An aerial photograph of Benton Harbor, Michigan, showing a mix of residential and commercial buildings, a marina with several boats, and a bridge crossing a waterway. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color.

Brief on Public and Private Sector Investment

Sustainability as a Catalyst for Community and Economic Development in the City of Benton Harbor

2025

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Introduction

Sustainability as a Catalyst for Community and Economic Development in the City of Benton Harbor outlines opportunities for strategic investment in an under-resourced community in Southwest Michigan. Through this initiative, we have attempted to demonstrate how initiatives loosely defined as climate solutions could be leveraged for increased prosperity. It draws heavily from prior planning initiatives such as the 2023 Best Benton Harbor Community Plan and the Ox Creek Revitalization Strategic Plan, with a focus on the critical areas listed below.

Each category includes targeted action items and objectives tailored to the Benton Harbor community to improve residents' quality of life and promote long-term environmental and economic resilience.

Climate Change Mitigation

- Action Items: Improve environmental health and wellness by protecting sensitive areas such as wetlands and wooded zones.
- Objectives: Strengthen the community's resilience by preserving natural spaces and reducing the effects of climate change on residents.

Clean Energy & Energy Efficiency

- Action Items: Enhance energy efficiency in city facilities, residences, and businesses, while exploring renewable energy options.
- Objectives: Implement a micro-grid at the Bobo Brazil Community Resilience Center to ensure a sustainable and resilient power supply for critical infrastructure.

Legacy Pollution Remediation & Reduction

- Action Items: Restore Ox Creek as a recreational area, clean up illegal dump sites, and prevent future contamination.
- Objectives: Work with various agencies to clean up contaminated areas, remove waste, and create community spaces that encourage neighborhood pride and passive recreation.

Clean Transit

- Action Items: Develop infrastructure for multiple modes of transportation, such as bike paths and electric vehicle charging stations.
- Objectives: Promote safe, eco-friendly transport options and connect Benton Harbor with surrounding communities to create a seamless transportation network.

Affordable & Sustainable Housing

- Action Items: Increase housing availability, improve existing housing conditions, and address gentrification.
- Objectives: Implement a program to develop 1,000 new housing units within five years, focusing on attainable housing and protecting historic structures.

Training & Workforce Development

- Action Items: Establish training programs, support small business development, and build pathways for minority contractors.
- Objectives: Launch a small business incubator, create co-op programs with local schools, and provide resources for workforce development in green industries.

Critical Clean Water & Wastewater Infrastructure

- Action Items: Integrate green infrastructure for stormwater management and improve water and sewer facilities.
- Objectives: Use asset management to safeguard infrastructure, incorporate sustainable designs, and control invasive species like Japanese Knotweed.

Revitalization of Food Systems

- Action Items: Assess food access and create community gardens and year-round farmers markets.
- Objectives: Support local food businesses, expand farmers markets, and provide fresh, affordable food options to strengthen Benton Harbor's food resilience.



This document outlines a foundation for the community to address environmental, social, and economic needs while fostering long-term resilience and prosperity. It includes detailed action items, objectives, and key projects.

Developed in collaboration with local leaders, community organizations, and subject matter experts, the plan identifies impactful, community-driven outcomes that reflect the priorities and needs of Benton Harbor residents. It focuses on leveraging current projects, such as local climate resilience initiatives, green infrastructure developments, and community education programs, and scaling them to have a broader impact.

This approach ensures that Benton Harbor's progress towards sustainability and resilience is rooted in established community efforts while opening doors for new innovations and resources to build upon them.

Prior planning efforts identified pillars to be considered for city policy and decision-making to promote sustainability. This included a focus on the environment, economy, and society, identifying and protecting environmentally and ecologically sensitive areas, promotion of local food-growing initiatives, and support for private sector reinvestment in green technology, alternative energy, and efficiency.

Additionally, the city called for smart growth principles, green building techniques, recycling programs, and education and engagement on the importance of sustainability.

Over a six-month period, a community advisory group worked to identify and strengthen local projects and initiatives that lay the groundwork for Benton Harbor's sustainability and resilience. Through a series of community engagement events, residents highlighted key priorities for creating a cleaner, more efficient, and sustainable Benton Harbor. These include making local schools more energy-efficient, establishing convenient drop-off sites for large items like tires, furniture, and other materials that often accumulate around the city and its waterways, and forming partnerships with businesses interested in sustainability initiatives. By addressing practical issues, such as waste management and energy efficiency, and fostering partnerships with businesses focused on solutions, the plan works to create long-term environmental, economic, and social benefits.

In addition to shaping a strategic foundation for local resilience, the advisory group targeted key funding opportunities and projects to expand the Benton Harbor sustainability portfolio. By securing additional resources, the group intends to enhance and scale projects that address community-identified priorities.

Priority projects can be found on the following page.

Summary of Key Projects & Initiatives

Ox Creek Corridor Revitalization

- Description: Restores Ox Creek and Hall Park, adding recreational spaces and housing developments to enhance the local environment.
- Sponsors: City of Benton Harbor, Benton Charter Township, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC), Michigan Department of Environment Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE), National Oceanic Atmosphere Administration (NOAA), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Bobo Brazil Armory Revitalization

- Description: Converts a vacant community center into a Community Resilience Center, focusing on clean energy and community safety.
- Sponsors: City of Benton Harbor, SWMPC.

Riverview Drive Redevelopment

- Description: Addresses high water issues using green stormwater solutions, increases public river access, and introduces placemaking elements.
- Sponsors: City of Benton Harbor, SWMPC, Cornerstone Alliance, EGLE.

Empire Corridor Redevelopment

- Description: Part of the “Sustainable Square Mile” concept, it focuses on sustainable and affordable housing.
- Sponsors: City of Benton Harbor, Benton Harbor Brownfield Authority, Benton Harbor Community Development Corporation.

Sustainable Materials Management

- Description: Develops a multi-county recycling and composting plan to divert waste from landfills.
- Sponsors: City of Benton Harbor, Berrien County, SWMPC, EGLE, Let Us R.E.S.T.

The Corner at Wall Street

- Description: Creates 55 affordable housing units to improve housing availability for residents.
- Sponsors: City of Benton Harbor, MHT Housing.

Flourish Community Garden

- Description: Provides free community garden space to support local food pantries and school-based food programs.
- Sponsors: Total Wellness by Choice, Benton Harbor Community Development Corporation.

Homegrown Program

- Description: Assists residents in starting backyard gardens to promote self-sustenance and local food production.
- Sponsors: Total Wellness by Choice, Benton Harbor Community Development Corporation.

Benton Harbor Black Wall Street Incubator Initiative

- Description: An incubator dedicated to empowering minority entrepreneurs in Benton Harbor through mentorship, funding, and resources to build sustainable businesses, creating a modern Black Wall Street and driving community prosperity.
- Sponsors: Emerge Innovation Hub, City of Benton Harbor.

Benton Harbor “Green Cities” and Mi Healthy Climate Challenge

- Description: Implement energy efficiency upgrades to municipal buildings, equipment upgrades, creation, and implementation of a sustainability plan.
- Sponsors: City of Benton Harbor.

Community Background and Context

Benton Harbor bears the weight of historical pollution and economic disinvestment. The city, with a population of 9,103—87.6% of whom are Black—has a median household income of \$26,592 (Table 1). Its economy has been heavily impacted by global shifts, straining manufacturing hubs in older urban areas. The decline of its industrial base and population created financial stress in this majority-Black city, prompting Michigan to impose the emergency manager program in 2010, effectively suspending local governance until 2016.

During this period, emergency managers implemented austerity measures similar to those seen in Flint, Mich., which drastically reduced city staff and experimented with water and service contracts. Under emergency management, Benton Harbor residents faced restricted participation in decision-making and in programs designed to address local economic and environmental challenges. The legacy of this program has left the community with enduring environmental and racial injustices that continue to impact residents today. Before the implementation of the emergency management program (2009 - 2016), the City of Benton Harbor had a workforce of 100 employees, which was reduced to 50.

Table 1:
City of Benton Harbor Socioeconomic Data

Data	Benton Harbor
Population Total	9,103
Population by Race	8,714
Median Household Income	\$26,592
Unemployment Rate	4.8%
Median Age	33.6

Due to the capacity constraints, the once functional municipal-led water system began to produce an annual \$2.5 million deficit, leading to a significant financial loss and drain to the city's general fund. The system now operates at just 12% capacity. The city faced ongoing challenges with its leadership, experienced the loss and sale of essential equipment, and was excluded from recreational contracts with the Department of Natural Resources for over a decade, resulting in a consent decree violation.

These accumulated issues undermined the city's capacity to deliver essential services, such as unreliable waste contractors that left the city without garbage collection for extended periods, and eventually an emergency order that mandated residents to use bottled water until service lines could be replaced.

Demographic Analysis

The demographic analysis in this section provides a breakdown of Benton Harbor by population, educational attainment, employment rate, and age. Table 1 illustrates the total population of 9,103, the median household income of \$26,592, with an unemployment rate of 4.8%, and median age of 33.6. Charts 1-3 provide a breakdown of the community's population by race, educational attainment, and age distribution. For instance, 35% of the population holds a Bachelor's, Graduate, or Professional degree (Chart 2).

In addition, Benton Harbor is at the highest percentile for "People of Color" (95-100th U.S. percentile), "Low-life Expectancy" (95-100th U.S. percentile), "Low Income" (99-100th U.S. percentile), "Unemployment Rate" (95-100 U.S. percentile) and multiple census tracts that are characterized as "Linguistically Isolated" (95-100 U.S. percentile).

The data highlights a significantly educated population with a lower median income and moderate unemployment rate which underscores the community's economic vulnerabilities. These factors in parallel with the city's history of environmental challenges position the need for targeted economic development and sustainability initiatives that leverage the community's educational assets.

Chart 1: City of Benton Harbor Population by Race

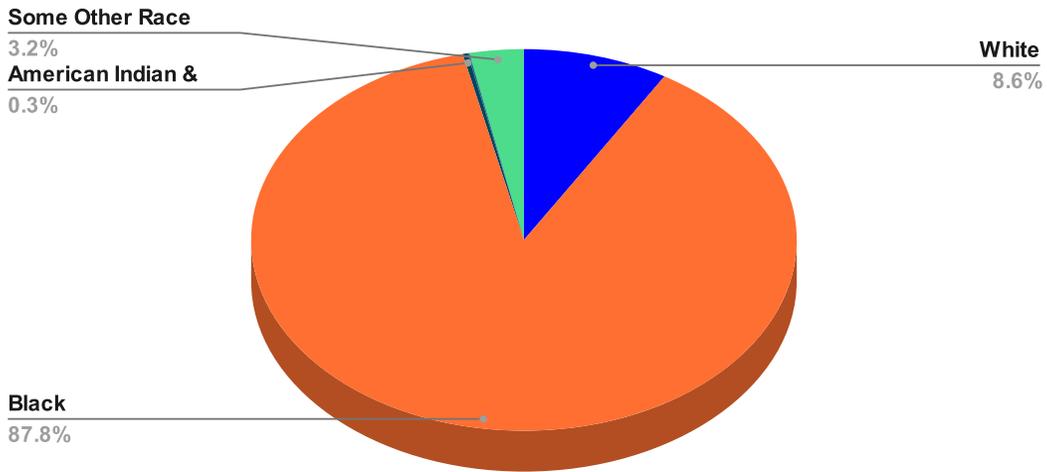


Chart 2: City of Benton Harbor Educational Attainment

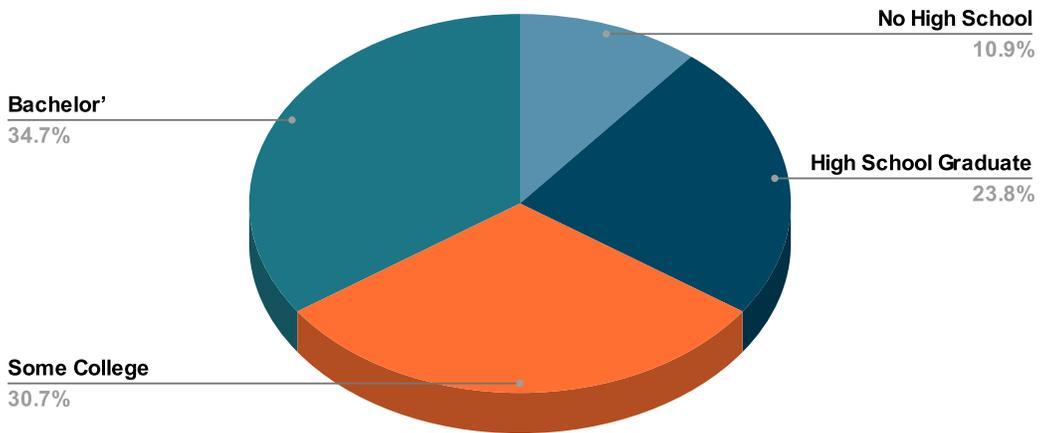
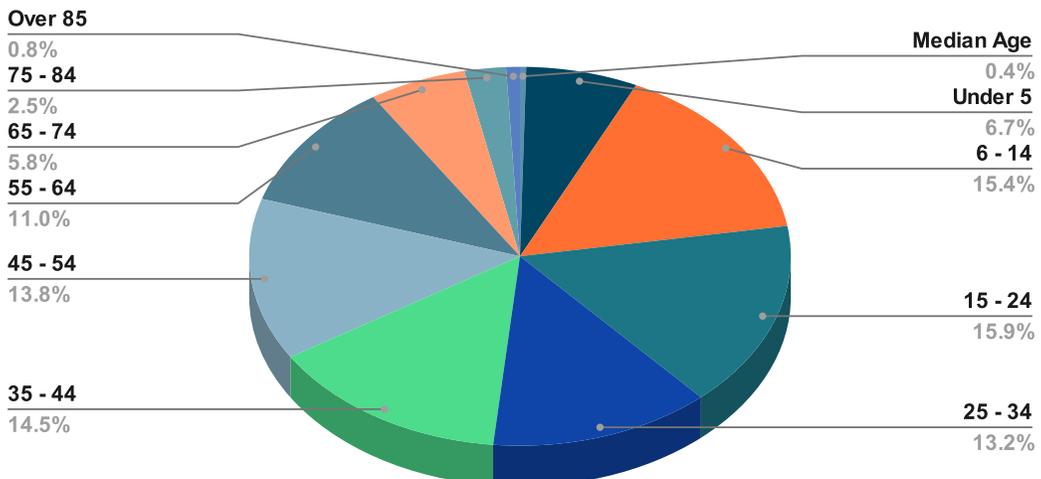


Chart 3: City of Benton Harbor Age Distribution





MISBF and frontline community partners Project NEED Foundation, City of Benton Harbor, Mosaic CCDA, Let Us R.E.S.T, and Benton Harbor Community Development Corporation hosted multiple education and engagement events to develop this plan.

Community Engagement & Participation

Ensuring Transparent and Participatory Decision-Making

In 2023, Michigan Sustainable Business Forum launched a series of community engagement and education workshops focused on local issues and opportunities to leverage state and federal grant opportunities. At a meeting held on January 20, 2023 at The Citadel Center, 31 residents attended and weighed in on how they envision sustainability.

The meeting included input and feedback from four City Commission members, the Deputy City Manager, Planning Commission, community based organizations such as Color Me Green Recycling, LLC, and Benton Harbor residents. Meeting participants were asked the following questions:

- What does sustainability look like in Benton Harbor?
- What role do you expect the government to take in sustainability efforts?
- What does the community need in terms of sustainability?

Key feedback received that influenced the action plan's development

Sustainability Vision: Residents emphasized the need for positive investments in public education, with a focus on energy-efficient upgrades for schools to help keep them open. They envisioned city programs that develop skills to support sustainability and foster a circular economy. A city drop-off site for large items like tires and furniture was suggested to address littering issues.

Role of Government: The community urged the city to collaborate more openly with local organizations. They want the city to lead workforce development and education initiatives, especially with business partnerships in recycling, public transportation, and solar energy. They also suggested expanding waste services to include recycling carts.

Community Needs: Residents highlighted the need for funding to support sustainability training and job opportunities. They also expressed the desire for a dedicated "sustainability champion" within the local government to drive these efforts and secure state and federal resources for Benton Harbor.



Naomi Davis, President of Chicago organization Blacks in Green, led an educational workshop.

Building Partnerships with Local Organizations

Michigan Sustainable Business Forum worked to create opportunities for stakeholder engagement, further providing the opportunity to bring in key stakeholders, community-based organizations, and other environmental organizations such as Blacks in Green. Events discussed projects such as the Sustainable Square Mile, a cornerstone of community development in some Black communities, best practices for high-water strategies, and projects such as the community gardens in Benton Harbor. The Coastal Zone Management events convened over 30 local and regional stakeholders, which included representatives of the Benton Harbor City Commission, community organizations, Benton Harbor Brownfield Authority, surrounding city, county, and township officials, real estate, and utility industries.

Additionally, the Benton Harbor Community Advisory Group was formed to provide input and feedback on this action plan process. This group assembled subject matter experts working to build Benton Harbor’s sustainability and climate resilience portfolio through project development and grant procurement. Working from August to December of 2024, they developed and weighed in on local projects and the funding mechanisms to support efforts such as remediation of the Ox Creek Corridor, revitalization of the Bobo Brazil Armory into a community resilience hub, and promotion of local food access through community garden development.

The group was composed of representatives from Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, City of Benton Harbor, Berrien County Conservation District, Emerge Innovation Hub, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, Project NEED Foundation, Be Healthy Berrien, Project Pillars, Total Wellness by Choice, and Abonmarche.



Community advisory group kickoff meeting where industry professionals, city leadership and leaders of frontline organizations gathered to discuss the development of this action plan.

Sustainability as a Catalyst Action Plan, Key Projects and Initiatives

The Sustainability Catalyst Action Plan draws from the 2023 Best Benton Harbor Community Plan, the Ox Creek Revitalization Strategic Plan, and the Benton Harbor Master Plan.

It aims to address critical areas like climate change, clean energy, pollution remediation, sustainable housing, workforce development, water infrastructure, and food systems. Each category includes targeted action items and objectives tailored to the Benton Harbor community to improve residents' quality of life and promote long-term environmental and economic resilience.

Table 2 highlights the action items and objectives drawn from the aforementioned plans aligned with investment priorities, while Table 3 illustrates key projects and initiatives working toward implementation of the action plan.

Table 2: Benton Harbor Sustainability Catalyst Action Plan Matrix with Investment Priorities

Investment Priority	Objectives	Outcomes
Climate Change Mitigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and protect environmental and ecologically sensitive areas for the health and well-being of Benton Harbor residents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve environmental, health, and wellness conditions for Benton Harbor residents.
Clean Energy & Energy Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Micro-grid implementation with Bobo Brazil Community Resilience Center. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve energy efficiency of city-owned facilities. Improve energy efficiency of residences and businesses, explore alternative energy opportunities.
Legacy Pollution Remediation & Reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to invest in neighborhood pride with clean-up days, block parties, and events at neighborhood parks. Work toward development of outdoor green spaces and parks for residents. Work with City of Benton Harbor, state and regional organizations to clean-up illegal dump sites and condemned structures, and take action to prevent future occurrences. Support and perform environmental studies on Ox Creek to ensure the environmental safety of the area. Look for and secure funding from state, federal, and private sources to remove waste and improve poor conditions found in environmental studies. Provide frequent seating along paths to allow visitors to enjoy passive recreation. Work with city, county, regional, state and federal agencies to clean up legacy contaminated sites such as Harbor Plating and Modern Plastics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve environmental, health, and wellness conditions for Benton Harbor residents. Improve Ox Creek to be a recreational and natural amenity.

Table 2: Benton Harbor Sustainability Catalyst Action Plan Matrix Continued

Investment Priority	Objectives	Outcomes
Clean Transit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create bike parking and bike infrastructure in key places in the city. Add electric vehicle charging stations at designated locations. • Encourage shared off-street parking and public access / shared parking agreements in areas where public parking is needed. • Work with regional stakeholders to connect Berrien County bike trails to South Bend, South Haven, Kalamazoo, and Chicago. Improve streets, sidewalks, and trails to create an efficient transportation network for cars, public transit riders, bicyclists, and pedestrians. • Consider creating connected entertainment options, like a drive-in movie theater, with space for bicycles and pedestrians to view in Benton Harbor. Improve streets, sidewalks, and trails to create an efficient transportation network for cars, public transit riders, bicyclists, and pedestrians. • Add electric vehicle charging stations at designated locations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage transportation system improvements that support all modes of transportation and prioritize the safety of vulnerable users.
Affordable & Sustainable Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage public agencies to urgently respond to issues relating to fair housing discrimination, absentee landlords, and unsafe rental housing conditions. • Create and implement a program to utilize the roughly 500 City-owned lots for middle housing and attainable workforce housing. • Protect existing housing stock, especially structures of historic significance, with renovation and rehabilitation programs. Develop programs to attract new Black and minority residents to the City. • Develop programs to attract new artists, musicians, and creative professionals to the City. • Consider creating a new position, or designating a City employee, to work with residents to address issues relating to fair housing discrimination, gentrification, and the unhoused/or the displacement of people or cultural assets. • Develop 1,000 new housing units in the City within five years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase city population through new housing development and new resident outreach. Improve housing conditions, including public housing complexes. Increase homeownership. Mitigate gentrification.

Table 2: Benton Harbor Action Plan Matrix with Investment Priorities Continued

Investment Priority	Objectives	Outcomes
<p>Training & Workforce Development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a small business incubator with to encourage and support small business start-ups. • Work with existing property owners to relocate existing heavy industrial uses into designated industrial business parks and away from waterways, key redevelopment sites, and neighborhoods. • Encourage and support small businesses in neighborhoods to improve access to services and employment. Encourage programs to support the development and training of minority contractors. • Create linkages so that trained and licensed minority contractors and business owners can be easily pre-approved to do business in the city. • Work with businesses to establish training opportunities and recruitment programs for residents. • Work with existing educational organizations and businesses to connect with and provide training and job placement services to returning citizens to reduce stigma and discrimination, as well as reduce potential impacts like homelessness, substance misuse, and recidivism. • Create a co-op program with Benton Harbor Area Schools for high school students to gain employment experience, or collaborate with the existing Career and Technical Education program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve environmental, health, and wellness conditions for Benton Harbor residents. • Develop and offer employment training with wrap-around services. • Encourage job growth and build expertise. Increase entrepreneurship. • Increase the population of workers through new affordable workforce housing.
<p>Development of Critical Clean Water & Wastewater Infrastructure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to promote sustainability as a part of assisting City policy and decision-making. • Identify and protect environmental and ecologically sensitive areas, including wooded areas, ravines, and waterways from the impacts of development. • Continue to utilize asset management to protect and invest in the City's water, sewer and stormwater facilities. • When designing projects look for opportunities to incorporate green infrastructure to handle stormwater. • Manage Japanese Knotweed so that it does not impact infrastructure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize environmental justice. Utilize green infrastructure to manage stormwater.

Table 2: Benton Harbor Action Plan Matrix with Investment Priorities Continued

Investment Priority	Objectives	Outcomes
Revitalization of Food Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create community gardens to increase freshly grown food and to educate youth about growing food. • Continue to support the Farmer's Market and consider expanding to create a farmer's market that operates year-round, with indoor spaces. • Support private businesses and nonprofits dedicated to healthy food provision and access within the City. • Encourage new markets, specialty food shops, groceries, restaurants, and expanding the farmer's market. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate the revitalization of local and regional food systems • Conduct a comprehensive community food assessment.

Leveraging Public-Private Partnerships & Recommendations

Public-private partnerships can play a pivotal role in establishing programs for the City of Benton Harbor. By leveraging collaboration between the city, organizations like the Project NEED Foundation, Total Wellness by Choice, Benton Harbor Community Development Corporation, and Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, these partnerships will continue to attract funding, technical expertise, and innovative solutions to drive sustainability goals.

Public-private partnerships can support these initiatives by securing grants, fostering investment from private entities, and co-developing projects that align with the city's climate resilience and equity goals. These partnerships would also help mobilize additional resources, such as community-based fundraising and municipal contributions, ensuring the office has the capacity to promote environmental justice and economic opportunity through community-driven solutions.

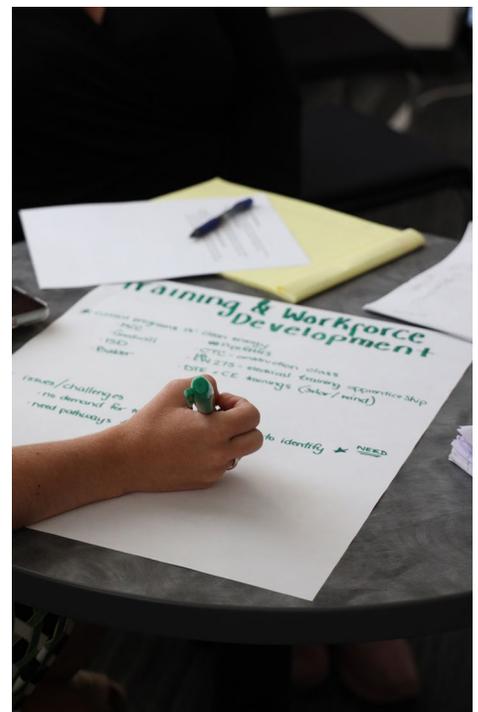


Table 3: Benton Harbor Key Projects & Initiatives

Project/Initiative	Description	Project/Initiative Sponsor
Ox Creek Corridor Revitalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restore Ox Creek & Hall Park Ox Creek Trail Housing development 	City of Benton Harbor, Benton Charter Township, SWMPC, EGLE, NOAA, EPA
Bobo Brazil Armory Revitalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revitalization of vacant community center within Ox Creek Corridor Create a Community Resilience Center 	City of Benton Harbor, SWMPC
Riverview Drive Redevelopment and Addressing High Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create opportunities to redevelop Riverview Drive area by addressing high water issues with green stormwater techniques as much as possible, increase public access to the river and implement placemaking elements 	City of Benton Harbor, SWMPC, Cornerstone Alliance, EGLE
Empire Corridor Redevelopment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Target area for Sustainable Square Mile 	City of Benton Harbor Community Development Department, Benton Harbor Brownfield Authority, Benton Harbor Community Development Corporation
Materials Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing project for the creation of a multi-county plan to address diversion from landfill, with a focus on recycling and composting 	City of Benton Harbor, Berrien County, SWMPC, EGLE, Let Us R.E.S.T.
The Corner at Wall Street	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 55 affordable housing units 	City of Benton Harbor, MHT Housing
Flourish Community Garden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free community garden supports local community and school based food pantries 	Benton Harbor Community Development Corporation
Homegrown Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistance for Benton Harbor residents to start backyard gardens 	Benton Harbor Community Development Corporation
Benton Harbor Black Wall Street Incubator Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports minority entrepreneurs with mentorship and funding 	Emerge Innovation Hub, City of Benton Harbor
Benton Harbor Green Cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implements energy efficiency upgrades to municipal buildings, equipment upgrades, creation and implementation of a sustainability plan 	City of Benton Harbor

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