

*Stacy Stout, President & CEO; Blandford Nature Center*  
*Michigan House Appropriations Subcommittee – Labor and Economic Opportunity*  
*Regarding the Blandford Farm Learning Center Project*

Chair Jenkins-Arno and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Stacy Stout, and I serve as President and CEO of Blandford Nature Center in Grand Rapids.

For nearly 75 years, Blandford has been a trusted educational and environmental resource for West Michigan families, students, and educators. We are the only nature center located within the city of Grand Rapids and one of the few *urban* nature centers in the state. Each year, we serve more than 100,000 visitors, including thousands of students—from preschool through college—representing school districts across 11 Michigan counties - Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kalamazoo, Kent, Mecosta, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newaygo, Oceana, and Ottawa. People come from across the region to enjoy our programming, over 8 miles of trails, and 264 acres of diverse ecosystems - including wetlands, woodlands, meadows, grasslands, and creeks.

Since 2010, our 2.5-acre working farm has been central to our mission. The farm grows more than 200 varieties of fruits and vegetables, supports pollinator habitats, and houses livestock including sheep, goats, and chickens. It is not a demonstration garden. It is a working farm that teaches agriculture, food systems, and land stewardship through direct, hands-on learning.

We support Michigan's agricultural industry by exposing young people to agriculture early—whether they pursue farming, food science, skilled trades, environmental science, or small business ownership. Blandford's farm is where students learn where their food comes from, how it is produced, and how agriculture connects to science, technology, and entrepreneurship.

However, our ability to deliver that education is limited by one significant barrier: we do not have a functional, year-round classroom facility at the farm.

Our current structure is unsafe and nonfunctional. There are no working toilets, no proper handwashing stations, and no climate-controlled space for students. Because of this, we cannot operate farm programming during winter months. In the summer, extreme heat and air-quality advisory days have forced cancellations. In 2025 alone, our region experienced 27 air quality advisory days and four alert days.

The proposed Farm Classroom construction project solves this problem through a practical infrastructure investment.

This \$500,000 State of Michigan enhancement grant—matched with private philanthropic dollars—supports core facility construction, not programming. It allows us to build a year-round, climate-controlled learning center that will:

First, expand access for Michigan students. We already serve more than 12,000 students annually through field trips, yet we routinely turn away farm-based requests due to space and safety limitations. A year-round facility allows significantly more schools to participate in hands-on agricultural learning.

Second, provide safe and reliable space. The building will serve as shelter during storms and extreme heat or cold. It ensures that when schools schedule a trip or families enroll in camp, we can reliably deliver that experience.

Third, strengthen food and agriculture programming. The facility will include a sanitary food preparation space that meets safety standards. This allows us to teach farm-to-table education properly and safely, expand our Community Supported Agriculture program, and support small local food partners who rely on our produce.

Fourth, extend our operating season from six months to twelve. Currently, community farm programming stops in late fall and does not resume until spring. A heated facility changes that immediately. It maximizes the return on public investment by increasing utilization year-round.

This project sustains and strengthens:

- Educational programming
- Summer camps serving more than 800 children annually
- Internships and apprenticeships for future farmers and agricultural professionals
- Safe food processing and distribution
- Partnerships with local restaurants and markets

Importantly, this is a lean, essential construction plan. The budget reflects responsible design and durable materials, with the majority of funds directed to core infrastructure. Private donors are investing alongside the state. This is a public-private partnership designed for long-term return.

The Farm Classroom is critical infrastructure needed to maintain and responsibly grow an existing, proven program that already serves thousands of Michigan families.

In short, this project represents:

- Workforce development in agriculture and food systems

- Expanded STEM education aligned with state standards
- Increased access for schools across 11 counties
- Strong stewardship of public and private dollars
- A durable community asset with measurable long-term value

The Farm Classroom is not simply a building. It is an investment in Michigan's youth, our agricultural economy, and the kind of practical, hands-on education that prepares students for real careers.

We appreciate your consideration and your commitment to projects that deliver meaningful public benefit. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Thank you.