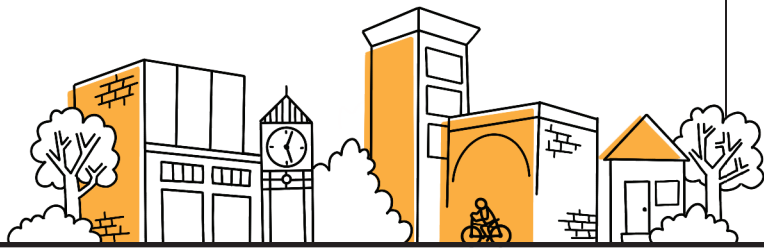


# East Lansing Info

We bring East Lansing the news.



## LOCAL NEWS

### Did a dead poet vote in East Lansing?

Charlotte Brontë voted in the November 2020 election in East Lansing. To make things seem even weirder, Brontë was residing, at the time, at the Dublin Square pub, just across the street from City Hall.

At least that's what a recent examination of Michigan's Qualified Voter File seemed to show.

But a bit of digging has revealed the voter was not dead, is not a poet (so far as we know), and was not really living at the Irish-themed pub. The voter is a real woman who happens to bear the name of a famous late poet.

... read the full story on PAGE 4

www.eastlansinginfo.news

In continuous operation since 2014

FEBRUARY 2021

## Thousands of East Lansing Residents Included in Lawsuit Against the City Over BWL Bills

BY ALICE DREGER  
City Desk Reporter

Thousands of East Lansing residents have now received a notice in the mail notifying them that they will become part of a class action suit against the City of East Lansing unless they indicate in writing that they want to opt out.

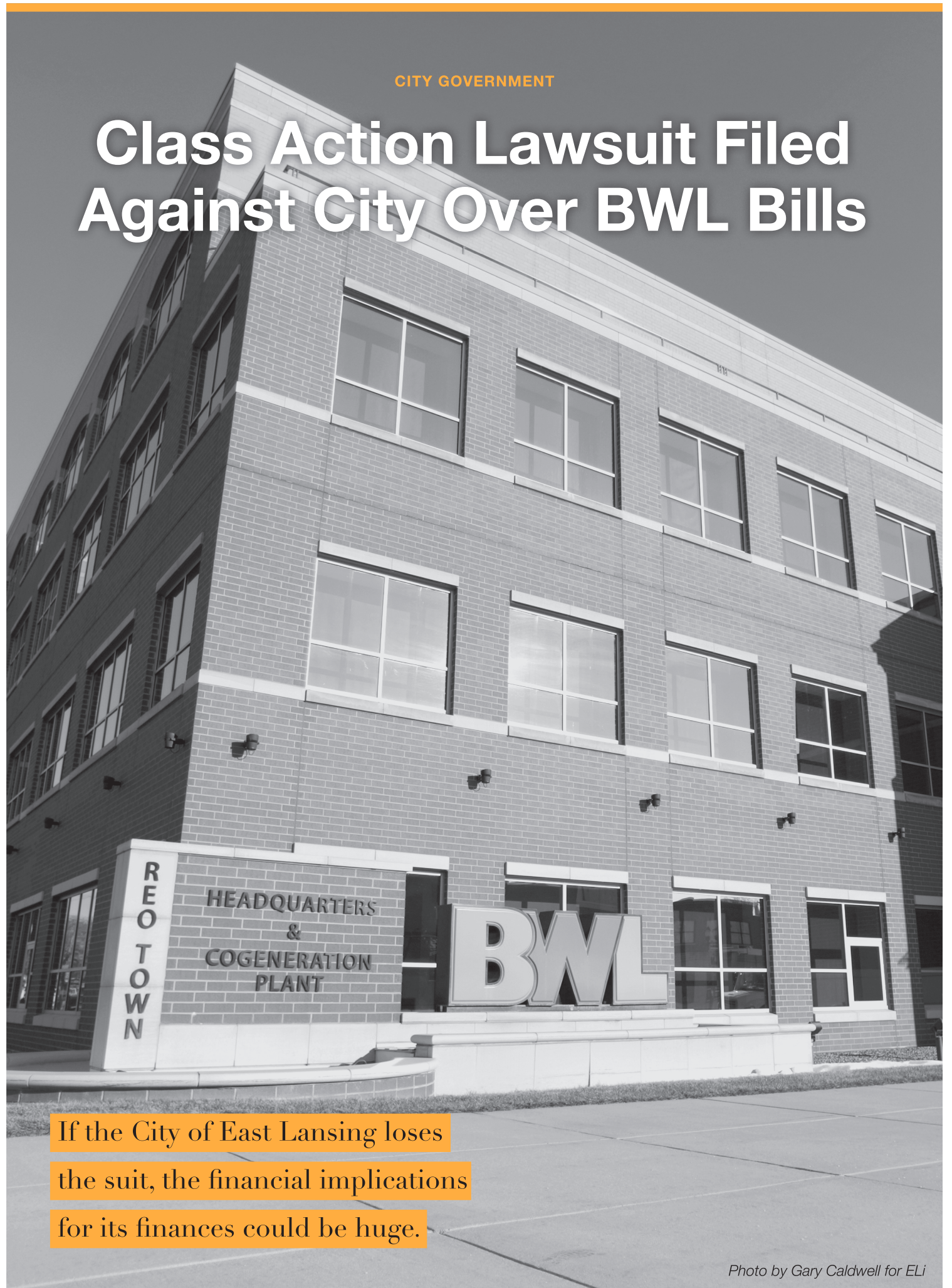
The case involves a "franchise fee" that the East Lansing City Council voted in March 2017 to impose on the electric bills of BWL customers within the City's borders. The franchise fee adds five percent to these electric bills, money collected by BWL that then goes back to the City of East Lansing.

If the City of East Lansing loses the suit, the financial implications for its finances could be huge. Since the franchise fee started to show up on BWL bills in East Lansing, the funding mechanism has had a major impact on the City's finances, as it has been bringing in about \$1.4 million each year.

The City's Finance Director has repeatedly named it as a significant boon to the City's bottom line.

The suit could lead not only to the cessation of the fee, but also to the City having to pay back the fees already collected. That would mean to the City both the loss of the annual revenue, and having to find a way to pay back millions of dollars.

... continued on PAGE 2



## Class Action Lawsuit Filed Against City Over BWL Bills

If the City of East Lansing loses the suit, the financial implications for its finances could be huge.

Photo by Gary Caldwell for ELI

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category/podcast

## LOCAL NEWS

ELPD released data that show Black people are subject to stops, arrests, and use of force by ELPD officers at rates much higher than whites.

PAGE 5

## ARTS + CULTURE

Broad Art Museum reopens with its latest exhibit, "Seeds of Resistance" on Jan. 15. The exhibit responds to concerns about our planet's biodiversity.

PAGE 6

Letter from the Publisher

# What Is This In Your Hands?



**ALICE DREGER**  
Publisher and Executive Director

Alice reports chiefly on city government for ELi and also serves as ELi's lead investigative reporter. Her national bylines include the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *WIRED Magazine*, and *The Atlantic*.

Welcome to the first-ever paper edition of East Lansing Info! We are excited to bring you this experiment, and we want your feedback.

East Lansing Info – known as ELi (and pronounced “EE-lye”) – has been serving this community as a nonprofit, factual and investigative news organization since September 2014. For over six years, we have been producing critical news about the City of East Lansing’s government, East Lansing Public Schools, local elections, policing, arts, businesses, and much more.

Until now, it’s all been online. But we’ve heard steadily over the years from our senior citizen community that this isn’t good enough in terms of really serving that important segment of our population. We also know that we are failing to reach people with no or poor internet connectivity, including some folks on the lower end of the income spectrum.

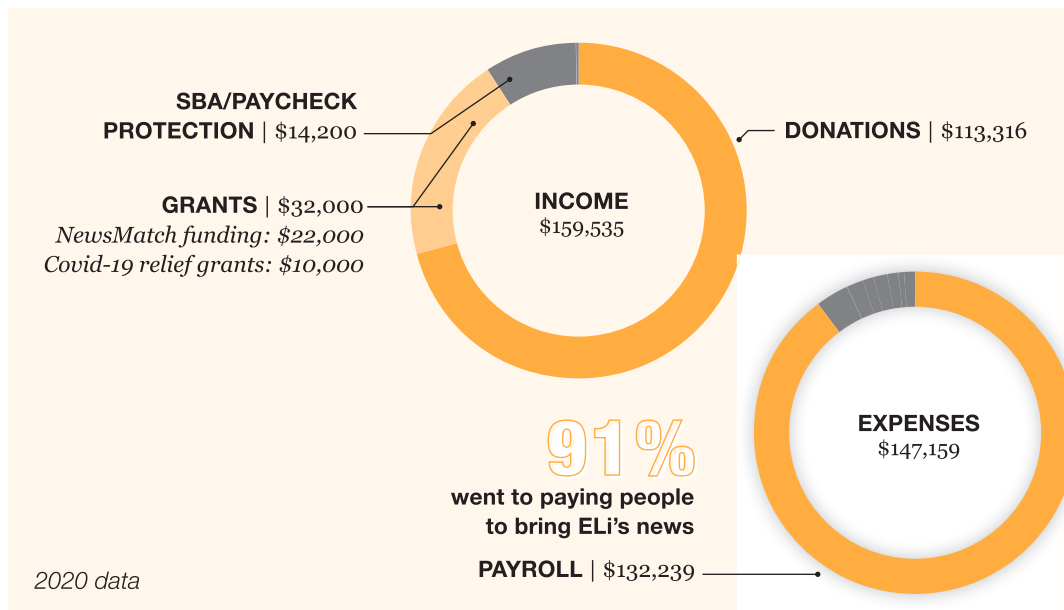
We’ve also heard from sister nonprofit local news publications around the country that, if we produce a paper edition even infrequently and drop stacks in coffee shops and community centers, we will reach people we would not have otherwise and get them connected to our free service.

The reasons we haven’t been delivering on paper are twofold: expense and environmental concerns. Taking these into account, we have decided to attempt an experiment in which we provide a limited run on paper of select articles from the last month. We are going to see if the benefits outweigh the costs, and – as with all our work – keep assessing what we should be doing with our budget.

Speaking of our budget, here’s something you should know about us: We run almost entirely on donations from this community. (We are an IRS-recognized 501(c)3 nonprofit, which means donations to ELi are tax deductible.) And we keep expenses very low.

One thing we like about a paper edition is the good possibility that businesses will be interested in paying for sponsorships spots that can then be used to fund the paper edition.

We want to hear any feedback you have! The whole point of ELi is to be here for the community. So, tell us what you think we need to know about the possibility of continuing a paper edition, about our reporting, about the layout of this prototype, who might sponsor the paper edition – whatever you want to share. Thank you!



**WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!**

If you have internet capabilities, an easy way to reach us is to write to publisher@eastlansinginfo.news.

You can also write to us on paper at:  
East Lansing Info,  
PO Box 115,  
East Lansing, MI 48826-0115

**COVER STORY**

(cont. from PAGE 1)

The named plaintiff in the case is James Heos, an East Lansing resident and attorney. He is represented in the case by the Kickham Hanley law firm out of Royal Oak and by Andrew Abood of the Abood Law Firm of East Lansing.

The City is defended by Foster Swift Collins & Smith, the Lansing-based firm hired under the City Attorney’s contract last fall after Lisa Babcock, Aaron Stephens, and Jessy Gregg voted in July to fire Tom Yeadon of the McGinty firm.

The firing of Yeadon led to the immediate resignations from Council of Ruth Beier and Mark Meadows, who had been on Council when the franchise fee was voted through.

ELi’s Michael Teager broke the story in May 2016 that the Council was considering this franchise fee as a way to try to deal with the City’s financial crisis, caused chiefly by decades of underfunding the City’s pensions.

In 2017, we ran an “Ask ELi” column responding to a customer who asked whether this fee was basically a tax, something the lawsuit now essentially asserts is the case.

State law limits the taxes a municipality’s council can simply vote to impose. Which parts of state law apply in this instance is one of the things that will be worked out in the case.

Kickham Hanley recently brought a similar suit against Delta Township, a case that resulted in a settlement in which Delta Township had to pay out \$2.3 million.

According to a press release from the township, “The Township contends that the franchise agreement is legal. However, in order to mitigate the risk of a larger judgement and to be

judicious with taxpayer funds, the Township Board of Trustees decided to settle this class action lawsuit in August 2020.”

Delta Township had saved up some of the franchise fee revenue, collected since 2017, to use for capital improvements. So, it had money set aside that could be used for the settlement. Still, the revenue hit to the township will be significant. There, it had been bringing in about \$2.5 million per year.

East Lansing has not set aside the funds it has collected from its BWL franchise fee.

The East Lansing suit was filed in Ingham County Circuit Court in March 2020 and was assigned to Judge Wanda M. Stokes. Stokes ruled that the case could proceed as a class action suit, and this is why BWL customers whose bills are implicated have been sent notice by the Kickham Hanley firm that they will be included unless they opt out.

Being included in the lawsuit won’t cost people anything. If Heos wins the suit, checks will likely be issued to those whose bills were involved, with the size determined by what they paid in franchise fees. Anyone who opts out will not be eligible to be paid if Heos wins the suit.

Why might someone take the trouble to opt out of the class action suit, when staying in it costs them nothing? They may wish to do so “to retain their right to file a separate action against the City,” according to the letter sent by Kickham Hanley. A person might also have some other reason for not wanting to be part of the class action suit.

Regardless of what happens, the City General Fund will be used to pay for the City’s legal defense. Foster Swift Collins & Smith will bill the City hourly for that defense work, because litigation representation is not covered in the annual \$500,000 contract cap.

## East Lansing Info

We bring East Lansing the news.

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Sign up at [eastlansinginfo.news/donate](http://eastlansinginfo.news/donate) to have a specific amount automatically donated monthly to ELi from your credit card, Google Pay, or Apple Pay.

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Covid-19



Photo by Emily Joan Elliott for ELi

## “Like Hollering Down the Well”

### GET VACCINATED

Ingham County Health Department urges everyone who desires a vaccine to express interest through ICHD, Sparrow, McLaren and wherever else possible. Meijer, Walgreens, and Rite Aid are currently allowing individuals to express interest and to sign up for updates.

### IF YOU CANNOT MAKE AN APPOINTMENT ONLINE, PLEASE CALL:

**Sparrow:** (877) 205-1300  
**Ingham County Health Department:** (517) 887-4623  
**Tri-County Office on Aging:** (517) 887-1440

## Local Seniors Frustrated While Trying to Get Vaccines

BY EMILY JOAN ELLIOTT  
 Managing Editor

Ingham County Health Department (ICHD) rolled out registration for the Covid-19 vaccine to the general public during the first week of January, and Sparrow, Meijer, and several other healthcare industry providers allowed for registration later in the month. But several senior citizens have expressed to ELi frustration with the long waits and confusing communication about vaccination appointments.

After registering to express a desire to receive a vaccine through ICHD, several seniors who were over age 70 waited approximately a month before receiving a link to make an appointment. Others say they are still left waiting.

### Seniors found delays and confusing communication from ICHD

ICHD asks people to fill out a form to express interest in receiving a vaccine. Initially, ICHD said those who submitted the form would receive a confirmation email, but when over 40,000 people registered in one day alone, the Health Department was unable to send these confirmations since its IT system limits sending email addresses to 10,000 emails per day.

ELi reported this, but some seniors have said that the communication issues ran deeper. One couple, both of whom are over age 70, submitted their initial forms on Jan. 8, two days after the system opened.

That evening, the wife received a confirmation email, but the husband, nothing. Afraid that his registration had been lost, the husband registered again. He didn't receive any confirmation until Jan. 18, and the email he received was different than the one his wife received.

Other seniors have pointed out that one line in the email has also lead to confusion: “This email is to inform you that either we do not currently have open appointments for your priority group OR your prioritization group is not yet eligible.” Based on the email,

some worried that ICHD did not place them in the proper prioritization group.

Another man, who is over age 70 with one underlying condition, contacted ELi in early January after submitting his initial form expressing interest to ICHD on Jan. 6. He never received a confirmation despite several of his friends who were also over 70 receiving links to make appointments.

This individual did not receive a confirmation email until January 27, but then was prompted a week later to make an appointment. Similarly, the couple received links to make appointments in early February, but they cited other factors that led to confusion.

For example, neither of the initial confirmation emails clearly said how they would be contacted regarding an appointment. Wrote the husband to ELi, “Why didn't they tell us whether they are doing this by phone or by email? Right now I'm checking email over and over again every hour of the day to make sure we don't miss a notification, and I'm also rushing to answer the phone. Or even worse, are they texting? We gave our land-line number which of course won't accept texts.”

### The Health Department explains the scene behind the confusion

According to ICHD's Public Information Officer Amanda Darche, prompts to register will be sent over email. She further elaborated that, “We do not send out more links to schedule than we have capacity for, but a spot will not be held indefinitely. If you are registered, it is important to check your email at least daily and to make your appointment promptly.”

Darche also acknowledged that there is still “a significant backlog of emails and voicemail messages...Currently, we have 19,155 people age 70 and older registered and 9,928 people age 65-69 registered. Due to supply, we are only able to vaccinate roughly 2000-3000 new people (first doses) each week.”

When ICHD announced that it would begin vaccinating individuals between ages 65 to 69, the health department renewed fears that ICHD had lost registrations for those over age 70 who had not yet been able to make an appointment.

But Darche said the reason for expanding access to those 65 and older was twofold. “There is inequity in life

expectancy across Ingham County,” wrote Darche to ELi. “People in some areas of our county can expect to live a full decade longer than those residing in other areas of the county. By giving access to only older seniors, we would be prioritizing residents of wealthier, healthier zip codes, which would exacerbate the disparity.”

Expanding access also kept ICHD in line with state prioritization.

Others over age 65 are still waiting for appointments through ICHD or other providers.

Explaining the experience of her husband, who is 73 with underlying health conditions, one woman said she is concerned that her husband has yet to even be offered an appointment.

Writing to ELi, she said, “The Ingham County form is a dead end, in our experience, even for those over 70 with underlying conditions. Ditto the Sparrow form, which requires one to have the good luck to check at a magic moment when one can actually get access to it. McLaren reaches out to some patients over 70 who have had surgery there but not to others.”

Another woman, who falls in the 65 to 69 category, told ELi that she had completed forms expressing interest through ICHD, Sparrow, and the Lake Lansing Meijer. So far, she has heard nothing.

“It's like hollering down the well,” she wrote.

Some who received vaccine appointments through ICHD told ELi they had tried to get vaccines by registering elsewhere without success. One man had attempted to make appointments through Sparrow but never succeeded. He had also inquired through MSU Health Team, but was told they are not currently receiving vaccines. When MSU receives them, he was told, vaccines will be distributed through the pharmacy.

The couple expressed interest to MSU Health Team, Sparrow, UM Medicine, McLaren Health/Walgreens, and Meijer Pharmacy.

“I am waiting to hear more from all of them, with very little info from them,” said the husband, despite the first three reaching out to him saying they would be administering vaccines at some unknown time in the future.

Over the past month, pharmacies have had a slow roll-out and have often used any doses they received in partnership with elder care facilities. Both ICHD and Sparrow have administered vaccines to the wider public that is currently eligible, and both have been successful in the job of not wasting vaccines. Sparrow reports that it has administered 99% of all vaccines received. ICHD has sometimes administered even more vaccines than planned, stating that some Pfizer vials often contain an extra dose.

Part of the problem for both

### NEWS BRIEFS



Photo by Gary Caldwell for ELi

## As ELPS Returns to School, What Are People Saying?

The East Lansing Public Schools Board of Education first approved in December a plan that prioritized a return to in-person learning for the district's most vulnerable students, but in January, the plan changed to allow any student who wanted to return to do so. Superintendent Dori Leyko stated the availability of vaccines and other factors led to the change, but ELi later learned that threats of litigation may have also played a role in the development of a new plan. Some families believe the Board dropped the ball on communication regarding safety protocols, but the Board countered that developing protocols takes time and the process has been transparent. Families considering a return have weighed not only safety protocols but also mental and physical health concerns. Students returned on Mar. 1.

### READ MORE

You can read the full take on the concerns at: [tinyurl.com/594e365d](https://tinyurl.com/594e365d)



Photo by Raymond Holt for ELi

## Newman Lofts Settlement Delayed by Concerns at DDA

On Feb. 23, City Council voted 4-1 to approve an amendment to the Center City District Master Development Agreement that would permit underage renters at Newman Lofts to keep their apartments indefinitely. Council person Lisa Babcock was the lone dissenting vote, calling the developers of Newman Lofts untrustworthy, but the others voted in favor, stating that the agreement clarifies that only individuals age 55 and older can rent in the future. When the Downtown Development Authority took up the issue, Vice Chair Jim Croom, who is also an attorney, found the language vague and voiced concerns that the language could permit other individuals under 55 to live there going forward. The DDA will consider new wording presented by the City at its Mar. 25 meeting.

### READ MORE

Check out the full story here: [tinyurl.com/2mjm7vfj](https://tinyurl.com/2mjm7vfj)



# No, A Dead Poet Did Not Vote In East Lansing's Most Recent Election

BY ANDREW GRAHAM  
Reporter and Sports Editor

Charlotte Brontë voted in the November 2020 election in East Lansing. To make things seem even weirder, Brontë was residing, at the time, at the Dublin Square pub, just across the street from City Hall.

At least that's what a recent examination of Michigan's Qualified Voter File seemed to show.

But a bit of digging has revealed the voter was not dead, is not a poet (so far as we know), and was not really living at the Irish-themed pub. The voter is a real woman who happens to bear the name of a famous late poet. Although she does not live at Dublin Square, the person registered legally, as we explain below. And she voted in the most recent election in person at her East Lansing precinct.

What at first appeared as an election impropriety in East Lansing really represents a look into apparent irregularities that arise from the challenges of Michigan voting database management, which aims to support the right to vote.

So, what actually happened and what's being done in response? ELi brings you the answers.

## How did this issue come up in the first place?

East Lansing resident Anne Hill — a member of ELi's Community Advisory Board and a frequent database-examining public commenter at City of East Lansing meetings — was doing her own research to coincide with the City's soon-to-be-completed housing study. (The housing study is supposed to tell us if there is going to be a bubble in student-attracting housing in East Lansing.)

In doing her own housing research, Hill turned to Michigan's Qualified Voter File (QVF) to cross-reference residences, to try to figure out something about the demographics of who is living where in East Lansing. As she worked with the QVF — commonly referred to as “voter rolls,” which are, in essence, a master list of all people who could vote in an election — Hill discovered a number of apparent irregularities.

The most notable of those appeared, on initial review, to show a dead poet voting while supposedly living at Dublin Square.

At a recent meeting of Mayor Aaron Stephens with the Council of Neighborhood Presidents, Hill brought forward that oddity and several others she found in a partial analysis of East Lansing voters. Going alphabetically by street name, she had completed A through G by then.

When initially presented with Hill's findings, the mayor laughed about it. In a subsequent message to ELi, Stephens said that he did not think the issue of potential voter fraud was a laughing matter, but that he found the idea of a dead poet voting to be funny.

Regardless, the question of what happened in that case needed an explanation — and, if necessary, an investigation into illegal voting. Other apparent irregularities turned up in Hill's research also warranted explaining.

## What were some other concerning findings?

At the Council of Neighborhood Presidents meeting, Hill cited some specific irregularities she found besides the apparent dead poet's vote.

One involved the discovery of about 50 registered voters living on Cherry Lane, a street that doesn't exist anymore.

Another involved eleven 49- to 51-year-old women who all appeared as legally registered to vote at a fraternity house in East Lansing, along with a group of 20- to 23-year-old current frat members. All the women had registered to vote around 1991, suggesting their registrations were held over from 30 years ago, when they lived at the house.

Both of these apparent problems have now been explained to ELi by East Lansing's City Clerk.

With regard to Cherry Lane, City Clerk Jennifer Shuster said, in a message to ELi, that “if a voter is linked to an address, [the voter registration] cannot be removed from the street index. For example, a military or overseas voter may still remain registered at their last known address in Michigan even if someone else is residing at that address or the physical residence is no longer there.”

If someone serving in the military had their voter registration removed by virtue of their former street no longer existing, that person would, in effect, be disenfranchised. So it's left as is.

As for the middle-aged women apparently living at a fraternity?

“All of those individuals were previously placed on the Inactive Voter File (IVF), but still show up on the voter list as they are part of our voter roll assessment and cleanup,” Shuster explained. “None of those individuals have voted with that registration information in East Lansing. Additionally, it appears that the property was sold to the fraternity in 2006, according to assessing records.”

Local lawyer, political consultant, and Ingham County Commissioner Mark Grebner explained further for us that the nature of Michigan's QVF being hand-maintained by the Secretary of State's office means there's often a delay between addresses coming into existence — i.e. a new apartment building opening — and that address appearing on the QVF.

Grebner said this is what happened to Charlotte Brontë when she registered to vote. Living

in a newly-constructed building, The Abbot, her actual residential address wasn't yet available in the online registration system when she went to register. So, she apparently simply used the nearest address she could find in the system. That was Dublin Square's, the closest building on her side of the street.

This explanation was confirmed by the City Clerk's office.

“The point is [that] we have for everybody a location of residence,” Grebner said. “In her case, it would have been The Abbot, but there was no way to introduce it, to communicate The Abbot's address, because [the] table hadn't been updated yet. There's always a slight latency. The second address that everybody has is a place that you can receive mail. And that can be different.”

## So, how did Charlotte Brontë vote?

If the living Charlotte had requested an absentee ballot, she presumably would have indicated her correct mailing address at The Abbot, and her ballot would have gotten to her that way. The whole point of an absentee ballot is to get it to you where you really are. But, in fact, we know that the living Charlotte voted in person, at her precinct location.

Why didn't her address get corrected then, at the polls? According to Shuster, “the electronic pollbook (EPB) that the poll workers use at the polling locations has data that is uploaded directly from the QVF.”

That means there wouldn't have been a way for poll workers to know the address showing up for Charlotte was a non-residential unless they took the time to check for themselves.

In a message from Clerk Shuster to Mayor Stephens, passed along to Anne Hill, the Clerk noted: “when the City Clerk's Office catches a non-residential address on a paper voter registration application, we contact the voter as soon as possible. With the recent implementation of online and automatic voter registration, this process [makes it] more difficult to catch these rare instances.”

“You have to give them a domicile address, you know, an address at which you're living,” Grebner explained further. “But if you don't, if you give them some other address, if you're not doing it fraudulently, it's still okay. In other words, nobody gets their hand chopped off for not filling a form out right.”

## What comes now?

According to the message from Shuster to Stephens, the Clerk's office has been in contact with Charlotte Brontë and the address discrepancy is being remedied. Beyond that, the Clerk's office has several part-time employees dedicated to cleaning up the voter rolls.

Shuster said that, “while the City Clerk's Office works year-round to keep the voter rolls up to date, we are working especially hard during this time [that is, the stay-at-home period] to take an even deeper dive into voter information. Therefore, situations like the one above are important for us to be aware of.”

Both Shuster and Stephens met with Hill last Friday.

Hill said it was “a good meeting” and that now is a good time for maintenance of the voter rolls, because there's a full calendar year between elections. (November 2021 is the next election in East Lansing; there will be three City Council seats on the ballot.)

Hill plans to keep working on her housing study along with keeping an eye on other issues she is interested in, including the massive spending for the revision of the wastewater treatment plant. (Hill voluntarily provides substantial assistance the ELi reporting staff with her research and analyses.)

One final note: On January 28, the day before Hill met with Shuster and Stephens, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson announced that as part of cancelling 177,000 voter registrations, the State is going to be making the list of canceled registrations available. ELi has requested that list and is waiting to receive the data.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:**  
*ELi has elected not to use the real shared-name of the actual living voter and the actual dead poet to respect the privacy of the living voter. (We subbed in the name “Charlotte Brontë.”) To be absolutely clear: the living voter did nothing wrong, and her vote was legal.*



East Lansing City Clerk Jennifer Shuster at work.

Photo by Gary Caldwell for ELi

# NEW DATA SHOWS HIGH USE OF FORCE BY POLICE AGAINST BLACKS

## School Board Member Calls East Lansing “A Sundown Town” in light of new data

BY HEATHER BROTHERS  
AND ALICE DREGER

Four years of data just released by the East Lansing Police Department shows that ELPD officers have employed “use of force” against more Black people than they have used against white people in those four years combined.

ELPD’s just-released use of force data shows that out of 468 cases from 2017-2020, 184 Black people were subject to use of force from ELPD officers (39.3% of all cases), while white people were subject to use of force 179 times (38.2% of all cases).

These data released by ELPD don’t include whether people were residents of East Lansing or non-residents. But in East Lansing, whites outnumber Blacks by over 11 to 1, according to the last available U.S. Census data, and even in the City of Lansing – the most racially diverse municipality within Ingham County – whites outnumber Blacks by about 2.4 to 1. That more Black people have been subject by ELPD to use of force than white people shows the racially disproportionate use of force.

This finding comes not long after other new data releases showed a heavy racial skew in arrests made by ELPD officers, with Black people many times more likely as whites to be arrested by ELPD officers when compared to background population.

New data has also been released by ELPD showing that Black East Lansing residents almost 3 times as likely to be stopped by ELPD as white residents.

All of this new information is emerging because of questions being asked by a special ad hoc committee appointed by City Council, the Study Committee on an Independent Police Oversight Commission. The group is tasked with making recommendations to City Council about establishment of an oversight commission – an issue City Council is expected to decide this year, prior to November 2021 elections, where three Council seats will be up for grabs (those currently held by Mayor Aaron Stephens and Council appointees Dana Watson and Ron Bacon).

Speaking to the data at the Study Committee’s public comment period on Feb. 8, East Lansing Public Schools Board Treasurer Kath Edsall called East Lansing “a sundown town” – a term used to denote a place where Blacks are harassed and roughed up by police after dark.

“Black people in this community have considered East Lansing a sundown town since I arrived in 1978,” she said.

“I’m not surprised at all by the data,” Edsall said, “and neither are most of the Black people I have spoken with.” She added, “What’s frustrating is that we continue to have commentary that we are shocked about this.”

Edsall and her wife have raised eight African-American children in East Lansing. On Feb. 8, she spoke as she has before on the pernicious persistence of problems in East Lansing policing. She called for action: “I’m tired of lip service; I want to see change.”

Study Committee member Sharron Reed-Davis said that she did not find the data shocking given what she has personally experienced, but she said she wants work that “actually means something.” She told the committee that she isn’t sure what the group can do to “change the heart of the police department,” but that change must come as the police are “risking their lives and risking our lives.”



Photo by Raymond Holt for ELI

Chuck Grigsby (left), now Chair of the Study Committee, at the Feb. 18, 2020, meeting of the Human Rights Commission.

“I’m not surprised at all by the data, and neither are most of the Black people I have spoken with.”

KATH EDSALL  
School Board Trustee

Coming into the Feb. 8 meeting of the Study Committee, City Manager George Lahanas wanted to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) to hire an outside expert consultant to determine whether racial bias exists in stops initiated by ELPD officers.

But Lahanas’s proposal was met with sharp criticism from several Study Committee members.

Committee Vice Chair Chris Root raised issues with the purpose of the proposal, arguing that the time and expense to gather more numerical data could be a way for the city to avoid addressing clear issues City officials are already well aware of. (Disclosure: Root has been a reporter for ELI.)

The draft RFP presented by Lahanas and his staff referred to similar studies already conducted in Lansing, Ann Arbor, and Portland, and Root noted their literature reviews didn’t need to be repeated again. She cautioned against East Lansing hiring of an outside expert as a gesture of performative action rather than to affect actual change.

Defending East Lansing “from claims that we’re racist is not a good goal to have,” Root told the Committee. “I don’t think this study is about helping to reduce racial disparities.”

Root had vocal support from Study Committee members Kathy Boyle and Cedrick Heraux.

Boyle, a retired labor attorney, pointed to flaws in the RFP’s stated purpose – “to determine the

extent of racial disparities in officer-initiated contacts” – and said that data released by ELPD already proves this.

“That extent has been already demonstrated by the work already done,” Boyle argued. “So perhaps [East Lansing should be] working on some other issues right now, before we put together an RFP that will be truly useful in addressing the disparities.”

Heraux refuted suggestions from City leaders that there is a statistically “correct” number of Black people that the city should be stopping, arresting, or using force upon.

A criminal justice professor with extensive knowledge of the type of analysis requested by the RFP, Heraux said, “If someone comes to you and says ‘this is where the numbers should be,’ then you’ve been conned. You’ve wasted your money. It’s not possible to make that kind of assertion.”

Heraux continued, reiterating what other Committee Members had said: “There’s a disparity here and we all know it....We know what the number is already. Let’s talk about why it’s that way, and therefore how we can change things to lower that number.”

In this discussion and prior ones, City Manager Lahanas has been quick to acknowledge that the ELPD data concerns him, but more hesitant to draw specific significance from it before getting outside expert analysis.

“I do think it’s important to have some sort of an objective look from someone outside the community, outside the organization,” Lahanas said, “To say, yes, you are over-policing and let me tell you why. Let me show you the number of what it should be.”

But the Study Committee pushed City officials to acknowledge the legitimacy of focusing on the fact that there is an apparent problem and to thus look for causes to root out as well as potential solutions to solve it.

After hearing feedback on the RFP, Lahanas agreed to reconsider.

“Let’s take a bit of a pause and think about it,” Lahanas said, tabling the RFP for now until more work can be done.

The Study Committee has continued to make progress towards its recommendation to Council, which it hopes to make in April. The group has decided not to pursue an investigatory type of Oversight Commission of the sort that exists in much larger cities with larger police forces and much bigger budgets.

Instead, the group expects to recommend a “hybrid” approach that provides review of complaints, seeks and tracks data, and makes recommendations about policing policies. At this point, they are looking to the approach of Albany, New York, as a possible basic model.



ABOVE: Chris Root speaking at the Feb. 12, 2020, meeting of East Lansing’s HRC.

RIGHT: The Human Rights Commission met on Feb. 12, 2020. From left to right: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Administrator Elaine Hardy, School Board Trustee Kath Edsall, HRC and Study Committee Chair Chuck Grigsby, and former Police Chief Larry Sparks.



Photos by Gary Caldwell for ELI

1  
MAR *Library Reopened With Covid-19 Protocols in Place*

The library will be open Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m.–2 p.m. and again from 5–8 p.m. as well as on Friday from 10 a.m.–2 p.m. and Saturday from 1–5 p.m.

... read the full story on [www.eastlansinginfo.news](http://www.eastlansinginfo.news)



Beatriz Cortez, *Generosity I*, 2019.

# SEEDS *of* RESISTANCE

## Exhibit Connects Local and Global

BY SARAH SPOHN  
*Arts + Cultures Reporter*

After a holiday closure, the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum reopened with its latest exhibit, “Seeds of Resistance” on Jan. 15.

The exhibit responds to concerns about our planet’s biodiversity, showcasing a long history of human interdependence on plants. Connecting local histories, the legacy of one of the university’s most-revered faculty Dr. William J. Beal, and international artists, the display encourages learning and imagining of a more sustainable future.

“So many people will find this exhibition relevant because of the subject matter. We all engage with plants in some way in our daily lives, whether it’s through our own gardens, the food we eat, or even in our careers,” Broad Museum Director of Communications, Morgan Butts said.

“But in a broader sense, this exhibition feels so relevant to me right now because it’s encouraging us to collectively imagine better, more sustainable futures. The focus is specifically ecological in ‘Seeds of Resistance,’ but I think the things we’ve lived through in the past year have shone a light on certain ways of living that are just not

sustainable. And instead of allowing ourselves to feel stuck in these models, these artists encourage us to imagine more for ourselves and for our planet. There’s urgency in this exhibition, but there is also a lot of hope.”

Paying homage to Dr. William J. Beal’s local legacy on MSU’s campus, the exhibit celebrates his work with the longest ongoing scientific experiment in modern history, the Beal Seed Viability Experiment, started in 1879. The display also reflects the ongoing student and faculty research in botany and forestry, cementing MSU’s spot as a top-tier research institution. The all-ages exhibition includes accessible native plant scavenger hunts, a gallery wall drawing activity, and discovery packs for all museum visitors.

Associate Curator Steven L. Bridges spoke to ELi about the showcase, which addresses concerns like seed banking, climate change, crop collapse, habitation destruction, and other environmental issues.

“Around 2016, I first started to think more deeply about the important ways that contemporary artists were approaching issues of biodiversity, environmental health and sustainability, and biocultural heritage,” Bridges said. “It was at that time that I wrote an essay for the online academic journal *Seismopolite* titled “Seeds of Resistance,” focusing on three artists — Dornith Doherty, Claire Pentecost, and Sam Van Aken — all of whom are in the current exhibition.”

“In the years since, I have become increasingly

### LEARN MORE

Admission to the museum is free, including this exhibit, which runs from Jan. 15 to July 18, 2021. Tickets can be reserved online, part of the museum’s newly implemented, timed-entry ticketing system that enforces capacity limits. Tickets can be reserved online up to a month in advance. New museum hours are Friday through Sunday from noon to 6 p.m.

*Photo courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles*

interested in how artists approach these topics in truly interdisciplinary ways, and how their powers of imagination allow us to envision new and alternative ways of relating to the natural world. The idea for the exhibition eventually coalesced around the form of the seed, in literal and metaphorical terms, and specifically how seeds encode both genetic information and human cultural values. In recognition of this, then, the preservation of seeds is also the preservation of cultural knowledge and production.”

Bridges describes the exhibit as a timely one, encompassing wide-ranging backgrounds, lived experiences and geographical regions of participating artists, while being rooted in local soil.

“In this way the exhibition as a whole points to the interconnected nature of our ecosystems — the local and global are deeply entwined — and the artworks too create a kind of ecosystem,” Bridges said.

“The exhibition isn’t just about seeds; one can’t talk or think about seeds if you aren’t also considering soil health, the threat of climate change, the dangers of pollution, and habitat loss,” Bridges continued. “This emphasis on interconnectedness hopefully inspires visitors to consider their role in these ecosystems, and how their own health and prosperity is very much linked to the natural environment and the great biodiversity of life on earth.”

## MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Scheduled market Sundays include March 14, March 28, April 11, April 25, and May 9.



## MARKET SUNDAYS

### Downtown Underground Market Opens

The Downtown Underground Market takes place on the lowest level of the M.A.C. Avenue Garage (310 M.A.C. Ave), located under the East Lansing Marriott Hotel.

Farmers' Market Manager and Community Events Assistant Karla Forrest-Hewitt spoke about the event: "The idea is to create a safe space in which local business, local entrepreneurs and customers can come together and support their local economy."

... read the full story on [www.eastlansinginfo.news](http://www.eastlansinginfo.news)

## ANN ABOUT TOWN

### Discovering Sparty's Kabob

*If you've been a foodie pretty much all your life, and traveled widely, being culinarily astonished is kind of a unicorn after a certain point. You have a favorite local hummus. You have eaten fondue in Switzerland, and you share the sad awareness that much of the international cuisine we see around us is transformed from its unique and vibrant essence to "something Americans will like."*



Photo Courtesy of Sparty's Kabob



**ANN NICHOLS**  
Public Editor

Ann does legal and culture reporting for ELi, and is the author of our placemaking column, Ann About Town. She also serves on ELi's Board of Directors and as our Public Editor.

My first meal from Sparty's Kabob on Trowbridge Road was . . . astonishing. I've never had Iraqi food, and my husband (henceforth "Captain Carnivore") hasn't, either. To be honest, when I looked at the menu and selected items for our delivery order, I imagined that it would be pretty much ordinary Middle Eastern Food, which is lovely, but not particularly earth-shattering in a town that can boast several fine Middle Eastern restaurants. The menu looked limited (chicken, lamb, vegetarian options) and the dishes were mostly familiar. I also thought it was a little weird that an Iraqi restaurant was offering Tandoori Chicken, but the whole point of the experiment was to keep an open mind.

Let me add here that based on its Facebook account, Sparty's Kabob offers food buffet-style when there isn't a pandemic, and several of the reviews speak of the generosity and passion of the owner about explaining the Iraqi dishes to newbies. I look forward to the day when The Captain and I can actually visit Sparty's Kabob, I can ask all my questions about how things are prepared and the origins of various dishes, but until then, I'm making educated guesses. I'm hoping readers who know more than I do will tell me where I'm wrong.

Neither of us eats lamb (because we are total hypocrites, and I grew up eating my mother's deliciously garlicky leg of lamb, but there it is), so we ordered chicken-based meals. For main entrees, the Captain ordered the "Mixed Grill Plate," which came with four pieces of chicken (he chose Tandoori), hummus and beans. I requested "Sparty's Regular" with two chicken kabobs and kabsa, described on the internet as something like Biryani, an Indian dish of rice

and marinated chicken or lamb.

Because I do have a favorite local hummus, I ordered a side portion of Sparty's, to see how it compared, as well as a couple of dishes that intrigued me: Eggplant Salad, and Pasta Salad. I knew the Eggplant Salad was not just another name for Babaganoush, because that's also on the menu.

Back to the whole "astonishing." The hummus has bumped my previous favorite from its position. It's standard chickpea-tahini-garlic-olive oil-lemon hummus (I think), but with no sharpness or acidity. It's mellow hummus, and tastes of chickpeas, excellent olive oil, and (mysteriously) European butter. The pita bread quarters that accompanied the hummus were pretty standard, but when the hummus is that good . . . who cares?

My kabobs were not what I expected, which was chunks of chicken on a skewer. These were a combination of ground or shredded meat and spices, more like gyro meat or a doner kabob, and in one long piece rather than chunks. They were tender, full of flavor, and juicy. There's nothing wrong with the chunks-on-a-skewer variety of kabobs (and from a look at the website, it appears they are also available), but it will be hard for me not to keep ordering this version.

My meal came with kabsa, which was again, not the mild, rich, biryani-like rice I was expecting. It was spicy, and instead of meat it included beans similar to pinto beans. I'm not sure if the kabsa was just the rice and the beans were a separate dish (things happen to food during delivery), but even if they were meant to be separate, they were really good mixed up and eaten with bites of chicken.

Captain Carnivore ordered the plate with Tandoori, and received a huge portion (for \$15.99) of chicken along with hummus, beans, and salad. The meal would easily have fed two people, and he said (and a bite confirmed) that the Tandoori was fall-off-the-bone tender. The pasta salad was unlike any I've had before; it had beans and other vegetables in it, and the sauce was much lighter than the standard mayonnaise-heavy version. I tasted, maybe, some yogurt or sour cream, and a hint of sweetness. The Captain (who doesn't really like any pasta salad) wasn't a fan, but I thought it was a nice surprise.

The star of the show, though, was the eggplant salad. I am sure there was roasted eggplant, along with onions, tomatoes, and green peppers, with the softness of the first three contrasting with the crispness left in the peppers. This was all enrobed in a kind of sweet and sour dressing, that probably involves some vinegar and something sweet like pomegranate molasses or plain old sugar. It was tangy, light, and so good that I had to refrain from licking the container (until I was alone in the kitchen). If you order nothing else, even if you think you don't like eggplant, order that salad.

In addition to having really good and interesting food at very reasonable prices, Sparty's is a good choice for vegetarians, vegans, people with gluten or dairy sensitivities, and children. There's a whole section of the menu devoted to vegan options, including a "regular" and a "special" vegan plate with your choice of grain, falafel, grape leaves or vegan kabobs, and salad, hummus, grilled veggies, or bean stew. Kids' Plates feature a salad, one kabob/Tandoori/grilled chicken, and fries.

This is also a great place if you're eating keto. Skip the grains and focus on chicken or lamb and some Iraqi or Greek Salad. If you're REALLY not eating keto, take a look at the dessert offerings, including baklava, cheesecake, something called Konafa that appears to combine both sweetness and cheesiness, and a rolled pastry called Klecha, which according to Google is "sometimes considered the national cookie of Iraq." Someday we will go on a ten-mile hike and then sample one of each.

Sparty's Kabob is fairly new, local, and (in my opinion) good. Really good. It's also a place that will let you feed a family healthy, hand-cooked food for around what it costs to eat at McDonald's. Our plan is to keep ordering for delivery and pickup until the day we can go in, peruse the buffet, and find out what's in that amazing eggplant salad.

## CHECK IT OUT

Sparty's Kabob is located at 930 Trowbridge Rd. in East Lansing.

# BAPS

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East Lansing kids of all ages have loved Mickey Mouse Hill for generations.

All photos by Gary Caldwell for ELi

## How Did Mickey Mouse Hill Get Its Name?

BY EMILY JOAN ELLIOTT  
Managing Editor

Mickey Mouse Hill, located on the east side of MacDonald Middle School, is well known as one of the local hotspots to go sledding on a cold, snowy day. But how did the hill get its name?

One ELi reader pointed us to a conversation on the East Lansing High School Alumni Facebook group that offered up some possible answers.

Some have assumed the name is related to the name of MacDonald Middle School. This theory suggests that “MacDonald” morphed to “Mickey” over the years, perhaps with some changes in between.

Others pointed out that MacDonald Middle and Mickey Mouse share the same initials: M. M.

A related theory believes that the M.M. for “Mickey Mouse” originally came from calling the hill “Marsh’s Mountain.” According to some alumni, the first physical education teacher at MacDonald was Craig Marsh, beloved by the school’s students who subsequently dubbed the hill Marsh’s Mountain.

But alumni who lived in East Lansing in the 1950s remember the hill being called Mickey Mouse Hill long before MacDonald Middle School opened in the late 1960s.

Perhaps the topography influenced the name? Some say that, once upon a time, aerial views of the two hills looked like Mickey Mouse’s ears. Today, the aerial views look more like bunny ears to some, and nothing at all to others. Those who remember the construction of MacDonald Middle School said that the hills were reduced in size when the school was built, thus distorting the aerial view.

One alum has suggested that Mickey Mouse Hill got its name from its size, writing, “I always thought the name reflected that fact that it’s such an unimpressive hill. Mickey Mouse meaning small, ineffective, or unimportant.”

Others quickly fought back against the notion of the hill being diminutive in size, recalling broken bones. Those who revisited the hill recently with their children recounted sore backsides.

The hill, however, was seemingly more dangerous in years past. Previous generations, who frequented the hill before some modifications were made, enjoyed “nutcrackers,” which caused one to fly off the east side of the hill before landing at the bottom.

One alum also recounted being part of the



*“Mickey Mouse Hill was the place to go sledding even in 1955 so the name has been around a long, long time.”*

**DON CLUGSTON**  
East Lansing resident

infamous “Mickey Mouse Mafia,” writing, “We had the Mickey Mouse Mafia, we’d wait for someone to go down, then about 10 to 15 of us would launch, and we’d all try to smash into each other.”

But one of the name-origin theories harkens back to 1950s postwar cultural changes. More and more Americans purchased televisions during that time, bringing the Disney character into children’s homes. Wrote one alum, “In the middle fifties when the first housing was coming up around it, I just thought we named it after our favorite TV show. Television was so new.”

Although no definitive answer was reached in the discussion, the debate clearly brought back happy memories for many. Several alumni fondly remembered Craig Marsh, who later became the principal of Marble Elementary, with one alum saying Marsh gave him the confidence to learn to swim.

Others recalled East Lansing before some significant changes were made. Back in the day, Burcham Drive stopped at Hagadorn Road, and the Inter-Urban Train’s railroad tracks were south of Burcham. One alum found a trunk near the tracks, and some suspected it had been thrown off a train earlier in the century. They also pointed out that the Burcham park area with the solar panel array was previously the town dump. (That land still requires active environmental management because of its history as a landfill.)

Regardless of the origin of its name, Mickey Mouse Hill remains a community gathering spot following snowstorms like the bevy we’ve had lately, and it seems very likely to stay just as popular for generations to come.



### MEMORIES

“Some seem to think the hill’s name has something to do with the Mickey Mouse Club TV series (that I watched ardently) but the fact is the hill had its name way before the series aired in 1955. Since Mickey Mouse actually was created in 1928 by Walt Disney, we will probably never know who tagged the small hill we all loved with that name. It is great that such a small hill has passed down through so many generations as a place for winter enjoyment. From what I understand, when the middle school was built on that land there was an intentional effort to maintain that hill in its present form because so many had enjoyed it in its past. That was a very wise decision because what was a pretty local (Marble school area kids) attraction has now become popular with most of EL. I arrived in EL as a 5th grader in 1955 and lived on Melrose St. so went to the old Marble school. Mickey Mouse Hill was the place to go sledding even in 1955 so the name has been around a long, long time. Most people don’t know that at the bottom of the hill (West side) was a small marsh (pond) area and in the spring time we would go and collect tad poles from those waters. That old trolley line (Inter Urban Train) was always a great summer adventure for us kids as we headed out to the old dump to look for interesting things like old TV sets and collect the tubes. Along the way we would cut off some of the dried vines from along the path and try smoking them. If you were lucky you even found a metal spike from the old railroad ties. Our boy scout troop from Marble even took an occasional hike down that old trolley line path doing some scout training along the way. EL was a great place to grow up with nearby woods for forts and the university for summer time bike riding and just doing fun stuff.”

– DON CLUGSTON