ECONOMIC GROWTH INSTITUTE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Michigan Clean Cities

RIVER ROUGE ORDINANCE AND ZONING FOR CLEAN ENERGY

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In summer 2026, River Rouge received two reviews of its zoning ordinance, one for solar energy and one for electric vehicle (EV) charging, along with recommended changes to help streamline both. The City of River Rouge worked with SolSmart and Charging Smart, two national programs that help local governments prepare for clean energy. Experts from each program compared the city's 2021 zoning ordinance against national best practices to answer the question:

Where do the city's own rules make solar panels and EV chargers harder to install than they need to be?

Other small industrial cities looking to update their zoning and building codes for clean energy can learn from this project.



WHY RIVER ROUGE

River Rouge covers just 2.65 square miles, and industry takes up about two-thirds of that land, so what the zoning code allows shapes much of what the city can build. The city rewrote its zoning ordinance in 2021. The new code included rules for solar panels, but some of those rules held projects back, and the code did not address EV chargers. In the Master Plan survey, residents ranked air quality as their top industrial concern, demonstrating the importance of clean energy for River Rouge. An ordinance review was a logical starting point as it is relatively inexpensive for a small city with limited resources, and is one of the few processes that changes what is possible across the whole city at once. Modernizing the code is a proactive step to prepare River Rouge for future funding and development, instead of amending its ordinance after the fact.

HOW WE GOT HERE: The MiVTTP Process

This initiative builds upon a structured community effort led by the University of Michigan's Economic Growth Institute (EGI) and Michigan Clean Cities (MICC). The process was organized into three progressive phases:

Phase 1 Listening Sessions: The MiVTTP team hosted comprehensive listening sessions to gather community feedback on local electrification needs and economic transition opportunities. Participants represented a broad cross-section of the community, from elected officials to community organizers.

Phase 2 Strategic Planning: EGI facilitated strategic planning sessions with a diverse group of River Rouge leaders including city government, economic development, environmental justice, workforce development, and education using the Allovance Method. The community submitted 14 project proposals, which were evaluated against five weighted strategic priorities. Two were recommended for Phase 3 implementation based on their high strategic value and feasibility, including the Ordinance and Zoning for Clean Energy project.

Phase 3 Workforce Solutions and Technical Assistance: The MiVTTP team worked to scope the two prioritized projects, establishing clear deliverables, timelines, and execution parameters. The City of River Rouge led the Ordinance and Zoning for Clean Energy project, and Michigan Clean Cities connected it with SolSmart and Charging Smart for expert reviews of the city's zoning ordinance.

PROJECT OUTCOMES



Both reviews focused on revising River Rouge's zoning rules to clarify requirements and remove barriers to clean energy.

Solar: The review identified three main barriers: a 10-kilowatt size cap on home and business systems, building height limits that can keep panels off flat roofs, and requirements to screen rooftop panels from view of the street. SolSmart recommended organizing the solar rules by how a system is used rather than who owns it, removing the size cap, letting rooftop panels extend a set height above building height limits, and dropping the screening and visibility requirements.

EV Charging: As a result of this review, Charging Smart recommended defining EV terms in the code, allowing chargers in parking lots in every zoning district without special approval, adopting accessibility standards, and requiring new parking areas to be wired for future chargers. It also advised adopting these changes together as one ordinance amendment, so the new rules take effect at the same time.

Staff Capacity: Limited staff and resources made it hard for River Rouge to dedicate time to finding suitable funding, preparing grant applications, and coordinating partners. By connecting the city with field experts, the project gave clear direction and guidance to prepare River Rouge for clean energy.

NEXT STEPS

The city is now implementing the recommendations and working towards earning a national SolSmart and Charging Smart designation. They are continuing to explore funding opportunities and coordinate with other Downriver communities to consolidate efforts and collaborate on larger regional opportunities.