

## DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

# In a thriving Michigan county, a community goes to war with itself

Ottawa County offers a glimpse of what happens when one of the building blocks of American democracy is consumed by ideological battles

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WEST OLIVE, Mich. — The eight new members of the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners had run for office promising to “thwart tyranny” in their lakeside Michigan community of 300,000 people.

In this case the oppressive force they aimed to thwart was the county government they now ran. It was early January, their first day in charge. An American flag held down a spot at the front of the board’s windowless meeting room. Sea-foam green carpet covered the floor.

The new commissioners, all Republicans, swore their oaths of office on family Bibles. And then the firings began. Gone was the lawyer who had represented Ottawa County for 40 years. Gone was the county administrator who oversaw a staff of 1,800. To run the health department, they voted to install a service manager from a local HVAC company who had gained prominence as a critic of mask mandates.

As the session entered its fourth hour, Sylvia Rhodea, the board’s new vice chair, put forward a motion to change the motto that sat atop the county’s website and graced its official stationery. “Whereas the vision statement of ‘*Where You Belong*’ has been used to promote the divisive Marxist ideology of the race, equity movement,” Rhodea said.

And so began a new era for Ottawa County. Across America, county governments provided services so essential that they were often an afterthought. Their employees paved roads, built parks, collected taxes and maintained property records. In an era when Americans had never seemed more divided and distrustful, county governments, at their best, helped define what remains of the common good.

Ottawa County stood out for a different reason. It was becoming a case study in what happens when one of the building blocks of American democracy is consumed by ideological battles over race, religion and American history.

Rhodea's resolution continued on for 20 "whereases," connecting the current motto to a broader effort that she said aimed to "divide people by race," reduce their "personal agency," and teach them to "hate America and doubt the goodness of her people."

Her proposed alternative, she said, sought to unite county residents around America's "true history" as a "land of systemic opportunity built on the Constitution, Christianity and capitalism." She flipped to her resolution's final page and leaned closer to the mic. "Now, therefore, let it be resolved that the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners establishes a new county vision statement and motto of '*Where Freedom Rings*.'"

The commission's lone Democrat gazed out in disbelief. A few seats away, the commission's new chair savored the moment. "There's just some really beautiful language in this," he said, before calling for a vote on the resolution. It passed easily.

A cheer went up in the room, which on this morning was about three-fourths full, but in the coming weeks it would be packed with so many angry people calling each other "fascists," "communists," "Christian nationalists" and "racists" that the county would have to open an overflow room down the hall.

The new slogan was largely the brainchild of Joe Moss, the 37-year-old new chair of the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners and a newcomer to politics. Moss and his fellow commissioners oversaw a thriving county with a budget of \$230 million. On a wall at the front of the meeting room where he now presided were 16 framed photographs of earlier boards, made up almost entirely of White, pro-business Republicans in jackets and ties.

Many of those commissioners traced their roots back to the county's early Dutch settlers from whom they inherited a Calvinist appreciation for thrift and moderation. They rarely spent more than a few hundred dollars on election campaigns and took pride in the county's AAA bond rating, fiscal discipline and low taxes.

Under their leadership, Ottawa County prospered. It had one of the lowest unemployment rates in Michigan and, since 2010, has been the fastest growing county in the state. Board meetings were civil, orderly and, until recently, sparsely attended. “We were rolling along good,” said Greg DeJong, a Republican who spent 12 years on the board before he was unseated. “No one came to our meetings before covid.”

Moss inhabited a different world than his predecessors. Like so many rising leaders in today’s Republican Party, his view of his country and its politics was shaped by his faith and his church, one of dozens of big evangelical congregations that had taken root amid the county’s sprawling farms and freshly sprouted subdivisions.

In these churches, traditional hymns and organ music had been replaced by electric guitars, drums, colored lights, smoke machines and modern praise songs. God existed as a tangible force at work in the county’s everyday business, battling a Devil whose presence was just as real and uncompromising.

On a typical Sunday at Moss’s Wellspring Church, people swayed and sang as the band worked its way through the 30-minute set that began every service. Then they settled into the pews and listened as their pastor warned of the “many people” in the country who were “trying to destroy everything that is righteous and good and pure and holy.” They were the sort, he said, who were demanding free condoms at school, “gender fluidity books” in the public library and drag queen story hours.

By his own admission, Moss had not paid much attention to local politics. He ran a small technology business and was focused on raising his children. Then, in the fall of 2020, the Ottawa County health department learned of a coronavirus outbreak at his daughter’s Christian school and ordered the school’s leaders to comply with the governor’s mask mandate. When they refused, state and county officials chained shut the school’s doors for more than a week and warned parents that continued resistance could bring fines and imprisonment.

Suddenly, Moss realized that those dangerous people that his pastor had been talking about on Sundays were not just in Washington and Lansing, the state capital. They were in West Olive, where the county government was headquartered. “In 2020, I became a threatened parent,” Moss said on the campaign trail. “I was threatened specifically ... by Ottawa County.”

In 2021, he and Rhodea formed Ottawa Impact to recruit and raise money for local candidates who ran as a slate. Moss, Rhodea and most of the other Ottawa Impact candidates declined to speak to local newspapers or television stations during the campaign. Moss and Rhodea also declined to comment for this story.

Instead they relied on the more than \$150,000 Ottawa Impact had raised from mostly local donors — the biggest was Moss’s mother — to spread their message via online videos, fliers, billboards, yard signs and Facebook posts.

With his quarter-zip sweaters and khaki pants, Moss looked like a suburban dad out for a round of golf, one who usually kept a handgun strapped to his hip. On his group's website, Moss warned that Ottawa County had been "strategically targeted" by the "progressive left," even though the county had, since 1864, consistently voted Republican in presidential races.

He saw evidence of this leftist campaign in the county health department's decision in the fall of 2021 to impose a school mask mandate for children who were still too young for the vaccine. About 1,000 people, including Moss, angrily protested the policy at a county board meeting. He saw it in the county's "*Where You Belong*" motto.

And he saw it in the \$470,000 that local corporations had donated to jump-start a county office of diversity, equity and inclusion. The companies, which sold auto parts and office furniture worldwide, hoped the initiative might help attract and retain global talent to a place that was more than 80 percent White and could sometimes seem unwelcoming to minorities.

Last November, commissioners backed by Ottawa Impact won eight of the 11 seats on the county board. They were now in charge of a government that they feared, overseeing county employees they did not trust.

In late January, Moss came face to face with the head of the department that he saw as most responsible for trampling freedom in Ottawa County. Adeline Hambley, a 43-year-old with long gray hair and horn-rimmed glasses, had started with the county's health department 19 years earlier as a field septic inspector.

In one of the previous board's last acts, the commissioners had picked her to replace her retiring boss. To the old board, Hambley seemed like a person who could work with the new Ottawa Impact board members. She had a reputation for being steady and calm. As the longtime head of the health department's environmental division, she had nothing to do with coronavirus policy or the mask mandate that had so infuriated Moss and his supporters.

To Moss, Hambley was a barrier to badly needed change. It was not clear under state law whether they could remove her without cause. And so here she was, standing nervously before the board. "Hi, I met a couple of you, and everyone else, nice to meet you," she said, before launching into a rapid-fire summary of her 120-person department's dozens of responsibilities.

Moss and the new board members did not seem interested in any of it. "I just want to be clear that the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners has a very firm stance on mandates, and there will not be mandates in Ottawa County," he told her. "We do issue orders regularly as far as systems that have sewage on the ground," Hambley replied. "I was referring to mandates regarding parental rights and the once-in-a-hundred-year pandemic. That kind of thing," Moss said.

Moss and the board's choice to run the county health department was Nathaniel Kelly, an HVAC service manager with degrees from an online university and no experience working in public health. Kelly, who did not respond to multiple requests for comment, had regularly pushed discredited covid treatments, such as the anti-parasitic drug ivermectin.

Before Moss could install Kelly, he needed a reason to fire Hambley. Then came a report on an obscure right-wing website that the health department was a sponsor of a local public university's "Sex Ed Week," which included an event called "Kinky Karaoke" and information about polyamory.

Hambley's office issued a press release saying the health department's role in the student-organized event was limited to testing for sexually transmitted diseases, which it did monthly on the campus. The new county administrator ordered Hambley to retract the statement, claiming it was a lie.

And Moss, appearing on a conservative radio show, suggested Hambley was engaged in a coverup. "There needs to be accountability," he said. The next day, Hambley filed a lawsuit in state court, accusing the board of micromanaging the department and illegally attempting to dismiss her without cause.

It had been a difficult three years for Hambley and her team. First came the pandemic, then the backlash over the mask mandate and coronavirus vaccines, which led to death threats and a police car stationed in their parking lot. Now they felt as if they were being demonized simply for doing their jobs. Moss and most of the other new commissioners declined repeated invitations to visit the health department.

So Hambley, in her appearances before the board, tried to explain what made the department's work meaningful. She described how its communicable disease specialists had been the first in Michigan to spot an E. coli outbreak in 2022 that caused four deaths and sickened hundreds in six states. She talked about the department's mobile dental teams, which offer free cleanings to children whose parents could not afford care.

And she showed board members a photo of the garden that the department had built as a final resting place for the cremated remains of those who were indigent and alone. "We strongly believe that every person's life matters," Hambley told them.

To Hambley, the value of county government lay in its closeness to the people it helped. She wanted Moss and the other commissioners to see her workers as neighbors and public servants, driven by a professional ethic that required them to set aside their political beliefs, suspend moral judgment and care for everyone in the community. "When you're looking at disease and disease prevention, it affects everybody, especially vulnerable populations," she said in an interview. "That's a core tenet of public health."

Hambley's employees had taken part in the university sexual health event because they knew that people between the ages of 18 and 24 were at the highest risk for a sexually transmitted infection, she said. These were the vulnerable people they needed to reach.

But Hambley and other senior health department officials said it was becoming harder to do their jobs. "We've never had a county leadership opposed to the principles of public health and opposed to its own departments," said Marcia Mansaray, Hambley's deputy officer. "It's disheartening. It's exhausting ... It's toxic."

And it was not just the health department. Across the county, government workers worried about running afoul of the new board's edicts. Department heads canceled implicit bias training sessions, which some social workers needed for their state certifications. A clear bin with condoms that had been in the county mental health agency's lobby bathroom for years was quietly removed. Hambley and her staff even stopped doing video conferences, worried that the new county administrator, or even Moss, might have the ability to secretly monitor them.

The sense of siege soon spread to those in the broader community. Dozens of people, supporters and opponents, were lining up to give public comment at the board's twice-monthly meetings. The sessions, which in the past often clocked in at less than an hour, now regularly stretched longer than four.

People argued about the safety of coronavirus vaccines, the constitutionality of the lapsed mask mandates and the security of electronic voting machines. They debated whether America was a nation blessed by God or stained by racism. They deployed the old and new county mottos as rallying cries.

Sometimes the comments aimed at the new commissioners were moving and personal. A former teacher at a Christian school spoke of how his commitment to biblical literalism had nearly led to his gay son's suicide. "He assumed that even Jesus didn't love him," the man told Moss and the other board members. "He had the pills lined up twice, ages 14 and 20. If he had committed suicide I would've been complicit in his death."

Often the commenters expressed beliefs that seemed irreconcilable. "There is a huge revival coming that no one has ever seen before. The silent majority is silent no longer," proclaimed a man in a dark blue button-down shirt to a burst of applause. "We will not be demonized for our faith in God and his word."

An ordained minister in a pink down coat rose to speak a few minutes later. She gripped both sides of the lectern and leaned toward the microphone. "I am sick unto death of all the Jesus talk," she said to cheers from the other side. "We are here for the common good."

Rebekah Curran, one of the new commissioners endorsed by Ottawa Impact, listened to them all and often looked pained. She had moved to western Michigan three years earlier for her husband's work and immediately got involved in local politics, starting up the Ottawa County Republican Women's Club.

In 2021, not long after Moss founded Ottawa Impact, she invited him, his wife and another couple over for steaks. Moss told them about what had happened at his daughter's school and his plans to fight back. Then they all bowed their heads and took turns praying for God's will to come to fruition in their county.

Curran admired Moss's strategic vision. He had created an infrastructure for regular people with "the right values" to run for office and win. But as time passed, she grew frustrated by his tendency to dismiss criticism and make big decisions, such as choosing Kelly to take over the health department, in secret and without public input. As far as Curran could tell, Kelly was the only person interviewed for the job. When she pressed Moss and Rhodea to explain the selection process, they brushed her off.

"We're not going to rehash the decision," Rhodea told her at a board meeting. Curran believed the previous board had governed in a divisive and dictatorial manner. Now she worried the new board was doing the same. "We've become what we despised," she said.

Curran began to wonder if there was a way to run the county that allowed for disagreement without causing so much anger and fear. "That's the question. That's what I am struggling with," she said in late January after yet another nearly four-hour board meeting. Earlier that morning she had received an email from a constituent who had refused to shake her hand before one of the meetings but was now praising her for her willingness to question some of Moss's decisions.

"Just be your own person and please vote your conscience," he wrote her. "You represent me too, a white Democrat who voted against you." He closed by expressing regret for his rudeness earlier in the day. "That's not how I was raised," he wrote.

To Curran, the email was a glimmer of hope, a "chip at the Berlin Wall." She immediately emailed back. "I know you were probably deeply upset this morning," she wrote. "While we may not agree on everything, I hope we can gain a mutual respect for one another."

The message Curran received was from Kevin Crowe, a 65-year-old former mortgage processor who delivered pizzas part-time to get out of the house and make ends meet. Crowe had two gay siblings who still lived in the area. He saw the board's decision to change the motto and close its diversity office as yet another effort to marginalize his siblings. "They don't like gays," he said. "They don't think they should exist and don't want them visible."

He had higher hopes for Curran, whom he found in the hallway before the start of the next board meeting. "I behaved badly," he said, reaching out to shake her hand. Then he invited her to come to church with him one Sunday at Georgetown United Methodist, about a mile from Curran's house. "There's big rainbow flags out front next to the sign," he said.

Curran knew Crowe's church. She passed by it on her way to Resurrection Life Church, where the parking lot was crowded most Sunday mornings with hundreds of cars and Pastor Duane Vander Klok worried that it was getting harder and harder for people to hear God's word. "In Canada it's already illegal to speak against homosexuality," Vander Klok said, citing laws prohibiting the promotion of gay conversion therapy.

Curran shared his concerns. She said she believed in compassion and kindness but refused to condone homosexuality and opposed the legalization of same-sex marriage. "It's too much," she said. Even in conservative Ottawa County she had noticed shop windows with rainbow stickers proclaiming that LGBTQ people were welcome.

"Does that mean it's not a welcoming place for Christians?" Curran wondered. She was not sure how to respond to Crowe's invitation. "I'd have to pray about it," she said. Several weeks passed, and she was still praying.

By late February, the county's new "*Where Freedom Rings*" motto had supplanted the old saying atop the county's website. New stationery was being printed. Among Michigan Republicans, Moss's star was rising.

At the party's annual convention, he took to the stage to nominate Kristina Karamo to serve as state party chair. In Karamo, a vocal proponent of disproven election fraud theories who refused to concede her 14-point loss for Michigan secretary of state in November, Moss saw a "courageous leader" with a "spine of steel." This was the sort of leadership he wanted to bring to Ottawa County.

Less than three months into the board's term, Moss had essentially stopped talking to two commissioners endorsed by Ottawa Impact — Curran and Jacob Bonnema — for what he saw as their disloyalty. Both said they still backed Moss's overall goals but complained that he was more interested in generating conflict than running the county. "He's not afraid to hurt people. That doesn't seem to be a consideration for him," said Bonnema, a newcomer to politics. "In my experience movements like this burn bright and burn out."

The other big check on Moss's power was Hambley and the lawsuit that was preventing the board from firing her. In late February, Moss crafted a plan to remove her from her health department post. He found a minor inconsistency between the way the previous board's resolution appointing Hambley was publicly read and the way it was written into the meeting minutes. By a 6-5 vote, Moss persuaded the new board that the discrepancy invalidated Hambley's appointment.

Curran and Bonnema voted with the minority, saying they were uncomfortable overturning the previous board's will. Hambley's lawyer blasted Moss's revision as an unlawful "attempt to rewrite history."

Hambley was sitting down with her staff for a meeting the following day when her phone buzzed with a new calendar notification. "Oh, that's interesting," she said.

Two of the county's lawyers were now coming to her regular monthly meeting with the county administrator at 10 the next morning. It seemed certain they were going to fire her. She called her lawyer, who asked a judge for a temporary restraining order. At 9:58 a.m., the judge granted her request and scheduled a hearing for March 31.

The hearing, which had been moved to a court in Muskegon after all the judges in Ottawa County recused themselves, focused on two issues. First, whether Hambley was properly appointed as county health officer. Second, whether the new board had the authority to remove her for political, rather than public health, reasons. Hambley and Moss sat at opposite tables and avoided eye contact.

"This board is going to do its duty," said David Kallman, who represented Moss and the board. "Miss Hambley is subject to their oversight whether she likes it or not." Moss nodded vigorously in agreement. Hambley and her lawyer countered that Michigan law shielded her from political pressure, allowing her to make unpopular decisions needed to save lives.

"I'm not a Democrat or a Republican. I'm not a libertarian or any of those things. And your health officers shouldn't be," Hambley said outside the courtroom. "They should be following good science and they should be protecting everyone in their community."

Earlier this month, Judge Jenny McNeill agreed. She ruled that Hambley was properly appointed to the job and could only be removed if the new board could show she was "incompetent" or had neglected her duties. "The public is harmed when the law is not followed in terminating the health director," the judge wrote.

A full trial on whether the new board has been micromanaging Hambley and interfering in her duties is likely to move forward later this year. Ultimately, it will be up to the court system to decide how a county government irreconcilably divided against itself should function.