



# Jackson County Strategic Plan

March 3, 2026



Credit: Tom Steele

# Acknowledgments

The Jackson County Strategic Plan was a collaborative effort and would not have been possible without the significant support and guidance of the following contributors.

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## Key Stakeholders

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## Consultants

**Planning NEXT**

**Ninigret Partners**

**Famous Destination  
Marketing**

*A special thanks to the Jackson County staff for their valuable contributions, and to the thousands of residents who participated in the strategic planning process.*

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# Executive Summary

The Jackson County Strategic Plan is a framework for navigating the next ten years. This plan contains 100 strategies organized into six chapters to advance the key priorities of the county as a local government organization.

## Preparing for the Future

A strategic plan reflects on the past and provides a roadmap for the future. It is grounded in shared values and informed by research, engagement, and best practices. This plan identifies the challenges and opportunities facing Jackson County and provides a framework for action. It serves as both a benchmark for progress and a springboard for improvement.

## The Planning Process

The planning process took place over nine months and consisted of an audit of the previous strategic plan coupled with robust engagement. Interviews with elected leaders guided the work as the previous plan was reviewed new priorities were explored. Nearly 1,300 residents from every city, village and township weighed in on the joint Drive Jackson and Jackson County engagement campaign, and over 100 employees participated in a survey for county staff. This process helped to align the county's vision with the community's needs.

## Recommendations

The recommendations of the plan are organized into six chapters:

1. Economic Development
2. Public Safety
3. Community Health and Well-Being
4. Arts, Culture, and Recreation
5. Public Services
6. Internal Operations

### What is Drive Jackson?

*Drive Jackson is a countywide initiative to develop a bold community-driven strategic plan, initiated by the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce alongside partners including Jackson County.*

*Its goals and strategies align with the county plan, but offer a more expansive framework for the community.*

*One public engagement process was used for both plans to ensure an efficient use of time and money.*

# About Jackson County

Jackson County is a community of 160,366 people located at the heart of southern Michigan. The County is home to nineteen townships, seven villages and the City of Jackson. Together, these communities offer the charm of rural living with the convenience of urban amenities.

Since the county's founding 1832, its history has echoed that of the state's. Its early economy was powered by the railroad and automotive industries, and the county became a hub for manufacturing. Jackson County also housed the first state prison in Michigan, now considered an arts community. Today, healthcare, manufacturing, energy services and the state correctional facilities are key economic drivers. Jackson College, Spring Arbor University and a branch of Baker College serve as the county's institutions of higher education, teaching technical and academic excellence.

At the headwaters of the Kalamazoo and Grand Rivers, Jackson County also offers a variety of waterways, trails and parks to explore. The county boasts state and local parks, biking and walking trails and a range of golf courses. The Falling Waters Trail, which runs from Jackson to Concord, connects visitors to The Cascades, a colorful and iconic landmark. Alongside these attractions, the Ella Sharp Museum, Michigan Theatre, Hot Air Jubilee and numerous other cultural assets and events offer up the best of Jackson County.

The government of Jackson County is led by nine commissioners and six elected officials who administer public services ranging from infrastructure to law enforcement to public health. The courts are presided over by elected judges at the circuit and district levels.

# Process & Background



The Jackson County Strategic Plan launched in Spring of 2025. The Jackson County process engaged with county leaders and staff with a plan audit, two staff surveys and interviews. The public process interacted with nearly 1,300 people across two rounds of in-person and online engagement.

## Public Engagement

Nearly 1,300 residents interacted with the public engagement effort through two rounds of engagement for the Jackson County Strategic Plan. Word was spread about the plan through press releases, radio, meetings, tabling, flyers and social media. From the Hot Air Jubilee to Trunk-or-Treat, residents were asked about the vision for Jackson County. Both rounds involved in-person and online activities.

The first round focused on residents' perceptions of the community and their concerns, hopes and vision for the future. The second round focused on topics revealed in the first round and asked them to help narrow down strategies for improving Jackson County. These responses were then analyzed and used to inform the County's plan.



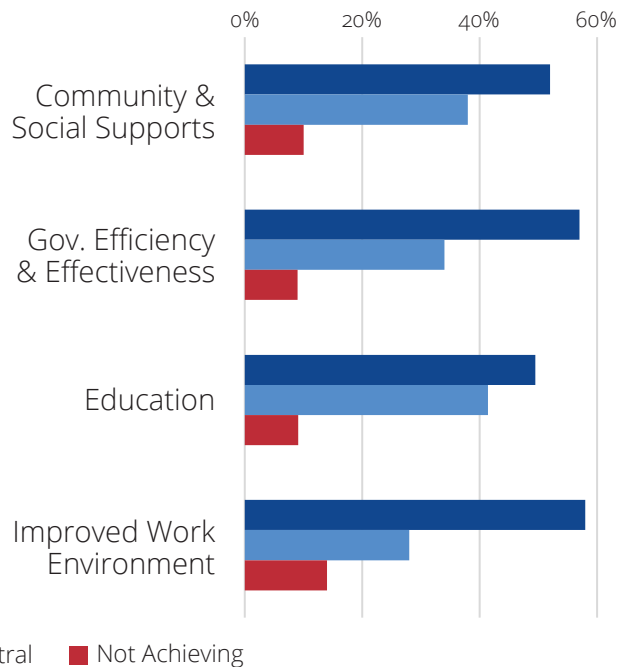
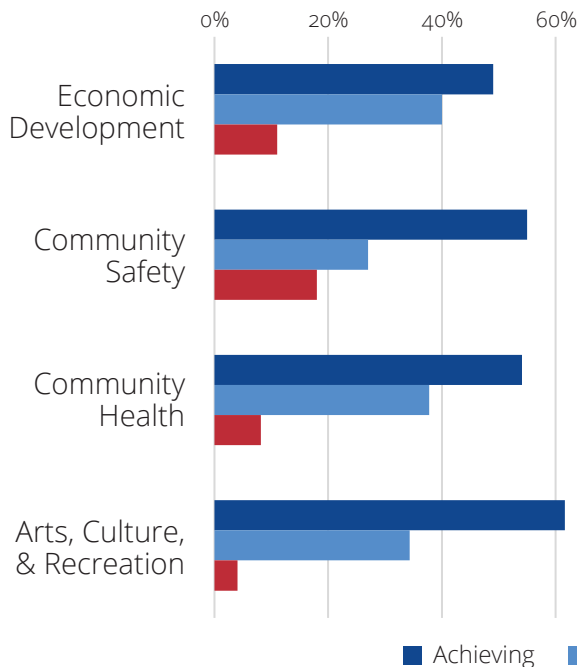
## County Staff Engagement

Over 100 county employees responded to a survey about the county’s values, priorities and operations. An overwhelming 97% of employees said their work was important to the success of Jackson County, and 91% felt proud of their work.

Employees expressed support for the county’s values of quality, integrity, community, teamwork, efficiency and accountability. Over 70% agreed or strongly agreed with quality, integrity, community and teamwork as core values. Employees suggested more work should be done to maintain efficiency and accountability as core values of the organization. The survey also asked employees to rate the county’s progress on its previous goals.

Employees reported the greatest success in arts, recreation and culture, work environment and government efficiency. They reported less success in economic development and safety. Interviews with elected officials reinforced these findings, with officials identifying economic development and safety as top priorities for the community. Officials supported continuing efforts to make the county more efficient and effective.

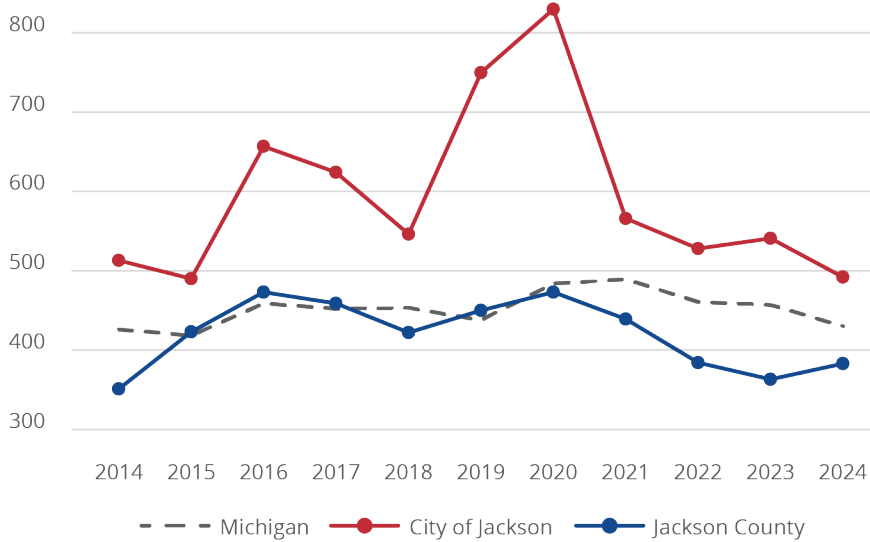
With input from county leaders and staff, the plan’s framework is organized into six chapters. Economic development and public safety are at the forefront, as expressed through feedback, with additional chapters focusing on additional issues and opportunities for the county.



## Data Snapshot

Data were collected from public and private sources. Federal, state and local government data as well as and multiple surveys provided valuable insights about the priorities of residents and county staff.

### VIOLENT CRIMES PER CAPITA



Source: FBI Data Explorer

**\$65,004**

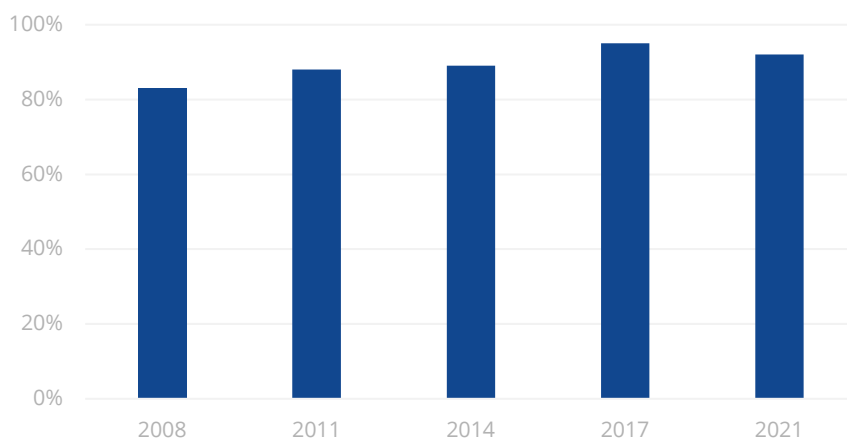
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN JACKSON COUNTY (2023)

**\$71,149**

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN MICHIGAN (2023)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

### PERCENT OF RESIDENTS WITH HEALTHCARE



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

**2.9 miles**

AVERAGE DISTANCE FROM HOME TO TO A TRAILHEAD

**3.4 miles**

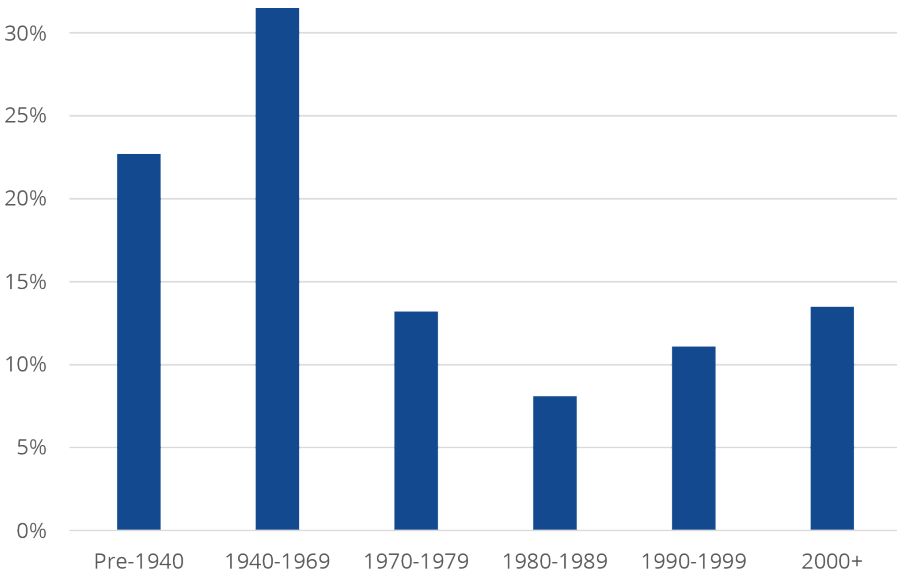
AVERAGE DISTANCE FROM HOME TO A LAKE

Source: Jackson County

## Data Snapshot

Data were collected from public and private sources. Federal, state and local government data as well as and multiple surveys provided valuable insights about the priorities of residents and county staff.

### AGE OF HOUSING STOCK



Source: Jackson County

**\$182,900**

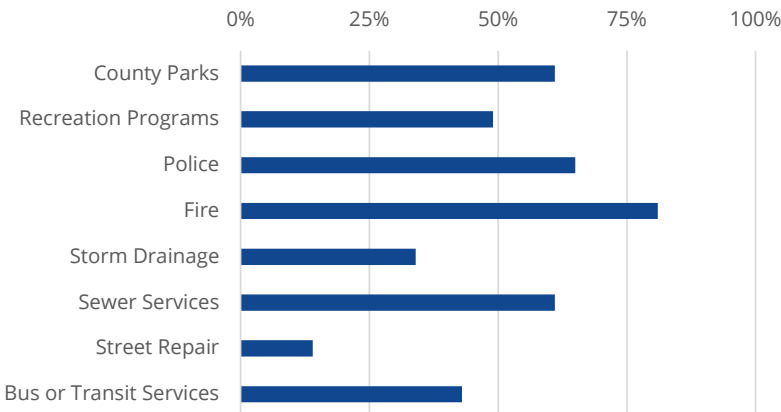
MEDIAN HOME VALUE  
IN JACKSON COUNTY  
(2023)

**\$303,400**

MEDIAN HOME VALUE  
IN THE U.S. (2023)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

### PERCENT RATING EXCELLENT/GOOD FOR PUBLIC SERVICES



Source: County Staff Survey

**94%**

OF COUNTY STAFF  
SAY THEIR WORK IS  
IMPORTANT TO THE  
COUNTY'S SUCCESS

**89%**

OF COUNTY STAFF  
TAKE PRIDE IN THEIR  
WORK

Source: County Staff Survey

# Recommendations



## Jackson County Core Values

Our county affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals. We value the diversity of our residents—of every race, ethnicity, culture, faith, and background—as a vital source of strength within our community and our nation.

While we honor the unique perspectives and cultural heritages that make our county vibrant, we also affirm that what binds us together is our common commitment to the ideals and values of American citizenship. Our goal is to foster a spirit of inclusion and belonging where all individuals feel valued and respected, while working together in service to the greater good of our community and our country.

**Quality.** We strive for great work, to get it right the first time and to constantly review the way we do business to produce quality services.

**Integrity.** We must be open and honest with ourselves, each other and our citizens. People with integrity do the right thing when no one's looking.

**Community.** We're all in it together working to improve Jackson County, the place we live, work, play and raise our children.

**Teamwork.** The interconnected society we live in requires us to work together to solve community problems.

**Efficiency.** We can't waste time, money, ideas or talents. We have to do the most with the least to derive a good value for the Citizen's tax dollar.

**Accountability.** The County will be held responsible to the public for resources entrusted in our care.

## Mission

The Jackson County government, in cooperation with the community and local government units, strives through a planned process to deliver quality services that address public needs.

## Goals

The following six goals serve to organize the strategies. Each goal has multiple subtopics that organize the more specific strategies. The goals are as follows:

- 1. Economic Development**
- 2. Public Safety**
- 3. Community Health and Well-Being**
- 4. Arts, Culture, and Recreation**
- 5. Public Services**
- 6. Internal Operations**

## Objectives

Each goal contains several objectives that further organize the strategies into subject areas. This aids different leaders, departments and offices to understand which strategies fit under their operations.

## Strategies

The planning process developed 100 strategies to address the goals. These were derived from public input, staff input, data analysis and research on best practices.



# 1. Economic Development

A strong, diverse economy powered by infrastructure investments and a skilled workforce.

*“I want people to be excited about exiting off I-94 to explore our shops and restaurants, and Downtown Jackson.”*

— Resident

*“We need to create more middle- and higher-income housing which will open up existing older stocks and allow folks to essentially move up.”*

— Resident

*“Skilled trades are in high demand. I think the community should do much more to support high school students in trades.”*

— Resident

## 1.1 Economic Promotion

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- 1.1.1 Coordinate economic development activities with Accelerate Jackson County.
- 1.1.2 Continue business retention and expansion efforts with a focus on manufacturing, transportation and logistics, and construction sectors.
- 1.1.3 Support site acquisition, readiness and promotion.

## 1.2 Workforce Development

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- 1.2.1 Coordinate workforce development activities with Accelerate Jackson County and regional partners.
- 1.2.2 Increase enrollment in workforce training programs for key sectors .
- 1.2.3 Partner with local employers to enhance workforce training programs to meet current and projected needs.
- 1.2.4 Expand access to apprenticeships and in-demand programs at trade schools, colleges and universities.

## 1.3 Infrastructure Coordination

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- 1.3.1 Work with local governments to secure grant funding from state and federal sources for infrastructure improvements.
- 1.3.2 Provide technical support to local governments that deliver infrastructure, such as sewer services, in areas with high development potential.

### Strategy in Action:

*Providing technical training programs is only one piece of the puzzle. Michigan Works! Southeast offered 1,255 apprenticeships in 2024. 76% of apprenticeships were for construction and 3% were for manufacturing. Understanding why residents choose certain programs is key to maximizing impact.*

Source: Registered Apprenticeship Michigan, Michigan Center for Data and Analytics

## 1.4 Housing

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1.4.1 Coordinate with local, regional, and state partners to support home repair programs for low-income residents and seniors.

1.4.2 Collaborate with Accelerate Jackson to conduct a countywide housing study that collects data on housing availability, affordability and quality every 5 years.

1.4.3 Implement a robust, uniform housing assessment process for all local assessors, ensuring that housing conditions across the county are known.

1.4.4 Improve access to publicly available property information on the county website through additional geographic information systems (GIS) layers.

1.4.5 Market the county as an affordable place to live with convenient access to nearby metros.

1.4.6 Strengthen the role of the land bank in redeveloping land for housing and community assets.



A group of public safety officers and children posing in front of a Christmas tree. The officers are wearing uniforms with stars on their shoulders. The children are sitting on the floor in front of the officers. The background is a blue-tinted photograph of the group.

## 2. Public Safety

A safe community that prevents crime, prosecutes offenders and prepares residents for emergencies through interdepartmental collaboration.

*“By giving kids and families safe, positive spaces to learn, grow and connect, we can strengthen our community and help reduce crime.”*

— Resident

*“I am proud to provide safety services for Jackson County, and believe public safety is the most important responsibility in government.”*

— Employee

## 2.1 Law Enforcement Recruitment

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- 2.1.1 Recruit and invest in law enforcement personnel.
- 2.1.2 Continue police academy sponsorships to recruit deputies.
- 2.1.3 Pilot a performance-based bonus program to retain personnel.
- 2.1.4 Promote the deployment of crisis response teams comprised of jointly trained law enforcement, paramedics and behavioral health specialists for mental health and substance use emergencies.

## 2.2 Crime Prevention and Enforcement

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- 2.2.1 Prevent crimes through education and deterrence.
- 2.2.2 Prevent crimes through reentry services that focus on physical and mental health, mentorship, education and employment.
- 2.2.3 Sponsor firearm safety programs to promote gun safety.
- 2.2.4 Strengthen court diversion programs for juveniles who commit low-level offenses.
- 2.2.5 Coordinate with public health experts to appropriately treat mental health and substance use disorders.

### Strategy in Action:

*Mental health is a serious issue in Jackson County and can strain emergency services. In Akron, Ohio, the SCOUT program, a team of law enforcement officers, paramedics and behavioral health specialists responded to 800 mental health calls in 2024. The program assists residents who are not a danger to themselves or others, but are experiencing a mental health crisis, relieving pressure on other first responders.*

Source: ADM Board of Summit County, Ohio

## 2.3 Jail Improvements

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2.3.1 Secure funding for physical improvements to the county jail system.

2.3.2 Establish mental health and substance use treatment facilities within the county jail system.

2.3.3 Pilot innovative programs to encourage rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates and parolees with a focus on health, education and employment.

## 2.4 Intergovernmental Collaboration

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2.4.1 Increase collaboration between the sheriff, prosecutor, clerk and court staff to better manage the justice system.

2.4.2 Increase collaboration between city, village and township staff to provide public safety education and prevent crime.

2.4.3 Increase collaboration with school districts, senior centers and community organizations to ensure emergency preparedness.

### Strategy in Action:

*Creating opportunities within the justice system can have ripple effects in the community. The Vocational Village at the Jackson Parnall Correctional Facility provides in-demand skills and reduces recidivism. The program offers a second chance for inmates and much-needed skills for the local economy.*

Source: State of Michigan

## 2.5 Law Enforcement Recruitment

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2.5.1 Build positive relationships between law enforcement and the community.

2.5.2 Foster positive perceptions of safety among the public in safe areas of the community.

2.5.3 Designate sheriff deputies as community liaisons.

2.5.4 Hold annual community events that connect the public to first responders across the county.

2.5.5 Launch a citizens' police academy.

2.5.6 Allocate staff for data analysis and communication through technology.

2.5.7 Utilize data to communicate trends in safety and crime accurately at local and county levels.



*Old State Prison Wall*



# 3. Community Health and Well-Being

A culture of continuous health improvement in our community that enriches the lives of residents..

*“It’s hard to stay healthy walking, running, and cycling in rural areas. The Falling Waters Trail is great but it’s miles from my home.”*

— Resident

*“I would love to see the county develop more access to alcohol/drug programs and mental health services.”*

— Employee

*“There does not seem to be enough primary care physicians accepting patients, and I would like to see better access to mental health resources.”*

— Resident

### **3.1 Health Education and Awareness**

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3.1.1 Continue to conduct community needs assessments and communicate results with the public.

3.1.2 Boost community awareness of key health issues.

3.1.3 Continue health education programs for students and families.

3.1.4 Educate residents on the benefits of a nutritious diet and physical exercise.

3.1.5 Promote volunteer opportunities for residents to assist with and learn about healthy living.

### **3.2 Healthcare Access and Affordability**

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3.2.1 Continue to foster relationships with key partners to develop a strong health and social services safety system.

3.2.2 Continue to coordinate health and social services through 2-1-1 referrals.

3.2.3 Expand free health clinics for residents in need that provide services such as immunizations, health screenings, STI testing, and hearing, vision and dental services.

### **3.3 Behavioral and Emotional Health**

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3.3.1 Provide suicide prevention programs and resources to all.

3.3.2 Promote mental health and wellness programs to county employees.

## 3.4 Family Health and Wellness

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3.4.1 Advance health equity to better serve vulnerable populations.

3.4.2 Enhance WIC programming to include additional support and education for expectant mothers, infants and their families.

3.4.3 Increase access to physicians for pregnant mothers through coordination between WIC staff and local hospital systems.

3.4.4 Reduce alcohol and substance use among pregnant mothers.

3.4.5 Coordinate with local school districts to reduce teen pregnancy and assist teen mothers.

3.4.6 Reduce lead exposure among children through abatement programs for lead pipes and paint.

3.4.7 Partner with transportation staff to expand safe routes for children to walk and bike to school.

### Strategy in Action:

*Jackson County is getting older, with residents over 65 making up almost 20% of the population. In Columbus, Ohio, a coalition of community leaders is preparing for a community that is a little older, but just as vibrant. Its Age-Friendly Columbus/Franklin County initiative is delivering innovation and grants to improve the lives of older residents. Jackson County's Department of Aging is crucial for addressing emerging needs over the next decade.*

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, AARP, Age-Friendly Columbus/Franklin County

## 3.5 Older Adult Health and Wellness

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3.5.1 Prepare an age-friendly community plan to better serve older residents and prioritize their ability to age-in-place.

3.5.2 Partner with libraries, senior centers, and youth organizations to build intergenerational connections in-person and online.

3.5.3 Collaborate with local partners to increase digital literacy and prevent scams targeting older adults.



# 4. Arts, Culture, and Recreation

Vibrant arts and cultural offerings and  
engaging outdoor amenities.

*“Turn Jackson’s current cultural landscape into  
a signature experience that draws visitors  
and deepens community pride.”*

— Resident

*“I would like much more public art in  
all of our communities.”*

— Resident

## 4.1 Arts and Culture

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4.1.1 Coordinate arts and culture marketing with Experience Jackson.

4.1.2 Provide grant funding for local artists to create public art.

4.1.3 Expand unique public art installations, including Bright Walls, throughout the county.

4.1.4 Provide grant funding for local artists to hold arts and cultural performances, with an emphasis on events at county parks.

## 4.2 Community Events and Engagement

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4.2.1 Create a user-friendly guide in print and web formats for Jackson County parks and trails.

4.2.2 Grow community events at park venues with fireworks celebrations, festivals, and family-friendly gatherings that are interspersed throughout the seasons.

4.2.3 Partner with community groups, non-profits, and schools to connect people with nature.

## 4.3 Parks and Trails

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- 4.3.1 Upgrade park amenities with a focus on parking lots, restrooms, and lighting.
- 4.3.2 Improve access to lakes and rivers through new piers and launch sites for boats, kayaks and canoes, and improve existing piers.
- 4.3.3 Ensure trails and parks are well-maintained and remain clean and accessible for residents.
- 4.3.4 Extend the trail network to connect communities within and outside of the county.
- 4.3.5 Upgrade trail amenities with additional trailheads, camping options and other recreational activities.
- 4.3.6 Prioritize sidewalks and bike path improvements that safely and effectively connect residents to parks and the trail network.
- 4.3.7 Coordinate with regional partners to create and implement a comprehensive wayfinding plan for the trail network.
- 4.3.8 Educate residents about environmentally responsible habits through park events and programs.
- 4.3.9 Enhance volunteer participation in park maintenance and conservation activities.

### Strategy in Action:

*Regional connections take recreation to the next level. The Grand River Greenway and Water Trail bridges rural and urban areas across western and southern Michigan. As Jackson County considers enhancements to its water and walking trails, it can provide opportunities for residents and visitors alike to connect to communities along the Grand River.*

Source: Grand River Greenway



# 5. Public Services

A county government that delivers essential public services with responsiveness and integrity.

*“Working at the Department of Transportation it is very important to ensure the safety of the residents to the best of our ability.”*

— Employee

*“We could encourage innovation through a continuous improvement model to improve processes and procedures.”*

— Employee

## 5.1 Data and Technology

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5.1.1 Regularly update programs, practices, and technologies to reflect the evolving best practices in local government.

5.1.2 Deploy the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to improve relevant programs and services.

5.1.3 Launch an open data portal with public demographic, infrastructure and geographic information systems (GIS) data accessible to the community.

5.1.4 Launch an open finance portal to ensure budgetary information is made transparent and accessible to the public.

5.1.5 Improve website design and continue to keep information up to date.



Key Leadership Group Meeting

## 5.2 Infrastructure and Transportation

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5.2.1 Continue to study and implement multimodal transportation improvements along key corridors.

5.2.2 Continue to study and implement safety improvements along key corridors.

5.2.3 Invest in new technologies to increase road safety and reduce travel times.

5.2.4 Continue to partner with the Jackson Area Transportation Authority (JATA) to explore transportation options to expand access for rural residents.

5.2.5 Leverage the Jackson County Airport as a local asset through improved connections, recreation, and training.

5.2.6 Pilot a rain garden grant program for areas vulnerable to stormwater issues.

### Strategy in Action:

*As new technologies scale up, local governments can improve services and reduce costs. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, passive detection technologies are creating safer and more adaptive intersections for pedestrians, bikes and vehicles along high-traffic routes. As these technologies are upgraded and deployed by state and local transportation departments, Jackson County can use tactical planning to amplify their effects along key corridors.*

Source: City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



## 6. Internal Operations

An efficient and effective government operated by committed and capable staff.

*“I feel there are technology barriers to efficiently complete our work. Better technology may allow us to be more efficient.”*

— Employee

*“The county needs to find a way to retain employees. I hate to bring it all back to money, but cost of living is high and people leave for better paying positions.”*

— Employee

## 6.1 Efficiency

---

6.1.1 Collect data on county responsiveness to resident issues.

6.1.2 Routinely evaluate county structure and evaluate changes to improve operations.

6.1.3 Train employees to use new technological tools, such as artificial intelligence (AI), to improve operations.

## 6.2 Staff Retention

---

6.2.1 Attract and maintain exceptional county employees.

6.2.2 Continue annual performance reviews and provide constructive feedback to county employees.

6.2.3 Conduct a compensation audit every three years to ensure competitive pay and benefits compared to the regional average.

## 6.3 Career Development

---

6.3.1 Create internal pathways for career development and leadership.

6.3.2 Provide impactful training opportunities for staff and leadership.

6.3.3 Create a countywide internship program that places high school or college students with a relevant office or department.

### Strategy in Action:

*Internships offer experience and connections for students and a pipeline for employers. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) reported that 72% of interns received offers of employment after an internship in 2024 and 59% accepted the offer. A robust internship program can provide students of every education level and background the opportunity to learn while expanding the county workforce.*

Source: NACE

## 6.4 Workplace Culture

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- 6.4.1 Foster a culture of collaboration and pride.
- 6.4.2 Embed core values in leadership decisions.
- 6.4.3 Enable staff to submit suggestions on improvements to workplace conditions and practices.
- 6.4.4 Share success stories with county staff and the community.

## 6.5 Internal Communications

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- 6.5.1 Implement best practices for internal communications.
- 6.5.2 Send quarterly updates from leadership to staff at the department level.
- 6.5.3 Establish an annual, countywide meeting that communicates key achievements, challenges and trends to staff.

# Conclusion

The Jackson County Strategic Plan delivers 100 strategies to advance a vision that accounts for community aspirations and county operations. Now, it is time to turn this framework into action.

## Implementation

County staff are working on two instruments to assist leaders, employees, and the public with advancing the Jackson County Strategic Plan: a list of success measures and an implementation matrix. These will serve as guideposts to the road ahead and help decision-makers to see where progress has been made and where work needs to be done.

### Maintaining Momentum

*The Jackson County community came together to complete two critical planning efforts over the last year. The Jackson County Strategic Plan and Drive Jackson Strategic Plan got the community talking and built momentum towards change.*

*Jackson County has the opportunity to maintain this momentum not only by implementing its strategic plan, but by continuing to involve residents in this work and creating community champions.*



*Paddle Boarding on Clark Lake*

