



TOP STORY

Animal Control Pay Request Draws Public Reaction, Raises Questions About County Oversight

A record-based look at the Sept. 15 meeting, the county job description and the questions still before the board.

STAFF REPORT | GRATIOT COUNTY WHISTLEBLOWER

ITHACA, Mich. - What began as a request to increase pay for Gratiot County Animal Control Officers developed into a much broader discussion during the Sept. 15 Gratiot County Board of Commissioners meeting.

The discussion covered the department's responsibilities, shelter operations, dangerous animals, liability, working conditions and the information commissioners want before approving a pay change.

Residents later debated portions of the exchange on social media, but the meeting record and the county's published documents remain the primary sources for this report.

A REQUEST TO MOVE ANIMAL CONTROL FROM GRADE 2 TO GRADE 7

Animal Control Director Jaime Haase appeared before commissioners seeking a pay-grade change for Animal Control Officers.

Gratiot County's official Animal Control Officer job description classifies the position as Grade 2. The county's published wage schedule effective Oct. 1, 2025 shows Grade 2 beginning at \$16.71 per hour, while Grade 7 begins at \$21.32 per hour.

Haase said the officers handle both field enforcement and shelter operations. The work described at the meeting included after-hours calls, neglect and cruelty cases, livestock, medical care, court cases and potentially dangerous situations.

She said the department has three Animal Control Officers and one part-time shelter employee, with on-call responsibilities outside normal shelter hours. Staff also described using foster arrangements when the building cannot safely accommodate a young or unusual animal.

COMMISSIONER QUESTIONS PAY REQUEST; BOARD SEEKS MORE INFORMATION

District 2 Commissioner Jan Bunting questioned whether such a large pay-grade increase was justified and compared Gratiot County with larger counties that pay Animal Control employees more.

Bunting proposed waiting approximately six months while Animal Control provides regular reports documenting its workload, including calls, animals received, animals returned to owners, adoptions and other activity.

The requested reports would give the board current information before it decides whether the position should be reclassified.

'STRICTLY TO GO OUT AND GET A DOG OR A CAT'

Bunting said:

"It's strictly to go out and get a dog or a cat."

The county's published job description says officers respond to animal complaints, patrol for strays, investigate abuse, address animal-related public-safety concerns and manage shelter operations.

The official job description also lists equipment including live traps, sedatives, euthanasia drugs, state testing kits, pepper spray and a shotgun, and warns that officers may encounter dangerous conditions, contagious diseases and physical trauma.

Michigan guidance likewise covers cruelty and neglect, animals running at large, dangerous animals, large carnivores, wolf-dog crosses and exotic-animal complaints. A Michigan Animal Industry Division report also lists hoarding cases and exotic or dangerous-animal complaints among local responsibilities.

Taken together, the county and state documents describe a broader function than simply collecting dogs and cats.

'WE'RE NOT LOOKING TO MAKE THINGS COMFORTABLE FOR THE ANIMAL'

Another exchange that drew attention occurred while Bunting and Animal Control staff discussed the size and layout of the county shelter. Bunting said:

"We're not looking to make things comfortable for the animal. We're just looking to put them there until we find the owner or somebody adopts them."

Haase responded that the shelter has seven dog kennels but at that time was housing approximately 11 dogs.

Michigan's Animal Control program describes animal welfare, shelter care and public safety as core responsibilities and requires formal training for many shelter-related duties.

Those standards do not answer the pay question, but they provide context for the board's discussion of kennel capacity, staffing and shelter procedures.

THE SNAKE DISCUSSION

Staff said calls can involve livestock, reptiles and other unusual domesticated animals.

The discussion turned to what would happen if the county shelter could not safely house a python. When asked, Animal Control Officer Nathen Lien said that under those circumstances he would be willing to take the animal home temporarily. His answer was a



Gratiot County Courthouse, Ithaca, photographed 2015. Photo: rossograph, CC BY-SA 4.0 / Wikimedia Commons; cropped.

response to the hypothetical; the meeting discussion did not establish that he had already taken a python home.

Bunting then raised a hypothetical situation involving a python being taken home by an officer and a child getting into its container, being bitten and dying. Lien responded that training exists specifically because handling unusual or dangerous animals carries risks.

Moments later, Bunting said:

"If you have a snake that's poisonous and they don't want it, you should take it out and shoot it right then."

Animal Control immediately disagreed, saying officers could not simply kill an animal belonging to someone else and explaining that custody and holding requirements had to be considered.

Bunting later told the officers:

"You're doing things that you shouldn't be doing."

Animal Control disputed that assessment.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Animal Control Pay Request: The Full Meeting Context

FULL REPORT | NAMES AND QUOTATIONS RETAINED | SOURCES BELOW

PAY REQUEST	MEETING RECORD	CURRENT STATUS
Grade 2 to Grade 7	Sept. 15, 2026 begins about 1:19:26	No final action; reports and legal guidance requested
ALLIGATOR DISCUSSION RAISES LIABILITY CONCERNS Bunting raised another hypothetical involving an alligator, a child being injured and the county's liability. She said unusual animals should go directly to the county shelter. Animal Control staff said the shelter cannot safely or humanely house every species it may encounter and that an unsuitable environment could put an animal at risk. Bunting said the county should seek guidance from the prosecutor, insurer and possibly outside counsel. The meeting did not resolve what written procedure should apply when the shelter cannot safely accommodate an animal. Bunting's questions concerned both employee safety and county liability. Staff said foster agreements and training are used in unusual cases, but no final policy was presented during the meeting. WHAT ANIMAL CONTROL SAYS THE JOB ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE Staff described entering a property containing approximately 70 dogs and 40 cats, removing multiple dead cats from another property, investigating cruelty and neglect, handling court cases and medical care, responding after hours, dealing with livestock on roads and operating the shelter. Staff also said the department had handled 387 cases sent to the prosecutor since January 2025 and receives roughly 1,500 complaints a year. Those figures were stated during the meeting and were not independently audited for this article. One officer told commissioners that, as of the meeting date, he had not had a day off since Aug. 22 because of his work schedule and on-call responsibilities. The county job description warns of extreme conditions, contagious diseases, airborne pathogens and physical trauma. Michigan materials describe the work as serving both animal welfare and public safety. THE COMPARISON WITH LARGER COUNTIES Staff said population is an incomplete wage comparison because some counties separate field enforcement from shelter work or rely on humane societies. Gratiot County employees perform both, so staffing, workload, call volume and outside services also matter. The county's published job description confirms that shelter operations are part of the position. Staff said some comparison counties transfer animals to a separate shelter or humane society after field pickup, while Gratiot County employees continue with intake, care and placement. The board can test that comparison when it reviews the requested workload reports.	NOT EVERY CONCERN RAISED WAS UNREASONABLE Commissioners control county spending, so requests for activity reports, call statistics, intake and adoption numbers, wage comparisons and liability guidance are ordinary oversight questions. The separate dispute is whether some remarks accurately described duties already assigned to Gratiot County Animal Control Officers. The county job description and Michigan guidance are available for residents to review. Both issues can be examined at the same time: the board can require evidence for a compensation decision while also making sure its discussion reflects the department's documented duties. PUBLIC REACTION GROWS AFTER THE MEETING Residents reacting on Facebook focused on the snake statement, the description of the job and whether the board had enough information before considering a pay increase. Calls for apologies or political consequences were individual opinions, not findings of this newspaper. The public record does not establish a final pay decision or a final unusual-animal policy from this meeting segment. WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? The board did not approve or reject the reclassification during this portion of the meeting. Bunting requested monthly reports on animals received, adopted and returned, along with legal and insurance guidance on unusual animals and foster arrangements. The next records to watch are the department's reports, written guidance and any formal compensation proposal. Those records can answer whether the position should remain at Grade 2, how comparable counties should be selected and what procedure applies when the shelter cannot safely house an animal. WATCH IT YOURSELF The Animal Control presentation begins at about 1:19:26 in the Sept. 15 meeting recording. The full discussion and source documents are provided so readers can review the record directly. Gratiot County Whistleblower will follow responses, additional documents and any compensation decision. PUBLISHED CLARIFICATION - SEPT. 17, 2026 The original Facebook article sometimes used 'commissioners' generally. The specific remarks quoted here were made by District 2 Commissioner and Vice Chair Jan Bunting; those quotations are unchanged. This clarification is published so the record is clear. PRIMARY RECORDS • Full Sept. 15 meeting recording - Animal Control begins about 1:19:26 • Gratiot County Animal Control page and officer job description	• County wage scale and Board meeting materials • Official Board of Commissioners roster • Michigan Animal Control Officer guidance and laws • Michigan Animal Control Officer training curriculum • Michigan Animal Industry Division 2021 annual report RECORD CHECK The Sept. 15 recording places the Animal Control presentation at about 1:19:26. The request discussed in that segment was a move from Grade 2 to Grade 7; no final reclassification vote appears in the segment reviewed for this edition. The county wage schedule lists \$16.71 per hour at the first step of Grade 2 and \$21.32 at Grade 7. Those figures describe the published schedule, not a new award or a guaranteed employee wage. Lien's statement about taking a python home was made in response to a hypothetical. The meeting record does not establish that he had already done so, that a child was injured, or that an animal was illegally destroyed. The board's next records should show the workload reports Bunting requested, any written guidance on unusual animals and foster care, and whether a formal compensation proposal returns for a vote. Readers can compare those records with the county job description, the state guidance linked above and the full meeting recording.

PUBLIC MONEY

Board Tables Conservation Funding Request; Service Agreement Still Pending

The district described watershed, farm and grant work; commissioners discussed \$125,000 but postponed action.

STAFF REPORT | GRATIOT COUNTY WHISTLEBLOWER

The Gratiot Conservation District asked the county for a new annual investment of \$125,000 to \$150,000 for watershed work, grant matching, public outreach and operating cash flow. At the Sept. 15 meeting, a commissioner moved to provide \$125,000, but the board later voted to table the matter until an agreement can define services and terms.

The district's written proposal lists \$75,000 to \$100,000 for a full-time watershed technician or scientist, \$25,000 for grant matching, \$25,000 for a part-time outreach coordinator and \$25,000 for cash flow during grant-reimbursement delays.

Those components total \$150,000 to \$175,000, which does not fully match the requested range. Before funding is approved, the county should obtain one reconciled budget stating which components are included and whether costs are annual or one-time.

DISTRICT'S CASE

District Chairman Kevin Craig said added capacity could move Clean Water Act projects into implementation, help farmers with voluntary soil-health practices, address septic and E. coli concerns, and support tire and hazardous-waste collection. He said the district currently lacks matching money for some state and federal grants.

A commissioner praised the district's value to farmers and noted its ownership of Forest Hill Nature Center. County counsel recommended time to identify the exact services and prepare an agreement before an appropriation is approved.

The tabling vote means the request remains unresolved. It is neither an approval nor a rejection. The next record to watch is the proposed service agreement and any revised budget that accompanies it.

- District proposal and full Sept. 15 meeting

REQUEST AT A GLANCE

REQUESTED RANGE

\$125,000 to \$150,000 annually.

ITEMIZED TOTAL

The listed components add to \$150,000 to \$175,000.

PROPOSED COMPONENTS

\$75,000-\$100,000 for a watershed position; \$25,000 for grant matching; \$25,000 for outreach; and \$25,000 for grant-reimbursement cash flow.

BOARD STATUS

Tabled. No appropriation was approved or rejected.

NEXT RECORDS

A service agreement, a reconciled budget and a later public vote.

WHY THE DISTINCTION MATTERS

A motion was discussed, but the final action in this segment was to postpone the decision.

PUBLIC CHECK

The next packet should make the purchased services, annual ceiling, reporting expectations and agreement term easy to identify.

THREE QUESTIONS STILL OPEN: Which services the county would purchase, what the reconciled annual cost would be, and what written terms would govern the work.

FY2027 BUDGET

What to Watch

The adopted plan uses reserves to cover the revenue-spending difference. Future budgets will show whether that use was temporary or became recurring.

- FY2027 budget and general appropriations

ELECTED-OFFICIAL PAY

Resolution Sets 3% Adjustment

The board approved a 3 percent FY2027 increase for listed non-judicial countywide elected officials and designated chief deputies. The resolution does not set commissioner pay. Listed salaries include \$125,811 for prosecuting attorney, \$105,474 for sheriff and \$94,569 for clerk, among other positions.

The meeting shows the resolution passed after the prosecutor deferred a separate request concerning her eventual successor's salary.

- Resolution 26-458 and Sept. 15 meeting recording

FY2027 GENERAL FUND | ADOPTED PLAN

Budget by the Numbers

\$18.65M

REVENUE

\$19.30M

SPENDING

\$648,895

RESERVE USE

\$11.49M

PROJECTED ENDING BALANCE

The projected ending balance equals about 59.5 percent of annual spending. Reserve use covers the adopted plan's revenue-spending difference.



COMMUNITY RESULTS

Extension Report Shows Broad Local Reach

MSU Extension reports 1,429 Gratiot participants; two county programs have approaching application and bid deadlines.

STAFF REPORT | GRATIOT COUNTY WHISTLEBLOWER

Michigan State University Extension's 2025 Gratiot County report says 1,429 county residents participated in programs and residents attended 272 programs statewide. The report was included with the County Board's Aug. 18, 2026 agenda.

The report divides participation among agriculture and agribusiness, youth, health and nutrition, and community, food and environment programs.

LOCAL REACH

The report says 1,295 people attended programs hosted in Gratiot County and 447 participated in agriculture programs held locally. Gratiot 4-H reported 329 youth and 115 volunteers.

More than 420 fourth-graders attended the county's RED swine and agriculture education event. The report values local 4-H volunteer time at \$34,020.45 and lists 192,784 total contacts.

WHAT THE FIGURES MEASURE

These are program-reported counts. Categories may overlap, and contacts are not necessarily unique people; the totals should not be added together as one headcount.

REPORT AT A GLANCE

1,429

County residents participated.

1,295

People attended programs hosted locally.

329 + 115

4-H youth and volunteers reported.

420+

Fourth-graders attended RED.

PROGRAM CATEGORIES

693

Agriculture and agribusiness participants.

638

Youth participants.

402

Health and nutrition participants.

145

Community, food and environment participants.

READ WITH CARE

Category counts may overlap, and contacts are not necessarily unique people. Do not add the figures together as one headcount.



Pine River from the Alma River Walk, photographed 2015. Photo: Tim Kiser, CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons; cropped.

COMMISSION ON AGING

Parking Bid Covers 43,000 Square Feet

The county is accepting bids to reconstruct the shared parking area serving the Commission on Aging building and Ithaca Senior Partners on South Pine River Street.

The request calls for pulverizing the existing asphalt, grading, placing 2.5 inches of 13A hot-mix asphalt and repainting markings, including accessible spaces.

Separate prices are requested for the two facilities. That should allow the final public record to show how the work is divided between the Commission on Aging property and Ithaca Senior Partners.

Bids are due at 11 a.m. Sept. 25. Review is scheduled through Sept. 30, with a possible board award on Oct. 6. The notice gives no county estimate and names no contractor; this is not yet an awarded contract.

After opening, the useful records will be the complete bid tabulation, staff recommendation, board vote and signed contract amount. Those documents will show whether the low bid was selected and what the county ultimately agreed to purchase.

• [Official Bid No. 10-26 page and request](#)

STATUS SEPT. 17: Open bid; no contractor or final price has been selected.

PARKS & RECREATION

Municipalities May Apply for New Projects

The parks millage generates about \$695,000 annually and permits up to 20 percent for new municipal park and recreation projects. Twenty percent is approximately \$139,000, an arithmetic estimate rather than a separately announced award pool.

Eligible projects must provide a direct public benefit and be located on property owned by the applying city, village or township. Routine maintenance and ordinary operating costs are excluded.

Requests must be at least \$1,000. Applications over \$5,000 require a local match of at least 25 percent, creating a larger local commitment for the larger requests.

Applications are accepted Sept. 1 through Nov. 1; awards are expected by April 1; approved work must be completed within one year.

The next accountability step is publication of the applicants, the evaluation used to compare them, the amounts awarded and the completion record for each funded project.

• [County Parks & Recreation page and application](#)

STATUS SEPT. 17: Application window open; no municipal awards have been announced.

DATES & FOLLOW-UP

SEPT. 25, 11 A.M.

Parking bids are due.

OCT. 6

Possible board award date listed in the bid schedule.

NOV. 1

Municipal park-grant application deadline.

RECORDS TO WATCH

Bid tabulation, final contract amount, park applicants, evaluation results and completed-project reports.

STATUS

Both opportunities were open as of Sept. 17, 2026.

OUT & ABOUT

Homecoming, Airplanes and Community Connections

Two upcoming Gratiot events, a neighboring-county service notice and ways to take part in this newspaper.

COMMUNITY DESK | DETAILS VERIFIED SEPT. 17, 2026 | CHECK LINKS FOR CHANGES

ALMA COLLEGE HOMECOMING

September 25-26, 2026

FRIDAY 3-5 p.m. Homecoming information table | Hood Building

SATURDAY 9 a.m. Scot Trot 5K | Hogan Front Entrance

SATURDAY 10:30 a.m. Homecoming parade | Superior Street

SATURDAY 2 p.m. Football: Alma vs. Adrian | Bahlke Field

SATURDAY 7 p.m. Homecoming Choir Concert | Presbyterian Hall

ALMA COLLEGE HOMECOMING

Alma College's 140th Homecoming celebration is scheduled for Friday and Saturday, Sept. 25-26.

Some events require tickets or registration. The college says the schedule is subject to change.

• [Official 2026 Homecoming schedule](#)



Dunning Memorial Chapel, Alma College, photographed 2003. Photo: Santosdo, CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons; cropped.

FLY-IN AND CAR MEET

EAA Chapter 134 is scheduled to host a fly-in and car meet at Gratiot Community Airport from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 19. Lunch is listed at \$12 for adults and \$8 for children. The airport is at 3999 W. Seaman Road in Alma.

• [Official event listing](#)

NEIGHBOR COUNTY

Midland County residents may obtain vouchers for free passenger-tire disposal through Sept. 25. The published rules require Midland County identification, rims removed, clean tires and no more than 10 per household. Gratiot residents should not assume they qualify.

• [Midland County September newsletter](#)

NEXT FRIDAY'S FOLLOW-UP

Koda & Queenie: how two Gratiot County shelter dogs reached research labs. We are tracing the county records, the Class B dealer, the universities and the legislation that followed.

FULL DOCUMENTED REPORT | FRIDAY, SEPT. 25

REACH OUT ON FACEBOOK

Send meeting records, corrections, community events or news leads. Identify what is verified and attach the original record when possible. Include a date, location and contact method.

SHARE THE FULL EDITION

Share the original post or complete PDF so the article, source links and later corrections stay together.

FREE BUSINESS SPACE - AVAILABLE

No business has been selected. One Gratiot County small business may receive a free monthly spotlight. Message the page with the business name, community, contact information, a real photo or logo you own, and a short description. The space is free, labeled and not an endorsement.



WHO WE ARE

About Gratiot County Whistleblower

Our mission, our reporting practices and the standards behind this independent local publication.

PUBLICATION STATEMENT | SEPTEMBER 2026



OUR PURPOSE

Provide Gratiot County residents with accurate, documented and transparent information about what is happening in our community.

WHO WE ARE

Gratiot County Whistleblower is an independent local news and accountability page operated by a small group of individuals who have chosen to remain anonymous.

SOURCE INDEX

Board meeting: [youtube.com/watch?v=fA6srn2QKg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fA6srn2QKg)

Board packets / wage schedule: meetings.boardbook.org/Public/Organization/1371

Animal Control job description: gratiotmi.com/156/Animal-Control

Conservation District materials: meetings.boardbook.org/Public/Organization/1371

WHAT WE COVER

We cover local government, public meetings, public records, budgets and spending, community concerns, local developments, and stories that deserve public attention - whether the news is positive, negative, or somewhere in between.

Good news. Bad news. Difficult questions. Public records. Local stories.

SOURCE INDEX, CONTINUED

MSU Extension report: meetings.boardbook.org/Documents/WebViewer/1371?file=7159978

Bid No. 10-26: gratiotmi.com/bids.aspx?bidID=70

Parks grant program: gratiotmi.com/290/Parks-Recreation

Alma Homecoming: alma.edu/alumni/homecoming

HOW WE REPORT

Our reporting is based on verifiable information whenever possible, including official documents, meeting recordings, agendas, minutes, contracts, policies, public records, photographs, and direct responses from the people or organizations involved.

NEWS TIPS / CORRECTIONS / RESPONSES

Facebook Messenger: [Gratiot County Whistleblower](https://www.facebook.com/GratiotCountyWhistleblower)

LOCAL PHOTO CREDITS

Courthouse (2015) - rossograph, CC BY-SA 4.0: [w.wiki/Uk5e](https://www.wiki/Uk5e)

Pine River (2015) - Tim Kiser, CC BY-SA 3.0: [w.wiki/Uk5g](https://www.wiki/Uk5g)

Dunning Chapel (2003) - Santosdo, CC BY-SA 3.0: [w.wiki/Uk5f](https://www.wiki/Uk5f)

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WHY WE REMAIN ANONYMOUS

Our anonymity does not mean a lack of transparency.

We believe the information, evidence and sources behind a story should matter more than the identity of the people publishing it.

When we make a factual claim, we will work to show the documentation supporting it.

OUR STANDARDS

We do not publish rumors as fact. Opinion will be identified as opinion.

When information is disputed, we will make a reasonable effort to represent the relevant sides. If we get something wrong, we will correct it publicly.

Facts. Records. Accountability.

INDEPENDENT & NONPARTISAN

We are not affiliated with Gratiot County government, any political party, candidate, public department, or established news organization.

This is a local news publication, not a designated legal-notice newspaper, and it does not publish statutory legal notices.

Our goal is to give residents the records, context and verified information they need to decide for themselves - not to tell them what to think.