tracey Williams, Carla Wilson-Neil, Sarah Wiltse, Tom Wiswell, Leila Wood, Patty Woods, Heather Yost, Chase Youngs, Stacey Youngs, Garrett Ziegler, and Courtney Ziny.