Local&State

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.



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 wheel-chairs...this crowd here has a lot of disabilities," said the Rev. Linda Stephan, who has led the church for 18 months.



with guests on Dec. 4 at the Williamston United Methodist Church.

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

"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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Church

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Jessica Lloyd of Williamston is a member of the church and the church choir. She was at the meal with her teenage daughter and her mother- and father-in-law.

"It's nice because, one day a week, we don't have to make anything," she said. "It's just a nice environment."

David McLaughlin of Williamston, who joined the church last year after he struggled with the death of his best friend, is a regular at the Wednesday evening meals.

"I think it's important that we do what we talk about in church, reaching out and helping our neighbor," he said.

'Spiritual group'

Another regular, Dan Gebes of Haslett, stops by for the meal then takes bread and other items to friends in need. He's not a Methodist but feels that he's among kindred spirits at the weekly meeting.

"People do nice things for me, and I get to do nice things for others," he said. "I kind of feel like this is my spiritual group."

Laura Maynard is a familiar figure in

town. The tiny woman always wears hats and often walks through downtown Williamston. Those who don't know her name call her the "lady who walks everywhere," Stephan said.

Though she's not a formal member of the church, Stephan said, "she claims us, and we claim her."

Maynard said she usually eats by herself. She enjoys the Wednesday meals so she can socialize, telling her dinner companions about a recent fire in the apartment above hers.

"I was very frightened," she said.

Maynard was on a task force that helped launch the program a decade ago. She volunteers when she can. She recently distributed flyers for a free Thanksgiving meal at the church.

"It's filling the need for the community. It's a place where they can eat and not have to worry," she said.

Another diner known for her warm hugs volunteers to say grace.

As a group of nine people stand in a circle holding hands, Jacqueline La-Forge recites: "God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for the food."

'This is the best place to come and have food," she said after the prayer. She cites several dishes as her favorites.

About a dozen church volunteers keep the program going, spending just \$75 a week by keeping an eye out for sales. The Williamston Sunrise Rotary



Sue Kaiser, one of the founders of the Open Table free community meal, discusses the accessibility issues with the women's bathroom.

NICK KING/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

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.

supports the efforts as do local businesses, particularly D&W Fresh Market, which donates surplus bread and des-

The menus are usually simple: A cas-

serole, vegetable, bread and dessert. There's always fresh fruit or vegetables included. Sometimes they offer baked potato or taco bars.

The menu last Wednesday utilized leftovers from a community Thanksgiving dinner attended by 35 people.

Diners were served leftover turkey, dressing, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, applesauce, cranberry sauce and acorn squash that came from the church's community garden. Sliced pound cake completed the meal.

Family shelter meals

Once a month, the group makes a dinner for about 30 people at Haven House, a family shelter in East Lansing. Leftovers, as well as summer produce from the church's garden, are delivered to a nearby low-income housing apartment.

"We're a community," said Cindy Moher, one of the founders of the event along with Sue Kaiser, who still does the weekly shopping. "We just want you to come in and have a meal with us and some fellowship."

To donate, go to: facebook.com/WilliamstonUnited

MethodistChurch/

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Report

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That method could lead to better policing, State Court Administrator Milton Mack Jr. told legislators Tuesday. He said departments would be less inclined to use methods like "speed traps" to issue a glut of tickets to motorists, which lead to fines that help fund the courts in the departments' communities.

'Traffic enforcement would be based on traffic safety instead of revenue, because ticket [fees] wouldn't come back to your city," he said.

Michigan trial courts also are funded by the federal government, at approximately 7.2%, and local governments, at 43.9%. The state pays for approximately 22.7% of trial court operations, in part with money generated from fines.

State government likely would have to pay a larger share if the legislature reforms court funding. Boyd said it's too early to say how much that would cost.

A spotlight turned on Michigan's trial court funding in 2017, when the state Supreme Court ruled local courts don't have the authority to use defendants' fines to pay for day-to-day operations.

The legislature responded by allowing courts to assess such fines through October, 2020 and creating the 14-person commission to review money's influence on Michigan's trial courts.

The commission presented their findings to the committee Tuesday.

Recent state and federal court decisions foreshadow a future with reformed courts, said Rep. Rob VerHeulen, R-Walker.

He pointed to a July opinion written by Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Bridget Mary McCormack, which referenced a conflict of interest when courts fund themselves.

"In my eyes, that's a warning or request to the legislature to take action before the Supreme Court does and puts us in a spot where we have completely underfunded court systems and then we have to scramble," he said.

Commission recommendations:

The commission developed five recommendations to make the state's court system more fair, including:

Establish a stable court funding system: The state should fund trial courts with help from local governments in a consistent, predictable and proportional way in order to make sure everyone has equal access to justice.

Pay for court technology: A unified technology system across the Michigan's trial courts would reduce costs, reduce the workload for court workers and make it easier to share resources such as interpreters, recording and transcrip-

Establish uniform assessments and centralized collections: Centralizing duties, like determining appropriate fines and then collecting them, at the state level would save costs and remove conflicts of interest.

Move toward a uniform employment system: Making court workers state employees instead of local employees would ensure they are paid equally and would reduce costs for local governments.

Transition to the new court funding model: Changing the way trial courts are funded would take thoughtful planning and years of implementa-

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