

Local&State

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The Rev. Linda Stephan, center, leads a group of patrons and volunteers in prayer during the Open Table free community meal on Dec. 4 at the Williamston United Methodist Church. PHOTOS BY NICK KING/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

CHURCH ASKS FOR RESTROOM HELP



Judy Putnam
Columnist
Lansing State Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK – MICH.

WILLIAMSTON – Every Wednesday since March 10, 2010, there’s been a free, made-from-scratch meal awaiting anyone who walks through the doors at the Williamston United Methodist Church’s Open Table event.

Attendance each week ranges from 40 to 70 diners. Some are church members. Most aren’t. Some are poor or deal-

ing with temporary emergencies. Many just like to have company as they enjoy a hot meal.

Nearly a decade in, the dinners are still running smoothly. In fact, the volunteers are proud that they’ve not missed a single Wednesday, even during snowstorms and on holidays.

But the church is struggling to accommodate the crowd in one key area: access to bathrooms.

“We have a lot of walkers and wheelchairs...this crowd here has a lot of disabilities,” said the Rev. Linda Stephan, who has led the church for 18 months.

1960s restrooms

The church’s 1960s restrooms are difficult to navigate. The women’s restroom, for example, has a long, narrow hallway that’s tough to walk or roll along while you are pushing in the door, and there’s no privacy when someone needs help as the stalls are too small.

The church is trying to raise \$20,000 to add a handicap-accessible family restroom. It’s turning to social media to ask the broader community for help.

“People know this program and value it in the community,” Stephan said. “We just thought this is something people would want to get behind and support.”

Upgrading the two bathrooms near the dining hall was part of an upcoming building renovation plan at one point. But, as church leaders crunched the numbers and had to cut back, the bathroom renovations were abandoned.

Instead, leaders came up with another plan to add a family restroom that would accommodate wheelchairs and walkers. To finance it, they turned to social media.

Since Nov. 22, the church has raised nearly \$7,000 via a Facebook fundraiser.

I visited the program Wednesday and found people eager to sing the praises of Open Table.

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Report says Mich. court system at crossroad

Commission finds unfair funding, financial woes

Carol Thompson
Lansing State Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK – MICHIGAN

LANSING — Michigan’s trial court system is broken, headed toward a possible “financial emergency” and unfairly funded by people involved in criminal cases, a state commission found.

To limit the influence of money on the judicial system, members of the Trial Court Funding Commission are recommending that the state create a stable funding system for local courts instead of allowing courts to generate their own revenue through fines.

“We want to eliminate the possibility that in every decision the judge is thinking about the bottom line instead of the guilt or innocence of the defendant,” said Ingham County District Court Judge Thomas Boyd, who chairs the commission, during a state House subcommittee meeting on Tuesday.

It costs between \$1.1 and \$1.4 billion annually to operate the state’s 242 trial courts, which hear cases involving criminal charges, civil and family disputes. More than \$418 million of that comes from fines and fees paid by people found guilty of crimes.

That means the judges who impose those penalties also rely on them to operate their courts, giving judges an incentive to issue heftier fines to boost court budgets. Fines don’t directly impact judges’ salaries, which are paid by the state. Judges’ benefits are largely paid by local governments.

Boyd said he saw the influence of such incentives firsthand when he was appointed to the bench in 2005. He said he has always seen fines as a rehabilitation tool, not a way to fund the courts.

One county official referred to district courts as “a cash cow for local government.”

“Once that became clear, I was summoned to the county commission to answer for my sentencing practices because it wasn’t bringing in enough revenue,” he said.

One county official referred to district courts as “a cash cow for local government,” he said, an attitude that poisons the relationships between courts and communities.

“I have met many young men from lower socioeconomic strata who believe in their heart the only reason they’re talking to me is because I want their money,” he said. “They fail to appear because they don’t have money to pay me ... and then they end up in jail.”

Commissioners aren’t suggesting eliminating court fines, Boyd said, but that fines should be sent to the state and then doled out to courts based on what courts need, not based on what courts collect.

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Want a say in how your congressional district is drawn?

Commission could use help with boundaries

Kristan Obeng
Lansing State Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK – MICHIGAN

Chandler Crossings, a group of three student apartment complexes, sits about three miles away from Michigan State University in Bath Township.

Considering its proximity to MSU and the age of the people who live there, students may see the apartments as an extension of the college’s campus, according to Matt Grossmann, a political science professor at MSU.

But that connection isn’t reflected in any political boundaries, he said.

Citizens recognize their own shared communities.

The new Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission, which will re-

draw voting district lines in Michigan following the 2020 U.S. Census, aims to keep shared communities together.

And they will need the public’s input to do so.

“Most people, even those who are politically active, may think they’re not an expert on redistricting. ‘What can I contribute?’” said Jowei Chen, a political science professor at the University of Michigan.

But the answer is — a whole lot.

The Commission itself will have only 13 members.

But people who want to see change where they live, make their voices heard and ensure their votes count can contribute to their work by drawing maps and giving input at public meetings after the Commission is formed in fall 2020.

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