



March 2026 Board of Commissioners Activity Report

219 E Paw Paw St. Paw Paw, MI 49079 | (269) 657-8253 | admin@vanburencountymi.gov | www.vanburencountymi.gov

Highlights

- **Board of Commissioners Vacancy Filled:** The Board appointed Mike Toth to fill the District 5 vacancy left by the passing of Commissioner Peat. This appointment will last until a successor is elected in November 3, 2026, General Election.
- **Specialty Court Grant:** The Board approved a request to submit a \$1,000,000 federal grant application to the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The funding will be used to support and strengthen the Swift and Sure Sanction Probation Program, an evidence-based alternative for individuals at significant risk of incarceration.
- **Planning Commission Bylaws Update:** The Board approved revised bylaws for the Van Buren County Planning Commission. The most significant change **reduces the membership from eleven to nine members** to help the Commission more consistently achieve a quorum and improve operational efficiency.
- **Sheriff's Office Grant Acceptance:** The Board approved the acceptance of a **Congressionally Directed Spending grant in the amount of \$576,000** to acquire Rapid DNA technology.
- **Technology Upgrades:** The Board approved the **2026 PC Refresh** purchase in an amount up to \$55,000 for 33 desktop PCs and 14 laptops. Additionally, the Board moved forward with a five-year **copier lease renewal** through Applied Innovations to replace nine existing copiers with new models.
- **Economic Development (New Age Laboratories):** The Board approved a partial mortgage discharge and a second loan amendment for New Age Laboratories. This releases a residential house and acreage from the mortgage while retaining vacant parcels as collateral, allowing the borrower to restructure higher-interest financing while keeping the County and EDC in a secure, first-position financial state.

- **Website Modernization MOUs:** The Board approved Memorandums of Understanding with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC) for the structural rebuild and modernization of the SWMPC website, MyWayThere.org (a public mobility platform), and the US-12 Heritage Trail website.
- **Public Transit Funding:** The Board approved MDOT contracts to secure **99,788 in CMAQ money** for bus replacements.
- **Purchase of Development Rights (PDR):** A resolution of support was approved for 2026 PDR grant applications to the Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development (MDARD) to permanently preserve productive agricultural land.

Committee and Board Appointments/Reappointments

The following appointments were approved or presented in March:

- **Board of Commissioners (District 5):** Appointed **Mike Toth** to fill the District 5 vacancy.
- **Forwarded for April Approval:** The appointment of **Mary Hosley** to the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC) for a two-year term expiring December 31, 2027, was postponed and moved to the next regular meeting of the Board of Commissioners.

Scan or click the QR code for updates, news, live Board meetings, agendas, minutes, and more!





Medical Director and Nursing

The Public Health teams had an active month, with the STI/HIV team conducting outreach at the Van Buren County Jail, presenting at Lawton Schools, and attending the Dowagiac Union Schools Sex Education Advisory Board. Immunization nurses began annual VFC provider site visits. Communicable disease nursing staff remained busy investigating Tuberculosis (TB), Listeria, Legionella, and other reportable illnesses. All nursing teams are preparing for the accreditation visit in September 2026.

Our Hearing and Vision Technicians completed an impressive 2,941 screenings in the first quarter of 2026. Congratulations to Amy Wagoner and Melissa Eldred for their outstanding work.

As of February 21, a total of 79 influenza pediatric deaths have been reported in the U.S. Regional level data on pediatric flu deaths of Michigan residents are shared in the **Michigan Flu Focus**¹. Information on age group, sex, vaccination status or more specific geography will not be shared in order to protect the privacy of the children and their families. Flu and COVID-19 vaccines continue to be available for insured, underinsured, and uninsured residents through programs such as the CDC's **Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program**² and the Adult Vaccine Program (AVP). Individuals are encouraged to contact us for additional information or go to **Vaccines.gov**³.

Dental Clinic and Outreach

Both clinics saw steady activity this month, with Dowagiac welcoming 25 new patients and completing 331 total visits, while Lawrence added 22 new patients and saw 484 patients overall. This was the first full month under the new fee schedule and sliding-scale discount, which has generally been well-received and is functioning as intended. Some refinement of discount tiers and income verification may be needed as more data is collected.

Hygiene services remain strained at both locations, but the hygiene team continues to work exceptionally hard to accommodate patients and maintain smooth operations. Overall, the dental team's dedication, resilience, and high level of care remain outstanding.

Environmental Health

- 46 septic permits
- 37 well permits
- 42 restaurant inspections
- 02 temporary food inspections
- 28 septic final inspections
- 35 well final inspections
- 07 restaurant reinspections
- 01 public swimming pool inspections

Location

Van Buren County

260 South Street, Lawrence, MI 49064

Cass County

302 S. Front Street, Dowagiac, MI 49047

Business Hours

Monday - Thursday · 8:00am to 5:00pm

Friday · 8:00am to 12:00pm

Clinics

Van Buren County

Immunization · Thursdays

STI Testing & Treatment · Wednesdays

Dental · Monday - Thursday

Cass County

Immunization · 1st and 3rd Wednesdays

STI Testing & Treatment · Thursdays

Dental · Monday - Thursday

Links

¹ <https://www.michigan.gov/flu/-/media/Project/Websites/mdhhs/Folder1/Folder43/MIFluFocus.pdf>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines-for-children/about/index.html>

³ <https://www.vaccines.gov/en/>



Van Buren Conservation District March 2026 Program Update

Spring will be here before we know it, and we have a lot in store for Van Buren County. As always, the VBCD is here to help you, our community, and natural resources. We'd love to hear from you!

Grant Received – The Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development recently awarded us a Regenerative Agriculture Education & Outreach grant to expand and enhance education and outreach events that promote regenerative agriculture practices and farmer-to-farmer networks. Be sure to check out our Farming for the Future conference (March 11) and an on-farm field day that will be scheduled later this year.

Tree Sale – Last chance! The pre-sale period closes March 29 at 11:59 PM. Leftover seedlings will be available for sale April 10 and 11, but we usually sell out of many species before then. Adding these seedlings to your property encourages large scale pollinator and wildlife habitat building and adds to our community's beauty. Profits from the sale go back into our conservation efforts and programs. Shop the sale at VanBurenCD.org/Shop

Farming for the Future – We're excited to host our 19th Farming for the Future Conference! Supporting Van Buren County farms, businesses, and stewardship is important to us. The event includes the resources, experts, and topics to support that vital work.

Date & Time: March 11, 2026 | 9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Location: Van Buren Conference Center | 490 S Paw Paw St., Lawrence, MI 49064

Registration required. Lunch will be provided. [To register, click here.](#)

Emily Hickmott

Emily Hickmott, Executive Director

Upcoming Events (details available on [our website](#))

- Farming for the Future Conference | March 11
- Discover with the District: Kal-Haven Trail | Saturday, March 21 | VanBurenCD.org/discover-2026
- VBCD Board Meeting | March 25 | VanBurenCD.org/About
- Tree Sale Order Pickup & Leftover Sale | Friday, April 10 & Saturday April, 11 | VanBurenCD.org/shop
- VBCD Board Meeting | April 22 | VanBurenCD.org/About
- VBCD Annual Meeting & Director Election | July 17 | details to be announced



Van Buren Conservation District

March 2026 Program Update

Program Updates

Resource Recovery & Recycling (*Kalli Marshall, Jacob Diljak*) – Five communities have worked with us to make their drop-off centers a place that you can bring foam in for recycling year-round. You can learn more about where and how by checking out the announcement at VanBurenCD.org/foam-recycling Our 2026 collection events have been announced. This year's electronic recycling opportunities have been changed to make it easier to keep those valuable materials in the economy. VanBurenCD.org/van-buren-county-recycling-collections

Outreach (*Jacob Diljak*) – Jacob delivered annual reports to our local municipal offices and partners, highlighting the impacts of last year's work. He is wrapping up the Food, Farm, Fun Guide, which should be ready to check out in April, just in time for our Tree Seedling Sale event which he's also been working hard to organize and make a success. Our goal is to see over 13,000 native seedlings planted in Van Buren County and Southwest Michigan through this sale this year.

Agriculture & Water Quality Team (*Erin Fuller and Colleen Forestieri*) – In 2025, we helped local farmers install 396 acres of no-till and 3,112 acres of cover crops. These best management practices prevented about 1,150 TONS of sediment runoff to our lakes and streams. We provided \$100,128 in cost-share dollars to help farmers try conservation practices. We also worked with lakefront landowners to plant 300 native trees and shrubs to help keep our lakes clean.

Invasive Species SWxSW Corner CISMA Team (*Alex Florian and Jena Johnson*) – We should receive decisions from funders on the grant applications we submitted last fall in the coming weeks which helps us finish planning our invasive species management and education for the rest of the year. February saw us connecting with local contractors about their role in preventing the spread of invasive species. We also started the process of hiring the VBCD's seasonal Invasive Species Strike Team Crew.

Conservation Technical Assistance Program: MAEAP and Regenerative Agriculture Programs (*Kyle Mead*) – Kyle has been visiting producers for both new and re-assessments and has completed several verifications this last month. He also restarted a state-wide CTAP Tech Team Monthly Meeting (virtual) to provide MAEAP training to newer technicians. These help other technicians get producers to the finish line of MAEAP Verification. The tech has also been assisting NRCS staff with I&E worksheets (5 producers) needed for NRCS Contracting as well as Record Collecting from producers to verify compliance for CSP payments (6 producers).



Van Buren Conservation District March 2026 Program Update

Natural Resource Technical Assistance (*Gabriel Francisco*) - Gabe continued to meet with landowners about their resource concerns on-property and in the office. Federal conservation program payment deadlines and application deadlines continue to be a focus of his time. Contact our office for help navigating federal programs to assist with land and water concerns.

Forestry Assistance Program (*Benjamin Savoie, Barry Conservation District*) - Ben is working across nine counties, including Van Buren County, supporting our forests. Working with landowners, Ben works in the Qualified Forest Program to save landowners money and strengthen forest health. Thank you to Van Buren County's Digital Information team for helping Ben connect with landowners who could benefit from this program.



ROAD COMMISSION TALKING POINTS

SURVEYING AND MANAGING INVASIVE PLANTS IN THE ROAD RIGHT-OF-WAY

Several members of the Van Buren Conservation District's Strike Team attended the Road Commission's March 5, 2026 meeting to report on the progress they have made surveying and managing invasive plants – specifically, Japanese knotweed and phragmites – in the road right-of-way. Phragmites is a tall wetland grass which can block visibility along Rights-of-Way. It is also a potential fire hazard. Japanese Knotweed roots can break through concrete bridges and pavement and damage roads from underground. Also, its bamboo-like stems can grow up to 12 feet and block roadway visibility. The Conservation District shared a Story Map which shows the progress being made by the Strike Team in their efforts to map and treat areas over the past five years. The Story Map can be found on the Road Commission's website at <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/1b1dd4f7bdc742e1a6c8c5633a3a58ba>.

REMINDER: ROAD SEGMENTS FOR SEALCOAT ROADS ARE DUE BY MARCH 31

Township's are required to provide the Road Commission with locations for sealcoat by **March 31st**. This allows time for each road to be reviewed by staff for any necessary culvert repairs. It also allows staff to accomplish de-berming and patching prior to the commencement of sealcoat operations when all hands are on deck. Please submit these sealcoat locations to Alyssa McAndrew (AlyssaMcAndrew@vbcr.org) as soon as possible!

UPDATE: INTERVIEWS AND OFFERS OF EMPLOYMENT

Open interviews were recently held for seasonal positions (engineering and seasonal general laborers). These interviews were held from 3 PM to 7 PM on two days to allow interested candidates the ability to choose a time that worked for their schedule. The response was good and offers of employment have been made. In addition, scheduled interviews were held for Road Maintenance Employees (RME), a Heavy Equipment Mechanic, a General Mechanic, a RME Apprentice, and a Purchasing Clerk.

SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT DONATES TOWER LIGHTS, GENERATORS, AND DIGITAL MESSAGE BOARDS TO VBCRC

The Van Buren County Sheriff's Department has generously donated unused equipment to the VBCRC. Portable Digital Message Boards (DMBs). The DMBs can be utilized to effectively communicate with the public and manage traffic during various events and emergencies, and can also be useful in work zones. Tower Lights were also donated by the Sheriff's Department, which can be critical for ensuring safety in emergency nighttime operations. The VBCRC extends its sincere appreciation to the Sheriff's Department for its generosity and for providing equipment that strengthens and enhances our capabilities.

MANAGING DIRECTOR TO COMMENCE ANNUAL ATTENDANCE AT TOWNSHIP BOARD MEETINGS

Managing Director, Bret Witkowski, will begin his annual round of attending Township Board Meetings this month. Through attending at least one Township Board Meeting annually, Director Witkowski is able to stay informed about township issues and developments, build relationships, and address and resolve conflicts.

NOTE: To receive project and complete maintenance & operations updates (Weekly Update) please see visit the Road Commission's website at www.vbcr.org/projectupdates.