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## Holism, Philanthropy, and Community Self-Determination: A Case Study of Urban Sustainability Logics in Kalamazoo

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# HOLISM, PHILANTHROPY, AND COMMUNITY SELF-DETERMINATION: A CASE STUDY OF URBAN SUSTAINABILITY LOGICS IN KALAMAZOO

Robert Roznowski, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2022

The social, economic, and ecological crises of contemporary cities have compelled some communities to pursue urban sustainability agendas. In the United States, municipal governments and local actors engage with a myriad of urban sustainability discourses and “logics” that shape urban sustainability agendas. The literature suggests that urban sustainability discourses and logics are shifting in ways that are more “selective” or exclusive of spaces, issues, and people. This study investigates the urban sustainability logics taking shape in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Most existing research focuses on large cities with well-established urban sustainability agendas. In contrast, this case study focuses on the urban sustainability agenda unfolding in a mid-sized city. Drawing on interviews, observations, and documents, I explore how Kalamazoo inhabitants make sense of the contested concept of sustainability and how the community navigates urban sustainable development. Three logics of urban sustainability are identified in Kalamazoo: the holistic sustainability logic, the philanthropic fix logic, and the community self-determination logic. For the case of Kalamazoo, sustainability is widely viewed as a holistic concept that moves beyond the conventional environmental, economic, and equity dimensions or pillars of sustainability. In a community with a unique presence of philanthropy, the intervening role of philanthropy plays an important part in the urban sustainability agenda unfolding in Kalamazoo, but so do community efforts to secure self-determined outcomes and deliberation in urban governance. This study

suggests that urban sustainability discourses and logics are continuing to evolve. In particular, holistic sustainability discourses may promote more inclusive rather than selective urban sustainability agendas; however, there remain challenges to translating holistic sustainability discourses into policy and practice.

HOLISM, PHILANTHROPY, AND COMMUNITY SELF-DETERMINATION:  
A CASE STUDY OF URBAN SUSTAINABILITY LOGICS IN KALAMAZOO

by

Robert Roznowski

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College  
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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### *Statement of Problem*

The human species currently faces a number of crises. The production, consumption, and overexploitation of resources threaten the integrity of ecosystems upon which humans and non-humans rely. Global temperature rise and the climate crisis, among other ecological “tipping points” or planetary boundaries, present an existential challenge to humans and the ecosystems of which we are part. Rising inequality and persistent global poverty are also among the social and economic crises that governments face (United Nations 2016). In 1987, in the wake of increasing environmental concerns and recognition of the limits of exponential and environmentally destructive growth, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development released the seminal report *Our Common Future* (known as the Brundtland Report), which defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Redclift 1985; United Nations 1987; Pretty et al. 2007). The “pillars” of sustainability or three E’s of sustainable development (environment, economy, and equity) are often illustrated as a tri-circle Venn diagram where sustainability or sustainable development is the central commonality that links environment, economy, and society. International institutions such as the United Nations have sought to address sustainable development at the global scale, however cities have been designated as key sites of response. Urban sustainability has been prioritized by the United Nations, evidenced by the emphasis on “sustainable cities” in the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” among other recent U.N. conferences and reports (United Nations 2015; United Nations 2020).

With growing urban pressures and the popularization of sustainable development, competing discourses of sustainability surfaced in cities and urban regions (While, Jonas, and Gibbs

2004; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012; Portney 2013; Vojnovic 2014; Gilbert 2014; Jocoy 2018).

Throughout the United States, some municipal governments and local actors have embraced the sustainability idea. The largest cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles have established formal sustainability initiatives, plans, and offices in order to achieve sustainability goals. Cities have been ranked as “sustainable cities” by various organizations and institutions. Using a range of environmental indicators, some cities and metropolitan areas have gained reputations as “green cities,” such as San Francisco, California, or Portland, Oregon (Agyeman 2005b; Siemens Corporation 2011; Portney 2013; Rosol, Béal, and Mössner 2017; McCann 2021). Although private and nonprofit organizations are important actors, local governments have a distinct role in shaping the urban sustainability agenda. Some cities have made concerted efforts in the name of sustainability, targeting issues such as greenhouse gas reduction, recycling programs, alternative and energy efficient transportation, renewable energy, “green” housing, greenspace and parks, and environmental education. While sustainability is often framed in environmental terms, understood as environmental sustainability (Agyeman 2013), some city governments have expanded the scope of urban sustainability to include a wide range of issues more akin to the three pillars framework of sustainable development (i.e. environment, economy, and equity). Issues such as poverty, homelessness, affordable housing and transportation, employment, small-business growth, civic engagement, and public participation in urban planning may be integrated into urban sustainability agendas. An initiative of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the 2019 US Cities Sustainable Development Report ranks cities based on progress toward the United Nations’ sustainable development goals that were adopted in 2015. Using a wider range of indicators that capture the environment, economic, and equity “pillars” of sustainability, the cities and metropolitan areas that top the list are San Francisco and San Jose, California, and Washington, DC (Lynch, LoPresti, and Fox 2019).

Located in Southwest Michigan, the city of Kalamazoo is not exempt from the sustainability imperative as it too struggles with the economic, ecological, and social crises of the twenty-first century. With close to 75,000 people, the city has grown to become a diverse population with longstanding inequities. The population is about 63.3% non-Hispanic white, 22.2% Black or African American, 2.1% Asian, and 6.6% two or more races. About 7.6% of the population is Hispanic or Latino. The median income for the community is \$41,774 and about 28.4% of the population lives below the poverty line, both which vary considerably across racially divided neighborhoods. About 34.9% of Blacks or African Americans live below the poverty line, which contrasts with 24.6% of non-Hispanic whites (American Community Survey 2019, 5-year estimates).

Like other cities in the Midwestern United States, Kalamazoo has experienced waves of industrial and economic shifts. The paper industry was the dominant force for nearly a hundred years until a decline in the latter half of the twentieth century. The city was once home to a number of iconic manufacturers such as Checker Motors Corporation (which produced the recognizable checkered taxi cabs associated with New York City) as well as Gibson, the guitar and musical instrument manufacturer. The Kalamazoo-founded pharmaceutical manufacturer, The Upjohn Company, was once one of the largest employers in the region along with a General Motors regional auto plant. Industry declines, relocations, and closures resulted in a substantial loss of jobs and a restructuring of Kalamazoo's economy. Today, Kalamazoo is home to a more diverse range of industries and sectors, including the medical equipment manufacturer, Stryker Corporation, two teaching hospitals, and three institutions of higher learning. Kalamazoo has also gained recognition as the home of the anonymously funded Kalamazoo Promise, a citywide scholarship program that guarantees tuition for post-secondary public education in Michigan.

In recent years, a number of government-led initiatives in Kalamazoo have sought to address twenty-first century challenges and shape the future of its inhabitants. Per Michigan law, the city

crafted its 2025 Master Plan, which was approved in October 2017. A master plan is foremost a land use plan along with a host of other caveats required by Michigan law, consisting of frameworks for transportation, zoning, infrastructure, downtown development, and neighborhood needs among others. The city's 2025 Master Plan lays out the next decade, "a guide for land use regulation, development actions and decisions as well as public infrastructure to support land use activities" (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021a). In the years prior, the city launched "Imagine Kalamazoo 2025," an ongoing planning initiative that shaped the 2025 Master Plan and established a "Strategic Vision" for the community. The Strategic Vision planning document outlines several "strategic goals" that resemble the language of sustainability, as typically characterized by policymakers and existing urban sustainability research. Among other plans and products of Imagine Kalamazoo, the city also adopted a citywide "Natural Features Protection" ordinance in 2019. For many of the aforementioned government-led initiatives, sustainability is not explicitly stated as *the* central policy concern, although the *language* of sustainability is evident. In 2019, however, the city specifically began developing a citywide sustainability plan, referred to as the "Sustainability Strategy." Meanwhile, a plethora of institutional players, nonprofit and community organizations, and mobilizing coalitions have pursued their own activities and initiatives for environmental, economic, and social transformation. Overall, the numerous governmental and non-governmental activities in Kalamazoo suggest an *urban sustainability agenda* is unfolding in Kalamazoo.

Municipal governments employ a myriad of sustainability discourses to achieve particular objectives of urban sustainability agendas. There are virtually unlimited interpretations of such normative concepts as sustainability or sustainable development (Eden 2000; Vojnovic 2014). The term "sustainability" may be placed in front of nearly any policy or initiative, but any action or outcome depends upon the defining actors. In other words, sustainability serves as an "empty signifier" whereby "sustainability can be made to mean what one would like it to mean" (Eden

2000:111). At least for policymakers among others, this might help explain the widespread popularity of the concept. The points of contention and debate are typically what urban sustainability *is* and *how* to pursue it. Even so, the specific agendas that are advanced tend to follow a particular “logic” that is contingent upon different interpretations of sustainability and imaginaries of “the sustainable city.”

The Brundtland formulation of sustainable development initially served as a guide to local governments. A “comprehensive” or broad view of the environment prevailed in urban sustainability discourses, focused on the “triple bottom line” of environment, economy, and equity. This approach to urban sustainability took hold at a time when local governments were becoming increasingly entrepreneurial and managerial. From the 1980s and into the 2000s, the prevailing urban sustainability discourses rested on a managerial and entrepreneurial framing of nature. Replacing radical discourses of systemic overhaul that were characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s, environmental problems were instead framed as solvable through “ecological modernization” and the “greening of capitalism” (Hodson and Marvin 2017). The *logic* of ecological modernization suggests that environmental problems can be resolved through technical means, especially market-led technological developments that improve efficiency and induce competition, thereby forging a “win-win” relationship between economy and ecology (Hodson and Marvin 2017:5). Ecological modernization was purported to resolve broader environmental problems while addressing equity and justice through work-based employment and redistribution (Hodson and Marvin 2017:7). Premised on economic growth while only marginally concerned with social equity, this approach to urban sustainability nonetheless reflected a “comprehensive” approach that viewed environment, economy, and equity as integrally linked.

However, discourses and *logics* of urban sustainability may be shifting once again in response to multiple ecological, economic, and social crises within the last decade or so. If urban sustainability

agendas are premised on economic growth (the ecological modernization logic), for example, then “what happens when there is limited or no growth?” (Hodson and Marvin 2017:1). City governments are responding with their own distinctive agendas, according to reformulated sustainability discourses and logics that are much more *selective* in focus; only certain spaces, issues, and people are considered in urban sustainability agendas. Specific neighborhoods and city spaces (e.g. downtown and central business districts) are targeted, and only specific issues are addressed (e.g. energy efficient buildings or electric car chargers). This tends to only cater to specific groups (e.g. white, middle and upper classes) and excludes others.

Scholars have shown the many permutations of urban sustainability and the ramifications of *selective* rather than *inclusive* or *holistic* urban sustainability agendas. Ecologies may be hyper-valued as an economic resource (Hodson and Marvin 2017), the scale of sustainability governance may expand geographically (MacDonald and Keil 2012; Temenos and McCann 2012), the environment may be de-politicized (Checker 2011), and new forms of “environmental gentrification” may reinvigorate inequalities among social classes and racial and ethnic groups (Dooling 2009; Checker 2011; Anguelovski 2016; Long 2016; Rice et al. 2020). Michael Hodson and Simon Marvin (2017) argue these innumerable, “fragmented” processes tend to intensify the economic valuation of urban ecologies and weaken or virtually dismiss equity and justice concerns.

Yet shifting sustainability discourses might very well provide a platform for transformation rather than intensification of existing ecological, economic, and social relationships. With each (re)configuration of urban sustainability, there are competing visions of urban sustainability and struggles between the politics of continuity and politics of transformation (Hodson and Marvin 2017). According to Hodson and Marvin (2017:7-8), the struggle between *intensification* or *transformation* of conventional sustainable cities’ discourse is about: (1) the desired types of economic organization, (2) whether sustainability can be achieved through capitalist structures, (3) the ways

environmental and social justice issues are understood, (4) the appropriate scalar context as a site of struggle (local, regional, national, global), and lastly (5) the struggle of *whose sustainability* in terms of valued knowledge, constructed ecologies, and the *logics* that inform sustainable cities' discourse.

Entirely new categories of cities have been devised that are usually situated around specific places, issues, or people. For example, “low-carbon cities” center on carbon emissions and resource flows whereas “smart cities” focus on efficient use of energy, transport, and public resources through digital technology and data. “Resilient cities” concentrate on adapting to conditions of uncertainty, such as economic recessions or the effects of the climate crisis. The number of concepts in academic and policy discourses signal transformed urban sustainability discourses and new urban logics. As cities and their inhabitants throughout the United States craft their own “sustainability experiments,” it is imperative to decipher the “sustainable city” as reimagined by city officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and residents. Research must aim to explain the shifting sustainability discourses and new urban logics, including what these suggest about changing relationships between ecology, economy, and society. Urban sustainability is about more than the bio-physical environment; rather, urban sustainability also concerns the economic, ecological, and social cohesion of cities, the social and ecological crises of advanced capitalism, the relationship between the local and the global, equity, justice, knowledge, and the power to manage *whose* sustainability prevails.

A core problem for research to explore is social exclusion. Urban sustainability agendas are often susceptible to the “equity-deficit” (Agyeman 2005b), whereby selected spaces, issues, and populations may be privileged while others are marginalized (Vallance et al. 2012; Gilbert 2014; Béal 2015; Long 2016; Hodson and Marvin 2017). In other words, urban sustainability agendas potentially accommodate the visions and imaginaries of some “stakeholders” while excluding others. This raises important questions for urban sustainability planning, policy, and research: Whose

visions of sustainability are accommodated? Whose imaginaries of the sustainable city and sustainable future prevail? In short, *whose sustainability?* Related matters to explore are the ramifications of prevailing urban sustainability agendas, including the social and material consequences for inhabitants of a given city. Furthermore, the responses to urban sustainability agendas should be explored, including alternative and counter-discourses to “official” government-led urban sustainability agendas. The central problematic for urban sustainability research to explore is what Hodson and Marvin (2017) refer to as the struggle between the politics of continuity and the politics of transformation, and whether there is potential for just and sustainable futures to be realized.

### *Significance of Problem*

Sooner than later, cities may be compelled to tackle the ecological and social contradictions of capitalist economic systems, and pursue a sustainable city agenda. While some local governments are making concerted efforts to adopt more sustainable and just patterns of living, the U.S. lags behind many countries and foreign cities, despite the fact it is the world’s largest consumer (Portney 2013:23; United Nations 2016). Amid heightened concerns about the climate crisis, the sustainability of U.S. cities, small or large, is an important endeavor both pragmatically and symbolically. In the United States, cities are burdened with environmental, economic, and social pressures while coping with global processes. With infrastructural strains, persistent economic inequality, and gentrified city centers among other urban problems, the challenge of urban sustainability is no simple matter.

Cities and urban regions are a formidable force in terms of their reproduction of ecological, economic, and social relationships. Urban sustainability agendas so far have fallen short in many ways, with dire ramifications for the most vulnerable populations. While many scholars and urban inhabitants may envision the idea of urban sustainability as wholly concerned with equity and justice issues, practitioners and policymakers demonstrate that equity and justice are subordinated to

economic and environmental imperatives (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012:1962). Failure to account for equity and justice in urban sustainability planning may exasperate social exclusion in multiple ways. Only certain spaces, issues, and populations may be considered in urban sustainability planning, enabling privileges for some populations while imposing disadvantages for others. Efforts to “green” city centers and downtown areas may lead to higher costs of living, exclusionary environmental amenities and technologies, criminalization of homelessness, and displacement of vulnerable populations such as low-income groups, people of color, single mothers and single-parent families, elderly, and those with severe mental illness among others (Dooling 2009; Checker 2011; Iles 2013; Béal 2015; Long 2016). “Environmental friendliness” may breed “environmental gentrification” as economically vulnerable populations cannot afford the higher rents that come with “green redevelopment.” The consequences of equity-deficient and “selective” sustainability agendas are well-documented and further described in the literature review (Macdonald and Keil 2012; Béal 2015; Montgomery 2015; Long 2016; Walker 2016). The findings of this study may provide insight to urban planners, city officials, and urban inhabitants in general as they pursue sustainable and just cities.

### *Purpose of Study*

In the context of cities, the relationships between economy, society and ecology are interpreted differently in urban sustainability agendas, and with varying consequences (Jabareen 2006; Lorr 2012; Vojnovic 2014). The sustainability idea is continuously negotiated in the construction of urban agendas and the framing of sustainability in the city (Vallance et al. 2012; Béal 2015). Case studies have explored the many conceptualizations and discourses of urban sustainability within a given city (or sometimes organization)(Temenos and McCann 2012; Vallance et al. 2012; Long 2016). Many researchers have also compared the actual policies and programs that comprise urban sustainability agendas in U.S. cities; typically, equity and justice are subordinated to economic

and environmental imperatives (Warner 2002; Saha and Paterson 2008; Pearsall and Pierce 2010; Opp and Saunders 2012; Portney 2013). Although urban sustainability agendas are peculiar to the urban context in which they manifest, familiar strategies and “logics” of urban sustainability have been identified across different urban contexts (While et al. 2004; Hodson and Marvin 2017). As noted, the logic of ecological modernization often undergirds urban sustainability agendas, which is premised on economic growth and prioritizes the merging of economy and environment at the expense of equity. However, sustainability discourses may be shifting and reformulated logics may be unfolding.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the urban sustainability agenda unfolding in Kalamazoo, Michigan. My research interest revolves around exploring what Kalamazoo inhabitants make of “sustainability,” including how they envision urban sustainability, how they are planning for urban sustainability, and how they are acting on urban sustainable transformation. I am interested in the circumstances surrounding official government-led initiatives, but also nongovernmental and alternative approaches to urban sustainable transformation. The overall intent is to decipher the “logic” or logics of urban sustainability materializing in Kalamazoo and the implications. Kalamazoo is a suitable research setting for studying urban sustainability. In addition to unique features such as the Kalamazoo Promise, the mid-sized Midwestern city has a racially diverse population, wide income disparities, and an uneven economy that combines legacies of old industries with newer manufacturing and knowledge economies. Most existing research into urban sustainability agendas has focused on large cities with many resources, yet most cities in the United States have populations below 100,000 and tax bases that do not match municipal operating needs. Consequently, this study may expand our understanding of the factors that shape urban sustainability agendas in communities that are more representative of the American urban context.

Building on the vast literature of urban sustainability, this dissertation aims to better understand the challenges and strategies for promoting a sustainable city. I hope to contribute to understandings of how cities could become sites for transformation of ecological, economic, and social relationships. Tracing the evolution of urban sustainability discourses and logics is essential for devising strategies that respond to contemporary urban crises. Discerning urban sustainability discourses and logics potentially illuminates broader cultural patterns and systemic factors that inhibit or enable urban change. This may provide direction to local governments, inhabitants, and social movements who seek to mobilize urban sustainability as a framework for environmental, economic, and social transformation. If we seek to advance more inclusive and equitable urban sustainability agendas, after all, then we must identify the factors that affect the inclusion or exclusion of spaces, issues, and people in urban sustainability agendas. Understanding how urban sustainability discourses and logics are evolving might also better prepare urban planners and policymakers when faced with new uncertainties or changing conditions.

### *Research Questions*

Three overlapping questions guide this study:

- (1) How is Kalamazoo imagining, planning, and implementing urban sustainability?
- (2) How and why do certain spaces, issues, and people come to be included in Kalamazoo's urban sustainability agenda?
- (3) What logic(s) of urban sustainability are unfolding in Kalamazoo?

First, this study examines the development of Kalamazoo's sustainability agenda and the ways that urban sustainability is imagined, planned, and implemented by city officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and residents. By *imagining*, I mean the ways that urban sustainability is constructed, envisioned, and defined. In other words, what and whose visions of urban sustainability are imagined, including the priorities and concerns regarding sustainability. By *planning*, I mean the

planning practices that exist and who is involved in specific governmental and nongovernmental activities around urban sustainability. This entails the way particular visions and ideas come to be included in the urban sustainability agenda, the conflicts or tensions throughout the process, and, for instance, the role of public participation. At the same time, this includes how policies, models, or knowledges are “imported” from other cities or sites, which may influence the specific issues considered or actions taken. By *implementing*, I mean the concrete policies, initiatives, and activities of various governmental and non-governmental actors.

Second, this study examines how and why certain spaces, issues, and people come to be included or excluded in Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability agenda. The key issue is how Kalamazoo advances a selective or inclusive urban sustainability agenda and the form it takes. By selective, I mean only certain spaces, issues, or people are recognized in the imagining, planning, and implementation of urban sustainability. I am interested specifically in the way Kalamazoo’s sustainability agenda privileges or excludes certain spaces, issues, or people. Situating urban sustainability in Kalamazoo in historical, political-economic, and cultural context, this dissertation more broadly explores the development of Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability agenda, including the discourses, conflicts, strategies, and potentials for transformation. By discourses, I mean frames or ways of interpreting the world, which are enmeshed with social relations and manifest in existing social practices. Attempting to capture the diversity of perspectives in Kalamazoo, I am interested in the issues that generate consensus across different actors and segments of the population, but also those issues that produce conflict or tension that potentially leads to resolution or not. Research on the discourses of urban sustainability often highlights the perspectives of local government officials and urban planners. The perspectives of other “stakeholders of urban sustainability” must be strongly considered as well, such as members of nonprofit and community organizations, neighborhood leaders, and inhabitants in general. This may reveal “perception gaps” and the

“contested” nature of sustainability, but might also offer insight to the ways that residents and other non-governmental actors respond to the official government-led urban sustainability agenda. In this sense, I am also interested in alternative discursive frames, counter-agendas, and the ways these are acted upon by persons or groups.

Third, this study attempts to identify and explain the logic(s) of sustainability unfolding in Kalamazoo. In other words, this study investigates the overall strategy evidenced by the discourses and the associated practices or actions that concretize or reify discursive frames. In particular, I am interested in whether Kalamazoo resembles the “logics” of urban sustainability in other cities, including shared elements, unique features, and whether there is a new emerging logic in the Kalamazoo context. Ultimately, this may signify an intensification or transformation of conventional sustainable cities’ discourse.

#### *Outline of Chapters*

A case study research approach was adopted for this study. Moving between micro, meso, and macro analytical levels, multiple methods were drawn upon to satisfy the objectives and research questions. Through in-depth interviews with city officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and residents, I explored the imagining, planning, and implementing of Kalamazoo’s sustainability agenda. Interviewees ranged from city officials and staff, members of nonprofit and community development organizations, neighborhood leaders, community organizers and activists, members of academic institutions, and inhabitants in general. In addition to interviews, this research also made use of observations of city meetings and community events. The use of documents and other data sources supplemented the fieldwork, including government resources and documents, media coverage, and other relevant materials from non-profit and community organizations.

In chapter two, I review the literature on urban sustainability. The conceptual issues with sustainability are presented along with a brief history of “sustainable cities’ debates.” I describe the

ways that sustainability discourses and logics are shifting, providing multiple illustrations of “selective” urban sustainability agendas in recent years. A number of themes in the urban sustainability literature are identified, in addition to theoretical insights drawn upon for this study. Chapter three outlines the methods employed for this case study. The research objectives and methodological foundation are discussed, followed by a brief overview of the research setting. I then describe my research design, methods, and procedures of data collection and analysis. Chapter three concludes with a brief commentary on field relations and the participants who made this study possible.

Each of the five “thematic chapters” that follow chapter three cover a different facet of the urban sustainability agenda unfolding in Kalamazoo. These chapters open with a vignette and several end with a “case within a case.” In chapter four, I unpack the abstract meanings and discursive frameworks surrounding sustainability in Kalamazoo. Referred to as the Sustainability Strategy, the development of the city’s sustainability plan is examined in detail (for a glossary of city plans and initiatives that are central to this study, see Appendix B). Chapter five explores the circumstances around sustainable development, including the community narratives and “dilemmas of development” that inhabitants face in Kalamazoo. The Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative and the city’s Strategic Vision planning document are examined. Chapter six serves as a “philanthropic interlude” whereby the historical role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo is reviewed. This chapter also explores how inhabitants make sense of the Foundation for Excellence, the newly incorporated donor-funded municipal finance model. “Governance sustainability” and the activities of Kalamazoo’s city government are the focus of chapter seven. The circumstances around the creation of a citywide Natural Features Protection ordinance are also surveyed in chapter seven. Seeking to transform their community and fulfill the many “promises” of Kalamazoo, chapter eight redirects attention to the activities of nongovernmental actors and inhabitants in Kalamazoo.

Relatively “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches to urban sustainable transformation are compared, including those of Kalamazoo’s many institutional players, community organizations, and mobilizing coalitions.

The concluding chapter, chapter nine, develops a comprehensive synthesis of the case study as a whole. In connection with the empirical literature and theoretical insights, I propose three “logics” of urban sustainability that operate in Kalamazoo: the holistic sustainability logic, the philanthropic fix logic, and the community self-determination logic. The limitations and implications of this study are then discussed, followed by a brief afterword on the global pandemic.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *The Concept of Sustainability*

Sustainability is both simple and complex, ambiguous and clear-cut, distinctive and universal, agreed upon and contested, political and impartial (Redclift 2005; Baker 2006; Jacques 2015; Burns 2016). Rather than a short-lived fad, the enduring *idea* of sustainability has been embraced by a wide range of actors and institutions (Campbell 1996:301; Portney 2013:24). The contested concepts of sustainability and sustainable development largely emerged from political and administrative processes of international institutions (Baker 2006; Burns 2016:882). Sustainable development might be considered a means to sustainability, whereas sustainability is the ultimate goal and principle of guidance.

Several key points are worth noting regarding the origin of the sustainability idea. Sustainability is often described as having three dimensions or “pillars” which include environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, and social equity sustainability. These pillars are not easily or clearly defined in practice. The three pillars framework derives from the United Nations Brundtland Report, which was published amid increasing global recognition of the ecological and planetary limits of growth in the 1960s and 1970s (Hodson and Marvin 2017). The Brundtland Report popularized the idea of sustainable development and is regarded as “the first serious attempt to link poverty to natural resource management and the state of the environment” (Pretty et al. 2007:1). The multidimensional concept of sustainability continued to spread with the Brundtland formulation and a number of subsequent key international conferences on environment and development, including the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, known as the Rio Earth Summit. One outcome of the Rio Earth Summit was Agenda 21, a non-binding treaty and agreement on the normative principles of sustainable development, which also led

to a number of internationally binding agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1995, the Kyoto Protocol in 1998, and the 2016 Paris Agreement (Baker 2006; Pretty et al. 2007:1; United Nations 2016). Agenda 21 connected the local with global as debates among international organizations and policymakers soon pivoted toward the role of cities (Hodson and Marvin 2017).

### *Sustainable Cities' Debates*

Cities are key sites of the struggle for sustainability. Given the globalized social, economic, and ecological interrelationships of cities, no cities can be sustainable on their own (Rees and Wackernagel 1996:236). The ecological integrity of any given city, after all, depends on the ecological integrity of the planet. At the same time, global sustainability depends on urban sustainability, or “the economic, social, and physical organization of cities and their populations in ways that accommodate the needs of current and future generations while preserving the quality of the natural environment and its ecological functions over time” (Vojnovic 2013:535). Cities have become a center of attention for a number of reasons. For more than a decade, cities have harbored over half the world’s population, serving as the economic, political, social, and cultural centers of the world (Vojnovic 2014:539). Despite only occupying around three percent of total land, cities constitute 70 percent of gross domestic product (United Nations 2016:166). Cities have become some of the most ecologically destructive forces that impose virtually insurmountable resource demands, accounting for 60 to 80 percent of global energy consumption and 70 percent of greenhouse gas emissions (United Nations 2016:16). Gilbert (2014) contends there is a “double discourse of urgency” with regards to cities becoming the dominant population centers while at the same time being ecologically destructive. Cities and urban regions play a central role in the global pattern of resource consumption by the wealthy, often at the expense of the economically and racially marginalized (Rees and Westra 2003:101). With more than half the world population residing in urban areas, global urbanization evokes dire questions about the livability of cities (van Vliet 2002; Davis 2006;

United Nations 2016). The world's poor, especially the "bottom billion," are clustering around urban areas, transforming into a "planet of slums" (Davis 2006; United Nations 2016). Living in conditions without durable housing, clean water, or adequate sanitation, more than one billion slum dwellers comprise the global urban population (United Nations 2021:48). In the face of the climate crisis, current models of urbanization are unsustainable and inequitable; cities exacerbate the climate crisis, induce multiple forms of inequality, and sharpen exclusion in the midst of low-wage work and economic hardship (United Nations 2016:5). With anticipated urbanization, the pressures upon governments and peoples are only expected to intensify in the coming decades (Fragkias and Boone 2013; Vojnovic 2013). The number of large cities (five to ten million inhabitants) and megacities (ten million or more inhabitants) doubled since 1995, with 55 large cities and 29 megacities in 2015 (United Nations 2016:8). Large and megacities are frequently given attention, and for important reasons, however medium cities (less than one million) and small cities contain the majority of the world's urban population (59%) and are the fastest growing (United Nations 2016:9). Smaller cities (for example, populations under 100,000) are more typical than large and megacities. In the U.S., only four percent of cities have populations with 50,000 or more (Toukabri and Medina 2020). Although less conspicuous, the struggles of urban sustainability are also prevalent at the small scale.

The Brundtland Report set the stage for a holistic view of sustainability, defined by ecological concerns, economic concerns, and social and political concerns (Pretty et al. 2007:1). At the city scale, challenges arise in the process of actually specifying what these core facets include, as determined by individuals, groups, organizations, governments, and stakeholders of all types. Many processes, actors, institutions, and relationships are embedded in urban sustainability planning. Scott Campbell (2013) illustrates "The Planners Triangle" (Figure 1) to represent the priorities, conflicts, and social and political institutions involved in urban planning, surrounding the "elusive ideal of sustainable development" (83).

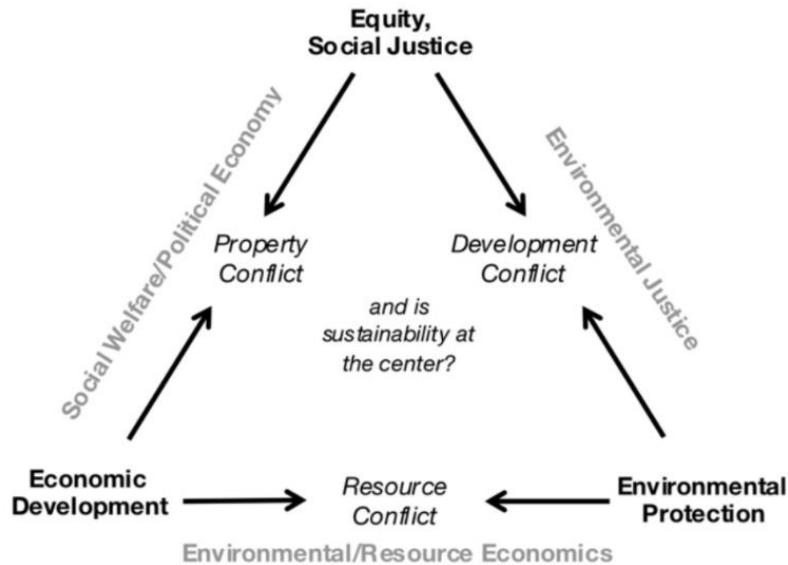


Figure 1: The Planners Triangle (Campbell 2013)

What does the “sustainable city” look like? Sustainability initiatives are wide-ranging and each city implements a different set and version of comparable policies, with different capacities, and with varying degrees of relevance to the environmental, economic, and social (equity) pillars of sustainability. Portney (2013:24) describes the scope and form that sustainability initiatives may take:

Some of the programs are citywide initiatives to address a particular environmental problem. Sometimes they are focused on a particular economic sector or activity (such as household recycling or brownfield redevelopment), and sometimes they cut across sectors and activities. Sometimes they operate out of single governmental agencies (an environmental department, a department of public works, a planning department, and so on), sometimes they integrate a variety of governmental activities, and sometimes they operate completely independent of government departments (i.e. a local nonprofit organization).

Examples include eco-taxes, elimination of agricultural and energy subsidies, recycling programs, hazardous waste reduction and landfill diversion, renewable energy, efficient and alternative transportation, greenhouse gas reduction, community supported agriculture and gardens, affordable housing, bike sharing programs, “green-rated” buildings, added greenspace and parks, environmental

education programs, etc. (Agyeman 2005b; Portney 2013). Saha and Paterson (2008) note that “most of the sustainability activities being adopted by communities are typically the ones that have been part of the planning paradigm for more than 40 years” (23). The sustainability concept, however, helped normalize environmental considerations in urban planning (Gilbert 2014:164; Béal 2015:305). Several cities in the U.S. have gained widespread recognition and reputations as “green cities.” Although a number of cities have embraced the idea of sustainability and have tailored their own sustainability initiatives, some of the most prominent examples singled out and cited by scholars include: Austin, Texas; Portland and Eugene, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; San Francisco and Santa Monica, California; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Boulder, Colorado; Jacksonville, Florida, and Scottsdale, Arizona (Agyeman 2005b; Portney 2013:23). The majority of the largest cities have official sustainability policies and initiatives, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and Philadelphia (Portney 2013:23).

What precisely the sustainable city includes, and the means to accomplish it, reflect the points of contention and debate. Different approaches to urban sustainability exist and revolve around the relationships between ecology, economy, and society. Hodson and Marvin (2017) view contemporary “sustainable cities’ debates” as deriving from the recognition of multiple economic and ecological crises in the late 1960s and 1970s, as perceived by Western nation states. In the 1960s and 1970s, radical critiques and appraisals about the fundamental systemic roots of environmental and social crises were prevalent. Urban planners, policymakers, global institutions, and scholars alike raised questions about the role of industrial capitalism and urbanization and effects on the environment. With the recognition of the planetary limits of growth, different viewpoints manifested about how to resolve and rethink relationships between economy and ecology (Hodson and Marvin 2017). The key question was about whether changes to economic, ecological, and social relationships “could be managed within the parameters of the capitalist system or whether it required

revolutionary transformation” (Hodson and Marvin 2017:4).

A major paradigmatic shift occurred in the 1980s with the Brundtland formulation. The United Nations Brundtland Report made the link between environment, economy, and “society,” which arguably contained within it principles of both intra-generational and inter-generational equity (Baker 2006). Lorr (2012) describes this as the comprehensive environmental, economic, and equitable change perspective. Environment, economy, and equity are not only viewed as interconnected, but potentially compatible and complementary to one another. This perspective “proposes that society use current and past methods of governmental regulation and management to administer growth policies by bolstering and further creating a Keynesian, environmentally aware, economically efficient form of government and business” (Lorr 2012:20). Subsequent international conferences after the Brundtland Report called for a greater role of local authorities, framing cities “not only as problems but also as sites of response and thus setting expectations about the role of local authorities” (Hodson and Marvin 2017:5). With the elevation of the sustainability agenda and rescaling of sustainable development to the urban context, local governments adopted a leading role and began constructing their own sustainability agendas centered on the environmental, economic, and social (equity) “pillars” of sustainability.

From the 1980s and into the 2000s in U.S. cities and elsewhere in the world, the dominant logic of urban sustainability operated under this comprehensive “three pillars” or “triple bottom line” view of the environment and sustainability, whereby “the management of social and environmental concerns is predicated on the proceeds of economic growth” (Hodson and Marvin 2017:5). Within the same time period, a new urban politics emerged in cities that prescribed an entrepreneurial and managerial role for city governments, compelling cities to seek out and attract private investment, tourism, public-private partnerships, and extralocal capital (Harvey 1989; Hodson and Marvin 2017). Much has been written on the managerial role taken on by local

governments post-World War II, including the rise of the “entrepreneurial city” and the “growth machines” that characterized local politics through the 1980s and onward (Logan and Molotch 1987; Harvey 1989).

In the United States, the pursuit of sustainability is characterized by “environmentally friendly” strategies of production and consumption, “ecological modernization,” and the “greening of capitalism” (While et al. 2004; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012; Lorr 2012; Hodson and Marvin 2017:5). What might also be described as “free-market greening,” the solution to environmental problems is a “win-win” relationship between ecology and economy, premised on market-led competition and technological developments that improve efficiency (Hodson and Marvin 2017:5). From this perspective, major transformations of institutions are not necessary; production and consumption will “modernize” as late capitalism becomes cleaner and environmentally competitive, thereby imparting “compatibility and convergence between the aims of capital and the environmental goals of society - as a new societal environmental logic” (Burns 2016:887). With the logic of ecological modernization, the strategies and policies of corporations, governments, and organizations are therefore guided by the principle of environmental rationality. Accordingly, the “[p]roductive use of natural resources and environmental media (air, energy, water, soils, ecosystems) - that is, ‘environmental productivity’ - can be a source of future growth and development” through eco-innovations and green consumption and production (Burns 2016:888). The “triple bottom line” was something to be managed and, furthermore, environmental problems were framed as an entrepreneurial opportunity. Seemingly paradoxical, urban environmentalism could coexist alongside the market-oriented neoliberal framework of urban entrepreneurialism (While et al. 2004:553). The managerial and entrepreneurial approach to the environment and urban sustainability, guided by the logic of ecological modernization, has arguably provided only limited accomplishments.

*Shifting urban sustainability discourses and logics*

Hodson and Marvin (2017) suggest discourses and logics of urban sustainability have been shifting once again since the mid-2000s, largely in response to economic recession and intensifying ecological and social crises. Not only do cities struggle with the political and technical challenges to the “realization” of sustainable cities, “but struggle now stretches to the discursive basis through which ‘sustainable cities’ are *envisaged*” (emphasis in original, Hodson and Marvin 2017:6-7). In other words, the very assumptions of current sustainable cities’ debates are being questioned, once again shifting understandings of the relationships between economy, ecology, and equity (Hodson and Marvin 2017:7). Table 1 shows Hodson and Marvin’s (2017:12) periodization of sustainable cities’ discourse. The struggle between *intensification* or *transformation* of conventional sustainable cities’ discourse is about: (1) the desired types of economic organization, (2) whether sustainability can be achieved through capitalist structures, (3) the ways environmental and social justice issues are understood, (4) the appropriate scalar context as a site of struggle (local, regional, national, global), and lastly (5) the struggle of *whose sustainability* in terms of valued knowledge, constructed ecologies, and the *logics* that inform sustainable cities’ discourse (Hodson and Marvin 2017:7-8).

Table 1: Periodization of sustainable cities’ discourse (Hodson and Marvin 2017)

	1960/1970s	1980s/2000s	Mid 2000–?
Approach	Radical critique	Managerialism	Fragmentation and hyper-intensification
Pressures	Oil crisis, pollution crisis and economic crisis	Globalisation – key role of international institutions	Global financial crisis and climate change
Environmental logic	Ecological limits to economic growth	Ecological modernisation	Transcending limits – exploitation of “valued” ecologies
Governance	Grassroots and alternatives	Multi-level cascade	Variable geometry
Urban context	Site of local experimentation	Local Agenda 21 processes and networks	Coexisting logics and networks – selected ecological re-bundling and experimentation
Consequences	Multiple experiments – selectively incorporated into state responses	Manage triple bottom line – “comprehensive” view of urban environment but not transformative	Selection of environments strategically important for urban reproduction

The vast number of concepts that have appeared in academic and policy discourses such as “smart city” or “low-carbon city” signal the ways that urban sustainability discourses are modified and guided by new urban logics. While “sustainable city” and “smart city” are the most popular lexicons in the academic literature, other evident concepts are “eco-city,” “low-carbon city,” “liveable city,” “digital city,” “compact city,” and “resilient city,” among many others (de Jong et al. 2015; Fu and Zhang 2017). With a focus on data as well as information and communication technologies, “smart cities” strive to make efficient use of energy, transport, and public resources (Ahvenniemi et al. 2017; Haarstad 2017; Martin et al. 2019). Linked to heightened realization of anthropogenic climate change, climate action and carbon control initiatives have become more commonplace in cities in the early twenty-first century. “Low-carbon” and “climate-ready” cities are arguably the next dominant frameworks of environmental governance beyond sustainable development, whereby cities seek to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases (While, Jonas, and Gibbs 2010). These approaches are selective since they emphasize the carbon component of resource flows, typically with market-based solutions that establish a price for carbon to be rationed, limited, and auctioned (“cap and trade”)(While et al. 2010:83; Hodson and Marvin 2017). “Resilient cities” are perhaps the clearest example of how these new discourses and logics are *responses* to the ecological, economic, and social crises of the twenty-first century. Resilience and “resilient thinking” are about adaptation in uncertain conditions (such as the climate crisis), placing special emphasis on those aspects critical to sustaining urban life and economic reproduction (Collier et al. 2013; Hodson and Marvin 2017:10; Gould and Lewis 2018). No matter the concepts or language employed in any given city, these represent “new urban logics” of sustainability, which Hodson and Marvin (2017) argue are *fragmented* responses that appear to have a *selective* focus on urban ecologies (9). Under a multitude of theoretical and empirical approaches, numerous scholars have documented the discursive (re)framings of urban sustainability towards “selective sustainability,” including the

associated policies, programs, and social-material consequences. In the following sections, multiple case studies of urban sustainability are described in order to illustrate “selective sustainability” and the *envisaging* or reimagining of sustainable cities.

*Selective sustainability in Manchester (United Kingdom) and Nantes (France)*

The examples of “eco-neighborhood” projects in two western European cities help illustrate the ways that sustainability discourses may be selective and also point to the associated policy consequences. In the cities of Manchester (United Kingdom) and Nantes (France), the implementation of eco-neighborhood projects was part of each city’s sustainability strategy. In Manchester, the eco-neighborhood projects were part of a program intended to encourage “green” practices for property developers and thereby turn the environment into a “competitive advantage” (Béal 2015:309). Public and private development agencies targeted disadvantaged neighborhoods with low property values to be sites for environmental innovation and urban regeneration. Through expanding environmental amenities such as greenspace, setting building standards and targets for environmental protection, and promoting “green” marketing campaigns, property developers and public authorities were able to attract middle to upper-middle class populations and subsequently add to property values (Béal 2015:311). Accordingly, Vincent Béal (2015:310-311) identifies three forms of “selectiveness” in Manchester, including *spatial* selectiveness (certain urban spaces targeted, especially those around the city center), *thematic* selectiveness (certain issues targeted, especially those with the potential to increase property values in a surrounding area), and *social* selectiveness (marketing to middle and upper-middle classes). In Nantes, sustainability and environmental objectives began to be emphasized in various development projects in the early 2000s. Economy and environment were united in a series of housing development opportunities that were presented as “eco-neighborhood” projects.

In both cities, sustainability planning was used specifically as a development strategy. The entrepreneurial framing of the environment manifested in municipal planning projects, official reports, development programs, and enacted policies. Guided by the pursuit of enhancing competitiveness or controlling its obstacles, sustainability planning and policies were applied selectively; in the cases of eco-neighborhood projects, only certain spaces, certain issues, and certain people or groups fell under the purview of the sustainability agenda (Béal 2015). It is this selectiveness that distinguishes these logics from earlier urban sustainability logics. Rather than a comprehensive view of the urban environment and urban sustainability, the “pillars” of sustainability (environment, economy, and social equity) are selectively applied to particular spaces, issues, and people in the city. In Nantes, Béal (2015) also suggests the eco-neighborhood projects served to “calm tensions” and “build an ambiguous consensus between entrepreneurial logic and environmental protection,” despite long-standing conflicts between environmental coalitions and property developers (314). This capacity for urban sustainability agendas to reconcile competing environmental and economic interests has been documented in other cities and contexts, which the next example illustrates.

*The selective narrative of sustainability in Austin, Texas*

The sustainability efforts in Austin, Texas, further demonstrate the ways that sustainability discourses may be “selectively” deployed (Tretter 2013; Long 2016). In a case study of Austin, Joshua Long (2016) traces the sustainability politics that have transpired in the eleventh largest city in the United States. Like other sustainability planning efforts in municipalities throughout the United States, tensions revolve around attempts to reconcile environmental, economic, and social interests. The city has successfully implemented a number of sustainability initiatives and policies, centered on environmental protection and amenities while also bolstering economic growth. The “Austin model” of urban sustainability is lauded by policymakers pursuing their own urban

sustainability agendas, however Long (2016) shows that many of its inhabitants are excluded from the “sustainable city” despite rhetoric that suggests otherwise.

Drawing on relevant scholarship and secondary data sources (such as statistical data and local media sources), Long (2016) conducted interviews with dozens of actors, ranging from city officials and employees, business leaders, academics, journalists, non-profit volunteers and activists, housed residents, and homeless residents. The goal was to elucidate the overall “narrative of sustainability” constructed by citizens, policymakers, advocacy groups, media, and academics. The “ideological construction” and “strategic implementation” of Austin’s sustainability agenda evolved over several decades, epitomized by the city’s 2012 comprehensive planning initiative, “Imagine Austin” (Long 2016:152). Taking a “critical historical approach” to understand whose sustainability is being produced, Long (2016) outlines the conditions that have led to Austin’s sustainability policies and reputation as a sustainable city. “Growth coalitions” and business interests initially conflicted with city officials and environmentalists in the early 1980s. Neighborhood associations and environmental groups eventually formed alliances in opposition to the rapid pace of “growth” in Austin, thereby channeling environmental concerns into local politics (Long 2016). The “development vs. environment” conflicts that followed began to construct the narrative of environmental sustainability and eventually led to “a new era of Austin environmental politics that saw an unusual compromise between environmental and business interests” (Long 2016:155). In the mid 1990s, “Smart Growth” represented the compromise, which advocated eco-friendly design and ecosystem protection while providing incentives to businesses and developers (Long 2016:156). Since the early 2000s, numerous sustainability initiatives have been adopted, including a green building program, habitat conservation, water security, renewable energy, and eco-neighborhood programs; the city is consistently praised by media and popular scholarship for its economic growth, innovation, sense of identity, “cultural industries,” and environmental amenities and protections

(Long 2016:159). Adopted by the city council in 2012, the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan is the “formal articulation of its stature as a model sustainable city” and claims to prioritize sustainability as the central policy concern (Long 2016:159). Some of the sustainability initiatives achieved since the adoption of the Imagine Austin plan in 2012 include: increased renewable energy share to 25%, added acreage of parks and wildland, added electric vehicle charging stations, bike share and environmental education programs, thousands of “green-rated” buildings, construction of a new African American Cultural and Heritage Facility, and creation of affordable housing units (Long 2016).

The Smart Growth principles and new sustainable agenda have targeted central downtown and surrounding areas for high-density development and revitalization. Yet processes of gentrification are intensifying in East Austin and the surrounding downtown area, with higher property taxes, rising costs of living, and criminalization of homelessness (Long 2016:164). Various downtown projects and ecodistricts are planned, prioritizing “the development of environmental amenities and a marketable urban image over social equity concerns” (Long 2016:165). In an already heavily racially segregated city, the “selective narrative” of sustainability is creating a sustainable city disconnected from Austin’s most vulnerable populations, including low-income working class, minorities, and homeless inhabitants (Long 2016). Summarizing this discrepancy, Long (2016:166) writes:

The Imagine Austin Plan is an excellent example of the rhetoric that is now pervasive in Austin. Seen in planning documents, tourist brochures, city websites and developer profiles, the city is presented as a creative, progressive, eco-friendly city committed to all of the principles of urban sustainability. The rhetoric is inclusive, but the city of the Imagine Austin Plan is inaccessible to many residents.

A mostly “white, progressive voice” has constructed “the dominant narrative of environmental sustainability,” sidelining environmental racism issues that have affected East Austin (for example, disproportionate siting of polluting industries and environmental hazards)(Long 2016:161). The

author argues this is linked to Austin's political representation structures that have also historically underrepresented minorities (e.g. electing city council members at-large rather than by district), diminishing voter turnout and essentially disenfranchising minority voters (Long 2016:160). Importantly, the case of Austin also illustrates the potential discrepancies between "visions" of sustainability, concrete sustainability plans, and existing social and material conditions.

In this sense, the sustainability agenda in Austin is selective. Only certain spaces are targeted and only certain economic and environmental issues are merged in sustainability initiatives and projects. Meanwhile, equity, justice, and entire groups of inhabitants are marginalized. Austin also represents a model of what some scholars have referred to as the "sustainability fix." In light of economic pressures for city governance to encapsulate the entrepreneurial spirit of advanced capitalism, combined with the realization of ecological pressures on the urban environment, While et al. (2004) suggest an urban "sustainability fix" has manifested in urban governance. The "fix" entails various policies and activities that purportedly relieve both economic and environmental pressures. The authors argue that "urban entrepreneurialism itself might depend on *the active remaking of urban environments and ecologies*" (emphasis added, While et al. 2004:550). This parallels the notion of a "spatial fix" described by Harvey (1989, 2001), whereby urban governments are compelled to expand their geographical reach to postpone the accumulation crises of capitalism (i.e. the need to resolve surpluses in capital). In many ways, urban entrepreneurialism *required* identifying and incorporating politics of the urban environment in order to, for instance, "clean up" after industrial capitalism, but also to build coalitions among countering interests (e.g. environmentalist coalitions and business coalitions) and secure future growth (While et al. 2004:565).

Urban regimes may seek to incorporate specific ecological goals as a *means* of continuing economic growth. In both Austin and the aforementioned eco-neighborhood projects, environmental amenities served as a "marketable appeal" to affluent classes. Projects such as eco-

neighborhoods “fix” economic and environmental pressures; business interests and developers are satisfied with the potential for profit while many environmental advocates and interests are satisfied with environmental goals and standards. Building on the notion of the sustainability fix, Long (2016) contends that “the successful implementation of the sustainability fix is predicated on its political legitimacy, and requires a widely supported ideological narrative to rationalise its policies” (167). In the case study of Austin, Texas, the sustainability narrative is constructed locally by policymakers, citizens, and various interests such as advocacy groups, the media, and academics (Long 2016). An abundance of studies have addressed and built on the notion of a sustainability fix (for example, MacDonald and Keil 2012; Temenos and McCann 2012; Rosol 2013; Tretter 2013; Tilger 2014; Hof and Blázquez-Salom 2015; Montgomery 2015; Johnson Gaither et al. 2016; Long 2016; Walker 2016).

*The new logics of urban sustainability*

Each city constructs its own urban sustainability logic or logics, reflected through different discourses and practices. Each “sustainable city” has its own interpretations, visions, and ways of implementing urban sustainability. Yet familiar discursive strategies, processes, and outcomes are evident. Hodson and Marvin (2017) argue that the multiple, fragmented logics since the mid 2000s tend to heighten the importance of the economic value of selected ecologies. The authors elaborate (Hodson and Marvin 2017:9):

The new urban logics each have a selective environmental focus. They are no longer explicitly attempting to construct a broad holistic view of the urban environment that was assumed in Agenda 21 and the sustainable cities’ discourse. Instead, each new logic exemplifies a much more focused view of the ecologies and resource flows that are potentially valuable. A comprehensive view of the urban environment is unbundled and selectively reassembled in particular configurations, mediated through the frameworks and techniques of each approach.

Ecological modernization is intensified and there is an explicit focus “on developing selected aspects of urban ecology as a basis for new rounds of economic growth” (Hodson and Marvin 2017:10).

They add that these new logics are not about becoming self-sufficient to meet limits of growth, but rather the urban context seeks to transcend the limits to urban growth and “secure the resources and provide the capacity and resources to ensure its economic and ecological reproduction,” despite conditions of economic and ecological uncertainty (Hodson and Marvin 2017:10). Lastly, given the managerial and entrepreneurial focus, the conventional commitment of sustainable cities’ discourses to equity and justice is weakened (Hodson and Marvin 2017:11).

Each city’s response is a unique “sustainability experiment” itself. Accordingly, cities are “sites of experimentation” that may serve as “exemplars” and “best practices” from which other cities and urban contexts learn (May and Perry 2016:4). Yet selective urban sustainability agendas and “fixes” are not necessarily inevitable. There is also a greater window of opportunity for counter-agendas and alternative responses, guided by alternative logics of urban sustainability that aim for systemic change. An important question for future research is the possibility of a more socially just sustainability fix, whereby urban sustainability agendas might craft policies that simultaneously “fix” economic, environmental, *and* equity issues (Jonas and While 2007:152). This brings it back to my main research interest: What is the sustainability agenda unfolding in Kalamazoo? What logic or logics does it follow? Are discourses of ecological modernization and urban managerialism and entrepreneurialism competing with other discourses that are more attuned to equity issues? Which dimensions of sustainability (e.g. economic, environmental, equity) prevail in discourses and practices? Are there differences between the perspectives of city officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and inhabitants in general - the stakeholders of the sustainable city? What is Kalamazoo’s sustainability experiment? Does it represent a distinctive form of urban experimentation? Are there counter-agendas and alternative responses that seek systemic change? What are the possibilities for a “just” and sustainable Kalamazoo? In the next section, I outline a number of themes that were explored in my case study of urban sustainability in Kalamazoo.

### *Themes and Key Areas of Interests in Urban Sustainability*

Given previous theoretical and empirical work in contemporary urban sustainability, I identified several broader themes or key areas of interest relevant to my study of Kalamazoo. In this section, I describe the following themes: (1) the meanings and discourses of urban sustainability, the environment, and the city, (2) multi-scalar and spatial politics of urban sustainability, (3) post-political sustainability, knowledge, and expertise, (4) the role of equity and justice in urban sustainability, including the ramifications of weakened equity and justice concerns, policy consequences, and processes of “environmental gentrification,” and lastly (5) contested urban sustainability agendas and alternative responses.

#### *(1) The meanings and discourses of urban sustainability, the environment, and the city*

Exploring the meaning of sustainability for city officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and urban inhabitants in general is a major area of interest in itself. In other words, the ways that sustainability is framed, defined, and understood by a variety of actors (Zeemering 2009; Vallance et al. 2012). Gilbert (2014) writes: “In the context of cities, ‘sustainable’ is often used interchangeably with a series of catchy, indefinite and equivocal terms, such as green, resilient, livable, healthy, happy, biodiverse, biophilic, and so forth” (164). The various ways that sustainability is defined, conceptualized, and understood has implications for the sustainability agendas that prevail and the ways that city officials in particular “do” sustainability. Sustainability may be categorized along environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Environmental sustainability may target issues of water, air quality, climate change resilience, parks and greenspace, waste, or energy use. Economic sustainability may involve supporting economic and business growth, downtown investment, tourism, employment, or renewable energy sectors. Social sustainability may cover issues ranging from affordable housing, food sovereignty, poverty, or public participation in urban governance. These dimensions or pillars of sustainability are not always clearly defined or

easily separated, carrying different meanings for different individuals and groups.

Sustainability is most often framed in environmental terms, understood as environmental sustainability (Agyeman 2013). Accordingly: “To some, the sustainability discourse is too all-encompassing to be of any use. To others, the words are often unthinkingly prefaced by ‘environmental’ and ‘environmentally,’ as in ‘environmental sustainability’ or ‘environmentally sustainable development’” (Agyeman 2013:4). City officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and residents may have different meanings in terms of the definitions, concepts, interpretations, and cultural significance of sustainability and its dimensions. “Social sustainability” may include equity and justice concerns for some, but not others (e.g. a property developer). At the same time, sustainability may be nothing more than a word, a slogan, or a catchphrase used to achieve particular ends (Gilbert 2014; Mössner 2015). In many ways, sustainability is an open or empty signifier; the concept of sustainability is virtually “empty” of meaning and therefore can be mobilized to achieve particular aims (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012). In short, what counts as sustainable (including environmental, economic, or social equity sustainability) in one urban context may not translate to another.

Numerous empirical studies examine what sustainability means for different groups. For example, Vallance et al. (2012) explore the different meanings of urban sustainability for urban planning professionals in the New Zealand city of Christchurch, identifying an exclusively technocratic and bio-physical environmental interpretation where there is “little place for people in these ‘sustainable cities’” (1704). They argue that “this tendency to focus on the bio-physical environment at the expense of social, economic and cultural environments is actually and actively worked out through particular urban policies to become a standard part of planning, architectural and building practice” (Vallance et al. 2012:1704). As a result, the implemented policies and “doing” of urban sustainability encompasses such things as solar panel installation, energy-efficient public

transport, recycling, and other efforts that “can be achieved in clear, measurable ways, unlike policy proposals associated with the messy, subjective and rich realm of the real people who actually inhabit the city” (Vallance et al. 2012:1704).

Given that urban sustainability agendas are not homogeneous, Zeemering (2009) suggests research focus on how sustainability is conceptualized by city officials and leads to “distinct programmatic priorities” (267). Sustainability conceptualizations are linked to how governments, groups, and organizations measure, evaluate, and “do” sustainability. Indicators of sustainability used by local governments are not simply technical tools, but rather entail socially constructed processes of conflict and cooperation among policy actors (Asteithner and Hamedinger 2003:629). This includes “official” indicators or measures of sustainability, the judgments of whether *something* or *somewhere* is sustainable, and the actual programs, policies, and government initiatives implemented using the language of sustainability. What governments and city officials opt to include in their own measures of sustainability depends on how they conceive of sustainability and which issues are most salient.

To understand the various ways that environmental goals are incorporated in urban planning, it must also be asked what is understood or what counts as the environment (Tretter 2013:300). The way that “nature” itself is framed in urban sustainability discourses is another area of interest, including what “visions” of nature exist and the interpretations of the relationship between humans and the natural world (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012). Susan Baker (2006) describes the “ladder of sustainable development” that distinguishes the different philosophical underpinnings of the relationship between humans and the natural world, from a solely human-centric view to a solely eco-centric view (28-29). This essentially involves beliefs about the degree that “natural capital” (the pool of natural resources necessary for production) can be substituted with “human capital” (the pool of human resources necessary for production). The types of policy imperatives and extent of

governance are dependent upon these worldviews. Whereas pollution control and “weak” sustainability approaches are more human-centric, “strong” and “ideal” sustainability are more eco-centric. Pollution control approaches accept environmental protection, but not at the expense of development. Accordingly, as societies progress through the stages of development, so goes the argument, pollution levels decrease with less resource-intensive economic activities (Baker 2006:32). Weak sustainable development, similarly, “aims to integrate capitalist growth with environmental concerns” and denotes that natural capital may be substituted with human capital (Baker 2006:32). Strong sustainable development, however, rejects the notion of complete substitutability of natural and human capital. In the midst of limited scientific understanding about the complexities of the environment, the “precautionary principle” should be adopted, which requires a stronger role for government intervention and new forms of participation (Baker 2006:34). In addition to breaking away from market forces, strong sustainable development “seeks a shift from quantitative growth, where growth is seen as an end in itself and measured only in material terms, to qualitative development, where quality of life is prioritized” (Baker 2006:34). However, it is what Baker (2006) refers to as the “ideal approach” to sustainable development that advocates substantial structural change and a “radical change in our attitude toward nature” (35). In this approach, the challenge of governance entails decentralization of political, legal, social, and economic institutions, ensuring bottom-up and equitable participation.

The managerial discourses and associated policies of the environment, embodied by ecological modernization, are ultimately based on particular notions of nature and how it should be managed (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012:1962). For example, is “nature” envisioned as a singular entity, separate from the city and in need of sustaining? Or is “nature” viewed as *part of the city*, whereby the urban environment and bio-physical environment are integrated? In New Zealand, urban practitioners distinguished between *urban* sustainability, and general sustainability and

sustainable development, and also viewed “town” and “country” as separate whereby the “environment” was primarily beyond the city limits (Vallance et al. 2012:1706). Even the meaning of “urban,” “urbanization,” and “the city” may be defined in a number of ways that are important to understanding urban sustainability (Bugliarello 2006; Marcotullio and Solecki 2013). In their study of the meanings of urban sustainability, Vallance et al. (2012) find that “the city” (along with its inhabitants) were missing in discussions of sustainability with urban practitioners. The authors add: “If the city was mentioned, it was usually seen as a mechanism through which the ex-urban or natural environment could be improved” (Vallance et al. 2012:1706). The ways that “the city” is conceptualized by city officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and inhabitants is arguably as important as their meanings of sustainability and visions of nature. For my case study of Kalamazoo, it is therefore necessary to explore the many meanings and dimensions of sustainability and how these are utilized by different actors. This also demands an understanding of how Kalamazoo inhabitants conceptualize the environment and how they imagine the relationship between humans and their bio-physical environment (“nature”). Furthermore, an effort must be made to understand how Kalamazoo inhabitants interpret and locate the city in relation to the bio-physical environment. This relates to the second major theme to which I now turn.

## *(2) The spatial politics of urban sustainability*

Sustainability encompasses both temporal and spatial concerns. Sustainability may incorporate intra-generational and inter-generational concerns, but it also involves relationships of scale (from local to global) and relationships of space. The “spatial politics” of urban sustainability is a major theme in urban sustainability research, including: (1) the scale at which sustainability is debated and practiced, and (2) the spatial, geographic, and physical organization of cities themselves. First, related to meanings of urban sustainability, is the scale at which urban sustainability is debated, envisioned, and practiced. In other words, from neighborhoods and cities to regions, nations, and

globally. In the Canadian province of Ontario, Sara MacDonald and Roger Keil (2012) identify a process of *extended metropolitanization*, whereby the scale at which sustainability is debated shifts beyond the city toward regional scales. Provincial legislative efforts established the Ontario Greenbelt, a land regulation initiative that created permanently protected land areas with restricted land uses (MacDonald and Keil 2012:126). The Greenbelt Plan and related policies therefore function as a form of regional sustainability and environmental governance. The same environment-economic dilemmas are played out at the provincial scale, given that the Greenbelt Plan exists alongside regional Growth Plans, which designate desired economic development areas (MacDonald and Keil 2012).

Temenos and McCann (2012) also highlight the way that the scale of urban sustainability may be extended beyond the city. They document the implementation of the urban sustainability agenda in the Canadian resort town of Whistler, British Columbia, focusing on the ways that policies expected to successfully suture or “fix” economic growth and environmental demands were “imported.” In 2000, the city adopted the sustainability framework of a global consultancy firm, The Natural Step (TNS), which provides a range of planning tools, software, educational material, professional training, and expertise to governments, corporations, and other organizations (Temenos and McCann 2012:1397). The TNS framework promotes a specific version of sustainability based on individual responsibility and a set of core principles, centered on reducing extraction, production, and refinement of natural resources; reducing environmental degradation; and, vaguely, ensuring people’s capacity to meet their needs is not undermined (Temenos and McCann 2012:1397). For TNS, these core principles are broad enough to be applicable across individual clients. Through participatory planning and coalescing of local business and environmental activist groups, many who were designated as “early adopters” of TNS, the municipality acted as a mediator that trained and legitimated nongovernmental experts in TNS practices (Temenos and McCann 2012:1398). In 2004,

the city's comprehensive planning initiative (Whistler2020) formally integrated the TNS framework into its sustainability agenda. In this case, the local "fixing" of economy and environment issues was extralocal in construction and legitimation, through what Temenos and McCann (2012) refer to as the "extralocal politics of policy mobility." By 2008, the nonprofit Whistler Centre for Sustainability opened and began consulting for other resort towns in British Columbia, exporting the city's increasingly reputable model of sustainability. Accordingly, this facilitated "the travel of sustainability as a vehicular idea" that is mobilized at different scales (Temenos and McCann 2012:1403). Overall, the case of Whistler illustrates how urban sustainability agendas may be imported from the global scale (TNS global consultancy firm), reworked, and then re-scaled and exported (The Whistler Centre consultancy) to other urban contexts.

The spatial politics of urban sustainability also involve the physical and geographical organization of cities. Regardless of whether "the city" is conceptualized as a physical entity or as a cluster of social processes linked with urbanization (Bugliarello 2006; Marcotullio and Solecki 2013), there remains a physical and geographic reality to it. The role of space and place was addressed in Béal's (2015) account of eco-neighborhood projects, in particular the spatial selectiveness of urban sustainability policies whereby edge-of-the-city neighborhoods with low-property values were targeted for green development. Long's (2016) study of Austin exemplifies the spatiality of sustainability in a different manner, given that the central downtown district and surrounding East Austin were targeted as "desired development zones." In the case of Austin, the "sustainability spectacle" exists in the central city and downtown areas, "an amenity-rich eco-topia with marketable appeal to the more skilled and moneyed members of the creative class" while a marginalized working class is "relegated to peripheral spaces" (Long 2016:167). Urban redevelopment under the banner of sustainability can also produce exclusive spaces, such as parks and greenspace, and facilitate the displacement of housed and homeless residents. Multiple authors describe processes of

ecological or environmental gentrification, which are characterized by the simultaneous “greening” and “whitening” of spaces and neighborhoods (Dooling 2009; Checker 2011; Anguelovski 2016; Long 2016; Anguelovski et al. 2019; Rice et al. 2020). Environmental gentrification is further described in a later section.

Urban sustainability agendas depend on the multi-scalar and social-material relationships across space, which ultimately shape whether individuals or groups are positioned to experience the amenities (and burdens) of the sustainable city. For this study, therefore, it is necessary to be attentive to the spatial politics that characterize urban sustainability in Kalamazoo. Thus, I explore how urban sustainability is “rescaled” in Kalamazoo and how urban sustainability debates are extended or re-scaled (e.g. to Kalamazoo County or Southwest Michigan region), and how sustainability models and policies are down-scaled or “imported” from other cities or urban contexts. Furthermore, I account for the ways that urban sustainability agendas attend to and reorganize spaces, including the social and material implications.

### *(3) Post-political sustainability, knowledge, and expertise*

The spatial politics of urban sustainability point to how urban sustainability research is not solely concerned with what sustainability means to various actors or simply the content of sustainability discourses, but also what urban sustainability discourses accomplish. For example, the ways that urban sustainability discourses reproduce existing social relations and the ramifications. The contemporary era of “post-politics” is another major theme in the urban sustainability literature. Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014) describe post-politics as conditions where “the political” is subdued by “politics.” In other words, spaces of political contestation and deliberation are “colonized” by the “technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures” of politics (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:6). Consequently, “political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is

narrowly defined in advance” (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:6). Scholars argue that post-politics has become a defining feature of “new urban environmental regimes” (Rosol, Béal, and Mössner 2017). Sustainability is framed as a managerial and technological issue, primarily in terms of management of the bio-physical environment and use of technology to resolve environmental problems. By “mainstreaming” environmental issues and having them managed by “expert” knowledge, “any concern, debate or discussion about the goals and objectives of the sustainable city have been silenced” (Mössner 2015:191). As discussed, sustainability agendas often serve to build consensus and forego opposition through the win-win narrative of environment-economy compatibility. Backed with the logic of ecological modernization, urban sustainability discourses build consensus between environmentalism and entrepreneurialism. In this way, urban sustainability agendas may neutralize opposition (Checker 2011; Tenemos and McCann 2012; Long 2016). For instance, Béal (2015) also noted the political strategy behind the eco-neighborhood projects in Nantes, France, which served to calm tensions and “build consensus between entrepreneurialism and environmental protection” (314). This promotes a narrow set of interests while “cleansing the concept of its political content” (Vallance et al. 2012:1706). The concept of sustainability is therefore “de-politicized” in urban sustainability discourses by framing it as a technical, apolitical idea (Checker 2011; Vallance et al. 2012; Mössner 2015). In this way, urban sustainability planning can be described as “post-political,” which has the dual effect of deflecting opposition while also restricting participation in urban sustainability planning (Long 2016). Urban sustainability agendas may “fix” environmental and economic issues by building consensus, but they also “fix” political contest (Temenos and McCann 2012; Long 2016:166). Not only are many voices silenced, but public participation may be narrowed to the level of “vision” rather than policy (Vallance et al. 2012:1706; Long 2016:166).

Depoliticizing urban sustainability results in only certain viewpoints and particular “expert” knowledges taken into consideration (May and Perry 2016). Hodson and Marvin (2017) argue that each of the new urban logics “works through particular configurations of knowledge and expertise that incorporate techniques and practices that frame how an urban environment is viewed and understood” (9). A major research interest is therefore to explore what knowledges and whose knowledges are considered in urban sustainability discourses and new urban logics. That is, how do cities such as Kalamazoo mobilize the sustainability idea? Are other “models of sustainability” taken as examples in order to discursively frame the sustainability idea and craft policy? (Temenos and McCann 2012:1403). How does this naturalize and legitimize specific ideas about sustainability? In the Canadian city of Whistler, the municipal government and its urban planners were taken as the experts, and the relative absence of contention, according to the authors, added to the city’s “expertise” position (Temenos and McCann 2012). The imported policy models of sustainability therefore involve a “political process of knowledge translation” (Temenos and McCann 2012:1391). This process of knowledge translation involves learning and “educating attention” toward specific interpretations of sustainability. For example, the creation of sustainability indicators, which directs attention toward specific parameters (Temenos and McCann 2012:1398). Haarstad (2017:426) succinctly summarizes:

[D]ominant ideas of what works to promote sustainability in a particular city can be expected to be a mix between broad discourses shaped by national or international authoritative actors and institutions, on the one hand, and localized understandings and experiences that shape how these broader discourses are received and put into practice, on the other.

To reiterate, the matter of importance is what knowledges, from where, and whose knowledges are mobilized and integrated into dominant sustainability discourses and practices. As perceived sites of expertise for city governments, universities also play a role in knowledge production. Universities are subject to provide interpretations that have a bio-physical environmental and technical bias as much

as private consultants and think-tanks (May and Perry 2016:6). Although universities and social scientists may contribute to centralized political authorities' "expertise," there remains potential for universities to adopt alternative approaches that engage with more socialized, democratic, deliberative, and co-produced knowledges (May and Perry 2016:9).

In this study, I evaluate the extent of post-political conditions of sustainability, or at least the appearance of post-political conditions of sustainability, including the extent of public participation in the imagining, planning, and implementing of sustainability. I consider the ways in which consensus is built between competing interests and groups. It is also important to consider whose knowledges are valued and what expertises drive the urban sustainability agenda.

#### *(4) Equity, justice, and sustainability*

A fourth major theme involves the roles of equity and justice in urban sustainability agendas and new urban logics. The post-political, managerial, and entrepreneurial framing of the environment and sustainability provide ripe conditions for what Julian Agyeman (2005b) refers to as the "equity deficit" of sustainability. Exclusion or restricted participation in urban sustainability planning is undoubtedly one representation of the equity deficit of sustainability. The overriding question is whether "sustainable" or "green" cities are also "just" cities. Although some cities have made substantial changes in the name of environmental (and perhaps economic) sustainability, as evidenced by various green initiatives and the ranking of the "greenest" cities, Gilbert (2014) argues that "social justice, as a claim and means for addressing equity deficits, has often been neglected in dominant sustainability discourses that drive the development of 'greener' cities" (159). Equity and social justice concerns tend to be overshadowed in urban sustainability discourses or fail to materialize in practice (Vallance et al. 2012; Long 2016). If equity is emphasized in sustainability discourses, it may be subjugated to economic and environmental interpretations of sustainability *in practice* (Mössner 2015; Long 2016).

Many scholars, for example, have explored the extent that equity and justice concerns are present in urban sustainability agendas (Warner 2002; Saha and Paterson 2008; Pearsall and Pierce 2010; Skinner 2010; Bina and La Camera 2011; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012; Opp and Saunders 2012; Gilbert 2014; Teron 2015; Long 2016). Although equity and justice were initially foundational elements to sustainable cities' debates, the present manifestations and new logics of urban sustainability have primarily weakened or completely left out equity and justice concerns (Hodson and Marvin 2017). Under the managerial and entrepreneurial discourses of sustainability, equity concerns are largely absent, other than perhaps assumptions about economic growth and capitalist development as preconditions to equity. This is unsurprising, given that the urban sustainability and broader ecological modernization paradigms are largely top-down initiatives, although there is a sub-variant of ecological modernization that supports democratically and institutionally-driven state governance in steering changes (Bell 2012; Burns 2016).

Although there are certainly imperatives to eco-efficiency and the merging of economy and environment, the “greening” of capitalism “almost completely ignores issues of social justice and the processes of social inclusion and exclusion that run through urban environments and the very technological advancements they are advocating” (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012:1963). Many “sustainable” or “environmentally friendly” technologies, such as electric vehicles and charging stations, are socially embedded with privileges and inequities (Iles 2013). When the actual agendas, policies, and practices of urban sustainability are equity-deficient, there are extraordinary ramifications for vulnerable populations, including homeless persons, low-income groups, people of color, and racialized poverty (While et al. 2004; Dooling 2009; Skinner 2010; Checker 2011; Macdonald and Keil 2012; Béal 2015; Montgomery 2015; Long 2016; Walker 2016; Haase et al. 2017; Rice et al. 2020). Several scholars have identified new processes of “greenlining” and ecological or environmental gentrification, which may further exclude already marginalized residents

across racial and class lines (Dooling 2009; Checker 2011; Wolch et al. 2014; Anguelovski 2016; Béal 2015; Sheller 2015; Johnson Gaither et al. 2016; Long 2016; Anguelovski et al. 2019; Rice et al. 2020; Shokry et al. 2021).

Considering homelessness in Seattle, Washington, Sarah Dooling (2009) devises the term “ecological gentrification” or “the implementation of an environmental planning agenda related to public green spaces that leads to the displacement or exclusion of the most economically vulnerable human population - homeless people - while espousing an environmental ethic” (630). A series of public meetings and ecological-design projects in the early 2000s mapped out new green spaces while replacing low-income housing and shelters, whereby “homelessness was conceived of only in terms of threats to the safety of housed residents who entered public spaces” (Dooling 2009:630). Thus, the initiative to enhance the “ecological functioning of the city” produced and exacerbated inequities for economically vulnerable and homeless residents.

Analyzing the consequences of high-end supermarket chains (Whole Foods) targeting neighborhoods undergoing urban redevelopment, Isabelle Anguelovski (2016) suggests that a sort of “supermarket greenlining” is evident in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts. Various interviews, observations, and data from media sources and community organizations revealed the conflicts and struggles surrounding the 2011 opening of the “natural” healthy food store, Whole Foods, in the Boston neighborhood. Whole Foods Market would replace Hi-Lo Foods supermarket, which provided affordable food as well as a sense of place and identity for Latinos in the multiracial neighborhood (Anguelovski 2016:1225). Anguelovski (2016) adds that for over 40 years, the Hi-Lo Foods supermarket “allowed immigrants to re-territorialize their traditions around *comida* and their socio-cultural food practices” but also as “a meeting point where people would nurture social relations, share life experiences or just converse about family and the Latino community” (emphasis in original, 1225). The conflicts that arose were primarily between

neighborhood newcomers (mostly white, middle-class, property owners) and long-standing residents, community leaders, and students who opposed the Whole Foods (Anguelovski 2016:1217). The arrival of the Whole Foods placed additional pressure on the displacement of many residents as the neighborhood underwent revitalization, indicating a new form of “green” Locally Unwanted Land Uses (LULUs) often cited in the environmental justice literature (Anguelovski 2016:1226). LULUs typically refer to land uses that pose environmental hazards (e.g. toxic waste facilities or contaminating industries) for those who reside in a given area. Yet the case of “supermarket greenlining” explored by Anguelovski (2016) highlights how “green amenities” may transform into LULUs for existing residents.

Long (2016) conveys the process of ecological gentrification unfolding in Austin, but argues that it transcends the neighborhood level, given the scope of citywide projects in the name of sustainability (167). Green resilience and climate adaptation measures is another layer to consider in urban sustainability planning (Gould and Lewis 2018; Shokry et al. 2021). Gould and Lewis (2018), for example, point to “resilience gentrification” in Brooklyn, New York. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy in 2012, a “climate change resilience” discourse was evident and was followed by efforts toward “structural mitigation” of surrounding neighborhoods. Given expected sea level rise, buildings may be raised or floodwalls built, but this is more likely to occur in the denser, “hot market” neighborhoods of the “sustainability class gentrifiers” - who (are able to) assume the building costs (Gould and Lewis 2018:13).

Processes of ecological or environmental gentrification must be considered in urban sustainability planning and research. In this case study of urban sustainability in Kalamazoo, I therefore consider the extent that equity and justice are integrated into urban sustainability planning and the urban sustainability agenda on the whole, including the implications for environmental gentrification. I attempt to identify the visions, planning practices, and policies that are unfavorable

to equity and justice issues as well those promising to a “just” urban sustainability.

*(5) Contested urban sustainability and alternative responses*

A fifth major theme involves challenges and interventions to urban sustainability agendas, including the rise of counter-agendas, alternative responses, and social movements over time. Dominant urban sustainability discourses and agendas are hardly left unchallenged (Rosol 2013). A handful of authors have documented the ways that selective urban sustainability agendas are contested by various groups, who are occasionally successful in modifying the sustainability agenda (Rosol 2013; Tretter 2013; Montgomery 2015). While many challenges to selective agendas are unsuccessful or even backfire, other challenges to selective agendas are successful, even if sometimes in the smallest, temporary ways. And in still other cases, counter-agendas and alternative responses are acted upon by individuals, groups, and organizations who seek systemic change.

Some of the strongest responses to selective urban sustainability agendas come from environmental justice movements. Eliot Tretter (2013) details the struggle of one environmental justice group in East Austin, Texas, that challenged the city’s Smart Growth platform in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Invoking the comprehensive environment, economy, and equity pillars of sustainability, the language of Smart Growth was used by the city to bring together environmentalist and business interests. Primarily representing Austin’s communities of color, the environmental justice group People in Defense of the Earth and Her Resources (PODER) opposed the Smart Growth initiatives on the grounds that it encouraged gentrification-prone “revitalization” and development zones in East Austin. The Smart Growth platform pledged to account for each pillar including the “equity” pillar, a standard met by allocating funds to a flood risk zone in a poorer neighborhood inhabited predominantly by African Americans. Still, the Smart Growth plan would transform the physical landscape and social demographics of East Austin - resulting in not a single Hispanic organization offering support to it (Tretter 2013:307). Tretter (2013) summarizes: “To the

extent that the plan offered a utopian sustainable vision for the future, it did so only by ignoring the dystopian history of racism and underdevelopment that (ironically) had resulted in east Austin becoming a potentially effective development zone” (307). The environmental justice group PODER was previously successful at challenging industrial zoning and demonstrating the hazardous environmental impacts of nearby oil facilities, although largely by framing it as an environmental issue and gaining the support of liberal, mostly white environmentalist coalitions. Yet PODER was less successful at garnering support against the Smart Growth initiative, primarily because liberal, white environmentalists did not perceive the transformation of the city center as an environmental issue (Tretter 2013:308). In this sense, challengers to selective sustainability agendas are not always successful. In the Kalamazoo context, I attempt to shed light on those stakeholders who seek to challenge or contest the prevailing sustainability agendas, including the non-prevailing discursive frames and practical strategies they use.

#### *Paradoxes of urban sustainability*

No doubt environmental justice movements across the globe have improved the lives of millions. However, the merging of environmental justice and sustainability agendas can produce new, unexpected challenges. Multiple authors have explored the long-term unintended consequences of environmental justice activism, particularly struggles for a livable environment and the pursuit of environmental amenities such as healthy food and greenspace (Checker 2011; Anguelovski 2016; Walker 2016). The experience of the Harlem neighborhood in New York City is a worthwhile example, given that it further illustrates several of the major themes discussed so far.

In the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, Melissa Checker (2011) provides one example of the difficulties of challenging selective sustainability agendas. Examining the crossover between environmental justice activism and urban sustainable development, Checker (2011) shows how environmental justice activism may face unintended consequences and be co-opted by urban

sustainability agendas. Between 2007 and 2011, Checker (2011) conducted research that used a combination of participant observation, interviews, and archival research “to learn how urban residents contest and resist sustainable policies that threaten their displacement” (215). In the Harlem neighborhood, a park expansion project that aimed to create one large greenspace was proposed, which was referred to as “the Green X:Change” and was connected to PlaNYC 2030, New York City’s sustainability plan at the time (Checker 2011:211).

However, many long-term residents opposed the project, skeptical of who would benefit from it. Harlem was historically a “repository for industry, waste stations, and bus depots” which inadvertently created the relatively successful West Harlem Environmental Action Coalition (WE ACT), an environmental justice organization that fought *against* environmental burdens (e.g. industrial siting and air pollution) and *for* environmental amenities (e.g. parks and greenspace)(Checker 2011:215). WE ACT had more recently adopted sustainability into its goals, including greenspace initiatives, and the organization’s director even secured an advisory position for New York City’s newly formed Office of Sustainability. Yet the city’s version of sustainability did not fully engage with questions of equity and justice, opting instead for a depoliticized, technocratic version based on infrastructure needs and metrics of sustainability (Checker 2011:222). This “post-political” strategy limited WE ACT’s capacity. Despite continued environmental burdens in the Harlem neighborhood, PlaNYC was launched and brought with it a heavy focus on green infrastructure and environmental amenities. Checker (2011) contends that processes of environmental gentrification are now shaping the future of the Harlem neighborhood. Since the mid 2000s, the Harlem neighborhood has experienced accelerated gentrification as a result of high-density rezoning and the entry of large-scale developers, high-rise office towers, and condominiums (Checker 2011:220). The promotion of eco-friendly buildings and green amenities took hold, detached from questions of social justice, and threatening the displacement of many neighborhood

residents. In 2015, PlaNYC was replaced by OneNYC, which includes provisions to become “the most resilient, equitable, and sustainable city in the world” (OneNYC 2018).

The challengers of selective sustainability policies therefore face a paradox (Checker 2011:211): “must they reject environmental amenities in their neighborhoods in order to resist the gentrification that tends to follow such amenities?” The active engagement of urban sustainability and environmental justice concerns “backfires” in what Checker (2011) characterizes as “the paradox of urban sustainability.” In this case, the material successes (removing environmental burdens and adding environmental benefits) and discursive successes (placing the language of sustainability on the urban planning agenda) of WE ACT’s environmental justice activism were inadvertently co-opted by the PlanNYC sustainability agenda, fostering the conditions for environmental gentrification.

Others have observed this paradox at work in diverse contexts (Montgomery 2015; Mössner 2015). These forms of ecological or environmental gentrification present new challenges and may dismantle hard-fought achievements, creating a “regressive environmental justice” (Anguelovski 2016:1221). Anguelovski (2016) provides a concise description of the crossroads of environmental justice activism: “as neighborhoods become revitalized, private investors start to value them again...Neighborhood environmental transformation is slowly triggering the displacement of low-income residents and people of color” (1210). In the next section, I briefly summarize existing theoretical insights that aid in understanding urban sustainability in Kalamazoo.

### *Theoretical Insights*

There are several theoretical perspectives lodged in the urban sustainability literature, including insights drawn from: (1) environmental sociology and sustainable development, (2) urban sociology and urban political ecology, (3) social movements, (4) environmental justice and just sustainabilities, and (5) alternatives in practice. My preferred approach is *theory triangulation*, whereby

different perspectives are complementary to each other and provide insight for similar and different aspects of the case. I discuss these perspectives in terms of how they build on each other.

Environment and sustainability, after all, appear to be transdisciplinary; the topics of environment and sustainability unite so many diverse natural and social sciences, from sociology, anthropology, criminology, and history to comparative religion, health and medical science, geography, engineering, and geosciences. Any discussion of the bio-physical environment requires a discussion of the social, cultural, historical, biological, and built environment, including the social institutions that interact with each of these features. I also draw on existing alternative practices of sustainability that extend beyond theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and critique. The expanse of perspectives and concepts helpful to understanding urban sustainability cannot be fully reviewed here, so I only briefly discuss some possibilities. Moreover, existing perspectives are to be a diversion point rather than impose restrictions; the greatest insights may be grounded by the inhabitants of Kalamazoo and my primary sources of data.

### *(1) Environmental sociology and sustainable development*

In general terms, sociologists were not quick to incorporate the bio-physical and material environment into their field, in part due to a different understanding of “environment” in sociology than natural sciences (Dunlap and Catton 1979:244). However, since the 1970s environmental sociology has incorporated a wide range of concerns and topics (see Pretty et al. 2007; Hannigan 2006; Bell 2012). Environmental sociology explores the interrelationship between ecosystems and societies, that is, the link between social and natural systems. Hannigan (2006) argues environmental sociology was initially organized around explaining the social bases of environmental degradation and destruction. The city and urban context were initially important in early explanations and studies of human ecology, in terms of the spatial and ecological organization of cities and mastery over nature (Hannigan 2006:17). Although in this sense, “ecological” was more of an analogy rather than

about societal links to natural ecosystems and the bio-physical environment (Hannigan 2006). Others postulated the competing functions of the bio-physical environment (as a supply depot, living space, and waste repository) and the limited capacity of the planet (Catton and Dunlap 1978), whereas political-economic explanations incorporated capitalist economic systems and the state (Hannigan 2006:20).

As one example, the “treadmill of production” perspective places economic change at the center of environmental degradation, which can be linked to the growth of capital available and replacement of production labor with new technologies in the post-World War II era (Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg 2008:7). Accordingly, heightened worker productivity compelled greater natural resource extraction and energy input, accelerating the treadmill of production as surplus profits were reinvested in production technology, further increasing ecological demands (Gould et al. 2008). The source of environmental degradation (and for that matter, environmental inequalities) thus lies with the global capitalist economic system.

Another framework expands on Karl Marx’s concept of the “metabolic rift,” or “the rift in the metabolic exchange between humanity and nature” (Foster, Clark, and York 2010:45). Marx was addressing soil degradation and soil infertility in “core” nations in the 1800s (e.g. Western Europe), which incidentally created an international trade of guano (bird droppings) that was used as fertilizer given its high concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus (Foster et al. 2010:78). Ultimately, natural cycles and processes of soil regeneration are undermined in the long term:

[T]he drive to increase agricultural production, the separation of town and country, and the loss of soil nutrients produce a metabolic rift in the soil nutrient cycle. In an attempt to overcome natural limits, capital engages in a series of shifts to sustain production, importing natural fertilizers and producing artificial fertilizers. As a result, the social metabolism is intensified, and additional ecological problems are created (Foster et al. 2010:82).

Marx’s analysis concerned soil metabolism, yet Foster et al. (2010) argue that this “metabolic

analysis” can be applied to the entire planet and “serves as a means to study these complex relationships of ecological degradation and sustainability” (46). In other words, these metabolic rifts and shifts not only threaten the integrity of entire ecosystems, but the planetary system on the whole.

The analysis of environmental *discourse* is one strand of environmental studies that has relevance for my case study. Various authors have proposed typologies that categorize environmental discourse(s). Hannigan (2006) elucidates discourse as “an interrelated set of ‘story-lines’ which interprets the world around us and which becomes deeply embedded in societal institutions, agendas and knowledge claims” (36). Discourses frame the environment, nature, and social-environmental relations in particular ways, guiding the practices and actions of governments, organizations, and social movements. For example, whether the environment is interpreted as something that needs to be preserved, regulated, studied, admired, or shared. Hannigan (2006) proposes a typology of three key environmental discourses in the twentieth century that have different “rationales in defense of the environment”: Arcadian discourse (“Nature has priceless aesthetic and spiritual value”), Ecosystem discourse (“Human interference in biotic communities upsets the balance of nature”), and Justice discourse (“All citizens have a basic right to live and work in a healthy environment”)(see Table 1, Hannigan 2006:38). Arcadian discourse is linked to preservationist and conservationist movements, whereas Ecosystem discourse is linked to the fusion of ecology and ethics, and Justice discourse is linked to the civil rights movement and grassroots environmentalism. Other authors refer more broadly to *environmental paradigms*, such as the New Environmental or Ecological Paradigm (NEP) circa the 1960s and 1970s (Dunlap and Catton 1979; Taylor 2000; Agyeman 2005b; Hannigan 2006). The NEP fits with the ecosystem discourse described by Hannigan (2006), recognizing the finite resources and limits to growth. The NEP therefore promotes a worldview of the environment that is more eco-centric rather than

anthropocentric, underscored by the ecosystem dependence of humans and their capacity to overexploit their own basis for survival (Dunlap and Catton 1979:250).

Environmental sociology and the NEP have integrated efforts to identify the mechanisms of environmental improvement, whether through civil society movements, the state, or technological changes (Hannigan 2006). Two divergent paths that grew out of environmental sociology are sustainable development and environmental justice (Sze and London 2008). Sustainability and sustainable development are essentially the derivatives of the NEP and the environmentalism espoused by policymakers, activists, and social scientists. Yet the notion of sustainability is not necessarily a historically new or unique configuration, given that basic concerns about development and resource scarcity have long existed as topics of inquiry, such as those linked to population growth and energy shortages (Vojnovic 2013; Burns 2016:18). Several approaches historically concerned with development have intertwined development, environment, and sustainability, including ecological modernization, world-systems, unequal exchange, and the treadmill of production among others (Burns 2016:886). Overall, environmental sociology and sustainable development perspectives acknowledge the bio-physical limits to economic growth, the social-ecological link, and the local-global interconnection. Environmental sociologists and sustainable development perspectives have more recently integrated equity into their analyses, converging with environmental justice perspectives.

## *(2) Urban sociology and urban political ecology*

With initial insights by Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, and the Chicago School among others, analyses of “city life” and urban contexts have long captured sociological interest. A wide range of perspectives characterize urban sociology, from the “city way of life” to the political-economy of cities and the more limited studies of human ecology (see Gottdiener, Hutchinson, and Ryan 2015). Although the city may be viewed as an entity with a built environment, it is perhaps best

analyzed as a social process (Marcotullio and Solecki 2013). One attempt to understand urban political-economy is the “growth machine” approach, which essentially suggests that a conglomerate of actors coalesce around a “pro-growth” agenda that advances real estate interests, such as private investors, real estate and property developers, public officials, and media (Logan and Molotch 1987). Growth machine approaches have been integrated with studies of urban sustainability (e.g. Tretter 2013; Lang and Rothenberg 2017; Gould and Lewis 2018).

Hackworth (2007) argues that many of the changes in American cities in the last thirty years are linked to “the utterly astonishing rise and reproduction of ‘neoliberalism’ as an ideology, mode of city governance, and driver of urban change” (2). As an ideology that espouses an economic system “liberated from the state,” it has shaped local, national, and international policy approaches for several decades. “Neoliberal ideology” is characterized by beliefs in open, unregulated markets that allow for mobile capital and privatization of public assets and infrastructure (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Hackworth 2007; Davidson and Gleeson 2013). Accordingly:

Competitiveness, individualism and self-sufficiency are promoted as incontestable virtues, which means that all forms of social protection are anathema, as are taxes to pay for welfare programs. Business regulation is regarded as an unnecessary imposition; unions and collective bargaining are despised as damaging to a ‘flexible’ labour market (Davidson and Gleeson 2013:53-54).

Various authors have explored “the neoliberal city” and the spread of urban neoliberalism, which Hackworth (2007) describes as “a highly contingent process that manifests itself, and is experienced differently, across space” (11). Rather than an end-state, urban neoliberalism is perhaps best understood as a process of *neoliberalization* of urban governance (Peck and Tickell 2002:383). Since the 1970s, cities have served as “strategically crucial arenas in which neoliberal forms of creative destruction have been unfolding” (Brenner and Theodore 2002:367). In cities, “actually existing neoliberalism” and ongoing neoliberalization processes are “destructive” of institutional arrangements and policies, while at the same time “creative” by forming new infrastructure for

market-oriented economic growth (Brenner and Theodore 2002:362). The destructive and creative elements of neoliberalism are also described, respectively, as roll-back neoliberalism and roll-out neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002).

Despite the economic and financial challenges of the “Great Recession” of 2008, these processes have not faltered (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2013). Such processes continue to flood urban sustainability discourses and practices in what might be characterized as “green neoliberalism” (Gilbert 2014). Market forces and environmentally friendly logic converge as “the ecological is easily recuperated for neoliberal ends” (Gilbert 2014:160). The costs linked to environmental and human welfare are externalized to the public, sustaining private profit and competitive advantage in the global world economy. There is a solid theoretical and empirical literature on neoliberal urbanism, ongoing neoliberalization processes, and the economic and racialized consequences that plague cities (for example, Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002; Harvey 2007; Hackworth 2007; Mele 2013; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2013; Wacquant 2014).

Drawing on analyses of neoliberal urbanism, another perspective that integrates environment and urban sustainability is Urban Political Ecology (UPE). Some contemporary political ecology approaches have explored the global scale, such as the role of international organizations or the political economy of North-South environmental relations (Hannigan 2006:55; Roberts and Parks 2006). UPE, on the other hand, rescales to the level of cities. Cook and Swyngedouw (2012) describe the UPE literature as “primarily concerned with the political-economic processes involved in the reworking of human-no-human assemblages and the *production* of socio-environmental inequalities” (emphasis in original, 1965). Accordingly, UPE challenges understanding about the relationship between society and nature, whereby nature and society are “intricately entangled in mutually constituted socio-natural assemblages” and, secondly, that capitalist market societies are responsible

for the current environmental conditions and socio-ecological relations (1965).

Several key contributions of UPE are reviewed by Heynen (2014), such as the notion of urban metabolism. Drawing on Marx, urban metabolism refers to “a dynamic process by which new sociospatial formations, intertwinings of materials, and collaborative enmeshing of social nature emerge and present themselves and are explicitly created through human labor and non-human processes simultaneously” (Heynen 2014:599). In other words, the ways that urban environments and spaces are produced by social and political processes of urbanization, such as various infrastructures that transform nature. Importantly, UPE also recognizes the “egalitarian potential” of “urban metabolic processes [that] unfold historically to produce both empowering and incapacitating socationatural conditions” given the unequal power relations in the urbanization of nature (Heynen 2014:600). Davidson and Gleeson (2013) advocate for a political economy of urban sustainability that counters “technocratic-entrepreneurial visions of the sustainable city” (63). Such visions are outlined and packaged for city governments by best-selling authors and popular journalists, consultants, and academics in business, management, and economics schools (Davidson and Gleeson 2013:201).

Richard Florida’s (2003) “creative class” model of urban development is one example, whereby the creative class includes the “super creative core” and “thought leadership” (e.g. scientists, engineers, professors, poets and novelists, actors, designers, architects, nonfiction writers, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts, opinion-makers) as well as “creative professionals” who work in knowledge based and high-tech sectors (Florida 2003:8). To boost economic growth and urban development, city governments are encouraged to attract “creative people” who seek out “abundant high-quality experiences, an openness to diversity of all kinds, and, above all else, the opportunity to validate their identities as creative people” (Florida 2003:9). In a later book, Florida (2017) acknowledges the limitations of the creative class model and recognizes the economic

inequalities within and between cities. The UPE literature, on the other hand, rejects these “new urbanologists” and rather promotes a political economy of urban sustainability that “argue[s] strongly for the development of a new space from which socio-environmental visions can be conceptualised, debated and constructed” (Davidson and Gleeson 2013:63). Overall, theorists of urban neoliberalism and UPE similarly emphasize the ecological limits of urbanization and existing models of urban development. The reign of entrepreneurial market-oriented models of development are viewed as pivotal to urban governance processes and urban socio-natural conditions.

### *(3) Social movements*

Drawing on theoretical insights from social movement theories may contribute to understanding urban sustainability in Kalamazoo. I have already alluded to the framing perspective, however there are numerous theories of collective behavior and social movements relevant to urban sustainability. While “classical” models of breakdown, social strain, mass society, or relative deprivation are important precursors to contemporary social movement theories, I will limit the discussion to more recent approaches. Two related perspectives are resource mobilization and political process.

In the post-world war era of civil rights and other social movements in the 1960s, various “resource mobilization” perspectives were advanced in the 1970s (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983:528; Buechler 2011:109). With influences from economics, rational-choice theories, conflict theories, and theories of organizations, resource mobilization theories direct attention to the necessity, availability, and means of securing “resources” that stimulate collective action. Although the concept of “resources” may be nonspecific, it potentially includes money, facilities, elite sponsorship, human labor, expertise, or skills (Jenkins 1983:533; McAdam 1999). A key contribution is the focus on the strategic role of social movement organizations (SMOs) as “complex, formal organizations that seek to implement movement goals” (Buechler 2011:117).

The broader political environment and other extra-organizational factors are further developed with political process models. Doug McAdam (1999), for instance, proposes a political process model to explain both the rise and decline of Black insurgency in the civil rights era. The main factors of McAdam's (1999) political process model are political opportunity, indigenous organizational strength, and "cognitive liberation." With the Black insurgency movement circa 1948 to 1970 as an analytical exemplar, McAdam (1999) illustrates each of these three main factors. Broad social processes and events, such as wars, industrialization, or demographic changes, may expand political opportunity and indirectly "facilitate increased political activism on the part of excluded groups either by seriously undermining the stability of the entire political system or by increasing the political leverage of a single insurgent group" (McAdam 1999:42). Indigenous organizational strength ranges from the members involved and their motivations to the presence of a communication network and movement leaders (McAdam 1999:43-48). In the Black insurgency movement, this directly refers to the "disproportionate role" of various formal organizations comprised of religious adherents, students, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which together "possessed the resources needed to generate and sustain an organized campaign of social insurgency" (McAdam 1999:128). Cognitive liberation is McAdam's (1999) third factor in the rise of social movements, which involves a "transformation of consciousness" and is represented by the high levels of Black optimism during the peak of the Black insurgency movement (161). For McAdam (1999), the breakdown in these same three factors helps explain the decline of Black insurgency. Importantly, the political process model focuses on social movements as a process, rather than a series of stages, while accounting for the historical context and the *response* to the movement, such as the federal government's initial "neutral role" to Black insurgency (McAdam 1999:59).

The cognitive liberation element is a step toward “bringing back culture” in social movement theories, redirecting attention to the subjective meanings attached to behavior (Buechler 2011). Framing perspectives emphasize the formation of collective action frames and framing processes, in terms of “defining what is going on in a situation in order to encourage protest” (Noakes and Johnston 2005:2). Framing processes are therefore about “meaning work” or “the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings” (Benford and Snow 2000:613). While framing processes are integrated into political process models, some authors have placed framing and social construction at the center of social movements analyses. Different “framing tasks” involved in the construction of collective frames, for instance, include diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing (Benford and Snow 2000). Diagnostic framing entails identifying problems and locating the sources, whereas prognostic framing involves imparting solutions and strategies to address the problem. Motivational framing, in contrast, is about supplying a “rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action” (Benford and Snow 2000:617).

Social movement theories have been applied to issues of sustainability and the environment. The aforementioned environmental discourses, for instance, are connected to the concept of framing in the social movement literature. With regards to climate change, McAdam (2017) contends that sparse grassroots activism in the last few decades can be explained by applying the political process model. Despite heightened awareness of such issues as climate change and global warming, there are insufficient political opportunities in the United States, reflected by an increasingly dominant and conservative Republican party, partisan polarization and gridlock, and the growing influence of the fossil fuel industry and fund-raising imperative for members of congress (McAdam 2017:198). With regard to mobilization structures, top-down institutionalized climate change networks have developed, but “depend for their legitimacy and financial survival on their embeddedness in the established organizational structure of society” (McAdam 2017:199). Although

there may in fact be “sustained organization” in the manner of social movement organizations and non-government organizations, these have yet to “achieve any significant legislative or policy breakthroughs on the issue at the federal level” (McAdam 2017:199). McAdam (2017) lastly points out that, in terms of framing processes, there lacks a collective identity and “strong emotion” around the issue of climate change, which is perceived “as less immediately salient than other issues” (201). Overall, climate change action is inhibited by these conditions and lack of political opportunities in the United States, which contrasts with other instances of insurgency such as environmental justice movements or civil rights movements.

#### *(4) Environmental justice and just sustainabilities*

Environmental justice refers to a plethora of social movements as much as a theoretical and empirical topic of inquiry. Whereas sustainable development manifested primarily as a “top-down” *prescription* from international institutions and policymakers, environmental justice emerged as a “bottom-up” *movement*. The Environmental Justice Paradigm (EJP) essentially draws on the New Environmental or Ecological Paradigm (NEP), but operates through “a framework for integrating class, race, gender, environment, and social justice concerns” (Agyeman 2005b:3). In many ways, the EJP and the environmental justice movement are in response to the NEP and environmental movement, which failed to adequately consider environmental inequalities across social class and race in particular. Environmentalist organizations and the NEP, after all, were primarily products of middle and working class whites, who historically experienced the environment very differently than people of color (Hannigan 2006:532).

The environmental justice movement stems from the convergence of a number of movements, including the environmental movement and civil rights movement (Bullard 2000; Benford 2005; Bryant and Hockman 2005). Although people and communities of color have fought for environmental rights for centuries, the contemporary environmental justice movement was

sparked by a number of key moments and claims of environmental racism (Benford 2005; Hannigan 2006:534). The 1982 waste siting struggle in Warren County, North Carolina, represents a pivotal moment in environmental justice activism (Bullard 2000; Bryan and Hockman 2005; Walker 2012). In a predominantly Black community, hundreds of protesters organized to prevent the disposal of soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), which had previously been illegally disposed of along roadways (Walker 2012:79). Although unsuccessful at diverting the toxic waste, the protest represented “a milestone for consciousness raising” and building of the environmental justice *frame* (Bryant and Hockman 2005:25). Another important moment is the 1987 report published by United Church of Christ, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*, which documented the disproportionate siting of toxic wastes and noxious facilities in minority communities (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 2002:4). The initial focus on waste and pollution in poor, predominantly Black communities soon expanded in scope; environmental justice came to signify a wide range of issues, affected populations, and scales. Such issues consist of environmental “bads” such as air or water pollution, toxic waste siting, or flood vulnerability, but also environmental “goods” such as healthy food, parks and greenspace, or other environmental amenities.

The notion of environmental racism is often cited in analyses of environmental inequalities. Robert Bullard (2000) alludes to environmental racism in his formative exploration of the siting of noxious facilities (e.g. landfills, hazardous waste facilities, lead smelters, chemical plants) in poorer, African American communities in the South. Bullard (2000) refers to environmental racism as “any policy, practice, or directive that differently affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color” (98). Providing benefits to whites and shifting industry costs to people of color, such occurrences are “reinforced by governmental, legal, economic, political, and military institutions” (Bullard 2000:98).

Other perspectives may correspond with neo-Marxist perspectives. Explanations of *why* environmental inequalities exist are usually tied up with capitalism as the prevailing economic system, such as the “polluter-industrial complex,” which “selectively victimizes” the poor and racial and ethnic minorities (Faber 2008:7). The polluter-industrial complex refers to “those sectors of business that would stand to profit the most from a weakening of the liberal regime of environmental regulation” in terms of how the “corporate power elite” and polluter-industrial complex are “wielding power over the state apparatus” (Faber 2008:69). Environmental inequalities may therefore be traced to political and economic systems, including the institutional practices and ideologies that have historically reinforced racial and economic hierarchies as well as urban spatial segregation.

Given that environmental justice is also a *movement* (or more accurately, a set of movements), environmental justice perspectives are largely focused on how specific groups protest, strategize, and mobilize around disparate environmental inequalities, such as the placement of hazardous waste facilities and landfills in poor and minority communities. Based on research conducted in 1987 and 1988, Bullard (2000) specifically investigated the mobilization of Blacks in five communities throughout Texas, West Virginia, Louisiana, and Alabama. The cases represent a mix of urban and rural areas, low and middle incomes, and the types of environmental threat related to hazardous waste siting and noxious facilities. Comparing issue crystallization and focus (e.g. as an environmental, health, or economic issue), leadership types, opposition tactics, resolution mechanisms, and outcomes, Bullard’s (2000) case studies and household surveys focused “on how black community residents defined the local disputes and the actions they used to eliminate the threat” (38). Environmental threats tended to be defined as a public health issue, with local community organizations leading the opposition and partaking in direct action. Residents in these communities also understood the placement of these facilities as a question of equity and attributed

race as the major contributing factor (Bullard 2000:81-84). Working through government administrative processes was typical across the communities, along with direct action, protests, petitions, and lobbying to the media. Although not always successful in mobilizing against environmental threats, Bullard (2000) highlights the importance of grassroots community groups and existing entities such as churches, neighborhood associations, and civil rights organizations.

Similar to the analysis of environmental discourses, scholars have also explored the environmental justice *frames* used by actors and activists (Taylor 2000; Hannigan 2006; Walker 2012). Framing, and the factors that contribute to successful environmental justice activism, are connected to the wider social movements literature expanded on previously. In the context of environmental justice, however, framing may be described as “a particular way of making sense of the world, specifically of interpreting and evaluating the intertwining of environment and social difference” (Walker 2012:16). Taylor (2000) contends that the EJP and environmental justice movement altered the environmental discourses of the NEP by using injustice as a “master frame” (514).

Environmental justice frames may shape the actions and outcomes for any given stakeholder group. One interest is how different individuals, groups, and organizations use different notions of justice to frame environmental inequalities. Sze and London (2008) note that government agencies tend to invoke a “distributive notion of justice” such as the unequal distribution of environmental harms, benefits, and resources across populations and sites (1335). Distributive justice is a regular focus of the environmental justice movement, centered on outcomes across social categories and spaces. This pertains to the recipients of environmental justice, what is to be distributed, and on what principles or basis is the distribution (e.g. “equality” or “fairness” and the meanings attached to those terms)(Walker 2012:45). However, additional notions of justice are evident in the environmental justice literature. Procedural justice, for instance, extends to unequal decision-making and participation. Environmental justice movement organizations may invoke a “procedural sense of

justice” in addition to distributive justice (Sze and London 2008). “Justice as recognition,” on the other hand, is about recognizing the rights and well-being of particular groups. This pertains to cultural and community respect and the (mis)recognition of diverse social identities and experiences (Sze and London 2008:1335; Walker 2012:10). Environmental justice movement organizations, for example, may question whether parks or greenspaces are socially or culturally inclusive spaces, or whether particular groups are even considered as stakeholders in the first place. Schlosberg (2013) advocates for a “capabilities” approach, in terms of the basic needs and functioning of human and non-human systems. Environmental justice frames may extend or transfer “horizontally” across geographicalities and places, or vertically in scale (“scaling up” and linking the local and global)(Pellow 2007; Walker 2012; Schlosberg 2013). Transnational organizations, for example, attempt to frame environmental justice as a global issue rooted in global economic and political systems (Pellow 2007).

Although diverse and complex, the environmental justice movement has been criticized as reactive rather than proactive; nonetheless, there is a clear effort toward linking environmental justice and sustainability (Taylor 2000; Agyeman et al. 2003; Agyeman et al. 2016). Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans (2003) argue that sustainability is not simply an environmental concern, rather, “[a] truly sustainable society is one where wider questions of social need and welfare, and economic opportunity, are integrally connected to environmental concerns” (Agyeman et al. 2003:2). The notion of “just sustainability” has implications from the global level to the local level, though it holds particular salience at the local level, where cities and communities struggle to cope with global challenges. An amalgamation of two distinct, yet related perspectives (environmental justice and sustainable development), the authors define “just sustainability” as “the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, while living within the limits of supporting ecosystems” (Agyeman et al. 2003:2). The notion of “just sustainability”

highlights the effort to combine sustainable development and environmental justice perspectives. It is a remedy to the limitations of each while retaining the strengths and core elements. It not only encompasses issues of distributive justice, such as fair access to parks and “sustainable” urban spaces, but also procedural justice concerns (e.g. the process of creating and improving urban parks and greenspace) and relatedly the recognition of social and cultural differences (e.g. culturally inclusive greenspaces)(Agyeman 2013:163). A convergence of perspectives is evident in the literature, with many authors merging diverse theoretical insights to better understand issues of sustainability, the environment, and the city (for example, Cook and Swyngedouw 2012; McAdam 2017; Sicotte and Brulle 2017).

#### *(5) Alternatives in practice*

While the theoretical insights reviewed thus far provide a comprehensive framework for examining urban sustainability, I believe insights drawn from “actually-existing efforts” and “alternatives in practice” are especially worthwhile. Swyngedouw and Kaika (2014) note that “although we may now be able to trace, chart, follow, and narrate the multiple socio-ecological lines that shape the urban process both locally and globally, precious little has been said about how to produce alternative, more equitable and enabling, urban socio-ecological assemblages” (466). Thus, it is essential to consider the activities of groups, organizations, and communities who advance their own pro-active urban sustainability agendas and counter-agendas, which I refer to as “alternatives in practice.” Julian Agyeman’s (2005a, 2005b) case study of Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE) in the Roxbury district of Boston, Massachusetts is one example. Through a mixture of discourse, content, and interpretive analysis, Agyeman (2005b) reviewed documents and other organization materials, including contemporary and historical documents produced by the organization. Agyeman (2005b:134) also undertook participant-observation of staff meetings and conducted interviews with organization members. As an organization with an agenda that merges

justice and sustainability, “ACE employs the discourse of ‘just sustainability’ - with its overlapping threads of environmental justice and environmental sustainability - to leverage influence and thereby bring positive, demonstrable benefits to this low-income and minority community” (Agyeman 2005a:12). Beginning in 1994 as an environmental justice organization, the programs and practices of ACE came to resemble the “just sustainability paradigm.” Although it mainly works with the low-income and predominantly African American, Hispanic, non-white Roxbury community “to promote local empowerment in decision making for environmental, social, and economic issues,” it has expanded its reach throughout the entire New England region (138).

The mission of ACE is about building power of communities of color and low income, with a focus on eradicating environmental racism, classism, and environmental injustices (Agyeman 2005b:138). With a staff representative of the demographics of the Roxbury community, the programs run by ACE cover education, youth leadership, housing, transportation, legal assistance, and coordination with local and regional environmental justice networks. The organization has led several successful transport justice campaigns, including convincing the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority to purchase compressed natural gas buses, pressuring policy changes to limit the time buses spent idling, and for implementing free transfers (Agyeman 2005b:16). Agyeman (2005b) found that ACE was becoming more proactive in its programs and practices along with concerns about “what happens next” (160). As ACE moves toward more deliberative community involvement and expands its scope to regional and systemic concerns, it builds coalitions with other organizations that embrace a just sustainability framework. Given the ongoing changes, Agyeman (2005b) considers ACE an organization that operates within the just sustainability paradigm, “in the vanguard of a movement for just sustainability that is looking to integrate justice and sustainability in a practical, grassroots way by building power in Roxbury, metro Boston, and the wider New England region” (175).

In the struggle for just and sustainable cities, the difficulties of contesting selective urban sustainability agendas also give credence to *systemically different* types of social and economic organization. The discursive and practical challenges to sustainable cities, after all, exist alongside capitalist activities that constitute a “capitalist economic system.” Gibson-Graham ([1996] 2006) characterizes capitalism as partial, nonsingular, fragmented economic practices, yet such practices are enveloped by prevailing discourses that predominantly imagine otherwise. Across a spectrum of social and economic theory, a discursive “capitalist hegemony” naturalizes capitalist economic activities while also concealing diverse “noncapitalist” and “alternative” economic practices (Gibson-Graham [1996] 2006). The characterization of capitalism as a monolithic totality to which all economic activity is subjugated overshadows diverse economic activities, such as unpaid labor, nonmarket transactions, or noncommodity production in the household (Gibson-Graham 2006:60-71). Seeking to reimagine economic relations, Gibson-Graham (2006) prescribes “the community economy” as an alternative discourse (and space) centered around “ethical actions” (81). Accordingly, discursive reframings of diverse economic activities are necessary to the community economy, “a space of decision making where we recognize and negotiate our interdependence with other humans, other species, and our environment” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healey 2013:xix). There are numerous examples of existing noncapitalist (and capitalist) activities and alternative practices that signal transformative *logics* of urban sustainability: the community economy, the solidarity economy, sharing practices and the sharing cities paradigm, community currencies, transition towns and degrowth movements, eco-villages, autonomous communities, and cooperatives (such as worker, agriculture, health care, or housing cooperatives), among many others (see Fotopoulos 2006; Hollinger 2012; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013; McLaren and Agyeman 2015; Longhurst et al. 2016).

Similar to the community economy, another reimagining of social and economic organization is the solidarity economy. The solidarity economy is about applying principles of participatory democracy and deliberation to the economic sphere, which is interpreted along economic, political, and symbolic lines (Dacheux and Goujon 2012; van den Berk-Clark and Pyles 2012; Wallimann 2014). In terms of sustainability, the solidarity economy “enriches the notion of sustainable development by the inclusion of a universal demand for democracy” (Dacheux and Goujon 2012:208). It recasts “development” as the collective development of the “social fabric” and suggests sustainability requires democratization. One definition of the solidarity economy is provided by the US Solidarity Economy Network (USSEN 2021):

An alternative framework for economic development grounded in practice and the following principles: Solidarity and cooperation; Equity in all dimensions (race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.); Social and economic democracy; Sustainability; Pluralism (not a one-size-fits-all approach); Puts people and planet first.

Different terms are used to describe the solidarity economy in its many variations, such as the Social and Solidarity Economy, social economy, alternative economy, new economy, cooperative economy, or economic democracy to name a few.

The solidarity economy is distinct in that it seeks to challenge current economic and social organization of life, aiming specifically to create a new system and alternative, post-capitalist society. At the global scale, Dacheux and Goujon (2012) argue the solidarity economy can be an alternative development model and is “an underestimated international reality” throughout the Global North and South (206). Many localized examples that aim to craft a solidarity economy already exist. In the United States, the active pursuit of the solidarity economy is evident in numerous communities and cities. In the city of Jackson, Mississippi, the organization Cooperation Jackson aims to advance the solidarity economy to overcome “chronic unemployment and impoverishment” and “decades of economic divestment, deindustrialization, and suburban flight fostered by structural racism and

major shifts in United States and global economy following World War II” (Cooperation Jackson 2021a). In the struggle for Black self-determination, the mission of Cooperation Jackson is to develop economic democracy in the city of Jackson “by building a solidarity economy anchored by a network of cooperatives and other types of worker-owned and democratically self-managed enterprises” (Cooperation Jackson 2021c). The organization’s Sustainable Communities Initiative aims to create interconnected cooperatives centered around helping stabilize rents, affordable “green” housing, living wage jobs, and “the sustainable transformation of Jackson’s economy through cooperative enterprise and solidarity economics” (Cooperation Jackson 2021b). Similar efforts are evident in St. Louis, Missouri (Solidarity Economy St. Louis 2021) and New York City (SolidarityNYC 2021).

Cooperatives are one feature of the solidarity economy and represent an alternative practice relevant to urban sustainability. Cooperative enterprises are jointly owned and governed by its members, existing for a specific purpose and serving particular social needs, such as food and agricultural cooperatives, worker cooperatives, producer or consumer cooperatives, housing cooperatives, education cooperatives, or health care cooperatives (Gordon Nembhard 2016; International Cooperative Alliance 2021; USFWC 2021). The International Cooperative Alliance defines cooperatives as “people-centred enterprises owned, controlled and run by and for their members to realise their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations” (International Cooperative Alliance 2021). In terms of worker cooperatives, the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives describes worker cooperatives as “values-driven businesses that put worker and community benefit at the core of their purpose” whereby worker members “participate in the profits, oversight, and often management of the enterprise using democratic practices” (USFWC 2021). Cooperatives also refer to a wide range of other common practices, such as community land trusts, community development corporations, mutual aid funds, and even credit

unions. The Mondragon cooperatives that originate in Spain are an example of a unified network of different types of cooperative enterprises, including manufacturing, retail, education, and finance (Mondragon Corporation 2021).

Since cooperative enterprises and “cooperative economics” can be a central feature of the solidarity economy, Cooperation Jackson envisions a “cooperative network” in areas such as construction, waste management and recycling, urban farming, child care, arts and culture, and several others (Cooperation Jackson 2021c). Yet cooperatives are not historically recent practices. Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2014), for instance, provides a historical account of cooperative thinking as practiced by African Americans over the past few hundred years, detailing the ways that Black Co-ops have greatly contributed to the economic independence, liberation, and well-being of African American communities. There are numerous examples of Black cooperative efforts, such as collective farms, mutual insurance and mutual-benefit associations, credit unions, or collectively owned grocery stores.

On a broader level, many of these systemic alternatives seemingly reflect a “postcapitalist politics” amid efforts to “take back” various spheres of economic and social organization, which include diverse activities and actors related to labor practices, business enterprises, transactions of goods and services, property ownership, and finance (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013:12-13). Worker-owned cooperatives, for example, may “take back” business enterprise whereas community gardens and community-owned spaces may reflect a reclamation of “the commons.” Like the “sustainability experiments” of selective urban agendas, these systemic alternatives are too experimental. Exploring any manifestations of these “experiments” in Kalamazoo may help reveal the broader struggles and strategies of alternative forms of economic and social organization.

Whether any of these “alternatives in practice” could work in cities on a global scale is an important question to ask. Dacheux and Goujon (2012) suggest that the solidarity economy can be

realized at the international scale, although there will be territorial variations given the underlying principles of participatory democracy and collective decision-making, which inevitably leads to community-specific initiatives (208). In a world with rapid global diffusion of information and communication, Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) similarly emphasize how “a local project can be replicated on a global scale,” whereby “small actions can initiate major changes...reframing our sense of possibility and unleashing new capacities” (xxiii). Ultimately, the question of urban sustainability is about what sort of futures are possible, about whether “sustainable cities” will be a fundamental transformation or relentless continuity of existing social and economic organization. The future of sustainable cities may depend on how the *politics* of urban sustainability play out among the innumerable stakeholders of the sustainable city. Alongside the imaginaries and logics of the sustainable city, this study attempts to illuminate the politics of urban sustainability as it exists in the Kalamazoo context.

### *Overview*

I began this chapter by breaking down the multidimensional concept of sustainability and the different perspectives of urban sustainability, which originated with international organizations and then were rescaled to the localized urban context. Different perspectives on what a “sustainable city” is and how it can be realized were described, including the shifting discourses of urban sustainability and new logics that have developed. Multiple contemporary examples of sustainability agendas were provided to illustrate the ways that sustainability discourses are utilized by municipal governments. Throughout the chapter, I also highlighted the numerous non-governmental actors involved in shaping urban sustainability discourses and agendas, including the responses to official government-led agendas and the disparate outcomes for inhabitants.

Based on my review of the body of work on urban sustainability, I identified several themes and key areas of interest: (1) the meanings and discourses of urban sustainability, the environment,

and the city, (2) multi-scalar and spatial politics of urban sustainability, (3) post-political sustainability, knowledge, and expertise (4) the role of equity and justice in urban sustainability, including the ramifications of weakened equity and justice concerns, policy consequences, and processes of “environmental gentrification,” and lastly (5) contested urban sustainability agendas and alternative responses. Intimately linked to my research objectives and questions, I account for these overlapping themes in Kalamazoo. To explore how Kalamazoo is imagining, planning, and implementing urban sustainability is to grapple with discourses, spatiality, post-politics, and matters of equity and justice. In this study, I attempt to build on and make connections between the identified themes. Swyngedouw and Kaika (2014), for instance, express the urgency to explore the “complex links between discourse, post-political management, and environment socio-ecological inequalities” (477).

The theoretical insights reviewed in this chapter are likewise compatible with the questions I pose for Kalamazoo. Environmental sociology perspectives contribute to an understanding of the social-environmental interrelationship, including the different discourses of the environment, nature, and social-material environment linkages. Sustainable development perspectives provide an outlook on the broader explanations of environmental degradation and transformation in the global capitalist system. Urban sociology and urban political ecology solidify and make explicit the link between political-economic processes, neoliberalization, environmental inequalities, and the pursuit of urban sustainability. Social movement perspectives capture the framing processes, strategies of protest, organization, political opportunity, and mobilization of groups that strive to bring about changes to the relationship between environment, social difference, and sustainability. Environmental justice perspectives offer insight into how and why environmental inequalities are experienced unequally. The environmental justice literature also documents how specific groups mobilize around environmental inequalities and the strategies employed. Looking to existing “alternatives in practice”

and transformative agendas, especially those with the capacity to realize sustainable and just communities, may also contribute to a better understanding of urban sustainability.

The above literature review offers a rich source of material to understand the sustainability agenda in Kalamazoo. If this chapter offers any lesson, it is that a great divide often exists among stakeholders in terms of the discourses and practices of urban sustainability. In particular, the divide between official government-sanctioned agendas and the perspectives and experiences of inhabitants themselves. Swyngedouw and Kaika (2014) suggest the issues and voices that are silenced in urban sustainability discourses must be explored, but also “how these discourses are competing with, altering, and being altered by other alternative discourses” (477). The above review highlights the need to explore such processes in Kalamazoo and to ask how (and why) certain spaces, issues, and people come to be included in Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability agenda. Attention cannot be given exclusively to city officials, urban planners, or their official agendas and documents - as is sometimes the case in urban sustainability research. Rather, an attempt must be made to seek and compare the knowledges, experiences, and perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders. In this study, I aim to incorporate the whole myriad of perspectives of different stakeholders, especially those voices and perspectives that may not be fully represented by the official government-led agenda. The next chapter details the research methods used in this study. After reiterating my research questions and objectives, I discuss the methodological foundation of my research approach. Key terms are defined and the research setting is briefly introduced, followed by descriptions of the research design, procedures, and participants involved in the study.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### *Research Questions and Intent*

The aim of this study is an inquiry of how urban sustainability is imagined, planned, and implemented in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The intent is to decipher whether there is a new emerging “logic” of urban sustainability and whether this represents an intensification or transformation of conventional sustainable cities’ discourse. The guiding research questions are:

- (1) How is Kalamazoo imagining, planning, and implementing urban sustainability?
- (2) How and why do certain spaces, issues, and people come to be included in Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability agenda?
- (3) What logic(s) of urban sustainability are unfolding in Kalamazoo?

The research questions embody descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, and comparative elements, which are bound to overlap. The objective was a case study of Kalamazoo that chronicles the discourses and practices of urban sustainability, including the present and historical development of locally constructed narratives and ideologies, the ways that these are acted upon, and the implications. I focused specifically on the viewpoints of city officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and residents themselves. I explored the perspectives of city officials and staff who are influential in shaping the sustainability agenda in Kalamazoo, nonprofit and community leaders, neighborhood associations and community groups, concerned citizens, activists, and inhabitants in general - in short, the stakeholders of the sustainable city.

First, I am interested in the ways that urban sustainability is *imagined*, as the city’s planning initiative, Imagine Kalamazoo 2025, attempts to concretize. What is Kalamazoo *imagining*? What and whose visions of urban sustainability are imagined? What does sustainability mean to public officials, neighborhood and community leaders, activists and inhabitants? In other words, their definitions,

desires, attitudes, and concerns surrounding the topic of sustainability (Rubin and Rubin 2011:9). What are their priorities and concerns regarding sustainability? What sort of things are considered relevant to sustainability? Second, I am interested in how Kalamazoo is *planning* urban sustainability. What sort of planning practices exist and who is involved? How do particular visions and ideas come to be included in the urban sustainability agenda? How are discourses utilized, imported, and refined by sustainability stakeholders? Where do planning and policy ideas come from? Are policies or models “imported?” What learning and knowledge translation is taking place? Is urban sustainability planning in Kalamazoo “post-political?” What conflicts and tensions occur in the planning process? Third, I am interested in the ways that urban sustainability is *implemented*. What policies and initiatives are implemented and what are the ramifications? What are the social, economic, and ecological implications of Kalamazoo’s evolving sustainability agenda? What are the foreseeable outcomes and potential consequences for inhabitants?

In short, I focus on what inhabitants of Kalamazoo are thinking and doing as stakeholders of sustainability. It is possible to discern matters of equity and justice by attending to the ways that Kalamazoo is imagining, planning, and implementing urban sustainability. This is represented by my second question: How and why do certain spaces, issues, and people come to be included in Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability agenda? My emphasis is on consensus and conflict, the possibility of alternative or counter-discourses, and the larger political-economic, cultural, and historical contexts surrounding the urban sustainability agenda in Kalamazoo.

As a whole, my case study proceeds to investigate the overall “logic” or logics of urban sustainability in Kalamazoo and the outcomes for inhabitants. Urban sustainability logics, for instance, might be the smart city logic, the resilience logic, the ecological modernization logic, the comprehensive three pillars logic, the intra-generational and inter-generational equity logic, the environmental justice logic, the just sustainability logic, or the climate-ready city logic. In this way,

this dissertation attempts to identify and compare whether Kalamazoo resembles other “logics” of urban sustainability, whether there are unique features, or whether there is a new emerging logic of urban sustainability in Kalamazoo. Hodson and Marvin (2017) maintain that underneath these shifting urban sustainability logics are struggles between the politics of transformation and the politics of continuity. Does Kalamazoo’s sustainability agenda represent an intensification or transformation of conventional sustainable cities’ discourse? Is Kalamazoo developing its own, original logic of sustainability? Why are certain issues considered to be “sustainability issues” and how does this compare to other urban contexts? What are particular sustainability discourses used for and are there gaps between discourses and practices? Broader implications consist of how relationships between economy, ecology, and society are changing, the scales at which urban sustainability operates (e.g. city, county, or regional scales), the embedded power relations among groups, and the potential for a “just” urban sustainability.

#### *Definitions of key terms*

“Residents” refers to all housed and non-housed persons who currently live within the geographic boundaries of the city of Kalamazoo. “City officials” hereafter refers to all elected, appointed, and hired persons who represent the primary governing, legislative, and administrative bodies for the city of Kalamazoo. This includes the mayor, city planner, city manager, city commission, administrative departments, and their staff. “Neighborhood and community leaders” refers to the directors, owners, boards, management, and employees of community development organizations, neighborhood associations, nonprofit organizations, community groups, small businesses, institutions of higher education, and other local organizations. I frequently refer to all of these individuals and group members as “sustainability stakeholders,” or those individuals and groups in Kalamazoo who have an interest or stake in Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability agenda. Kalamazoo’s “urban sustainability agenda” refers to the whole collection of initiatives, plans, and

activities of governmental and nongovernmental institutions, organizations, groups, and inhabitants who seek urban sustainable transformation.

By “logics,” I mean the overall strategy evidenced by the *discourses* and the associated *practices* or actions that concretize or reify discursive frames. I define “discourse(s)” as *frames* or ways of interpreting the world, recognizing that there are many discourses (plural) or ways of interpreting the world *and* that discourses can be conduits of power/knowledge. My assumption is that there may be *prevailing* discourses that function as conduits of power/knowledge embedded in social practices. Yet while these prevailing discourses potentially shape individuals’ interpretations of the world, my assumption is that this does not preclude the possibility of alternative or counter-discourses. My definition of discourse, and its place in this dissertation, is based on my methodology as established in the next section.

#### *Methodological Foundation*

Although this dissertation is not an intended medium to grapple with the philosophical underpinnings of research, I wish to briefly mention several points regarding my *methodology* and research approach. I believe that the best approach to research starts with methodological awareness, that is, awareness of the link between particular worldviews and the actual tools of research. Furthermore, elaborating on different paradigms underlying my methodology should help clarify what I make of “discourse” and its place in this dissertation.

Importantly, I differentiate *methodology* and *method*. Whereas methods are tools for collecting and analyzing data, methodology is “the theoretical bridge that connects the research problem with the research method” (Hesse-Biber 2010:11). Morgan (2008) describes paradigms as “systems of beliefs and practices that influence how researchers select both the questions they study and methods that they use to study them” (31). Generally, paradigms as *worldviews* entail specific ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies (Morgan 2008). Whereas ontology concerns the

nature of reality (e.g. single, multiple), epistemology is about the nature of knowledge (e.g. objective, subjective), and methodology encompasses the logic of research that connects methods with the aforementioned philosophical assumptions. Comparisons are often made between “positivism” and “constructivism” (with similar notions of “naturalistic inquiry” and “interpretivism”), however these ideas are much more varied and complex than often described (Bergman 2008:17; Morgan 2008:41). For example, Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) compare positivism, postpositivism, constructivism, and various critical theory and participatory paradigms across numerous philosophical and practical issues.

For the intent of this dissertation, it is unnecessary to delve into the historical debates and central tenets among (post-)positivism, constructivism, critical theories, and the like. It is relevant, however, to consider the paradigms that influence my research approach. My approach is to be located within the broader constructivist-interpretivist paradigm of inquiry, but with heavy inspirations from various critical theory and discourse-analysis paradigms of inquiry. Each have particular ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies and tend to be associated with particular tools of research (methods), although do not necessarily determine the methods.

### *Paradigms of inquiry*

Constructivism and similar paradigms of interpretivism and naturalistic inquiry, underlying many qualitative methods, assert that individuals seek understanding of their world and “develop subjective meanings of their experiences - meanings directed toward certain objects or things” (Creswell 2006:20). There are multiple, constructed realities that are historically and socially conditioned. The relationship between the knower and the known is inseparable, as realities and knowledge are co-constructed (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998:10; Sale, Lohfeld, and Brazil 2002:45; Creswell 2006:20; Lincoln et al. 2011). In the research process, researchers construct their social worlds through their interpretations and actions based on those interpretations, attempting to rely

on participants' historically and socially conditioned view of the situation as much as possible (Hammersley 2001:103; Creswell 2006:20-21). Fieldwork requires a "thick description" of groups or settings with regards to members' interpretations and sense-making of their worlds. Importantly, Geertz's (1972) conception of thick description is not simply a description of events, activities, or local meanings, but rather "a complex interpretation of local meanings" by the ethnographer or fieldworker (Emerson 2001b:33). That is, "inscriptions" by which ethnographers or fieldworkers "write into being" social worlds, not straightforward accounts but "partial, selective and purposed re-presentation" (Emerson 2001b:22). In participant observation, for instance, it may be recognized that the observer "outsider" perspective (etic) and the "insider" perspective (emic) cannot be harmonized (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2011:468). The aim of social research is therefore not to reproduce reality, but to represent it, whereby representation is from some point of view and there can be "multiple, non-contradictory and valid descriptions and explanations of the same phenomenon" (Hammersley 2001:108).

Many "critical theories" are as much theoretical frameworks as they are paradigms of inquiry. Whether it be neo-Marxist, feminist, or critical theories of race and ethnicity, this set of approaches views reality as based on struggles of power, which means that interactions are founded in privilege and oppression (Lincoln et al. 2011:102). Through research on social structures and institutions of power and inequality, the production of knowledge is believed to be a means to impel changes and empowerment. Accordingly, the methodological assumptions are a dialectic process of inquiry that aims for participatory and empowering research with regards to the oppressed (Lincoln et al. 2011:105). For instance, critical race theories might place discussions of race, racism, white privilege, or white supremacy at the center of interpretation, but a critical race *methodology* involves "counter-storytelling" and locating knowledge in the perspectives and experiences of people of color (Parker and Lynn 2002; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). The "counter-story" or counter-narrative is "a tool for

exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002:32). This may overlap with advocacy and participatory paradigms of inquiry, whereby research contains an action agenda concerning the issues that face marginalized groups, including power and oppression (Creswell 2006:21). Researchers may collaborate *with* participants as *co-researchers*, whose voices are heard throughout the research process (Creswell 2006:22; Lincoln et al. 2011). Critical theories *as paradigms of inquiry* fit well with my research interests and do not necessarily negate constructivism-interpretivism, but rather direct attention to the experiences and perspectives of socially marginalized groups.

Representing a broad spectrum, discourse analysis is the term for both a methodology and method. Ontological and epistemological assumptions are more difficult to parse out with discourse analysis, especially given the different strands of discourse analysis. A major strand of discourse analysis is critical discourse analysis (CDA), which operates more within (neo)Marxist and critical theory paradigms (Hamill 1991; Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 1995; Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Breeze 2011). Breeze (2011) identifies two central elements of CDA: “A more or less political concern with the workings of ideology and power in society; and a specific interest in the way language contributes to, perpetuates and reveals these workings” (495). For van Dijk (1995), CDA proceeds as “an oppositional study of the structures and strategies of elite discourse and their cognitive and social conditions and consequences, as well as with the discourses of resistance against such domination” (19). In contrast to the linguistic focus of many branches of CDA, a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis may involve a “genealogical” or “archaeological” process of inquiry. Breeze (2011) writes (497):

In Foucault’s view, discourse moves back and forth, both reflecting and constructing the social world of the different agents who use it, or are situated by it. Orders of discourse are the discursive practices of a society or an institution, which are interrelated and interwoven.

Reality is bounded by power and knowledge (which in effect are the same), and discourses of power/knowledge are relative and fluid (Breeze 2011). For Foucault, discourses and meanings cannot be accessed, but rather analysis proceeds to unpack “the conditions of existence for meaning and the principles of producing meaning” (Breeze 2011:497).

*Mixing paradigms, hybridization, and discourse*

In this study, I combine the three aforementioned paradigms in what might be referred to as mixing paradigms, a notion more recently grappled with by mixed methods researchers (Greene 2007). This decision is based on the assumption that mixing paradigms offers complementary strengths. To be clear, paradigms are distinct from the methods that tend to accompany them. Such research paradigms are more likely ideal types than actually-existing, but regardless my approach can be described as a *hybridization* (Flick 2009:459) between constructivist-interpretivist, critical theories, and discourse analysis paradigms. I suspect that many researchers in some way follow hybrid paradigmatic approaches, even if not explicitly acknowledged. One clearly acknowledged hybrid approach is what Holstein and Gubrium (2011) refer to as the “constructionist analytics of interpretive practice.” Their approach is essentially a constructivist-interpretivist approach that integrates Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis and ethnomethodology. They argue their approach retains individual agency and accounts for power relations, which involves “the interplay between structure and process” and avoids “analytic totalization or reduction” (Holstein and Gubrium 2011:348).

The way I approach “discourse” in my case study should help illustrate how I mix paradigms of inquiry. Discourses are only one piece of the research puzzle (Lidskog 2001:124; also cited in Hannigan 2006), an intricate puzzle that cannot be solved with even the most careful delineation of discourse. Yet it is worth relegating the different interpretations of discourse and its place in this dissertation because it influences the very questions I ask, my research design, and ultimately my

interpretations. The urban sustainability literature is overwrought with the term “discourse”; sometimes it is defined, but mostly it is left open for the reader’s interpretation. There are multiple ways to approach “discourse.” Discourse may firstly be understood as a *linguistic category* that refers to language or text (Chalaby 1996; Holstein and Gubrium 2011). Discourse may secondly be understood as a *frame* or way of interpreting the world, not limited to texts or linguistic categories. This version is invoked by environmental sociology, environmental justice, and social movement perspectives fitting with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. For instance, the typology of environmental discourses formulated by Hannigan (2006) or the New Environmental or Ecological Paradigm (NEP) described by Dunlap and Catton (1979). The Environmental Justice Paradigm (EJP) reflects modified environmental discourses and the use of injustice as a master frame (Taylor 2000). The study of collective action frames and social movement “framing processes” represent this understanding of discourse (Benford and Snow 2000). Many urban sustainability scholars, for example, seek to identify the variegated sustainability and sustainable city discourses-as-frames (e.g. Agyeman et al. 2003; Pearsall and Pearce 2010; Vallance et al. 2012; Kambites 2014; Beal 2015; Long 2016; Haarstad 2017; Tozer 2018). From this perspective, discourse is about the constructed meanings, rationalizations, rhetoric, narratives, and storylines surrounding “urban sustainability.” There may be multiple, competing discourses-as-frames invoked across individuals, groups, and organizations.

Thirdly, discourse may be understood *as practice* (Hall 2004; Holstein and Gubrium 2011). This quite different conception of discourse is the version invoked by Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis approaches. From this perspective, discourse is a function of power/knowledge (an inseparable problematic for Foucault) and operates as a way of *constituting* the world. Therefore, ways of interpreting the world (and hence acting on it) are bounded by *prevailing* discourses that organize reality and the realm of possibilities (Flick 2009:64-66). In this

sense, discourses are exercises of power/knowledge that produce social actors and social relations (Holstein and Gubrium 2011). Although not fully subscribing to a perspective grounded in the Foucauldian version of discourse, many urban sustainability scholars are nonetheless attentive to the *prevailing* discourses and their consequences, often acknowledging what and how sustainability discourses “get things done.” The discursive “fixing” of economy and environment in urban agendas, along with the depoliticizing of the environment, reflect this understanding of discourse-as-practice. Tahvilzadeh, Montin, and Cullberg (2017) argue that research should concentrate more on these functions of discourse and what sustainability discourses *do*, for instance, the fixing of environment and economic dilemmas, the calming of tensions between business development and environmentalist coalitions, or the actual material outcomes. A major point of interest in urban sustainability literature is precisely what urban sustainability discourses *do*, whether it is the intensification of the economic valuation of the environment, the displacement of poor and minority populations (ecological gentrification), or the general environment, economic, and social outcomes.

My approach to discourse combines the latter two approaches (discourse-as-frame and discourse-as-practice) because I am interested in what urban sustainability discourses-as-frames exist in Kalamazoo *and* what these discourses-as-practices do and how. This reflects the constructivist-interpretivist and Foucauldian discourse analysis paradigms of inquiry, respectively. Furthermore, as discussed at the close of chapter two, the perspectives of everyday residents and silenced voices are understudied. For instance, the *responses* to “official” urban sustainability agendas and prevailing discourses. To investigate this side of the matter fits with the critical paradigm, especially when considering the perspectives of the most vulnerable and marginalized sustainability stakeholders. My analysis is not limited to dominant discourses-as-frames and discourses-as-practices of the environment and sustainability, but rather attempts to account for the *non-prevailing alternative* or

*counter* sustainability discourses of sustainability stakeholders, and what these discourses do. Given my hybrid methodology, a multifaceted concept of discourse is necessary - one that allows for the study of discourses-as-*frames*, discourses-as-*practices*, and *non-prevailing alternative* or *counter*-discourses.

Although methodologies are not commonly acknowledged in studies of urban sustainability, I believe many authors who focus generally on urban sustainability *discourses* employ a hybrid approach. A few studies resemble my hybrid approach, for example, even if not explicitly delineated in the way that I have. Long's (2016) study of Austin resembles my hybrid methodology, which the author refers to as a "critical-historical approach" (167). Long (2016) explores the historical development of discursive frames of urban sustainability and what those discourses do politically and with regards to the outcomes for inhabitants. Long (2016) attends to competing discourses of environmentalist and business-oriented interests. Likewise, Checker's (2011) study of Harlem mirrors my hybrid methodology. The author considers the discursive frames of PlaNYC, including the "official" discourses as well as the non-prevailing and counter-discourses of the West Harlem Environmental Action Coalition (WE ACT). Yet Checker (2011) addresses the practices linked to these discourses, including the "post-politics" of PlaNYC and the outcomes for the most vulnerable residents such as environmental gentrification. In both cases, the authors proceed to study discursive frames, discursive practices, and non-prevailing alternative or counter-discourses. Each approach to urban sustainability, in terms of methodology, reflects the overlapping constructivist-interpretivist, critical theories, and discourse analysis paradigms.

I have only included this methodological preamble so that my research design is placed in an appropriate methodological context. Rather than be methodologically lost in endless paradigmatic afflictions, my research objectives should simply be read in light of the foregoing discussion. With my hybrid methodology, I believe that in-depth interviews, observations, and use of archival records and documents are well-suited to the research setting of Kalamazoo. My chosen methods reflect

those typically associated with the research paradigms and body of work on urban sustainability.

### *Research Setting*

Located in Southwest Michigan and situated at the mid-point between Detroit and Chicago, the mid-sized city of Kalamazoo is a fitting case for the study of urban sustainability. The city has a diverse industrial and manufacturing history, ranging from celery growers, paper mills, and pharmaceuticals. In addition to multiple institutions of higher learning, the city is home to the Kalamazoo Promise, a regional-based college scholarship program funded by anonymous donors. First implemented in 2006, the Kalamazoo Promise provides students in the local school district with a tuition scholarship for public universities and colleges in Michigan. Like other U.S. cities that experienced waves of de-industrialization over the course of several decades, Kalamazoo has struggled to cope with persistent inequalities. In a city with a population of approximately 75,000, about 28.4% of Kalamazoo residents live below the poverty line, a rate much higher for single-mother homes, families with children, and socially marginalized racial and ethnic groups (American Community Survey 2019, 5-year estimate). A racial gap has persisted over time, with a disproportionate number of Black or African Americans who live below the poverty line (34.9%) and who constitute about 22% of the population (American Community Survey 2019, 5-year estimate). One revealing measure is United Way's measurement of Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) households, which include households above the federal poverty line, but below the basic cost of living (United Way of Michigan 2017:5). In the city of Kalamazoo, 29% of households are ALICE households, while combined poverty and ALICE households are approximately 59% (United Way of Michigan 2017:116, 182).

The city encompasses about 25 square miles with multiple nature preserves and the Kalamazoo River, which meanders along the eastern edge of the downtown. Surrounding the Central Business District in downtown Kalamazoo, the core neighborhoods are the Northside,

Eastside, Edison, Vine, and Douglas neighborhoods. A few other smaller neighborhoods and historic districts border the downtown, along with the city's major hospitals and academic institutions such as Borgess Medical Center, Bronson Methodist Hospital, Kalamazoo College, and Western Michigan University. Located near the southwestern limits of the city is Asylum Lake Preserve, a nature preserve on the edge of the Oakland Drive-Winchell neighborhood and nearby the Oakwood and Parkview Hills neighborhoods.

An urban sustainability agenda is beginning to unfold in Kalamazoo. Through an ongoing planning initiative referred to as "Imagine Kalamazoo 2025," the city of Kalamazoo revised its Master Plan and crafted a "Strategic Vision" planning document. As a "guide to shape all plans being created in the future," the Strategic Vision serves as a framework for developing plans, projects, and policies (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021a). A citywide "Natural Features Protection" ordinance was adopted in 2019, followed by an ongoing development of a citywide sustainability plan referred to as the "Sustainability Strategy" (see Appendix B for a glossary of city plans and initiatives that are central to this study). The issues, keywords, and goals aligned with these government-led initiatives signal different dimensions of urban sustainability, including issues of income inequality, poverty, homelessness, transportation and mobility, greenspace, food, waste, greenhouse gas emissions, crime and safety, youth development, housing affordability, complete streets, business development, and community investment. Among the aforementioned government-led initiatives, there have been renewed public participation efforts and a persistent emphasis on inclusiveness, open dialogue, and community engagement. Beyond city government, Kalamazoo's plethora of institutional players, nonprofit and community organizations, and mobilizing coalitions have devised their own approaches to urban sustainable transformation. With a historical presence of philanthropy in the community, Kalamazoo's donor families have also played an influential role in recent years - most notably with the newly incorporated "Foundation for

Excellence,” a unique public-private partnership and donor-funded municipal finance model.

The city of Kalamazoo is an atypical case in the urban sustainability literature given its relatively smaller population size (less than 100,000), above average poverty and child poverty rate, and racial and ethnic disparities. Racial and ethnic representation have been shown to be a decisive factor in shaping urban sustainability agendas, not to mention minority groups bearing the burden of equity-deficient agendas (e.g. Long 2016). Several other aspects make Kalamazoo an exceptional case, such as the Kalamazoo Promise, band of anonymous donors, and the industrial legacies and economic shifts in the community. While each manifestation of urban sustainability is peculiar in itself, commonalities may be identified across cities and urban contexts. It is worth noting that the majority of cities nationwide have population sizes of less than 100,000, which means that Kalamazoo represents a typical city in the U.S. in terms of population size. The dialogue, resources, and circumstances that shape urban sustainability are likely very different compared to larger, denser urban areas with hundreds of thousands or millions of people (e.g. Austin, Seattle, Harlem, or New York). Intrinsically, this study contributes to a better understanding of urban sustainability planning in the city of Kalamazoo, the conflictual and consensual relationships in the community, and Kalamazoo’s potential for a socially and ecologically “just sustainability.” Instrumentally, this study provides insight to the workings of urban sustainability agendas and the relationships between urban sustainability discourses, practices, scale, post-political conditions, equity and justice, and social change. As a mid-sized city that is more representative of the American urban context, the case of Kalamazoo has the potential to expand our understanding of the factors that affect urban sustainability agendas in communities throughout the United States.

### *Research Design*

There is a robust empirical literature on the extent of sustainability efforts in cities. Employing methods that draw on quantitative data, the “degree” of sustainability has been

documented across cities using survey and quantitative content analysis techniques. In the United States, dozens of cities may be included in a survey and ranked for the policies and initiatives taking place. Sustainability indices are typically developed that combine the environmental, economic, and equity dimensions of sustainability (Warner 2002; Saha and Paterson 2008; Opp and Saunders 2012; Portney 2013). Developing an urban sustainability index to compare multiple cities is insightful, however sustainability indices are problematic on many levels. Sustainability is a complex, contested, multidimensional concept. Different cities and communities may have different perceptions, needs, and concerns about sustainability. Searching for a universal definition of sustainability is not possible, and perhaps it is not even a useful scientific concept (Berger 2014). Zeemering (2009) adds: “If the salient characteristics of sustainability vary across communities, researchers should reconsider how they measure local governments’ pursuit of sustainability” (254). In addition, sustainability indices do not tell us about how sustainability is conceptualized or contested in political debate amid the efforts that have been made in individual communities (Zeemering 2009:254). Cataloging and ranking cities based on predefined sustainability indices does not necessarily reveal the nuances behind the sustainability discourses of local inhabitants, including the meanings, concerns, rationalizations, justifications, histories, and imaginaries of sustainable cities. Case studies of urban sustainability account for this by examining the locally constructed narratives, meanings, and discursive frames of urban sustainability through a wide range of data sources.

Given the research objectives, research questions, the relevant literature, and the advantages of integrating multiple methods, I opted for a case study research approach, which “is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (Stake 2000:435). I used multiple methods and sources of data, including interviews, observations, archival records, and documents. The use of multiple methods allowed for a triangulation of primary and secondary sources of data, which were collected relatively simultaneously through a flexible design. Together, these methods

and sources of data provided context to the evolution of urban sustainability discourses and practices, the political-economic conditions, cultural context, embedded power relations and tensions, and the possible futures of Kalamazoo's sustainability agenda. The interviews enabled a rich understanding of the meanings, concerns, conflicts, and perceived challenges to urban sustainability in Kalamazoo. Observations gave insight to the circumstances and relationships among persons and groups imagining, planning, and implementing urban sustainability. Archival records and documents provided further insights into the circumstances around the urban sustainability agenda unfolding in Kalamazoo, including how discourses are translated into tangible form, and whose sustainability is taking shape.

#### *Interviews*

The primary objective of the interviews was to ascertain perceptions about urban sustainability from the viewpoints of city officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and residents in general. Interviews were especially helpful for revealing the nuances and subtleties in the concept of sustainability (Rubin and Rubin 2005:47). The interviews explored the different concerns, conflicts, and perceived challenges to planning and implementing sustainability in Kalamazoo. The interviews also helped decipher the various logics of urban sustainability in Kalamazoo as evidenced by competing, prevailing, and non-prevailing discourses of urban sustainability.

#### *Data collection procedures*

Purposeful sampling strategies were used, such as "snowball" or chain sampling as well as "critical case sampling" of persons who hold key positions. Seeking out information-rich cases (Patton 2002), my goal was to interview a wide variety of people from Kalamazoo's core neighborhoods, community development organizations, and city departments. The variation in participant background and positions helped illuminate typical patterns and contrasting viewpoints. In particular, I actively sought out individuals who occupied or had previously occupied key

positions in local municipal government, including those who were elected, hired, appointed, or otherwise voluntary members of specific departments, boards, or commissions. Likewise, I interviewed individuals affiliated with key local community development organizations, neighborhood associations, and nonprofit organizations.

The sample of interviewees produced a range of diverse viewpoints and topical depth. In total, 37 interviews were conducted with 39 participants (a few interviews were group interviews with two individuals present). Almost all participants were residents of Kalamazoo. Only a few participants indicated they lived outside the city, but otherwise worked or conducted their activities in the city. Nearly a third of the interviews were with city officials. About one-fifth of participants were members of voluntary or appointed citizen advisory boards, commissions, and advisory teams. Many participants were otherwise affiliated with various community development organizations, nonprofit organizations, community groups, small businesses, institutions of higher education, and other local organizations.

City officials were identified through city websites and government directories for relevant departments, in addition to personal contacts and recommendations. Neighborhood and community leaders were identified in a similar manner through organizations' websites and directories, personal contacts, and recommendations. Participants were also identified through serendipitous contact at public meetings and events that I attended as part of my observational fieldwork. Persons who attend neighborhood meetings, city meetings, public events, or who are actively involved in local politics do not necessarily reflect the general public, but nonetheless shed light on wider patterns in the community. Likewise, the city officials selected for interviews neither represent all city officials or staff, nor do they necessarily represent the "organizational narrative."

Prior to the interview, participants were contacted by email or phone and were provided information about the purpose of the study and the format for participation. They were assured

confidentiality prior to the interview. As noted, key actors within local government were singled-out, several who were highly resourceful for learning about sustainability efforts, gaining access to settings, and as an entree point to a network of potential interviewees (Rubin and Rubin 2005:89; Fetterman 2009:557). Once participants agreed to an interview, a time and date were scheduled, typically at an office location or public place. All participants gave permission to audio record the interview and all were reassured that no identifying information would be collected in any capacity. Interviews typically lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 90 minutes.

The approach to qualitative interviews varies based on: (1) how narrow or broad the questions asked, and (2) whether the aim is to elicit understandings and meanings or whether the focus is describing events or processes (Rubin and Rubin 2005:5). The interviews leaned toward “topical” interviews (Patton 2002; Madison 2005:26; Rubin and Rubin 2005). Topical interviews explore points of view on particular subjects, programs, issues, or processes, producing a coherent explanation of “what, when, how, why, or with what consequence something happened” (Madison 2005:26; Rubin and Rubin 2005:11). The qualitative data collected were the recorded responses, words, and quotations given by interviewees. Audio recordings of each interview were accompanied with fieldnote-taking. Fieldnote-taking during the interview serves several purposes, such as to help formulate new questions and pace the interview by communicating to interviewees what is “noteworthy” (Patton 2002:383). During each interview, I made repeated attempts to confirm and clarify what constitutes sustainability, what would make Kalamazoo a “sustainable city,” and what are the greatest obstacles and opportunities that face inhabitants of Kalamazoo. The structure of the interview was, however, fairly flexible; the direction of the interview and wording of questions were altered or spontaneous rather than fixed and sequential (Patton 2002:343). An interview guide was used during the interviews, which contained multiple sections of questions and subject areas to explore during the interview (see Appendix A). Each section was designed to cover different facets

of the urban sustainability agenda in Kalamazoo. Interviewees were asked different questions depending on their position (e.g. city officials versus members of community development organizations).

Each section of the interview guide was covered according to when the topic and questions emerged in the conversation or in ways that allowed for smooth and logical transition. Rubin and Rubin (2005) use the term “conversational partners” to emphasize “the active role of the interviewee in shaping the discussion and in guiding what paths the research should take...a congenial and cooperative experience, as both interviewer and interviewee work together to achieve a shared understanding” (14). They advocate a “responsive interviewing” model that highlights the “dynamic and iterative process” of qualitative interviewing (Rubin and Rubin 2005:15). When a theme or topic emerged during a given interview, it was preferable to focus on the depth and detail of that theme or topic. Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe the “river and channel” interview model used “when you want to explore an idea, a concept, or an issue in great depth, following it wherever it goes” (146). When this is repeated across interviews, a pattern may emerge that suggests a broader issue (Rubin and Rubin 2005:146).

I refer to the people I interviewed as participants because they were not passive interviewees and rather guided the direction of the interview. They offered insights and subjective interpretations to the initial ideas and early themes I was pursuing at the time of a given interview. Throughout the interviews, participants shared definitions, provided descriptions, made use of examples, and made comparisons to other cities. They shared accounts of events, activities, and behaviors. They provided insights to concepts and conceptual frameworks (of sustainability and others) in the Kalamazoo context or simply in general terms. The analytical content and chapters that follow are, in effect, products of collective inquiry for which I have only sewn together with my sociological interpretative needle.

### *Data analysis procedures*

For the analysis of qualitative interviews, interview transcripts are coded and then interpreted in terms of the connection to theory, previous work, or broader implications. Data analysis must be systematic and thus the first stage of data analysis is coding. According to Lofland et al. (2005): “The essence of coding is the process of sorting your data into various categories that organize it and render it meaningful from the vantage point of one or more frameworks or sets of ideas” (200). The interview transcripts were coded using a combination of hand coding and QCAmap, a simple qualitative analysis software program (QCAmap 2020). The qualitative analysis software allowed for highlighting text, creating codes, and categorizing codes into higher-level codes, categories, and themes. All codes and highlighted text were then downloaded as a spreadsheet. I began the coding process after several readings of the transcripts and memoing, which also occurred throughout the coding process. While using QCAmap, I kept a paper copy of my research questions nearby, broken down into subsets of important questions and topics, along with a copy of the major themes and key areas of interest identified in the literature review. A few trial runs of coding caused me to reconsider the coding strategy that I initially planned: a “thematic coding” strategy (Flick 2009) that treats each interview as a case in a series of case studies, using initial coding and focused coding to develop a continuously modified “thematic structure” for each case. After reviewing articles and book chapters on coding, I experimented with different techniques and developed my own approach that best fit the data and study. The interviews did not always follow a linear succession of topics, nor did the same topics become prominent in each interview. As anticipated, different interview participants had divergent, unique insights akin to their background, position, and experiences. Early interviews during data collection also influenced the direction and depth of some topics in later interviews. Some coding occurred early on in the data collection process, but I mostly relied on my interview notes and memos when developing new questions and topics to explore in later interviews.

Memoing occurred throughout the coding process and functioned as the intermediate step between coding and the initial analysis (Charmaz 2001:347). Memo-writing consisted of writing down and elaborating ideas, thoughts, experiences, definitions, and assumptions about my codes and categories. As noted, I also presented recurring topics and initial ideas to participants, who frequently offered nuanced interpretations and new paths of inquiry.

Initial or open coding involves inspecting the transcript line-by-line and applying labels to words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. These labels constitute the codes. Codes may include concepts, processes, actors, events, behaviors, or places. In the process of coding, each item may be asked, for example, what it represents, what it is an example of, what is happening, what conditions or events, what interactions or actors, what strategies or tactics, what consequences or changes, what do actions or statements take for granted, or what is the influence of structure and context (Charmaz 2001:342; Lofland et al. 2006:201; Flick 2009:320).

Focused coding builds on these initial codes and involves creating categories that bring multiple codes together. Categories are codes or sets of codes that are deemed significant or important descriptively and analytically (Charmaz 2001:345; Lofland et al. 2006:201). Categories were often taken directly from interview participants' own language or were informed by the urban sustainability literature. Charmaz (2001) writes: "By the time you engage in focused coding, you have decided which of your earlier codes make the most analytic sense and categorize your data most accurately and completely" (344). A preliminary list of categories and themes, informed by the urban sustainability literature, was incorporated (in particular, the economic, environment, and equity dimensions of sustainability) while other codes emerged from the data.

I found it most useful to work through a set of interviews for initial coding and then turn to focused coding for the same set of interviews. This helped to identify more meaningful codes and categories while capturing larger patterns and processes. I began initial coding with a set of four

interviews, which consisted of line-by-line coding while eliminating, merging, and modifying hundreds of codes as necessary. I then worked through the first set of four interviews again in order to sort hundreds of codes into a few dozen categories and subcategories (focused coding). I continued this process with the next set of four interviews, making significant modifications throughout and occasionally creating new codes. A baseline coding framework was established after eight interviews. After coding 37 interviews, I reevaluated and refined all codes, categories, and subcategories. Some codes were collapsed into a new code and other codes were abandoned. In the end, there were nearly 100 codes sorted into more than a dozen categories and subcategories. A codebook was created to help organize the data, which contained a full list of codes with descriptions and examples.

A combination of different and often overlapping types of codes were applied to the interview transcripts. For example, topical codes (identify topics, not necessarily content), in vivo codes (use the language of interviewees), process codes (capture actions using gerunds or -ing words), versus codes (compare and contrast ideas, behaviors, beliefs, processes, actors, etc.), and values codes (capture values, attitudes, beliefs, etc.). When possible, a subject-verb-object structure was applied to many codes in order to create more elaborate and analytically meaningful codes. All codes were sorted into categories as well as subcategories if applicable. Some categories were topical inventories of participants' perspectives while others were more analytically complex.

Overall, the coding process was an iterative back-and-forth process. The relationships between codes, categories, and subcategories formed the basis for identifying broader themes. Most importantly was how the interviews, in combination with other material, contributed to the case study as a whole, as exemplified by the research questions and goals. The coding process was simply meant to organize and interpret the accounts and experiences of interviewees, while identifying patterns, abstracting meaning, and making connections to the wider research objectives.

## *Observations*

My case study approach also entailed a degree of observational fieldwork, although not necessarily exploring social worlds through sustained and immersive participation, in the sense of ethnographic observation. Rather, I conducted intermittent unstructured observations of public (and semi-public) events, meetings, and encounters. The primary objective of observations was to gather additional insights to how urban sustainability is imagined, planned, and implemented. Although my research was not centered on a specific situation or setting, observations were a fruitful approach and enhanced the case study in several ways. Observations shed light on the interactions and relationships of sustainability stakeholders in Kalamazoo. At the same time, observations provided another window into the meanings, discursive frames, discursive practices, and interactions surrounding sustainability, including the tacit and taken-for-granted aspects of settings and relationships (Denzin 1989; Dewalt et al. 1998; Emerson 2001a; Patton 2002; Lofland et al. 2006). While unstructured, and in some instances unplanned, my observations were *focused* given that my research objectives served as a guide.

The number and length of observations were not predetermined or fixed, but rather depended on the opportunities that arose at the time of research. Multiple observations of the same sites were conducted, including city commission meetings, Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 events, Sustainability Strategy team meetings, and other public and semi-public gatherings (intended for specific “in-group” members). Public gatherings, meetings, and events were identified through the city of Kalamazoo website, news media, social media networks, and participants themselves. Semi-public gatherings were identified through participants and key informants who acted as gatekeepers to particular sites. Establishing initial contact and building rapport with key informants and gatekeepers were crucial to gaining welcoming access to these sites.

As a research method, observation is usually delineated by the degree of observation and participation (i.e. from “complete observer” to “complete participant”)(Denzin 1989; Emerson 2001a; Angrosino and Rosenberg 2011). The term and method of participant observation (as opposed to nonparticipant observation) is most often used, given that field researchers typically interact with others as a member of the setting. Participant observation, of course, “necessarily combines observing and informal interviewing” (Patton 2002:287). Participant observation thus involves the process of taking part in the activities, interactions, and events surrounding a given group and their associations. It is a means to explore and understand the experiences of a particular group in their symbolic and material world. For this study, the degree of participation was dependent on the setting and type of meeting or event. My participation was fairly limited in city commission meetings, for example, yet there were other settings (such as Sustainability Strategy team meetings) that involved a greater degree of participation.

I relied on fieldnotes rather than a structured observation protocol or guide. Fieldnotes are essentially the mode of data collection for observations (Dewalt et al. 1998:270; Emerson 2001a; Lofland et al. 2006). Depending on the setting, my observations consisted of the physical setting, the actors involved (including evident demographics), their verbal and nonverbal interactions with each other, the activities that took place, the acts of specific individuals, the goals they were trying to accomplish, and the feelings and emotions expressed. This included my own reactions and initial impressions, but also “actions, interactions, and events that catch the attention of people habitually in the setting” in terms of what they react to as significant and find meaningful (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:28).

On the whole, my observations primarily served to contextualize the interviews and other supplementary sources of data. Thus, the same extent of data analysis and coding procedures for interviews was not applied to observations. Even so, I recorded some degree of fieldnotes for the

observed events, meetings, and encounters. Types of fieldnotes have been formulated in a number of ways. Typically, the division is between *jottings* and *full fieldnotes*. While “mental notes” might include initial conscious perceptions of what is note-worthy, it is “jottings” that turn those into written record (Emerson et al. 1995:20; Lofland et al. 2006:109). Even though each observational period was not particularly long, I attempted to write jotted notes on site rather than relying on my recall ability (mental notes) alone. This was primarily in public and semi-public settings where my participation was fairly limited. While “full fieldnotes” usually constitute the log of observations, I only wrote full fieldnotes for certain settings of special interest. As Emerson et al. (1995:68) and Lofland et al. (2006:113) recommend, full fieldnotes consisted of concrete descriptions, reproduced dialogue, and “characterization” of individuals, as well as some early analytic ideas. The products of my observations are integrated throughout my analysis. In the following chapters, observations were especially pivotal to several vignettes as well as those chapters that present a “case-within-a-case.”

#### *Use of Archival Records and Documents*

To supplement the interviews and observations, I utilized a variety of archival records and documents in physical and digital forms, including written, visual, and audio materials. These materials consisted of historical records, public and private documents, websites and news media, and other secondary data sources. Government documents consisted of planning documents, reports, and city meeting agendas and minutes. Nongovernmental documents included private and non-profit organizational documents, annual reports, and other organizational material. Relevant websites and online material from the city of Kalamazoo, private businesses, non-profit organizations, community organizations, and news media were also valuable sources of written, visual, and audio material.

Social science research and sociology in particular have historically relied on documents as sources of data. The use of documents can be resourceful as “a stimulus for paths of inquiry that

can be pursued only through direct observations and interviewing” (Patton 2002:294). Documents may also serve as an important data source for purposes of contextualization of other information, including interview and observation data (Bowen 2009:30; Flick 2009:259). As sources of data, documents may be integrated into a research study in various ways. The content of documents may be analyzed using document analysis, “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents” (Bowen 2009:32). In general, this study treated documents as supplementary to fieldwork. A limited document analysis was conducted for the city’s “Strategic Vision” planning document, given the stated intent to serve as a “guide to shape all plans being created in the future” (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021a). Other key documents, such as the city’s 2025 Master Plan, were still reviewed and incorporated into my analysis. Master plans, as tools for sustainability planning, are useful for determining the extent and form of sustainability planning that is taking place in a given city, in terms of policies and programs encouraged by any given master plan (Neamțu 2011; Portney 2013).

In addition to the use of documents as *sources* of data, documents also served as *topics* of inquiry in themselves (Prior 2008:824; Flick 2009:257). Various manifestations of discourse analysis are perhaps more sensitive to focusing on documents as topics, which might entail an “archaeological” approach to “the ways in which any given document came to assume its present content and structure” (Prior 2008:824). Lindsay Prior (2008) argues that researchers should focus more on how documents, as topics of inquiry, influence and function in social activity, whereby “the entire complex of events deserves study, and in that structure documents function as props, allies, rule-makers, calculators, decision-makers, experts, and illustrators” (Prior 2008:828). Documents may in fact be viewed as *social actors* or as *things* that “function in schemes of social activity, and with how such things can drive, rather than be driven by, human actors” (Prior 2008:826). Thus, my case study considered the social role of certain documents. While the content of several city planning

documents were relevant to my research problem, there was also relevance to how specific city planning documents were used, by whom, and the significance of such documents to different stakeholders of sustainability. It was important to grasp the perspectives of document-authors and what they “meant” or intended (for example, city officials involved in the creation of specific city planning documents). At the same time, it was important to explore how these documents were “received,” including how these documents influenced interactions and relationships among stakeholders (Prior 2008:824).

Documents, as material culture, are inscribed with social meaning in a given historical context (Hodder 2000). Prior’s (2008) model of documents *as social actors* emphasizes the way documents take on a life of their own, carrying meanings inscribed by actors while also reinforcing existing socially meaningful statuses and relations of power. Accordingly, I inquired about the role of specific documents in my interviews and observation settings. Interviews captured the associated meanings and responses to key city planning documents from the perspectives of interview participants. During my observations, I considered the role of these documents in structuring events, activities, interactions, meanings, and relations of participants in a given setting.

#### *On Field Relations and Participants*

Field relations are important to the quality of work and are continuously negotiated, granting intimate access to people, events, and perspectives. Thus, “different kinds of relations with different individuals variously situated within the setting are likely to yield different perspectives and understandings” (Lofland et al. 2006:67). Researcher biases and preconceptions must be reflexively assessed throughout the research process. In addition, the standpoint of the researcher influences the research process. In research that employs qualitative methods, the researcher is one of the instruments, but one that is embodied with gender, race and ethnicity, and other socially meaningful characteristics and relations (Warren 2001:221; Patton 2002:14; Rubin and Rubin 2005:37; Creswell

2006:38; Lofland et al. 2006:3; Fetterman 2009:552; Flick 2009:106; Lincoln et al. 2011:123).

Researcher position should be acknowledged and constantly considered throughout, given that participant interaction may consist of a disparity in power and privilege (McCorkel and Myers 2003:228-229). Simply the status of a “researcher” potentially shapes interactions with participants. As a white, younger male taking the role of student researcher affiliated with a local academic institution, I attempted to persistently and reflexively gauge how these statuses shaped interactions with others or shaped my own perceptions and assumptions. Both similarities and differences in personal characteristics may have worked to my advantage and my disadvantage with different participants.

My attendance and participation at various city events and meetings meant that I encountered many of the same people in different settings, including persons I had already interviewed or would later interview. Moreover, many of the people I interviewed were networked in various ways. Identifying even general characteristics would risk revealing participant identity given the many overlapping roles, key positions, and familiarity among this relatively small subset of the Kalamazoo population. Therefore, I have taken the cautious route, especially since I assured participants of the confidentiality of their responses. Before an interview began, a common occurrence was for participants to indicate they had no concerns or worries about confidentiality. Midway through the interview, however, they sought reassurances of confidentiality prior to (or immediately after) discussing a topic, making a statement, or revealing a specific piece of information. Although I provided a description of the project before the interview, this sudden shift was possibly due to participants’ initial assumptions and impressions of what the interview would entail. One participant, for example, remarked that “sustainability is not a controversial topic” after I gave a brief description of the study and gave assurances about confidentiality (ID37). Thirty minutes later, the same person was hesitant to discuss a topic without receiving multiple

reassurances of confidentiality. Often this occurred when participants shared criticisms of city government or commented on the Foundation for Excellence, the city's newly incorporated public-private partnership and donor-funded municipal finance model.

I initially planned to make group comparisons based on participants' roles and occupied positions. Comparing different groups may reveal "perception gaps," which have been explored in environmental risk assessment, sustainability of shale development, and environmental resource planning, among others (Checker 2007; Crowe et al. 2015; Alexander, Freeman, and Angel 2018; Drews et al. 2018). However, it was difficult to assign participants to a "comparison group" based on various characteristics or positions occupied. Participants often held positions in multiple capacities, with overlapping roles in city government, nonprofit or community development organizations, community groups, academia, or other groups and organizations. This is particularly common in a community with so many registered nonprofit organizations and community development organizations.

Comparisons were mostly limited to those who are city officials (elected, appointed, and hired staff) and those who are not city officials. Given the case study approach, I was less concerned about making direct comparisons based on participant characteristics, with the exception of highlighting how city officials may differ from participants on the whole (in tandem with other sources such as city planning documents, activities, or policies). It should be noted that participant statements or accounts do not necessarily represent the views of other inhabitants; individual statements or accounts are presented for illustration, contrast, and voice rather than generalization. This does not negate the possibility of identifying patterns in participants' statements and accounts. On the contrary, my goal was to specifically identify and describe shared community understandings, narratives, and discursive frameworks.

*Kalamazoo's Sustainability Story: A Case Study*

The next five thematic chapters reflect an inventory and interpretive summary of what I refer to as Kalamazoo's sustainability story. After the first handful of interviews, it became clear that the interviews would be the most fruitful avenue for telling the "story" of urban sustainability and sustainability planning in Kalamazoo. For this reason, I conducted more interviews than initially anticipated. While interviews largely shaped the basis of the following thematic chapters, my own observations, chance encounters, and participation in events were vitally important. Moreover, the use of archival records and documents were essential for a full portrait of the case. At times, many elements of the following chapters may only appear loosely connected to sustainability, even if a broader and more inclusive understanding of sustainability is assumed. However, each chapter is essential to Kalamazoo's sustainability story. In the concluding chapter, chapter nine, I discuss the broader implications of the findings and potential modifications, extensions, and development of new theoretical perspectives (Rubin and Rubin 2005:230). Given the case study approach, I develop a detailed description of the case as a whole in light of the findings from different methods (Stake 2000; Creswell 2006:195; Yin 2009).

## CHAPTER IV

### IMAGINING A SUSTAINABLE KALAMAZOO

#### *Vignette: Kalamazoo Environmental Summit*

Surrounded by lush autumn foliage and the woodland ambience of an imminent October dusk, I descended down a winding pathway with a quickening pace. Upon crossing an elevated walkway, I took notice of an engraved cement block lodged within a red brick pillar. The engraving read: “Kalamazoo Nature Center 1964.” I swiftly made my way across the covered walkway, glancing over the metal railing into the forest terrain. The sound of my footsteps on the wooden planks reverberated into the approaching night. At last, I reached the main entrance of the Kalamazoo Nature Center, located about five miles north of downtown Kalamazoo. Greeted at the doorway, I located my name tag and headed down the hall to the inaugural Kalamazoo Environmental Summit. The small banquet hall was filled with about a dozen large circular and long rectangle tables that occupied much of the space. At the far side of the room, several oversized white notepads were perched on easels, awaiting use against a backdrop of windows overlooking the grounds of the nature center. I recalled my interview from a few weeks earlier, when I first learned about this one-time weeknight event and was added to the invitation list. It was described to me as a gathering “with the intent to bring together as many environmental organizations as possible into one place, to basically identify what shared values there are, what shared needs there are, and where there may be opportunities for different organizations to partner together in the future” (ID23). The relevance to my project, bolstered by a patent curiosity, led me to register as an attendee. As advertised, over thirty different organizations and institutional affiliations were represented by the more than fifty individuals who registered to attend, ranging from local and extra-local environmental groups, nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, and neighborhood associations among others.

At this point in my research, the bulk of my interviews were completed and I had attended two meetings with the city of Kalamazoo’s Sustainability Strategy team. As the night carried on, the structure and sentiment of the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit became increasingly familiar. A hired professional facilitator led us through various activities and discussions, tasking us with identifying the challenges that face environmental organizations of greater Kalamazoo. These challenges were supplemented with recognizing “what we have” in terms of the people, organizations, tools, and resources available in Kalamazoo, along with devising strategies for “what we can do” and “how we can do it.” Those in attendance voiced the conceptual, organizational, and practical challenges they faced individually and collectively as environmental organizations. They voiced potential strategies and collective actions that they could take to reach their goals. When I made my way back across the unlit elevated walkway, I reflected on the event, pondering how the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit fits into my research project on urban sustainability. Likely rooted in the daunting scope of the task at hand, the activities and discussions were at times disorganized, redundant, and unsettled. One of the culminating challenges or “implementation areas” identified by the group was

after all “Overwhelming - to the public and people working on it.” Yet at the end of night, the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit had seemingly performed a sweeping, although fragmented reflexive synthesis of environmental organizing. I left the grounds of the Kalamazoo Nature Center wondering if a Kalamazoo Sustainability Summit would ever take shape, how it would compare, and who would be invited.

### *Introduction*

The Kalamazoo Environmental Summit was organized by the Kalamazoo Environmental Council. It took place at the Kalamazoo Nature Center in a room full of individuals with environmental backgrounds in activist and professional roles. Yet it was clear something other than a tacit concern for the bio-physical environment motivated those who attended. While it served as a networking event, a different form of networking also occurred: a networking of ideas, a bridging of issues, a linking of environmental discourses, and a reimagining of the bio-physical environment. Throughout the night, the individuals in attendance appeared to be committed to broadening the reach of environmental organizing while also expanding the scope of the bio-physical environment. The existence of the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit may be a statement in itself; a declaration that a broader interpretation of the bio-physical environment is necessary to the future of environmental organizing.

The premise of the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit was environmental organizing, yet there was also a re-organizing of the environment as a complex whole made up of various overlapping, interconnected parts. Virtually any issue, problem, strategy, or social condition was subject to emerge in the activities and group discussions. Topics ranged from environmental racism and political mobilization to carbon taxes, shared organizational databases, and sustainability educational workshops. At the same time, the sentiment of the night may be described as a pendulum of commonality and disconnection. The commonality among attendees was the desire to coalesce around something larger and more whole - perhaps an overarching vision of environmental sustainability - in order to work more effectively toward the goals of their respective environmental

organizations. The disconnection, however, was that it was primarily environmental organizations, and individuals with environmental backgrounds, who were assembling this grander vision that transcended the environment.

My research project embarked on a similar endeavor as the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit, only I sought to explore how *sustainability* was conceptualized by inhabitants of Kalamazoo. In this chapter, I sort through the various meanings and discourses of sustainability in Kalamazoo, as understood by interview participants and supplemented with my own observations of events and activities. Exploring how participants conceptualized sustainability, the interviews first revealed how participants understood and separated out the different *scopes* of sustainability pertaining to issues, scales, time frames, and levels of abstraction. The interviews also showed how participants made sense of the conventional three pillars framework of sustainability and the presumed environmental, economic, and equity dimensions of sustainability. A larger pattern weaved throughout the interviews was evident, whereby *thinking holistically about sustainability* was the interpretive foundation of the sustainability concept. Arguably a higher-level discursive framework, sustainability was treated as a concept made up of overlapping, interconnected parts-of-a-whole. Several “unifying concepts” beyond the sustainability concept were employed by participants, which served as additional markers of thinking holistically about sustainability. This holistic thinking was also apparent in how participants interpreted the relationships between environment, economy, and equity. The relationships between environment, economy, and equity were described in nuanced and unresolved ways, whereby thinking holistically about sustainability was paired with assigning greater weight or importance to certain presumed dimensions of sustainability. In what might be referred to as *hierarchical holism*, participants assigned greater weight, importance, and prioritization to certain presumed dimensions of sustainability (i.e. environmental, economy, or equity) within a holism framework. With the case of the Sustainability Strategy as an illustrative example, this chapter shows

how conventional discourses of sustainability are reassembled by the inhabitants and institutions of Kalamazoo. The research implications are discussed, along with several other key findings that offer insight to Kalamazoo's sustainability story.

### *Beyond the Pillars: Conceptualizing Sustainability*

For many participants, simply introducing the topic of sustainability elicited diverse responses that set the tone and direction of the interview. When asked about the meaning of sustainability ("What does sustainability mean to you?"), participants interpreted the question in a variety of ways. Some participants provided precise definitions of their own making, while others referenced a specific source (e.g. United Nations Brundtland Report) or general framework (e.g. three pillars of sustainability such as environmental, economic, and social sustainability). Multiple participants expressed difficulty in forming a response to the meaning of sustainability. This was especially the case when it was the first topic or question asked and therefore required participants to identify the "scope" of sustainability. Some made references to bio-physical environments, planetary ecosystems, and "the natural world" (ID01) while others made use of general descriptors such as development, quality of life, and well-being. Several participants identified an indeterminate future time frame such as "leaving something for the next generations to inherit" (ID12), yet others spoke more timelessly about balance, survival, and continuing "indefinitely" (ID03). Many defined sustainability in terms of actions, behaviors, decisions, and policies surrounding "how we do regular business" (ID05) while the initial impressions of others were that sustainability "no longer means anything" (ID30).

### *The scope of sustainability*

The purview of responses to what sustainability means highlighted the scope of sustainability, which was not only relevant to my research goals, but was also important to participants. In this section, I provide an overview of how participants demarcated the scope of

sustainability based on: (1) the issues or topics deemed relevant to sustainability, (2) the scale of reference, from local to global, (3) the time frame of reference, and (4) the level of abstraction (or level of analysis), such as individuals, groups, communities, or systems. The compartmentalization of sustainability around different scopes is admittedly another tedious accessory to the sustainability concept, but the interviews made clear the importance of such matters.

A wide range of issues were identified throughout the interviews, many which are typically labeled “sustainability issues” by communities, governments, organizations, and researchers. Topics that surfaced included carbon mitigation, energy efficiency, water quality, flooding, transportation infrastructure, employment, business and industrial development, education, housing, homelessness, cost of living, food access, parks and greenspace, tax revenue, zoning, and feeling welcomed or accepted in the community. Participants either directly characterized specific issues as “sustainability issues” or otherwise persistently cited and problematized such issues throughout the interviews. A few issues described as prominent community-wide issues were flooding prevalent throughout several neighborhoods, the cost of living and affordability of housing throughout the community, and the quality of the transportation infrastructure.

In terms of participant backgrounds, there were not substantial differences in who deemed particular issues as sustainability issues. A pattern between different racial and ethnic groups was difficult to decipher, despite the racial and ethnic diversity of participants largely mirroring the racial and ethnic diversity of the community. Perhaps a product of the sample of participants I interviewed, the range of perspectives varied as much within racial and ethnic groups as it did between groups. There were some variations between participants in different inferred socioeconomic positions, based on known educational background and occupation. Participants in higher socioeconomic positions with advanced degrees, for example, more often spoke about the climate crisis, yet there were also cases that did not fit this pattern. Differences between participants

were mostly at the neighborhood level, in terms of whether participants lived, worked, or conducted their activities in a specific neighborhood.

While similar issues were identified across the neighborhoods, a few issues were characterized as especially important for certain neighborhoods. For example, availability and affordability of housing were frequently identified as major concerns in the Northside, Eastside, and Edison neighborhoods. Education opportunities, youth programs, and job training were also emphasized in the Northside, Eastside, Edison, and Douglas neighborhoods. The number and viability of commercial businesses were viewed as prominent concerns in the Eastside neighborhood while the lack of resident-owned and Black owned businesses were highlighted in the Northside neighborhood. Flooding was also a distinct concern in several neighborhoods that are vulnerable to flooding from the Kalamazoo River or adjacent watersheds. One of the more notable examples of a neighborhood-specific issue was concerns about maintaining the deer population in the Oakland Drive-Winchell and Oakwood neighborhoods. Some participants explained the differences in neighborhood issues and concerns as being connected to the demographic compositions of neighborhoods while others pointed to the variable socio-economic conditions or the bio-physical environment (e.g. the quality and number of parks and greenspace). The different neighborhood issues and priorities are further reflected by their neighborhood plans, which were addendums to the city's 2025 Master Plan. The neighborhood plans, along with neighborhood and city government relations, are expanded upon in subsequent chapters.

While participants mostly situated their responses in the Kalamazoo context, the scale participants referenced was important to how participants discussed topics and issues. Some participants “rescaled” issues to the regional, statewide, national, or global scales. Aside from comparisons between neighborhoods and different sectors of the city, as noted above, participants also made comparisons with adjacent communities and cities in the region, state, country, or

elsewhere in the world. For example, when participants spoke about carbon emissions in particular, they often “upscaled” to the county and regional level, sometimes pointing out the limited capacity to address the global climate crisis at the local level. Referring to carbon emissions and climate targets at the local level, the following participant identified scale as an important factor in making sense of sustainability:

Here’s the fundamental problem if you talk about sustainability: when you only make it about hitting a climate target, then all you’re really doing is making your city feel better, when you apply it to the global context. Because let’s get very realistic here: Kalamazoo, Michigan - the city - could put solar panels on every single roof, it could make sure that we are completely like energy efficient - hell, we could even rip up the streets, make everything bike path, make sure that it’s all public transportation. The Western world - well a lot of the Western world is, the rest of America isn’t doing that, core of the petroleum capital empire as it were. Bottom line, you’re just going to end up with a very pretty city that is going to be facing a very intense and chaotic future (ID08).

This passage describes the potential impact of reducing carbon emissions and achieving “climate targets” relative to “the global context.” This participant appears to suggest that conceptualizations of sustainability must take into account the global scale and extend beyond “hitting a climate target.” At the end of the passage, this participant makes note of the time frame of reference (“a very intense and chaotic future”), another scope of sustainability deemed important to participants.

In addition to issues and scale, participants considered the time frame of reference as significant when they conceptualized sustainability. A key difference among participants was how they viewed the relationship between existing present conditions and possible future conditions, which parallels the notions of intra-generational and inter-generational sustainability. In some instances, a *preservation framing* of sustainability was invoked (i.e. preserving what exists now so that it will exist in the future) while in other instances a *progress framing* of sustainability was used (i.e. changing what exists now to allow for a different future). A preservation framing was generally used in connection with the environmental dimension of sustainability. The following passages from

three different interviews illustrate progress framing:

Well, sustainability means ability to sustain, or to keep your momentum at least stagnant, worst case scenario, and progressing, best case scenario. But not backsliding. Sustain. You are able to sustain whatever it is you're trying to. I don't know what you want this word to mean in reference to, so it could - I mean, it's a broad question, if you're talking economic development, if you're talking about homelessness. I mean, the list can go on and on (ID10).

Sustainability is, like I said, so just sustainability is just average, it's the average status quo, but the progression and the progress through that, you know, sustainability, you organically are growing and developing (ID36).

Sustainability isn't about sustaining what's existing, but it's about creating strategy, implementing strategies, that will allow for [a] future. Sustainability isn't always about sustaining what's there. Because if we sustained only what was there, we would not have a country (ID32).

In the first passage, the participant equated sustainability with stagnation and “not backsliding.” The first passage also shows how one participant initially grappled with the scope of sustainability when asked about the meaning of sustainability (“What does sustainability mean to you?”). In the second passage, the term sustainability itself was indicative of “average” and “the status quo.” The third passage added that sustainability is about “strategies” for the future and not only about “sustaining what's there.” All three passages suggest that preservation framing alone is insufficient.

Participants also specified different levels of abstraction when making sense of sustainability. That is, some spoke of sustainability pertaining to individuals while others spoke of groups, organizations and institutions, communities, or systems. Distinctions were made about what sustainability means at the individual level, such as individual behaviors and choices (and beliefs), relative to “huge culture shift things” (ID12). In terms of economic sustainability, for example, some participants made distinctions between individuals (sustainable incomes), organizations and governments (sustainable revenues), and systems (sustainable economic growth). Referring to economic sustainability and downtown development, for example, one participant separated out levels of abstraction:

So when it comes to the economical part, yeah there's more money in play, so that might help Kalamazoo. That might help Kalamazoo city, but it might hurt some individuals. You can't win both sides. Both sides can't win" (ID18).

This passage demonstrates how interpretations of sustainability, at least in terms of economic development, may be different at the community level ("That might help Kalamazoo city") than the individual level ("but it might hurt some individuals"). At the same time, this participant problematized the tension that may occur between different levels of abstraction ("Both sides can't win").

#### *The conventional three pillars framework*

At this point, I have outlined how participants discerned the different scopes of sustainability. That is, the issues and topics under consideration, the scales of reference, the time frames of reference, and the levels of abstraction. With this in mind, I now turn to how participants made sense of the conventional three pillars framework and how they made sense of environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, and social sustainability in the Kalamazoo context. The more ambiguous term *social sustainability* was intentionally used in the interviews to gather initial impressions, although the role of equity - or what might be referred to as social equity sustainability - was thereafter introduced to participants.

The conventional three pillars framework was presented to participants in order to explore how participants made sense of each presumed dimension of sustainability as well as the relationships between the presumed dimensions. Participants were asked about the meaning of each ("What does environmental/economic/social sustainability mean to you?"), followed by inquiries about the features, challenges, and strategies that would make Kalamazoo a "sustainable city" ("What would need to happen to make Kalamazoo an environmentally/economically/socially sustainable city?"). Some participants defined and categorized sustainability using a specific framework (e.g. the United Nations Brundtland Report) or in ways seemingly inspired by the three

pillars framework (e.g. three legs of a stool, three lenses, three buckets, three E's, triple bottom line).

Promising insights to each of the pillars or dimensions were shared upon request, although several admitted that such conventional frameworks of sustainability were partial, insufficient, and “a bit dated these days” (ID16). One exchange reveals some of the problems that arose with inquiries about the presumed dimensions in the Kalamazoo context:

RR: What would need to happen in order to make Kalamazoo environmentally sustainable?

ID29: You tell me. You define to me what environmentally sustainable means when you ask it. Because what I may answer, it-

RR: I mean, what are you thinking about?

ID29: Is it not sustainable right now?

RR: I don't know.

ID29: The question that you're asking me is leading me to say you think it's not sustainable, because what it would take to make it sustainable.

RR: That's a good point. Okay, what issues would be environmental sustainability issues in Kalamazoo?

ID29: What issues are? Everything is about sustainability, so that's pretty broad. Environmentally, I think we're very sustainable as we are.

In this specific interview, the participant often spoke of sustainability in terms of economic sustainability, efficiency, and management, but the exchange overall shows the conceptual haziness around defining the presumed dimensions of sustainability and the application to the Kalamazoo context. As one participant exclaimed halfway through the interview: “Sustainability is hard” (ID02).

When asked about environmental sustainability, conventional bio-physical environmental issues were brought up by participants such as: preservation, use, and management of natural resources and land; the quality of air and water; the reduction and mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions; flooding; the management, efficiency, and quality of various infrastructures (transportation, energy, utilities, buildings, and housing stock). Some participants quickly alluded to

the bio-physical environment. For example:

Just personally from my opinion, right, what it includes - yeah, using our natural resources in an effective way, but not, you know, overusing those. Good management of all of our natural resources (ID05).

However, the bio-physical environment was not always immediately mentioned by participants; in general, participants viewed matters of environmental sustainability as transcending the bio-physical environment, frequently making connections to economic and social equity dimensions of sustainability. Environmental sustainability (pertaining to the bio-physical environment) was not always treated as the cornerstone of sustainability, although participants were able to provide definitions, descriptions, and examples with much greater ease and diversity relative to economic sustainability or social sustainability. In some instances, participants used the terms environmental and ecological interchangeably, while in other cases these were actively differentiated.

When discussing economic sustainability, participants mentioned everything from jobs and cost of living to the economic position of inhabitants and the “financial health of the city” or “maintenance of a tax base.” Speaking of Kalamazoo’s downtown, one participant replied:

So in terms of economic sustainability, you’re talking about having businesses, you’re talking about having all the storefronts full, you’re talking about having all the apartments full. That’s making it sustainable, when you have, you know, that all kind of filled out (ID02).

References to affordability and the cost of housing were prominent, and such remarks highlighted economic inequality. For many participants, the presumed dimension of economic sustainability was centered around money as a resource, whether that included sources of funding or the distribution of money as a resource. Some specified the economic capacities of individuals, groups, and the city government, while others spoke of systems of production, distribution, and consumption.

Throughout this chapter, I primarily use the term “social sustainability” as it pertains to equity, or what might be referred to as “social equity sustainability.” In the interviews, as noted, I

typically first introduced the ambiguous term “social sustainability” in order to allow for more inclusive interpretations. Some participants spoke of social bonds and community relationships, for example, when asked about social sustainability. At some point during the interview, participants were directly asked about the relationship between equity and sustainability. The term “equity” in itself was differently interpreted and often used interchangeably with equality. In some instances, equity was described as a normative concept, in the sense of justice or *what ought to be the case*. In other instances, equity was described as conditions of fair treatment and distribution of resources among groups, in the sense of *what is the case*, as demonstrated in the following passage:

When I talk about cultural and social [sustainability], I’m primarily talking about things in terms of discrimination, whether that is based on race, gender, sexual orientation, anything that makes one class of people less able to have long term success from another (ID30).

Equity was also described in numerous other ways, from well-being and livelihood to respect, dignity, trust, and “listening to others.” Such variations in the concept of equity (and social equity sustainability) are cumbersome, but are important to acknowledge. The different interpretations of equity may be one of multiple *discursive struggles* that exist among inhabitants in Kalamazoo, several which are outlined in greater detail in the next chapter.

The interviews promptly revealed deficits of the conventional three pillars framework. Some participants accepted the framework while other participants reorganized the framework to their own liking, and still others rejected the framework entirely. Numerous participants exhibited understandings of sustainability beyond environmental, economic, and social (equity) sustainability. Substantial remarks about urban governance and the role of governments - particularly Kalamazoo’s city government - suggest that participants may have considered “governance sustainability” as another dimension of sustainability. For the case of Kalamazoo, governance sustainability refers to all matters surrounding city government actions and concrete policies deemed relevant to

sustainability, or are enacted in the name of sustainability. This includes city government operations (for example, the “greening” of public facilities, utilities, and daily operations) as well as activities and policies that more or less directly affect individuals, groups, and nongovernmental entities. One city official summarized this:

As far as the City goes, to declare themselves sustainable I think goes beyond making sure that their facilities, their buildings, are green. It’s also the fleet. It’s also the policies and how their policies intentionally or unintentionally force people to make decisions that, you know, might not be sustainable (ID01).

Referring to Kalamazoo’s city government, another city official noted:

So part of that sustainability is making sure that we’re providing good and timely services and maintaining infrastructure that we have, and maybe not expanding that to something that’s unsustainable (ID05).

In these passages, city officials spoke of sustainability in terms of the city government’s internal operations, sustainability policy-making, and service provision. Many participants pointed to the factors and conditions that influence Kalamazoo city government’s ability to craft and implement sustainability policies. For example: (1) the organizational structures and processes of Kalamazoo’s city government, (2) the planning practices used and the role of public participation, (3) the historical and present city government-community relations, and (4) regional relations and the influence of county, state, and federal governments. These factors and conditions preclude any municipal government actions or policies deemed relevant to sustainability or enacted in the name of sustainability. In this sense, governance sustainability is also about the *capacity to govern sustainability*, which concerns all matters surrounding the organizational structures, institutional processes, financial terrain, and external relations with community members and higher-level governmental entities.

Similarly, participants pointed to the role of “leadership” in city government and the need for “people willing to take the risk,” as emphasized in the following passage when asked about

environmental sustainability in Kalamazoo:

RR: What would need to happen to make Kalamazoo environmentally sustainable?

ID33: I think there would have to be a commitment to it. I think that there would have to be some agreement within our community that sustainability, as a generalized principle, is important for us to attach our resources to. And I don't think we have a consensus on that. I think that there are some strong leaders in that, within the city and within the nonprofit sector. And I don't know if you get the consensus on something like that, I think you just have to have leadership and people willing to take the risk to make those kinds of decisions on behalf of the broader community.

In several instances, participants spoke of “the process side” of sustainability, such as transparency and accountability (ID16) while in other instances sustainability was about planning practices, public participation, and civic engagement (ID34). In the passage below, one participant highlighted city government-neighborhood relations when asked about the meaning of sustainability:

To me, [sustainability] means the government supporting and promoting neighborhoods, and neighborhoods feeling comfortable enough to get involved with, for lack of a better word, government activities. And I'm not thinking of running for any particular office or anything, but just getting involved, knowing what's going on, and believing that what is going on is something that's going to actually occur. As opposed to somebody with a big bull horn saying ‘that shouldn't happen like that’ and it gets either swept under the rug or something (ID17).

This participant elsewhere spoke of “listening to the people” as one element of sustainability, in reference to homeless persons in Kalamazoo:

ID17: Sustainability is listening to the people that are affected, not the people that are just observing and saying ‘I wouldn't want to live like that.’ Well how do they know that the other people do or do not want to live like that, are content with it? Do they really have that conversation with them? Or are they just - and we as humans have a bad habit of inflicting our perceptions and desires on other people, on a regular basis. So I don't know.

RR: Making assumptions?

ID17: Yes, yeah. What about actually verify...which is why it's important that we, [this community development organization], get the feedback from the residents, constantly, because we do not want to fall into that trap.

Given the breadth of governance sustainability, an entire chapter (chapter seven) is devoted to unpacking urban governance and the sustainability efforts of Kalamazoo's city government. In

chapter seven, I outline the factors and conditions of governance sustainability in greater detail, including community evaluations and efforts to build an effective municipal governing apparatus that is capable of governing sustainability.

### *Thinking Holistically about Sustainability*

Thus far, I have presented the concept of sustainability as made up of “dimensions” or categorical “pillars” of sustainability (environment, economic, equity, and perhaps governance sustainability). When I introduced the conventional three pillars framework in each interview, participants offered their interpretations and examples of each presumed dimension. Yet the use of this typology in my research is misleading for at least one major reason: the participants I interviewed. Throughout the interviews, I was persistently reaffirmed by nearly all participants that any dimensions or pillars of sustainability are overlapping and tightly interconnected, if not inseparable. Many participants were reluctant to discuss sustainability as made up of separate abstract dimensions in the first place, let alone separate in the practices, activities, and behaviors of individuals, groups, or organizations. Instead, participants embraced what I refer to as *thinking holistically about sustainability*. In the following sections, I illustrate the myriad of ways participants expressed thinking holistically about sustainability. Thinking holistically about sustainability refers to interpretations that treat the sustainability concept as a holistic concept made up of overlapping, interconnected parts-of-a-whole. These interconnected parts-of-a-whole are virtually inseparable; the dimensions of sustainability (environment, economy, and equity) are treated as fluid and imprecise, rather than fixed and well-defined.

### *Sustainability as a holistic concept*

Participants routinely described sustainability as a multi-dimensional concept either before or after I introduced the conventional three pillars framework and asked about each dimension separately. In the following exchange, one participant cited the standard definition of sustainable

development originating from the United Nations Brundtland Report, and then identified the dimensions of environmental, economic, and social (equity) sustainability:

ID27: I think that you definitely - when we're talking about sustainability, we need to be making sure that we're meeting the needs of the present without compromising - I mean meeting the needs of the present, yeah, without compromising the future.

RR: Okay, that's kind of like the United Nations definition.

ID27: Yes, so yeah, when we're looking at - we need to be looking at the environment, we need to be looking at economics. So it's like not - when we think about sustainability, sometimes I think about like you said, the green building and the air quality and the water, but definitely there's economic, there's environmental, and there's social. So it's like, this is a really big thing. And I just happen to be more interested in the economic side at the moment, but I think when we're talking about sustainability, we've got to think about all of that.

The extent that participants emphasized the overlap and interconnectedness between the dimensions of sustainability cannot be overstated. For participants, the dimensions of sustainability were treated as artificially separate, yet tangibly overlapping interconnected parts-of-a-whole. In the following passage, one participant articulated how “they're all interconnected,” a common reaction when I introduced the conventional three pillars framework:

RR: Sometimes you hear people talk about the three pillars, or the environmental, the economic, and the equity part.

ID33: Right, so I think it's all of those things. The hat that I wear is more in the economic probably, and not so much technically speaking in the equity or the environmental, but they're all interconnected. Neighborhoods that don't have trees, because trees were never planted because it wasn't important for poor people to have trees, are gonna have a different environmental experience than in neighborhoods where trees were planted and where that was important. And you know, that gets into just heat patches and just livability in neighborhoods and health in neighborhoods. So I don't necessarily split those things apart as being different things in my mind, and I think even our organization looks at all of that holistic view of what makes a place, you know, a neighborhood of choice. Part of that is the environment, it's certainly the economics, and it's certainly an equity question as well.

In this passage, the statement “I don't necessarily split those things apart as being different things” highlights the holism embedded within participants' treatment of the sustainability concept, whereby sustainability is not simply viewed as separate, discrete parts (i.e. dimensions), but rather consists of

overlapping, interconnected parts-of-a-whole that are artificially divided. When asked about the meaning of sustainability, one participant characterized sustainability as an empty concept and suggested that “because it can mean just about anything to anyone, it no longer means anything” (ID30). This participant then proceeded to problematize only treating sustainability “in terms of ecology,” as shown in the following passage:

RR: So then what does this word sustainability even mean to you?

ID30: That’s a great question, because I think sustainability is like ‘progressive.’ I hate using progressive anymore, politically, just because anyone who’s left of Donald Trump calls themselves a progressive, and so it’s really lost any meaning. I think sustainability is a lot like that. It doesn’t have a meaning - because it can mean just about anything to anyone, it no longer means anything. And so to me, I think we really miss out if we talk about sustainability just in terms of ecology. I think when I talk about sustainability, it has to be social and cultural, it has to be economic, and it has to be ecological.

After suggesting that sustainability is an empty concept that “no longer means anything,” this same participant then frames sustainability as a holistic concept, eventually concluding that “we need a lot more of that kind of thinking” (ID30).

#### *Unifying concepts: Survival and thoughtful development*

Thinking holistically about sustainability was also communicated by participants’ use of several “unifying concepts” beyond the sustainability concept. By unifying concepts, I mean words or phrases that serve to bring together multiple presumed dimensions of sustainability (i.e. environment, economic, and equity) as well as scopes of sustainability (i.e. issues, scales, time frames, and levels of abstraction). The term “sustainability” itself was used in ways that mend dimensions and scopes of sustainability - and communicate thinking holistically about sustainability - yet participants also expressed thinking holistically about sustainability through a variety of semantic appendages. These semantic appendages, or what I refer to as unifying concepts, ultimately served as markers of thinking holistically about sustainability. A handful of words and phrases were especially

notable, including “survival” and “thoughtful development.” The following selection showcases one application of “survival,” which is drawn upon by the participant when asked about the meaning of sustainability:

RR: Okay, how about this word sustainability. What does that mean to you?

ID35: That’s a good question. At first, what immediately comes to mind is environmental sustainability, because that’s, you know, as the kids would say, ‘that’s the house that’s on fire right now.’ And what are we doing at the local level to address environmental issues. But it also has to do with economic sustainability, and that’s what I guess I’ve been talking about mostly, like how does the city survive and bring in enough revenue to support an infrastructure that contributes to the quality of life for everybody. So that has to be there as well. So it’s about survival, and how do we maintain a level and a lifestyle where everyone in the community can thrive. Sometimes it’s not like people having more, sometimes it’s people giving up something so other people can have enough.

This passage demonstrates several matters detailed up to this point. First, this participant integrated the different dimensions of sustainability, moving from environment to economy and then transitioning to equity and “quality of life for everybody.” Second, this participant incorporated different scopes of sustainability. Multiple issues were mentioned, along with different scales (for example, globally “the house that’s on fire right now” was juxtaposed to “the local level”). At the same time, different levels of abstraction were implicated. For example, the community level based on quality of life for everybody, but also the organizational-institutional level based on city government as a governing apparatus. Third, the word survival served as a unifying concept to mend together multiple dimensions and scopes of sustainability; a semantic appendage that united “environmental issues,” revenue of the city government, governance capacity, quality of life, capacity of the community to thrive, and equity in terms of distribution of resources.

Simply the short phrase “how does the city survive” may be interpreted in several ways, given the possible meanings of “the city” and the many connotations of “survive.” For example, “the city” could refer to the municipal governing apparatus, the geographic area or region, the

collection of organizations and institutions, the social collective, the bio-physical environment and its inhabitants, or something else. Although the undertones of “survive” (and the derivative survival) would require further clarification by this participant, the context in which it was used provides some insight. The incorporation of the different presumed dimensions and scopes of sustainability, combined with the participant’s summarizing thought (“So it’s about survival”), arguably conveys thinking holistically about sustainability. Other participants used survive, survival, and survivability in ways that communicate thinking holistically about sustainability, with descriptions and accounts pertaining to: (1) survival of the fittest, usually in economic terms pertaining to competition among regional cities, (2) species survival of humans and non-humans, (3) temporal survival in the short term, the long term, and across generations, (4) “survival mode” in connection with the struggle to meet basic needs, particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable inhabitants, (5) equitable or just survival, which includes treatment of individuals or groups retaining the right to meet basic needs, and (6) adaptive survival, with reference to the capacity and resilience to withstand future environmental or economic changes.

Thoughtful development was another conspicuous unifying concept used to join the presumed dimensions (and scopes) of sustainability. The phrase “thoughtful development” was typically used in reference to the “Natural Features Protection” ordinance, as one participant asserted in the following exchange:

ID03: The whole point of it [the Strategic Vision] is to make Kalamazoo a place that people want to live. And the plan is pro-development, but it’s more of a thoughtful development.

RR: I’ve heard several people say that - thoughtful development - where does that come from?

ID03: I think, well, it’s a phrase they use a lot in the Natural Features Protection process. And maybe I heard it first from [a city official who] is emphasizing this ordinance is not prevent development, it’s meant to enhance it. That could be your thoughtful.

Multiple interviews affirmed that use of the phrase “thoughtful development” largely originated from the Community Planning and Economic Development Department. Like survival, the phrase thoughtful development was used in ways that merged environment, economic, and equity dimensions of sustainability. In simplest terms, thoughtful development may be defined as supporting property rights and development while preserving nature, but participant interpretations are varied. Referring to the Natural Features Protection (NFP) ordinance, one city official commented:

So in NFP we’ve always talked about ‘It’s not no development, it’s more thoughtful development. So it’s how do we preserve what we say we want to preserve and allow for development? So what are your relief valves, where are your compromises and how do you do that? And that is just the way it works (ID01).

In this passage, the city official invoked the phrase thoughtful development to meld “development” and “preservation” while using the language of compromise. In the process of drafting the NFP ordinance, preservation was used in reference to the bio-physical environment, but also in terms of preservation of property rights of individuals, businesses, organizations, and “development interests.” In the following passage, there was a greater emphasis on the bio-physical environment and “working within the land” when one participant was asked about thoughtful development:

So thoughtful development in the city’s viewpoint - and mine is similar, I don’t know if it would differ - but I think it means working within the land, using the land, and saving as much of what’s there as you can while still allowing for development (ID06).

Several participants also provided more general descriptions of thoughtful development that emphasized the need to consider multiple dimensions and scopes of sustainability. The participant previously cited, for example, also expanded the use of thoughtful development to issues of equity in terms of the outcomes of development:

You’re going to talk to other people who will say ‘Where’s the affordable housing? What about gentrification? What about those things?’ I think that they are important, but we can’t let perfect get in the way of good. And I’m not saying gentrification is a

good thing, I'm just saying that it's thoughtful development. So if people start buying up big tracts of land on the Northside because it's cheap, it better be a pretty robust conversation [with] that neighborhood and those neighborhood leaders on where's the win-win. It's not just all about money. So a developer comes in and buys up tracts of land, I think it's up to the city to work with them and say "They're not a non-profit, they're there to make money, but we have to incentivize them in some way, whether it's money or whatever, to say we want that development because it puts more money on a tax rolls, because that's what we need, but how do we do it in a responsible way that doesn't just turn these into another set of \$1,600 a month condos for rich college kids and retirees, so now where do the people that don't have that money, you know (ID06).

In this passage, thoughtful development is about ensuring a "win-win" between stakeholders, with Kalamazoo's city government taking on the mediator role, for example, between neighborhood leaders and developers. Thoughtful development was similarly used in connection with urban governance and the need for "good processes," as shown in the following exchange with a city official:

RR: So you said thoughtful. I've heard this from many people in the city in particular, this whole like 'thoughtful development'. What would that mean to you?

ID19: Mm-hmm. We have to listen to our constituents. I think we as a city administration and leadership have to make good decisions and we have to have good processes. Good processes for input from employees, from residents, from business owners, from anyone that has a stake in the game. So again, that's what thoughtful means to me, is really how are we doing this - do we have a good process? How are we getting input, and does it make sense? Are we looking at trends? What are the most successful cities in America doing? I mean, there's blueprint after blueprint after blueprint out there. We don't have to go out there and create this whole new thing, there's successful things out there right now.

Multiple "scopes" of sustainability were also addressed when participants shared their insights to thoughtful development. For example, different scales and levels of abstraction, including at the individual level (e.g. individual property rights), the group level (e.g. city administration and staff, neighborhood groups and residents, business owners and development interests), the community level (e.g. "What are the most successful cities doing?") as well as the system level (e.g. "good processes").

Thoughtful development served as a marker of thinking holistically about sustainability, but also served as a conceptual remedy to perceived tensions between the dimensions of sustainability. In the context of the NFP ordinance, thoughtful development was also treated as a development strategy. In chapter seven, the case of Natural Features Protection draws attention to governance sustainability, where Kalamazoo's municipal governing apparatus attempted to manage the tension between (economic) development and (environmental) preservation, as played out between different "sustainability stakeholders" (e.g. environmentalist and neighborhood coalitions, developers, business interests, neighborhood inhabitants).

The phrase "responsible development" was also used by some participants, and this phrase also appears under the "strategic goal" of "Environmental Responsibility" in the city's Strategic Vision, where responsible development is to "encourage sustainable community redevelopment and rehabilitation practices that address blighted buildings, and preserve and protect historic properties" (Strategic Vision 2017:40). While the Strategic Vision description of responsible development was narrower, participants I interviewed linked responsible development to the environmental, economic, social equity, and governance sustainability dimensions.

Aside from survival and thoughtful development, several other words and phrases were also used in ways that signal thinking holistically about sustainability. For example: balance, livability, quality of life, and the collection of "three's" frameworks such as three pillars, three legs of a stool, three buckets, or the three E's. Quality of life was often invoked when participants were asked about each of the dimensions of sustainability. When asked about economic sustainability, for instance, one participant replied:

Well, for the city of Kalamazoo, that would probably be first and foremost the maintenance of a tax base that allows the city to operate in a sustainable manner. And development that doesn't negatively affect the quality of life around Kalamazoo. Other things like the active implementation of complete streets and making mobility for all a priority in Kalamazoo (ID03).

When asked about environmental sustainability immediately afterwards, this participant once again invoked quality of life:

Well, that's another quality of life issue. There's air and water quality in Kalamazoo remains such that it's not negatively affecting people's health or their lives. That the city's natural resources are not depleted in the name of development and that we continue to have and expand our tree cover, people's access to natural areas, things like that. And that industry becomes an active partner in that effort (ID03).

In this instance, "quality of life" operated as a unifying concept that binds multiple dimensions of sustainability. The response reinforces thinking holistically about sustainability, whereby participants treated the dimensions of sustainability as overlapping, interconnected parts-of-a-whole.

*Re-envisioning the relationships between environment, economy, and equity*

One goal of the interviews was to gather participants' insights to how the environmental, economic, and equity dimensions of sustainability are linked to one another. As participants' made sense of the presumed dimensions and scopes of sustainability, they also made inferences about the *relationships* between the presumed dimensions of sustainability. In other words, insights to how the interconnected parts of sustainability are in fact interconnected. Participants often described the degree or strength of interconnectedness, the direction of relationships, and the relative importance (or relative consequence) of each dimension. When asked about what would make Kalamazoo an environmentally sustainable city, for example, one participant replied:

For Kalamazoo to become environmentally sustainable? Well I mean, it's hard because I think that real sustainability ties up all three of those things [environment, economic, and social equity sustainability]. And I think that any of them acting in isolation makes it harder for the other two to remain healthy as well. So I really see it as the three legged stool. That there is balance there and that I think that if you focus entirely on environmental issues - as much as that is a huge passion of mine - if you do that out of context of people's sense of well-being, or equity is a good way of putting it like you said, and if you do that out of the context of people's economic conditions - you're going to have a very difficult time getting people on board. But if all three of those things are tied up together and you find ways that truly can advance all three of those issues at the same time, you have a much higher likelihood of getting a significant part of the community on board (ID23).

In this passage, environmental sustainability is differentiated from “real sustainability” which “ties up” environment, economy, and equity. For this participant, “real sustainability” means “to find ways that truly can advance all three” while “getting people on board” in terms of garnering community support. The statement that “any of them acting in isolation makes it harder for the other two to remain healthy” communicates a specific interpretation about the *relationships* between environment, economy, and equity. Used in the previously cited passage, the “three-legged stool” indicates thinking holistically about sustainability (treating sustainability as overlapping, interconnected parts-of-a-whole), yet also raises questions about how those interconnected parts are in fact interconnected. The three-legged stool reveals a key question and central point of conflict among participants: is one dimension - one “leg” of the stool - more or less important to prioritize? Does one dimension “carry more weight” or are the dimensions of sustainability relatively equal parts-of-a-whole?

The interviews revealed that participants held diverging interpretations on how environment, economy, and equity are in fact interconnected, or rather interdependent. While a commitment to thinking holistically about sustainability was relatively shared across participants, there were notable differences in whether one dimension was viewed as more important. By “more important,” I do not mean importance in terms of intrinsic value or inherent worth (a matter of sustainability ethics), but rather importance in terms of weight, influence, and degree of consequence. In some instances, greater weight was assigned to the environmental dimension of sustainability, whereby participants viewed the quality of the environment or the ecological integrity of the planet as most consequential. In other instances, greater weight was assigned to the economic dimension, whereby participants emphasized financial conditions, economic opportunities, and how “it comes down to money” (ID06). Participants who centered the equity dimension, however, insisted that “it always has to come back to quality of life...[and] building a more equitable way to distribute resources” (ID31).

To put it another way, participants made sense of the relationships between environment, economy, and equity by “centering” the dimensions of sustainability while retaining a sense of thinking holistically about sustainability. I designate each of these respectively as eco-centric holism, economic-centric holism, and equity-centric holism.

The re-envisioning of sustainability through the lenses of eco-centric holism, economic-centric holism, and equity-centric holism further complicates the sustainability concept. The combination of thinking holistically about sustainability while “centering” the dimensions may be referred to as *hierarchical holism*. In contrast to the conventional tri-circle Venn diagram, or the “planners triangle,” these particular configurations of sustainability may instead be visually represented as a holarchy, whereby each circle or dimension is embedded in another and one at the center. The notion of hierarchical holism has been suggested before in the realm of environmental ethics (Shrader-Frechette 1998).

Shrader-Frechette’s (1998) conceptualization of hierarchical holism consists of laying out a ranking system that integrates individual ethics with a holism framework. Largely rooted in the environmental dimension of sustainability, this position ranks or prioritizes “strong human rights” over environmental welfare, while also prioritizing environmental welfare over “weak human rights” (such as property rights). In terms of sustainability and environmental ethics, the author rejects ethical frameworks based solely on individual welfare, but also rejects ethical frameworks based solely on bio-centric holism. Accordingly, a purely individual welfare approach could be detrimental to the bio-physical environment and planetary ecosystem. At the same time, a purely bio-centric or eco-centric approach could be detrimental to individual welfare (with violations of human rights potentially justified or required)(Shrader-Frechette 1998).

My rendition of hierarchical holism differs from that proposed by Shrader-Frechette (1998) in that hierarchical holism is less about participants’ sustainability *ethics* and rather more about

participants' sustainability *pragmatics*. The participants I interviewed largely demonstrated a shared sustainability ethics (e.g. duties, obligations, or responsibilities) surrounding environmental, economic, and equity sustainability. The difference was whether one dimension was viewed as a more influential part-of-a-whole, and therefore played a greater role in bringing about “real” sustainability. To reiterate, participants “centered” one dimension of sustainability based on perceived weight, influence, or degree of consequence - but not in terms of *intrinsic value*.

The meanings and discourses of sustainability - and envisioning of relationships between environment, economy, and equity - may depend on whether humans view themselves as separate-from-nature or as part-of-nature. While this divide could partly be deciphered in the interviews, participants' concerns were mostly situated around the idea that people in general, and Kalamazoo inhabitants in particular, view themselves as separate-from-nature because human social systems *have separated them from nature*. The environment may be viewed “as a luxury” (ID37) when people are in “survival mode” (ID20) and more concerned about economic insecurity or racial and ethnic discrimination. Accordingly, participants explained that when people maintain a privileged position in the economic and racial and ethnic hierarchy, “it’s very easy for you to start thinking about the environment...it’s very easy to say ‘we’ve got to save the planet’” (ID32). In some ways, this aligns with environmental justice perspectives, which suggest existing social divisions and inequalities must firstly or concurrently be addressed in order to garner grassroots environmental movements that span across social class, race and ethnicity, and other manifestations of social inequality.

Overall, the interviews suggest sustainability remains a complex concept, if not an unresolved concept. In Kalamazoo, sustainability is less of an “empty concept” and rather more of a “full concept” heavily imbued with nuance and deliberation. In order to further ground the contents of this chapter, the next section spotlights the city of Kalamazoo’s efforts to craft a citywide sustainability plan. The “case” of the Sustainability Strategy exemplifies the processes of

conceptualizing sustainability and thinking holistically about sustainability as actualized in the Kalamazoo context.

### *The Case of the Sustainability Strategy*

In the summer of 2019, the city of Kalamazoo's Department of Community Planning and Economic Development began work on a citywide plan that came to be known as the "Sustainability Strategy." The idea of a city plan specific to sustainability - a sustainability plan - was reportedly floating around the departments for some time. Several factors may have prevented a full focus on development of an official sustainability plan, namely the launch of Imagine Kalamazoo in 2015 and subsequent work on the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan in 2017. The approval of the Foundation for Excellence in 2017, changes in staffing, and work on the Natural Features Protection ordinance in 2019 also may have delayed work on a citywide sustainability plan.

The Sustainability Strategy was in part derived from the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative, which I revisit in later chapters. One of the goals and products of Imagine Kalamazoo was the 2017 Strategic Vision, a planning document that incorporated community participation and outlined a "vision" for the community that would thereafter inform the 2025 Master Plan. Given the breadth and accelerated timeline of producing the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan, a sustainability plan was not the primary directive of Imagine Kalamazoo. At the same time, the contents and scope of Imagine Kalamazoo arguably signify elements of a sustainability plan, even if not by name. The terms "sustainability" and "sustainable" are periodically used in the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan, usually linked to "environmental responsibility" and "sustainable community redevelopment," although the terms are also used in reference to "good governance," revenue, zoning, food sources, and neighborhood associations and coalitions (Master Plan 2017; Strategic Vision 2017). One "strategic goal" of the Strategic Vision is "Environmental Responsibility," the closest resemblance to sustainability in the conventional bio-physical

environmental sense of the word. This strategic goal consists of several categorical “directions” and actions: waste management, responsible development, efficient public transportation, water management, healthy food access, and sustainability and conservation.

The 2025 Master Plan called for a climate action plan, of which there have been two manifestations in 2017 and 2019. Although neither version constitutes a formal or official plan adopted by the city commission, both provide recommendations and a framework for developing a full climate action plan. The 2017 Kalamazoo Climate Action Plan was the capstone project for students in the Master of International Development Administration program in the political science department at Western Michigan University. This plan was developed alongside the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative that produced the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan. Serving as a “guide for city administrators as they move forward in the planning process,” the 2017 Kalamazoo Climate Action Plan laid out a series of recommendations for the city to put into action (Clements et al. 2017). Several “areas of action” were addressed including buildings, transportation, trees and gardens, local food, waste management, and engaged community. The more recent 2019 city of Kalamazoo Climate Action Plan Framework was similarly produced, where the city of Kalamazoo collaborated with undergraduate and graduate students at Michigan State University’s School of Planning Design and Construction. Building on the 2017 plan, the 2019 incarnation consisted of a review of climate action plan “best practices” and case studies, accompanied by climate vulnerability analyses for Kalamazoo and interviews with city staff and “key community partners” (Cangelosi et al. 2019). The 2019 plan was in development alongside the Sustainability Strategy and, similar to the 2017 plan, “ultimately is meant to be a guide to help the city of Kalamazoo move closer to achieving a lower carbon output and create a more sustainable and resilient city for its residents” (Cangelosi et al. 2019). Driven by the goal of “Environmental Responsibility” in the city’s Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan, the ensuing Sustainability

Strategy was slated to be more extensive and comprehensive than the proposed climate action plans.

*The Sustainability Strategy team*

One of the first actions toward the Sustainability Strategy was to organize an advisory team made up of residents, experts, and city staff. While the planning department would take on the bulk of the work in drafting the plan, the team would provide direction and lay out a “vision of sustainability for the city” (ID05). I did not attend the first meeting of the “Sustainability Strategy team,” although I was present for the four meetings that occurred from August 2019 to January 2020, in addition to a community “kick-off” event in September 2019. After learning about the team early on in my interviews, I requested to sit in at the meetings and was thereafter invited as an active participant. Attending the meetings afforded me the opportunity to observe and contribute to the meetings, but also provided access to additional interview participants. This section is heavily based on my interviews with eight members of the Sustainability Strategy team, in addition to my own observations and participation in multiple meetings.

The team was made up of about twenty community members from different activist and professional backgrounds, ranging from nonprofit organizations and environmental groups to university administrators, faculty, and students. In addition to the sustainable development coordinator leading the team, there were several departmental city staff who served as contributing members of the team. The sustainable development coordinator title itself was relatively new to the planning department, with a scope of responsibilities extending beyond the Sustainability Strategy. Members were recruited by word of mouth and targeted networking by the sustainable development coordinator. The first few meetings were nearly full while the later meetings had variable attendance, although all members were updated regularly through email. Early on, the team was divided into subcommittees that also met separately to discuss certain topics in more depth, such as natural resources, community engagement, targets and tracking, and resiliency.

A community event in September 2019 was orchestrated in order to “kick-off” the Sustainability Strategy and the community involvement portion of the project. Held at the Kalamazoo Farmers Market, the event hosted multiple speakers as well as the launch of a community survey on sustainability and climate action priorities. Paper surveys were made available to the event attendees, although there were successive efforts to distribute the survey to a wider subset of the community, which included making the survey available online and reaching out to the neighborhood associations. The Sustainability Strategy team was involved in reviewing the survey questions and providing input to the overall design and objectives of the survey. The survey results were later discussed at the team meetings.

The agenda for the team meetings typically consisted of subcommittee reports, group activities, open discussion, and updates on relevant community happenings. Open group discussion was usually the central feature of the meetings. After the themes and goals were settled and a “Sustainability Goal Map” was finalized in January 2020, a series of focus groups were planned for February and March 2020. The focus groups would gather additional insights to the themes and goals by seeking out individuals, organizations, and relevant stakeholders for each theme. With the completion of my interviews in late 2019 and the declaration of a global pandemic in March 2020, it is at this point one could say I “left the field” (for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this study, see the “Afterword” that follows the concluding chapter).

#### *Beyond the pillars and thinking holistically*

Alongside my participation in the Sustainability Strategy team meetings, the interviews with team members displayed a series of notable and familiar patterns. Like the overall interviews, the Sustainability Strategy team highlighted the different scopes of sustainability. Team members identified and debated the issues, scales, time frames, and levels of abstraction when making sense of the sustainability concept. This was evident simply in *the naming of the plan* as a “sustainability plan” or

a “climate plan.” One of the initial tasks of the team was to identify what the plan was in the first place. In the following passage, one team member recounted the first meeting of the team (which I did not attend):

ID03: The first order of business when we met this week was - we’re supposed to come back in two weeks - is what do we call this plan. I think the Master Plan calls for a climate action plan. I mean there’s people that really say this has got to be a climate action plan because there’s a crisis that we need to address.

RR: What do you think?

ID03: Um, I think it’s going to be a plan that covers more than that. You know, I agree that there’s a crisis and we need to address it. I think the ability to address it on a city level, I think there is a lot of potential, but it’s not the whole answer. It’s also a regional issue because not everything affects emissions, climate resilience, and degradation. And anything like that is not limited to people living in Kalamazoo for our region.

The team ultimately settled on a sustainability plan, although interviews with team members indicated a difference in opinion did in fact exist. The surface divide may have been between those who view a climate plan as too narrow and those who view a climate plan as the most pivotal or consequential. Although a range of different reasons were cited by team members, the divide largely revolved around carbon emissions reductions, which a climate plan may imply and prioritize. As multiple team members indicated, some Sustainability Strategy team members were adamant about setting targets for emissions reductions, yet others communicated that sustainability was “so much more than that” (ID05).

Beyond the naming of the plan, there were countless underlying discussions and exchanges about the *scope* of the Sustainability Strategy. Throughout the course of the Sustainability Strategy team meetings, there were conversations around what issues are “sustainability issues” in the first place, and then what issues should be addressed (and prioritized) in the city’s Sustainability Strategy. Although the Sustainability Strategy was inherently a citywide plan, the scale of sustainability remained a point of discussion in terms of if and how the city plan would connect to regional,

statewide, national, and global scales. In the previously cited passage, the team member questioned the ability of the city to address certain issues that were regional issues and “not limited to people living in Kalamazoo” (ID03). The time frame of the plan also became a point of dialogue. Specific time frames were regularly questioned, especially with discussions about setting targets around carbon emission reductions. For example, the timeline for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by a certain percentage (e.g. 90% by 2025, 2035, or 2050) and baseline year. Team members also conversed about the extent the Sustainability Strategy should focus on existing intra-generational concerns versus future inter-generational concerns. Different levels of abstraction were also addressed by the team. There were exchanges about the ways the Sustainable Strategy could target individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and systems. As multiple team members pointed out, decisions would have to be made about whether the plan would only affect city operations or whether it would extend communitywide.

The team on the whole seemingly swayed towards bio-physical environmental conceptualizations of sustainability, which was likely due to a few reasons. The team was, after all, heavily made up of members with environmental backgrounds in activist and professional roles. Moreover, the “Environmental Responsibility” goal (from the city’s Strategic Vision) was largely the branching off point for the Sustainability Strategy, in addition to the call for a climate action plan in the 2025 Master Plan. The economic dimension of sustainability usually transpired with regards to the financial viability of the Sustainability Strategy, such as the potential costs (or savings) for the city as well as for individuals, groups, or organizations. A smaller subset of team members was more adamant with raising questions about the equity dimension of sustainability, although discussions about equity as participation and community involvement were routine. Governance sustainability was arguably a central focus of the team pertaining to the capacity of Kalamazoo’s municipal government to implement a citywide sustainability plan. Team members, for example, periodically

spoke of the Sustainability Strategy in the context of the organizational dynamics of Kalamazoo's municipal government, the role of its city commission, and the influence of its citizen advisory boards such as the Environmental Concerns Committee. Chapter seven is structured around governance sustainability, where the Sustainability Strategy is placed in the larger context of urban governance and urban sustainability efforts in Kalamazoo.

While the presumed dimensions of sustainability were addressed and dissected in earlier meetings, the Sustainability Strategy quickly evolved beyond the conventional three pillars framework of environmental, economic, and social (equity) sustainability. Like interview participants on the whole, the Sustainability Strategy team treated sustainability as a holistic concept made up of overlapping, interconnected parts-of-a-whole. Sustainability was the unifying concept that brought together multiple presumed dimensions of sustainability and scopes of sustainability. There were tendencies to gravitate toward the environmental dimension of sustainability, yet there was enough advocacy from team members and city staff such that one dimension did not become lost. At most, the environmental dimension of sustainability was “centered” while retaining a sense of thinking holistically about sustainability, thus re-envisioning sustainability through the lens of eco-centric holism.

In August 2019, a Sustainability Strategy Update was presented to the Environmental Concerns Committee, where the goals of the Sustainability Strategy were listed: “A green and healthy city, focused on shared prosperity, dedicated to a just transition, increases community resiliency and biodiversity, and strives for a carbon-neutral future” (City of Kalamazoo 2019c). About five months later, one of the products of the team was finalized: the “Sustainability Goal Map.” This visual representation lists the goals and actions of the Sustainability Strategy, categorized into several themes: energy, food, adaptation, waste, mobility, nature, built environment, and a catch-all “parking lot” theme (City of Kalamazoo 2020a). The Sustainability Goal Map illustrates

how the conventional three pillars or dimensions of sustainability have largely been dismantled by the team. Instead, sustainability is categorized into several themes with overlapping, interconnected goals and actions. For example, the theme of food consists of several goals and actions, yet food-related goals and actions are listed in nearly every other theme. Likewise, there is a thematic category for Waste, yet waste-related goals and actions are listed under multiple other themes. The presumed dimensions of sustainability may be present, but the dimensions are not separated out and the boundaries between environment, economy, and equity are not necessarily clear. In this sense, the Sustainability Goal Map illustrates how the team conceptualized sustainability beyond the pillars and around thinking holistically about sustainability.

Team members expressed optimism about the Sustainability Strategy, with multiple people praising the sustainable development coordinator, the existence of the team itself, and the “better position” of the city compared to past efforts (ID15). However, team members also pointed to the challenges to the team, as the following exchange shows:

ID23: Oh with the team itself, I think it's incredibly well-intentioned and I'm just delighted that the city has a sustainability team at all. My, that is good news. I am always concerned with any of the city teams - the timelines are very aggressive, all the people in those teams are always over committed, and I think that it's just - I think it makes it hard to get deep work done. But I think that I do think it helps keep momentum going, so I think there are, you know, pros and cons.

RR: So what do you see coming out of it?

ID23: At the very least, just to some degree, the existence of it seems like that does some of that networking job that I was just talking about. We're at the meetings, getting people from different organizations who are representing different groups and interests where there is an overlap of values. That gets everybody in the same room, and I think that in and of itself is very, very useful. The fact that some actual climate goals may come out of this...that's pretty spectacular. Whether or not the rest of the community rallies behind those goals is a whole 'nother story, but I think articulating the goals and putting them out there is an excellent first step.

Several team members welcomed the “sense of urgency that activists are really good at,” but were adamant on setting “concrete goals.” This is demonstrated in the following passage after one team

member was asked about the outlook on the team:

I feel fairly good that it exists, so that's cool. It is - I foresee it being a challenge that most of the faces in the room, and I think [the sustainable development coordinator] has even pointed to this before, are coming from an activist background. Like it's really nice we have a guy who represents Public Works on there. He's kind of - I don't want to say the other people are being unreasonable, but he's kind of like a voice of reason, like 'look here's the cost and here's what it's going to take, blah, blah, blah'...And so that's probably my main concern with the sustainability team is folks not coming from a background of implementation and more from activism and organization. So I'm not totally convinced that their objectives are as achievable as they think they are, but I'm all for big goals too (ID22).

This sense of urgency is demonstrated by one team member who, after praising the team and the qualifications of the sustainable development coordinator, expressed concerns about the structure and process of the earlier meetings:

You've been at just one meeting, so this is going to be a critical comment. Even though I think we are making progress, it feels to me a bit as if there's more interest in having a meeting with the things that are supposed to be in a meeting, like people filling out sticky notes and putting them on the wall, than making actual progress. So I think at the first meeting - I don't remember whether it was the whole group or the first meeting of the smaller group...It felt as if everybody was really on board for getting a lot done, and had the tools maybe to do that. But I have felt as if we've not been moving as quickly as the energy for that was (ID15).

Team members also acknowledged and expressed concerns about the racial and ethnic composition of the team. Describing the first meeting (which I did not attend), one team member recounted this observation: "We look around the table and, yeah, it was very diverse gender wise, but it was not very diverse - it was not diverse race wise. And there's a lot of discussion about that" (ID03).

Another team member similarly remarked that "it's a pretty white room" that "hits you over the head" when you look around the room (ID16). In the following passage, the same team member offered one explanation:

It's a pretty white room. Those are the people who have the time and have the positions that, you know, if you really want the folks who are running Bronsons and Westerns and Ks [Kalamazoo Valley Community College or Kalamazoo College], that's who they are. So I think that it says more about our own society structure than it does about the city and their choice of people who should be on a committee.

Does that make sense? Because those are the people. Those are probably all the right people in the room, for their ability to move the other pieces, yet it is a terrible cross-section of Kalamazoo (ID16).

The planning department and several team members were therefore persistent about public participation strategies. The launch of the focus groups was in part geared toward greater community involvement and representation, along with the community survey and “kick-off” event for the Sustainability Strategy at the Kalamazoo Farmers Market. One team member recounted discussions about building a table at the farmers market as a public participation strategy, commenting that “I don’t know if you’ve ever been to the farmers market - it’s not very demographically diverse either” (ID03). Like typical city plans, a public comment period is expected prior to adoption of the Sustainability Strategy. The role of public participation and the city’s various public participation efforts (especially for the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative) are discussed in chapter seven.

Throughout the remaining chapters, I periodically return to the case of the Sustainability Strategy, which is only one piece of Kalamazoo’s sustainability story. While the Sustainability Strategy remains “in progress” and has yet to be completed and adopted by the city commission, the case up to this point provides several insights to this project. In this chapter, the Sustainability Strategy team highlighted, in action, the processes of conceptualizing sustainability beyond the pillars as well as thinking holistically about sustainability. In the open dialogue and group discussion portions of the meetings, the sustainability concept was disentangled, debated, and reconfigured to the Kalamazoo context. With the finalization of the Sustainability Goal Map, the Sustainability Strategy team - over a period of six months - constructed its own discursive framework of sustainability. Like my interview participants on the whole, the team exhibited thinking holistically about sustainability, but with the additional task of translating this into concrete goals, actions, and policies under the purview of Kalamazoo’s city government.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter explored how inhabitants of Kalamazoo conceptualized sustainability and made sense of the relationships of environment, economy, and equity. By this point, the conceptualization of sustainability by participants has been thoroughly exhausted and it may be of little value to continue unpacking the sustainability concept. Of greater importance is the implications for the study at hand as well as for inhabitants of Kalamazoo. I have shown how thinking holistically about sustainability was prominent among participants, who were reluctant to separate the dimensions in the first place. Sustainability was treated as a concept made up of overlapping, interconnected parts-of-a-whole. Along with the dimensions of sustainability (environment, economic, and equity), participants also demarcated what I refer to as the scopes of sustainability (issues, scale, time frame, level of abstraction). Underscored by the case of the Sustainability Strategy, this indicates a nuanced, complex understanding of sustainability. Several unifying concepts beyond the sustainability concept were employed to communicate the linkage of dimensions (and scopes) of sustainability. In other words, unifying concepts helped mend the different dimensions and scopes of sustainability. In conjunction with thinking holistically about sustainability, participants also “centered” or ranked dimensions by assigning greater weight to one or more dimensions (in terms of relative importance or consequence), which I referred to as hierarchical holism. At the very least, this suggests that conventional sustainability discourses or frameworks propagated by researchers and policymakers are an oversimplification of how everyday persons make sense of complex relationships between environment, economy, and equity. In this study, participants from diverse backgrounds and positions reflected on the sustainability concept, articulating nuanced understandings of sustainability and the relationships between environment, economy, and equity. The Sustainability Strategy team built on and worked to translate these discourses and frameworks into an overarching sustainability plan for the city.

This chapter illuminates several of the themes and key areas of interest outlined in the literature review. A leading interest for this study is whether there are any prominent or widespread discursive frameworks of sustainability in Kalamazoo. Some scholars have outlined specific discourses (While et al. 2004; Baker 2006; While, Jonas, and Gibbs 2010; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012; Lorr 2012; Griggs et al. 2017; Hodson and Marvin 2017). It is unlikely there are any all-encompassing discourses; rather, there are many coexisting discourses that may be conflicting in some ways while harmonizing in other ways. Furthermore, individuals or groups or communities can “operate” on multiple and potentially conflicting discourses at once. While the pattern of thinking holistically about sustainability and, in turn, hierarchical holism, are prominent enough to constitute higher-level discursive frameworks in Kalamazoo, these do not negate or dismiss conventional or familiar sustainability discourses. Rather, these simply operate as a lens through which various discourses may be molded, shaped, and re-envisioned.

Various familiar discourses of sustainability were made evident throughout this study, with inhabitants at times debating and persuading each other in the semi-public sphere. Interestingly, there was little evidence of discourses of ecological modernization, whereby sustainability is premised on a “win-win” relationship between economy and ecology, and environmental problems are therefore resolved through market-led technological developments, improvements in efficiency, and competition. At least in Kalamazoo, the limited presence of ecological modernization suggests that urban sustainability discourses are in fact evolving in ways that move beyond conventional frameworks. At the same time, discourses of urban managerialism and entrepreneurialism were partially evident in conceptualizations of sustainability, especially in terms of “governance sustainability,” a matter to be further explored in the remaining chapters. The comprehensive three pillars discourse, most clearly represented by the United Nations Brundtland Report, was also apparent in Kalamazoo. In the case of the Sustainability Strategy, discourses of the “climate-ready

city” and “low-carbon city” (with the emphasis on reducing carbon emissions) were clearly evident. Discourses of the “smart city” were also hinted at, which become more apparent in future chapters regarding the activities of Kalamazoo’s municipal government. “Smart-city” discourses revolve around the use of data and information communication technologies to manage the city and make efficient use of energy, transport, and public resources.

Several other key areas of interest outlined in the literature review were evident in participant’s conceptualizations of sustainability. The spatial politics of sustainability, for example, was hinted at when participants made distinctions between different scales of sustainability (e.g. local and global) or when certain sustainability issues were emphasized in different neighborhoods. The unifying concept of thoughtful development highlighted the tensions between the presumed dimensions of sustainability, but the context in which it was used also signaled elements of post-political sustainability. With regards to the process of the Natural Feature Protection (NFP) ordinance, the unifying concept of thoughtful development was plausibly used to “fix” tensions between environmentalist coalitions and development interests. This initially points to a strategic “sustainability fix” and the often observed co-optation of environmentalism by development interests, however the unique conditions and events around the emergence of the NFP ordinance may suggest otherwise, a matter explored in chapter seven.

Campbell (2013) illustrated “The Planner’s Triangle” to represent the different conflicts of sustainability and sustainable development that result in urban planners adopting different worldviews and priorities. It appears these same conflicts and debates are occurring in Kalamazoo - and not simply limited to urban planning or city officials. This chapter has shown how discourses of sustainability are disentangled and reassembled or repackaged in Kalamazoo. The case of the Sustainability Strategy in particular highlights how discourses of sustainability are constructed and negotiated, however there remains much more to unravel in Kalamazoo’s sustainability story. Similar

to the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit that opened this chapter, the Sustainability Strategy was, in effect, about disentangling the sustainability concept and gauging how to transfer discourses of sustainability into practices of sustainability. Widening the purview of environmental organizing and broadening the scope of the environment, attendees at the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit grappled with the conceptual and practical challenges of environmental organizing. Likewise, Sustainability Strategy team members deliberated over the sustainability concept while identifying the actions the city government could pursue. The existence of both entities appears to operate as “sustainability networking apparatuses” in themselves by connecting individuals, groups, and organizations - a “directory of who does what” as one participant described the Kalamazoo Environment Summit (ID23). While the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit was geared more toward environmental organizations in the community and region, the Sustainability Strategy was a broader, city government-led effort that involved the participation and recruitment of individuals from a variety of sectors. The Sustainability Strategy and the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit demonstrate community efforts to make sense of sustainability, but also show community efforts to lay out a path for a sustainable city and community. As pointed out by members of the Sustainability Strategy team and other individuals I interviewed, the problems and challenges that face a citywide sustainability plan extend far beyond discursive frameworks of sustainability. The prospects of a sustainability plan - and the realization of a “sustainable Kalamazoo” - rest on existing social systems, processes, and institutions that may or may not be setup to reify discursive frameworks of sustainability. While this chapter has focused on the abstract meanings and discursive frameworks of sustainability in Kalamazoo, the remaining chapters more tangibly explore the dilemmas, challenges, and strategies enroute to a “sustainable Kalamazoo.” From the vantage point of Kalamazoo’s many historical legacies, the next chapter considers the community narratives, discursive struggles, and practical dilemmas of urban sustainable development in Kalamazoo.

## CHAPTER V

### DEVELOPING A SUSTAINABLE KALAMAZOO

#### *Vignette: Marcell*

Slipping the leftover change into my pocket, I stepped outside the door of a local eatery I frequent. Focused on returning home after a week of interviews and city meetings, I hardly noticed somebody heading toward me from across the paved lot. I looked up and made eye contact, exchanging a brief smile and nod of the head.

“Hey,” calmly exclaimed the unfamiliar passerby. I offered another casual smile and head nod, matching the greeting with “Hi,” and then continuing across the lot.

“Hi. Excuse me, sir?”

With a mild curiosity, I once again looked up and made eye contact, taking notice of the six foot plus broad-shouldered, mid-aged Black man approaching me with a slow stride.

“Thank you for acknowledging me.”

I paused for a moment, attempting to grasp the meaning of the statement. “Err...yeah,” I muttered, hastily moving from a state of mild curiosity to fresh confusion.

“Thank you for acknowledging me. For making eye contact and not ignoring me,” explained Marcell, whose name I learned a few moments later.

Reactively, I immediately asked “What do you mean?” Marcell then described his attempts to ask for change for the bus, which resulted in him being ignored, as if he could neither be seen nor heard. I asked Marcell if that happens a lot, if people pretend they cannot see or hear him.

“Ohh yeah.” Marcell spoke slowly, nodding his head with widened eyes. Marcell held onto a layered facial expression, which seemed to be a mixture of disbelief and uncertainty about what would happen next. I gave Marcell the change. Repeatedly giving dap, Marcell told me about his noticeable occupational injuries, subsequent job loss, and ongoing struggles with securing new employment. I asked him about where he was staying and he indicated the shelter downtown was his destination. For some time, we talked about Marcell’s former employer, the previous year’s homeless encampment protest at Bronson Park, recent downtown development, housing, and Kalamazoo’s donor families. As we carried on our conversation outside the local eatery, measured glares were repeatedly directed our way: a couple entering the eatery, a seated patron peering out the window, an employee or two. Suddenly, Marcell was visible.

#### *Introduction*

The chance encounter with Marcell (a pseudonym) occurred in summer 2019, around the same time I was conducting interviews and attending various city meetings. I later wondered why Marcell had abruptly become visible to others in the vicinity. Perhaps it was my whiteness. Maybe it

was simply the act of acknowledgement itself. Or maybe it was something else. I contemplated why Marcell had been ignored in the first place. Was it Marcell's appearance or demeanor? Were the wary glares directed at me, Marcell, or both of us? Were they looks of approval or condemnation? Regardless, the interaction with Marcell shows who and what is at stake in the pursuit of a "sustainable Kalamazoo." The phrase "sustainable Kalamazoo" refers to an imagined ideal and mental construct as envisioned by inhabitants, scholars, policymakers, and even the participants I interviewed. As the previous chapter suggests, individuals may hold contrasting interpretations of what constitutes a sustainable Kalamazoo and how it may come to fruition.

Likely far from atypical, Marcell's situation also hints at circumstances that extend beyond discourses of sustainability and abstract frameworks of the bio-physical environment. Developing a sustainable Kalamazoo brings an array of dilemmas, saturated with historical and social-cultural circumstances that shape Kalamazoo's capacity for environmental, economic, and social transformation. In many ways, Kalamazoo has transformed over the past few decades, yet it has not transcended history. The community is saddled with the social and economic shifts of the past, with longstanding social divisions that pose challenges for the future. Developing a sustainable Kalamazoo not only raises questions about who will be affected (and how), but also who will be positioned to experience a sustainable Kalamazoo. As the interaction with Marcell shows, some inhabitants already experience - and live - in a Kalamazoo that marginalizes rather than welcomes their being.

In the previous chapter, I detailed how participants made sense of the sustainability concept and how they envisioned "sustainability" in the Kalamazoo context. This chapter addresses the historical and social-cultural circumstances around "sustainable development" in Kalamazoo, once again in accordance with insights gained from interview participants, city planning documents and initiatives, and my own observations and participation in activities and events. First, I outline

multiple *community narratives* of Kalamazoo. These community narratives embody various historical legacies and ultimately shape Kalamazoo's prospects for sustainable development. Second, I describe several interconnected *dilemmas of development* in Kalamazoo. As Kalamazoo inhabitants seek to develop their neighborhoods and community on the whole, they must contend with the perplexities of gentrification, homelessness, and housing. Lastly, I turn to the case of Imagine Kalamazoo where I discuss the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative helmed by Kalamazoo's city government. The city's "Strategic Vision" planning document is briefly outlined. As one product of Imagine Kalamazoo, the Strategic Vision lays out numerous "strategic goals" that correspond to a collective "vision" for the community. Concluding with insights that build on the literature review, this chapter represents one more piece to Kalamazoo's sustainability story.

### *Community Narratives of Kalamazoo*

Three community "narratives" were prominent across the interviews: (1) the "thriving community" narrative, (2) the "two Kalamazoos" narrative, and (3) the "Kalamazoo can-do" narrative. By community narratives of Kalamazoo, I mean patterned accounts and sense-making of various features of Kalamazoo. Embedded in these narratives are Kalamazoo's many historical legacies, including the legacies of deindustrialization and redevelopment, racial and ethnic inequality, poverty and homelessness, and social services and philanthropy. The community narratives outlined in this section are not necessarily comprehensive or definitive, but rather serve to contextualize the circumstances around Kalamazoo's sustainable development.

### *From "ghost town" to "thriving community"*

Kalamazoo's history can be traced back to land occupied by, among others, the Pottawatomi and Miami peoples of Southwest Michigan. Following white European occupation and settlement by "founder" Titus Bronson, various industries emerged and dissolved over the last few centuries. The celery industry allegedly made a name for Kalamazoo as a "celery city," followed by the designation

as a “paper city” given the prevalence of the paper industry and substantial number of paper mills. The narrative of Kalamazoo’s transition from a “ghost town” to a “thriving community” primarily concerns the post-war decades defined by waves of industrial shifts, deindustrialization, and reinvestment in the community. Several participants marked the loss of multiple paper mills in the 1970s and 1980s as a major downturn and precursor to the “ghost town” sentiment, combined with the reverberating economic and social impacts of various industrial shifts. Multiple participants recalled the “company town feel” that previously defined Kalamazoo, especially with the presence of The Upjohn Company, the Kalamazoo-founded pharmaceutical manufacturer that operated as one of the largest regional employers. The Upjohn Company underwent a merger in the 1990s and was later acquired by the pharmaceutical conglomerate Pfizer in the early 2000s, which resulted in the downsizing and relocation of headquarters.

Various other changes altered the landscape of downtown Kalamazoo in particular. In the late 1990s, the downtown experienced the loss of multiple department stores, along with the reintroduction of motorized traffic through the Kalamazoo Mall - the “nation’s first” outdoor pedestrian mall. One participant described Kalamazoo’s downtown of the 1990s relative to the “thriving community” of the present:

The downtown was completely different. The downtown was dead. Absolutely dead. Wasteland. It was - there was no stores, there were no restaurants... Yeah, it was people came to their jobs and they left, and it was a ghost town on weekends and evenings. Nobody came downtown. The change that has happened over the last twenty years, you know, it has really become a thriving community (ID02).

Participants attributed multiple reasons for Kalamazoo’s eventual transition to a “thriving community.” Often referenced were Kalamazoo’s many “anchor institutions” and industries in education, health care, and manufacturing. “I know that people thought that once Upjohn was gone, the city would just roll up and die,” one participant recalled, “and that has not been the case. It has been able to find new things and new ways to go ahead” (ID21). Despite Kalamazoo’s “ample

opportunity to fall into decay” (ID34), many participants shared the assessment that Kalamazoo had endured its sectoral shifts amidst deindustrialization and urban economic transitions. The growth of the medical and health care sectors was crucial, including the medical equipment manufacturer, Stryker Corporation, and two teaching hospitals, Borgess Medical Center and Bronson Methodist Hospital. General Motors closed its regional auto plant in the late 1990s, yet the imprint and sway of academic institutions continued to grow. “We’ve diversified some,” one participant remarked, “and in that way [we] become more sustainable or resilient economically, where we’re not so tied to the fate of one company” (ID37).

The “thriving community” narrative was widespread, although participants acknowledged that, despite changes in the downtown, the decades of shifts remain visible throughout the community. With lingering effects of the 2008-2009 recession, some questioned for whom the community is “thriving” while also highlighting the differences among the central downtown and Kalamazoo’s core neighborhoods. Participants - and neighborhood inhabitants - continue to recover from the loss of industries and economic shifts. The residual impacts on neighborhoods - such as the amount of retail, commercial businesses, and employment opportunities - ultimately shape neighborhood quality of life. In chapter eight, I more closely examine how neighborhood leaders, community organizations, and inhabitants are forging self-determined opportunities for commercial businesses, housing, amenities, and overall improved neighborhood quality of life.

### *“Two Kalamazoos”*

The treatment of Kalamazoo as a freshly thriving community was accompanied with the perception of a historically divided community. “You may have heard people talk about this before,” one participant remarked, “We have two Kalamazoos. And the differences are stark” (ID20). The “two Kalamazoos” narrative, which occasionally shows up in news media accounts and local politics, reflects the widespread recognition of persistent inequalities that cross spatial,

socioeconomic, and racial and ethnic lines. When the phrase “two Kalamazoos” was not explicitly used, participants nonetheless pointed to the social contrasts of the community, as the following passage illustrates:

Oh, it's like a tale of two cities around here. Because I mean you can drive - there's like a homeless encampment three blocks from a thirteen story high rise being built. And so the development is really exciting, and it's exciting to see density in the urban core, and potential for better business viability downtown and just more going on downtown because of that. But at the same time, we're not meeting the needs of so many people in our community. And there's like noise about that, but I still don't see a whole lot of action (ID09).

Like this passage, participants often highlighted the social contradictions of the downtown. The “two Kalamazoos” narrative in essence depicts spatial-geographic divides, such as the divide between the downtown core and the surrounding areas, or the divide between neighborhoods. Yet the “two Kalamazoos” also depicts intersecting social-relational divides that are, for example, made visible in the downtown core. Moreover, the income differentials and disparate rates of poverty across the core neighborhoods further underscore the social-relational divide of the “two Kalamazoos.” In some instances, vast wealth disparities are made visible within the same neighborhood, such as the Vine neighborhood's enduring contrast of “millionaires living within less than a mile from houses that were \$8,000” as one participant attested (ID11).

The social-relational divide of the “two Kalamazoos” also exists as a racial and ethnic divide, for example, between whites, Blacks, and Latinos or Hispanics. Many participants spoke of Kalamazoo as “still a pretty segregated city” (ID34) entwined with a history of redlining and housing discrimination against African Americans. Referring to the Northside neighborhood, one participant observed that “you literally go across the tracks and there is all of the African American people who have been redlined into that zone” (ID34). Throughout the interviews, participants addressed Kalamazoo's systemic efforts to exclude communities of color from housing, schooling, and employment opportunities. Commenting on the different core neighborhoods, participants

expressed concerns about the lack of Black owned businesses, Black homeowners, minority employment opportunities, racial profiling and police encounters, and family separation among undocumented Latino persons. Referring to a span of about four decades, one participant concluded that the “culture of the community” had changed little “in terms of non-white people being accepted here in Kalamazoo” (ID36).

Conceding that Kalamazoo has a poverty rate comparable to Flint, Michigan, one participant used the phrase “two Kalamazoos” to refer to a perception gap that may exist among segments of the community, whereby “we have this shining view of ourselves and then there’s the reality” (ID21). In the following exchange, I asked for clarification about the two Kalamazoos when the participant initially invoked the phrase:

ID21: I started talking about the two Kalamazoos...because it is. We have this shining view of ourselves and then there’s the reality.

RR: Okay, is that what the two Kalamazoos is?

ID21: Yeah, yeah.

RR: Shining reality - what do you mean?

ID21: The shining view of ourselves: ‘we’re cool, we’re cultured.’

RR: ‘Progressive?’

ID21: ‘Progressive,’ yeah. ‘And it’s just a wonderful place to be, wonderful place to live. How could you not want to live here?’ And then we’ve got babies dying, and we’ve got poverty, and kids that can’t get through school even when they’ve got the incentive of the Promise.

This participant contrasted select perceptions of Kalamazoo as a “wonderful place to live” with several indicators that exemplify the reality of the “two Kalamazoos.” In the city of Kalamazoo, for example, there is a persistent racial disparity for infant mortality rates. From 2017 through 2019, the infant mortality rate for Kalamazoo city was 7.9 per 1000 births (a rate comparable to the 7.7 per 1000 births for Kalamazoo county). In the city, the white infant mortality rate was 5.2 per 1000 births, which contrasts with the Black infant mortality rate of 16.7 per 1000 births (Michigan

Department of Health and Human Services 2022). A racial and ethnic disparity is also evident for child poverty. Between 2013 and 2017, child poverty (people under 18) was about 20.9% for children who are non-Hispanic white, which contrasts with 51.8% for children who are Black and 43.8% for children who are Hispanic or Latino (Bolter, Robey, and Anderson 2019).

Comparing neighborhoods further illustrates how the “two Kalamazoos” manifests as a spatial-geographic and social-relational divide. Surrounding the central downtown, the core neighborhoods are all located within a few miles of each other, yet the demographics and economic conditions vary considerably from one neighborhood to the next. In the Oakland Drive-Winchell neighborhood, for example, the population is about 80% white. The median value of owner-occupied units is \$189,500 in the Oakland Drive-Winchell neighborhood, which is more than three times the median home values in the diverse Northside, Eastside, and Edison neighborhoods (American Community Survey 2019, 5-year estimates). In one census tract in the Northside neighborhood, the population is 91% Black or African American and the median home value is about \$50,100. Median home values range from \$45,300 to \$68,200 in the Edison neighborhood, one of the most diverse neighborhoods (almost a fifth are Hispanic or Latino and more than one third are Black or African American)(American Community Survey 2019, 5-year estimates).

At the end of the previously cited exchange, the participant referred to the Kalamazoo Promise, the geographically-based scholarship from anonymous donors, which pays up to one hundred percent of college tuition for graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools. This alludes to the historical presence of community philanthropy, which I discuss in chapter six, along with competing narratives around the philanthropic impact of Kalamazoo’s donor families.

*“Kalamazoo can-do”: “Bold,” “progressive,” and “community-minded”*

Cultivated with the community narratives described thus far, a unique exceptionalism permeates Kalamazoo, one that casts Kalamazoo as a “can-do” community on the cusp of

improving quality of life for all. In this narrative, the people and organizations of Kalamazoo retain a special capacity to overcome obstacles. One city official asserted, for example:

People in Kalamazoo in particular - there's like this little hamster bubble of peace. We're just sort of in our space where we're like 'We got this, we can do this.' And that to me is hard to explain to folks that don't live here (ID07).

The “Kalamazoo can-do” narrative characterizes Kalamazoo as a problem-solving community, yet one that is “bold,” “progressive,” and “forward-thinking.” Several credited the city and community with drawing on “creative ideas” (ID34) and “experimenting with new ideas” (ID22). One city official observed: “It seems like there's always like a sort of bold move after bold move, and sort of new different things happening - trying new things” (ID05). Especially in comparison to the region and surrounding communities, some participants described Kalamazoo as having a “strong sense of a liberal community” (ID14) that is becoming “more open and progressive” (ID31), although others objected to this perception. Such assessments were often linked to public and private community initiatives such as the Kalamazoo Promise, Imagine Kalamazoo 2025, or the Foundation for Excellence.

The characterizations of Kalamazoo as “bold” and “progressive” were accompanied with descriptions of Kalamazoo as “community-minded.” Many participants spoke broadly about Kalamazoo as a caring community, guided by shared values of compassion, empathy, and generosity among the “community-minded people” of Kalamazoo (ID02). When asked about how the community has changed, for example, one participant replied:

I think it's changed in many good ways. Like the Kalamazoo Promise and a lot of things like that show that people are trying to look out for each other. We've got several charitable organizations...They're not fully funded by any means, but I think they're decently taken care of. That there is a lot of community-minded people here and I see that getting better as time goes on. That there are more people that are trying to consciously look around them - and not just focus inward - and try to help those organizations (ID02).

Some spoke about the “spirit” of giving in the community while others described their own

neighborhoods as uniquely where “people go out of their way to help each other. You don’t see that in other communities like you do here” (ID10). At times singling out specific entities, such accounts involved references to the extent of community foundations, nonprofit organizations, social services agencies, and grassroots organizing in Kalamazoo. An especially important piece of the Kalamazoo can-do narrative is the historical philanthropic presence of Kalamazoo’s donor families. The “deep pockets” and “philanthropic bent” of Kalamazoo, in the words of participants, places the community in exceptional circumstances relative to other communities.

### *The Dilemmas of Development: Gentrification, Homelessness, and Housing*

The interviews revealed an apprehensive yearning or longing for development and the build-up of Kalamazoo’s downtown and core neighborhoods. Like “sustainability” or “sustainable,” the meaning of “development” was not necessarily uniform, although the environmental, economic, and social equity dimensions could often be deciphered in participants’ descriptions of development. Participants were adamant about the need and desire for development, yet they also expressed concerns about the potentially adverse effects of development in the central downtown, the core neighborhoods, and the community on the whole. Statements such as “I’m pro development” or “I’m not against development” or “There’s nothing wrong with development” were often followed with a list of stipulations and caveats about the forces of development. In this way, participants grappled with the problems and imminent obstacles of development, or what may be referred to as “dilemmas” of development. In this section, I discuss how participants made sense of multiple dilemmas of development, including the dilemmas of gentrification, homelessness, and housing.

### *The “gentrification question”*

Gentrification is typically linked with displacement of populations. This may involve shifts in the socioeconomic and racial and ethnic makeup of a neighborhood or area, whereby higher rents, property values, and overall costs of living are the outcome of external reinvestments in real estate,

housing, and commercial businesses. Across the interviews, there was a general consensus that gentrification involves displacement. Some participants contemplated whether an area is gentrifying if, for example, “nobody lived there before” (ID10) or if “non-white people [are] even trying to get into those spaces” (ID36). Regardless, the question of how to facilitate development without displacing people was the crux of the “gentrification question”:

Well, the whole gentrification question. And so I think I define gentrification probably a little differently than some folks do. I think what it really is to me, is: are we displacing people? Is it a displacement issue? Because we need to bring the cost of living up a little bit, we need to bring people’s wages up so that they can live (ID33).

Similar to the previous passage, some participants suggested higher costs of living were necessary and beneficial, if not inevitable, with development. Others pointed to the need for higher wages, “good paying jobs,” locally owned small businesses, and neighborhood “anti-gentrification” strategies.

Participants expressed a range of views on the extent of “gentrification” in Kalamazoo. One city official, for example, indicated “that is an issue, gentrification - we haven’t seen any of that yet” (ID04). Other participants emphasized that gentrification was a “huge concern” and pointed to specific neighborhoods and areas of the city. One participant observed: “I can see the groundwork for it. It’s not happening just yet, but you can see the skeleton, you can see that it’s a potential for it” (ID13). After describing income-segregated and racially-segregated neighborhoods that encompass the Chicago metropolitan area, another participant noted that “Kalamazoo is not that big that it’s so noticeable, but you can see little hints of that here and there I think” (ID18).

Generally, participants agreed that recent downtown development was not in itself indicative of gentrification. In the following passage, one participant contemplated whether gentrification was evident in the downtown:

There wasn't a lot of - ten years ago, there wasn't a lot of residential downtown. This has just been a recent boom where people are starting to develop some of those old buildings that had not been used for years, into lofts and apartments and all that stuff. A big chunk of those are way out of anybody's price range. So is it gentrifying? I mean, how do you answer that question? Nobody lived there before, now really super rich people live there now. Is it gentrified, or is it just different? (ID10).

Also with reference to the downtown, other participants asserted that "the displacement happened there decades ago" (ID28) and "in the very core of downtown, displacement is not something that is happening in any sort of scale. There just weren't people living here before" (ID37). Even so, recent developments downtown and in specific neighborhoods were treated as causes of concern for future gentrification and displacement.

Some participants suggested displacement was occurring at the edges of neighborhoods adjacent to the central downtown. Often taking the Northside neighborhood as an example, numerous participants linked gentrification and displacement with Kalamazoo's history of racial and ethnic segregation, institutional discrimination, and redlining. Several contemplated the degree to which present indications of displacement are systematic and selective toward certain neighborhoods and demographics. One participant and Northside resident, for instance, observed that the downtown was "moving closer" to the Northside, a predominantly Black neighborhood:

I noticed that the downtown is moving closer to the Northside in certain areas, and the more people they get out of there, the more it's gonna up for certain groups. I don't want to say that that's deliberate, but it's a possibility based on if we go back fifty years ago and if you understand redlining, and you understand a lot of things that have taken place such as discrimination and housing, you'll see it slowly creeping in (ID13).

Other participants more directly characterized displacement as deliberately targeted at the poorest and most vulnerable inhabitants. "Development displaces people," one participant remarked when the topic of gentrification in cities was raised, "I think the dirty secret is that it's intentional. I think the reason that it happens across the board is because it's intentional displacement" (ID20). Citing cultural ideas about "who in society is respectable enough to be in space," this participant added that

“the movement to develop is also a movement to move people that are undesirable out” (ID20). In many ways, displacement is connected with access and rights to space, whether it is the downtown sector or parks and *greenspace*. Closely linked to gentrification and the right to space, another dilemma of development involves homelessness, which I discuss next.

*The “homeless problem”*

In the late summer of 2018, Bronson Park was occupied by what was estimated to be more than one hundred unhoused persons, protestors, and allies. Prior to the culmination of the “Bronson Park Freedom Encampment,” the city of Kalamazoo had been considering changes to ordinances for Bronson Park, the public greenspace and epicenter of the city. The proposed changes to the park’s ordinances were related to various rules about sleeping in the park, park hours, and bathing in fountains among others. Although some changes would have reduced penalties for certain rule violations, several other proposed changes would have increased penalties while allowing for easier enforcement of park rules by city staff (Barrett 2018a; Barrett 2018b; Berent 2018).

The protests began at city hall ahead of a scheduled city commission meeting where the proposed changes would be addressed. A few dozen or so unhoused persons pitched tents on the steps to the front entrance of city hall and later shifted to Bronson Park, directly across the street. The “Bronson Park Freedom Encampment” grew quickly and the encampment gained enough traction to carry on for several weeks. No proposed changes were ultimately advanced at the time, however the city of Kalamazoo and its inhabitants took notice of Kalamazoo’s existing park rules and penalties, which some argued criminalized homelessness (Barrett 2018b; Berent 2018; The Index 2018).

Over the next month, the encampment remained intact and prompted periodic gatherings, speakers, volunteers, donations, and local news media coverage about those “camping” in the park (Barret 2018c). The proposed rule changes included a definition of camping, although the term

“camping” may be a misnomer given that many park dwellers were living and sheltering in the park. Some persons joined the protests in support and there were eventually attempts by the city to make alternative arrangements with the park dwellers, such as relocating to a nearby vacant fire station (Barrett 2018d; The Index 2018). Segments of the protest listed demands, such as open public discussion, investigation of alleged abuses at the local shelter, access to psychological and physical health support, and a long-term strategy to more effectively address homelessness in Kalamazoo. The encampment was dismantled several weeks later with the assistance of local law enforcement. Although many persons cleared the park before the final deadline to vacate, a few dozen tents with personal belongings remained and were subsequently cleared with bulldozers and front loader construction equipment (Barrett 2018e; Kuch 2018; The Index 2018).

The dilemma of homelessness elicited a variety of responses from participants who were interviewed for this project. As a feature of the “two Kalamazoos,” some participants drew attention to the extent of homelessness in the community. “If you look, we’ve got the downtown right there,” one participant observed, “but then we got the homeless shelters and the people laying out there in the park. I mean it’s not too far - it’s what, within a mile? So what are we gonna do with those people?” (ID27). Several participants commented on the criminalization, treatment, and displacement of homeless persons. The Bronson Park encampment may represent a more immediate and glaring example of displacement in the downtown area, but participants also described more subtle instances of displacement and the implications for the downtown. For example, one participant observed:

Like you see those park benches that you can’t lay down on, and little barbs on the concrete and stuff. I understand, because we’ve had these discussions with downtown too about like - there is at least a perception of a safety issue for people that visit downtown, and some of the business owners are feeling the pressure from that...Like come on, just pushing these people around is not going to solve the problem. And I don’t know, I don’t see cities solving this. It feels like a federal government public housing kind of thing (ID22).

Like the previous passage, many participants alluded to the scale of homelessness. In terms of governmental entities, the question of “who is responsible” adds to the dilemma of homelessness. Some participants attributed responsibility to Kalamazoo’s city government while others assigned roles to the county, state, and federal government.

The homeless problem isn’t Kalamazoo’s problem, it’s a community problem. But you’ll talk to people from Portage [the neighboring city] and they’ll go: ‘We don’t have any homeless people.’ Yeah, and why not? Do you think our weather is better? It’s because all the services here, so they come here. And it’s not that we shouldn’t try to help those people, but it’s not just our problem. You can’t just go: ‘We don’t have that problem.’ - Vicksburg [a nearby village]: ‘We don’t have that problem.’ - Again, I don’t think our city is doing a bad job, but can we do more? Are we reaching out to these communities? How can they help with these global issues of homelessness and lack of housing and things of that nature? (ID06).

This passage also points to one feature that some participants regarded as a contributing factor to the degree of homelessness in Kalamazoo: the amount of “services.” One participant, for instance, suggested the number of services draws people “from all over the Midwest and country” and places extra strain on the community (ID26).

In connection with homelessness, several participants pointed to the “giving community” of Kalamazoo, marked by the abundance of social services, nonprofits, community organizations, philanthropy, and populace with “a desire to help the homeless population” (ID36). One participant juxtaposed the Bronson Park homeless encampment protest with the availability of services:

I think that’s one of the issues that was going on with the people who were camping out in the park. It’s like ‘well, we give to organizations here to help you have a place to go, so why are you really in the park?’ (ID36).

Conversely, another participant contrasted Kalamazoo’s “rich mecca of philanthropy” with the availability and quality of shelter for unhoused persons:

How does this rich mecca of philanthropy have people who don’t have homes, who can’t find a place to sleep at night? The only shelter that exists in town is in terrible condition and is religiously discriminatory. We’re a rich city - we can’t even get a municipal shelter (ID08).

One concrete matter is the availability of housing units in Kalamazoo, and in particular a shortage of

housing deemed “affordable” or low-income. “Even if we wanted to do something about really helping these people,” one city official stated, “we’ve got no place to put them” (ID04). Although the “sense of urgency” may have lessened in the months following the Bronson Park encampment, multiple participants agreed that the issue of housing gained a degree of prominence since that late summer of 2018. “A lot of people who’ll talk to me about it, it’s like: ‘Well, what did the encampment really accomplish?’ It accomplished a whole lot,” one participant observed, “everybody’s talking about housing now - a few years ago, they were not” (ID08).

### *The “crisis of affordable housing”*

Interconnected with gentrification and homelessness, another dilemma of development involves housing. “Definitely in the city we talk a lot about gentrification and sort of that balance,” one city official noted, “and there’s a huge awareness to our lack of affordable housing. I mean, it gets called a crisis all the time here” (ID05). A 2015 report by the city of Kalamazoo predicted the number of housing units needed by 2020 (including affordable housing units), a number that was reportedly unmet (Knowles 2020). When affordable housing was raised in the interviews, the question of what qualifies as “affordable” was often addressed. One participant observed: “But what is affordable housing? You know, they say that a lot, but they’re not saying what that means” (ID17). Specific rental rates or income thresholds were identified by several participants (e.g. a percentage of Area Median Income or AMI), although the term “affordable” was at times treated as suspect. Multiple participants suggested there were misuses of “affordable” by developers for certain housing projects. Some questioned the use of *regional* AMI thresholds for the designation of affordable or low-income housing, as opposed to city or neighborhood AMI thresholds. The use of regional versus city AMI may be important for several reasons, such as assessments about the amount of affordable housing units, marketing purposes, or qualification for tax credits awarded by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA). When asked about recent downtown

development, for example, one participant replied:

Again, it's a developers' market. They know how to pay people to write the grants to get the low income housing credits, to say 'hey we're gonna have these low income apartments.' But then if they use the county statistics in the middle of the city, they're not doing any poverty anything. And our state legislators are aware of it and no one's doing anything about it. So when you ask me what do I think about it, I don't have any thoughts on it. That is what they're able to do - it's legal. Do we think it's morally legal? But our country doesn't run on morally legal anymore, it runs on 'is it legal?' And it's legal. They're checking the boxes (ID32).

Numerous participants spoke of various "market dynamics" and legal restrictions involved in the creation of affordable housing, including the need for "incentives" for affordable housing given limited capabilities for the city to require affordable housing. While some projects were applauded, multiple participants problematized specific housing development projects throughout the city.

Pointing to certain housing projects downtown that were "very much driven by a desire to make a profit," one participant added:

Nobody's saying that you have to be in the red for the first five years with these projects, but there is something to be said about sort of being tone deaf - like you're moving into a neighborhood that has a whole host of issues and all of the sudden you're going to have \$1,400 single units? Like nobody from the neighborhood can afford to live there (ID11).

The counterpart of low-income or affordable housing, of course, is high-income or "luxury" housing. The Exchange building, which opened in the summer of 2019, is one of the more recent developments in downtown Kalamazoo. Located in the central downtown, The Exchange is a fifteen-story mixed-use building branded as "luxury living in the heart of Kalamazoo" (The Exchange 2021). This "giant parking lot with a building on top of it," as one participant described it, contains a five-floor above-ground parking garage, commercial and retail space, and over one hundred "luxury" apartments.

The Exchange elicited mixed responses from the participants I interviewed. Multiple participants maintained that The Exchange may make downtown more "attractive" to upper-middle

class professionals and “well-to-do retirees” (ID31). Several participants questioned the demand and viability of the type of housing emulated by The Exchange, although there was a general consensus that more downtown housing was necessary. Some emphasized the benefits that the building may bring, such as increased density, a higher demand for retail businesses, and the potential to “alleviate some of the boom in the neighborhood markets that have priced some people out” (ID28). Overall, The Exchange raises questions about the benefits, trade-offs, and implications of high-income or luxury housing developments in the face of an affordable housing shortage. “It’s not going to do anything about the low income housing,” one city official stated, “but it’s a resource, it’s money. I mean, it’s property tax, it’s jobs. So it’s worth it, but it’s not doing anything about it” (ID04). Embedded in the quest for more housing units is the city’s need to generate tax revenue amidst the longstanding “structural deficit” of the municipal budget, a matter discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Overall, the circumstances around Kalamazoo’s sustainable development are manifold, whereby community narratives of Kalamazoo exist alongside overlapping dilemmas of development. In order to illustrate a broader spectrum of the goals and issues pertaining to sustainable development, the next section introduces the case of Imagine Kalamazoo. The city government-led Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative sought to establish a community “Strategic Vision” that would serve as the foundation for concrete actions and future policy directions. Drawing on my interviews for additional depth, I discuss Imagine Kalamazoo and briefly outline the Strategic Vision planning document.

#### *The Case of Imagine Kalamazoo*

In 2015, the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 website was launched. Over the next few years, the city of Kalamazoo organized various public participation activities aimed at “creating a shared vision to enhance quality of life for all” (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021a). The initial directives of the Imagine

Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative were to craft a “Strategic Vision” for the community and contribute to the 2025 Master Plan (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021a). Based on interviews with city officials familiar with or involved with the planning initiative, Imagine Kalamazoo was at least partly guided by a holism framework, which I discussed in the previous chapter. This holism framework “solidified with Imagine Kalamazoo,” one city official attested, “and we really started to think about how cities often fall into a trap - cities, companies, anything, any entity - fall into a trap of operating in a silo. And not kind of understanding how all the pieces are intertwined” (ID01). Moreover, Imagine Kalamazoo seemingly emerged out of the recognized need that “we had to do better” in terms of public involvement in city government processes and goal-setting (ID20).

Public participation and the “not-business-as-usual public engagement process” were framed as central features of Imagine Kalamazoo (Strategic Vision 2017:24). Several phases of public participation occurred between January 2016 and April 2017 (Strategic Vision 2017:25). I attended a handful of Imagine Kalamazoo affiliated events and meetings during and after the initial “public engagement” phase. The “visioning” phase involved various citywide meetings and events, neighborhood meetings, picnics, art hops, hands-on activities such as drawing on maps, open web-based town halls, and various surveys. The “visioning” phase helped generate themes regarding desires and “what’s missing” in the city and individual neighborhoods. In the next phase, these themes were formalized with the drafting and adoption of the “Strategic Vision” (Strategic Vision 2017:28). Adopted in 2017, the Strategic Vision was slated to be the “guide to shape all plans being created in the future” (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021a). The seventy-three page document first provides background on its political inception and then describes the Imagine Kalamazoo process. The document also summarizes the findings of the National Citizen Survey (NCS) for Kalamazoo, a community wide survey conducted by the National Research Center (NRC). Evaluating the “livability” of cities, the NCS is conducted by the NRC in cities across the country. In tandem with

the qualitative and quantitative data gathered in the Imagine Kalamazoo process - which were analyzed by a consulting firm - ten “strategic goals” were then identified.

### *The strategic goals*

The final section of the Strategic Vision outlines the strategic goals, which are intended to assist the efforts of city staff in developing plans, projects and policies (Strategic Vision 2017:36). There is a uniform structure to this section of the document. Each goal is named and briefly described, followed by a list of city plans associated with the goal. A number of categorical “directions” are prescribed for each goal, which “suggest specific actions to be taken to implement the goals” (Strategic Vision 2017:36). Lastly, a short list of “metrics” is proposed for each goal, which “will be used to measure the progress and/or impact of each Goal” (Strategic Vision 2017:36). The appendix of the document contains “Goal Maps” that visually present each strategic goal, in addition to more details about Imagine Kalamazoo, the “Public Participation Policy,” and the survey results of the NCS. The strategic goals include (Strategic Vision 2017:36):

- Shared Prosperity: Abundant opportunities for all people to prosper.
- Connected City: A city that is networked for walking, biking, riding, and driving.
- Inviting Public Places: Parks, arts, culture, and vibrant streets.
- Environmental Responsibility: A green and healthy city.
- Safe Community: Creating a safe environment for living, working, and playing.
- Youth Development: A city with places and supports that help young people thrive.
- Complete Neighborhoods: Residential areas that support the full range of people’s daily needs.
- Strength Through Diversity: An inclusive city where everyone feels at home.
- Economic Vitality: Growing businesses and stabilizing the local economy to the benefit of all.
- Good Governance: Ensuring the City organization has the capacity and resources to effectively implement the community’s Strategic Vision in a sustainable way.

The Strategic Vision was not necessarily a policy document, but rather a starting point that, as previously indicated, would serve as a guide for all future city plans. The Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 website provides a list of plans and projects connected to the strategic goals, ranging from citywide plans to neighborhood specific projects, such as Complete Streets, Lead Water Service Removal, and Park Improvements (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021b). Several plans and projects have been completed since the adoption of the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan, including the Shared Prosperity Kalamazoo Action Plan, the Housing and Urban Development Consolidated Plan, and the Parks and Recreation Plan (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021b). Neighborhood Plans for the core neighborhoods have also been completed while other plans remain in progress, such as the Sustainability Strategy.

As suggested in the previous chapter, Imagine Kalamazoo is arguably a sustainability initiative in terms of the substance and scope of the initiative. The Strategic Vision and strategic goals, as products of Imagine Kalamazoo, are emblematic of sustainability; the issues, keywords, and goals aligned with Imagine Kalamazoo, the Strategic Vision, and the affiliated city plans signal different dimensions of urban sustainability. Additionally, the issues and topics that my interview participants deemed relevant to sustainability generally mirrored the substance of the Strategic Vision and affiliated plans.

In this section, I have only briefly described the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative, summarizing the strategic goals in order to expand the scope of sustainable development. Imagine Kalamazoo and the Strategic Vision play important roles in Kalamazoo's sustainable development and path toward a "sustainable city." Participants frequently cited the Strategic Vision (and affiliated neighborhoods plans) as evidence of the priorities and commitments of the city, placing value in both the substance and symbolism of the planning documents. Throughout the remaining chapters, I periodically return to the case of Imagine Kalamazoo and participants' overall evaluations about the Imagine Kalamazoo process, especially in connection with public participation, governance

sustainability, and city government and community relations.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, the circumstances encompassing Kalamazoo's prospects for sustainable development were examined. Multiple community narratives of Kalamazoo were outlined, which collectively epitomize Kalamazoo's historical legacies. The assessment of Kalamazoo as a "thriving community" was countered with the "two Kalamazoos" narrative, a descriptive taxonomy highlighting the social-relational and spatial-geographic boundaries that split the community. The "Kalamazoo can-do" community narrative, on the other hand, linked the "giving spirit" of the community with inclinations about Kalamazoo as a creative, bold, and forward-thinking community. Alongside community narratives of Kalamazoo, participants contended with the challenges and complexities spawned by the forces of development, which I referred to as the "dilemmas" of development. Participants' impressions of gentrification were revealed, including assessments about the extent of gentrification in Kalamazoo. Different commentaries on homelessness were provided by participants, which also prompted mixed reactions to the Bronson Park Freedom Encampment. Moreover, participants offered different appraisals for the dilemma of housing, including the supply of affordable and luxury housing projects in Kalamazoo. Although not explicitly promoted as a sustainability initiative, the case of Imagine Kalamazoo provided a glimpse into collective goals and priorities that seemingly relate to sustainable development.

This chapter upholds the themes and key areas of interest for this project. The environmental, economic, and social equity dimensions of sustainability are embedded throughout the "thriving community" narrative, the "two Kalamazoos" narrative, and the "Kalamazoo can-do" narrative. The "two Kalamazoos" narrative also reflects a conceptualization of the city in both spatial-geographic terms and social-relational terms. Participants' aspirations for development without displacement also bears on the spatial politics of sustainability. General assessments of

development and displacement varied with regards to the central downtown or across specific neighborhoods. Several participants emphasized national trends and historical processes such as redlining, white flight, and the return of people and capital to city centers. Gentrification and homelessness specifically highlighted issues about the access and right to spaces. Along with the issue of housing, these “dilemmas” of development draw attention to the role of equity in urban sustainability, a key area of interest that is also evident in community narratives of Kalamazoo and the case of Imagine Kalamazoo. The case of Imagine Kalamazoo also provides insight to the sources of knowledge or expertise drawn upon in urban development and sustainability planning. In some ways, the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative was a consensus building process that incorporated inhabitants’ priorities and “visions” of Kalamazoo, although the ultimate policy directions and planning agenda hinge on the city commission and administration.

The Bronson Park Freedom Encampment may suggest processes of “environmental gentrification” whereby economically vulnerable and homeless inhabitants are displaced from public greenspaces. The homeless encampment protest in Bronson Park, which occurred one year after the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan were finalized, may also point to counter-agendas and alternative responses to urban sustainability agendas. Among inhabitants, news media, and the city of Kalamazoo, the Bronson Park Freedom Encampment reinforced discussions about the extent and scale of homelessness, who is responsible, and what should be done about homelessness and housing in the city. Overall, the homeless encampment protest reflects the culmination of Kalamazoo’s community narratives and dilemmas of development, including the interconnected dilemmas of gentrification, homelessness, and housing. The encampment firstly juxtaposed community narratives about Kalamazoo as a “thriving community” with the “two Kalamazoos” narrative. Across the street of the Bronson Park encampment protest was, after all, the ongoing construction of The Exchange building, fitted with over one hundred units marketed as luxury

housing. The “Kalamazoo can-do” narrative may have played a role as well, where Kalamazoo is treated as a problem-solving community capable of harnessing its many resources to address gentrification, displacement, homelessness, and housing.

This chapter has concentrated on the circumstances and challenges to sustainable development. The remaining chapters give more attention to the strategies and concrete actions of inhabitants and institutions seeking to realize a sustainable Kalamazoo. The Bronson Park Freedom Encampment may reflect one such strategy, which made visible the conditions of those without reliable shelter. Like Marcell, who was introduced at the opening of this chapter, some of the most vulnerable and stigmatized members of the community sought to be made visible, and their right to the city and survival acknowledged. The next chapter serves as a brief “philanthropic interlude” to Kalamazoo’s sustainability story, whereby the strategies and recent actions of Kalamazoo’s donor families are considered.

## CHAPTER VI

### A PHILANTHROPIC INTERLUDE: THE ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY IN KALAMAZOO

#### *Vignette: Foundation for Excellence Handout*

With the summer season only days away, I slipped through the doors of city hall and climbed the quarter-turn staircase toward the second floor. I entered the city commission chambers, glancing up at the high ceiling and then into the rows of mostly empty chairs that faced the dais or elevated platform at the front, where the mayor and other members of the city commission would soon take their seats. A few minutes before the start of the meeting, the mayor walked around the room and handed out a double-sided glossy coated “informational item” to those already seated, including myself. On the front side, beneath the heading “Success, Doing the Work,” a brief paragraph read:

The Foundation for Excellence is a unique innovation by the City of Kalamazoo and private donors to address systemic challenges to the prosperity of the city. The Foundation has so far provided over \$70 million to stabilize the city’s budget, lower its property tax rate, and support aspirational projects.

The handout contained short descriptions and bullet points with quantifiable and discrete accomplishments made possible with the initial 70 million dollar donation to the city. This specific handout from the mayor soon became an effective “prop” for many of my interviews. Gauging participants’ reactions, I quickly learned about the spectrum of views around the Foundation for Excellence, Kalamazoo’s donor families, and the role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo.

Over the next few months of interviews, contrasting accounts and “stories” were told about the Foundation for Excellence, which was incorporated in 2017. Many participants credited the lead donors with empowering and saving the city from a dire financial situation, welcoming the funds that undoubtedly could have been directed elsewhere. Yet others expressed discontent with the unprecedented public-private partnership, questioning the philanthropic intervention in municipal finance and urban governance. “A lot of folks were excited about this model. They have a true genuine belief in it,” one participant explained, motioning toward the mayor’s handout. “I didn’t... Yeah, there are a lot of people that passionately donate millions and millions of dollars a year. Undeniable. No one has ever successfully donated just to a city general fund at this level. Ever” (ID28).

#### *Introduction*

This chapter serves as a brief “philanthropic interlude,” both in terms of describing the historical intervention of philanthropy in Kalamazoo, and in terms of piecing together Kalamazoo’s sustainability story. As one of the more divisive topics throughout the interviews, the connection to

urban sustainability and Kalamazoo's sustainable development initially appears somewhat removed. However, the importance of this matter became evident early on across my interviews, observations, and participation in city meetings and events. In this chapter, I discuss Kalamazoo's "deep history of giving" and broad institutionalization of philanthropy. These circumstances have produced a distinct philanthropic backdrop in the community. Competing narratives about the role and impact of Kalamazoo's philanthropy are evident. In some ways, Kalamazoo's philanthropy is highly politicized, yet in other ways remains politically subdued. In 2017, the city incorporated the Foundation for Excellence (FFE), a donor-funded municipal finance model that aims to address the city's budget challenges while simultaneously reducing the property tax and funding various city projects. The case of the Foundation for Excellence helps illustrate the categorical divisions about the role and impact of philanthropy in Kalamazoo. Across the interviews, participants attested that Kalamazoo's philanthropy empowers the city and its inhabitants, yet some pointed to the potential drawbacks and disempowering repercussions. The relevance to urban sustainability and my research interests for this project are thereafter summarized.

### *The "Deep History of Giving"*

The significance of philanthropy in Kalamazoo cannot be overstated. For this chapter, I primarily discuss philanthropy in the "top-down" sense, heavily fueled by a small group of individuals and families with widespread financial, institutional, and cultural influence in the community. A handful of multi-generational family names are widely known to many inhabitants of Kalamazoo - Upjohn, Gilmore, Parfet, Stryker, or Johnston to list a few - which I collectively refer to as Kalamazoo's donor families (several do in fact share kinship). The lasting influence of Kalamazoo's donor families envelops Kalamazoo's economic and social history, marked by any number of organizations, foundations, institutes, or festivals that were founded by or otherwise bear the names of Kalamazoo's donor families. Following W. E. Upjohn, founder of The Upjohn

Company, these donor families have become renowned for their civic involvements, charitable contributions, and avowed interests in the welfare of the community.

The “deep history of giving,” as one participant enunciated, is an enduring feature of Kalamazoo. Across the interviews, participants described Kalamazoo as a “giving community” that is guided by shared values of compassion, empathy, and generosity. Related to the “Kalamazoo can-do” community narrative, which I discussed in chapter five, some participants linked the “giving community” to the historical presence of philanthropy. In the following passage, one participant made an observation about the legacy of Kalamazoo’s philanthropy:

I think that part of why people in Kalamazoo are so generous is because they have the model of the philanthropist[s] that have been generous to the community in turn. I don’t have any statistics or anything, but it just feels like that, you know. Because they are, they’re very, very generous. Both the people that have the money and the rest of us. I think it’s really going to be interesting to see what Kalamazoo is in ten years, because we have become aware of what we’ve ignored through the years. And we are trying to do things about it (ID21).

At the same time, some participants grappled with other repercussions of Kalamazoo’s “deep history of giving” and philanthropic presence. For example, one participant contemplated whether Kalamazoo’s historical philanthropic presence is linked to an “expectation that the businesses or the organizations are the leaders [and] will take care of things” (ID09). This participant continued:

Because we have these, like, really socially minded philanthropists - that they don’t just want to build buildings, they want to send everybody to college. And so that kind of in a way maybe makes everybody else a little bit complacent...right, like ‘maybe we don’t really need to work that hard to figure out what to do, to house homeless people, because probably the Strykers will come in and, like, come up with a solution’...I think that’s like kind of a very real underlayer of the mindset here. It’s definitely something that makes Kalamazoo really special (ID09).

Many participants characterized Kalamazoo’s philanthropists and donor families as uniquely concerned about the well-being of the community, evidenced by lasting contributions and investments in Kalamazoo. Comparisons were made to other cities, such as “the billionaires in Grand Rapids [who] want to build buildings” or the disinvestment that historically occurred in

various cities such as Detroit. Referring to historical trends of deindustrialization and urban disinvestment, one participant observed:

Something that was kind of unique to Kalamazoo is you started to see the philanthropic class fill this gap in a way that wasn't happening in a lot of cities... We didn't have that [disinvestment] here in Kalamazoo, which while that is ultimately better, there is a catch-22 about it. You kind of become this community that - it's almost like philanthropy worship (ID08).

Several participants remarked that Kalamazoo's deep history of giving and philanthropic presence in Kalamazoo have facilitated a community where Kalamazoo's philanthropy and donor families decide what problems are in need of solutions and - through intentional donations and funding - decide what those solutions are. "The people who have the wealth and the power also think they have the answers," one participant concluded, "so they fund in a way that shows what answers they feel are the ones" (ID34). Other participants emphasized that such donations and funding were intentional - intentional to the community, whereby Kalamazoo's philanthropy and donor families have decided at their own expense to direct funds to Kalamazoo rather than external to the community.

#### *The Institutionalization of Philanthropy*

Kalamazoo's philanthropy materializes in the many foundations, nonprofits, and community organizations that encompass Kalamazoo. The institutionalization of philanthropy dates back to the time period of W. E. Upjohn, who helped establish one of the oldest community foundations in Kalamazoo. Providing grants, scholarships, services, and funding for various programs, the influences of Kalamazoo's philanthropy and donor families were stressed by participants. This creates a unique setting with complex organizational and institutional dynamics among those entities seeking to obtain or are dependent upon those funding sources. "I think the nonprofits in this community are doing a lot of good," one participant observed, "but they couldn't do it without the philanthropic, you know, bent that the community has" (ID21).

As was pointed out in the interviews, such a large number of entities presents several challenges. For example, nonprofits and community organizations may be competing for funding from different sources and community foundations. The most well-established and wide-reaching entities may have a relative advantage in comparison to smaller and newer organizations. One participant commented on the “saturation of nonprofits” in the community, whereby funding and resources are spread “really thin,” which leads to “mediocre” performance and organizational instability. This participant continued:

And the foundations need to take some responsibility in being like ‘you don’t get funding, you do get funding, you don’t get funding.’ And like cutting that out, or saying ‘hey maybe you absorb each other, you know, have a unique partnership.’ But the nonprofit sector all over is just hamstrung, because of how it’s structured (ID34).

Aside from the flow of resources directed to nonprofits and community organizations, one notable philanthropic influence is the Kalamazoo Promise. First implemented in 2006, the Kalamazoo Promise provides Kalamazoo Public Schools students a tuition scholarship to public universities, colleges, and more recently trade schools in Michigan. Widely recognized as an economic development strategy, the regional-based scholarship program reflects an “unprecedented experiment in education-based economic renewal” (Miller-Adams 2009:1-2). Funded by anonymous donors, the scholarship provides up to one hundred percent of tuition based on length of attendance in the public school system. As a defining feature of the community, the Kalamazoo Promise represents one example of the influence of Kalamazoo’s philanthropy.

Kalamazoo’s deep history of giving and institutionalization of philanthropy extend beyond the private and nonprofit sectors; the influence of Kalamazoo’s philanthropy and donor families also reaches into the public sector in terms of the city government. Throughout the interviews, participants described the historically close relationships among Kalamazoo’s donor families and city government. One participant, for example, speculated about the historical relationship between

Kalamazoo's city government and donor families:

I think it was kind of a pretty poorly kept secret that this city was founded on, you know, there was paper mills, there was celery, but then there was Upjohn. And I don't know how much you know about Upjohn, but I don't think it was that uncommon back in the day for our city commissioners to go to Upjohn - 'A couple million short in the budget this year.' So there's always been that sort of - I'm not saying it's right, I'm just saying that again it's a culture that gets passed along from year to year to year (ID06).

W. E. Upjohn was, after all, involved in the 1918 formation of Kalamazoo's commission-manager government structure, and thereafter elected mayor (City of Kalamazoo 2021; Kalamazoo Public Library 2021). At one point during my research, I was directed to the Community Room on the second floor of city hall, a meeting room adjacent to the city commission chambers. I had already visited this room numerous times in order to attend smaller city-related meetings, such as citizen advisory board meetings or multiple Sustainability Strategy meetings. Along the walls of the room, as described to me ahead of time, there were photos of previous city commissions that date back several decades. Captioned with the names of those who served, there were multiple instances of surnames associated with Kalamazoo's donor families. In the following passage, one participant commented on this matter:

Historically these families have controlled Kalamazoo...and you could see it really blatantly at what time, because the commission body would be made up of multiple members of [Kalamazoo's donor families]. And then over time, that became less acceptable, right. And so now what you have is you have people in elected office who cater to [these families] (ID20).

The involvement of Kalamazoo's philanthropy and donor families in urban governance manifests in a variety of ways. In the next section, I describe the circumstances around the Foundation for Excellence, the donor funded public-private partnership that was delivered in response to the city's budget challenges. Supplemented with the accounts, critiques, and insights from the participants I interviewed, the case of the Foundation for Excellence reveals competing narratives about the role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo.

*The Case of the Foundation for Excellence*

In the summer of 2016, inhabitants of Kalamazoo learned about plans for the city of Kalamazoo to receive a 70 million dollar donation to alleviate the city's budget challenges over a three year period. The involvement of Kalamazoo's donor families was revealed shortly after the initial announcement, which perhaps generated as much intrigue as it did questions. A year later, in the summer of 2017, the Foundation for Excellence (FFE) was incorporated. A 500 million dollar fundraising goal was declared, an investment amount that would presumably produce enough market earnings for "a fully endowed foundation that can sustain this funding in perpetuity" (FFE 2021).

The creation of the FFE is rooted in the city's "structural budget deficit," whereby the city's operating costs increase faster than the revenues captured through property taxes and state funding. As multiple participants identified, this is partly the result of dated Michigan laws that limit the rate of property tax increases. Following economic recessions (e.g. 2008-2009 recession), this places extra strain on municipal budgets that experience rising costs and needs for infrastructure and services. An additional hurdle with the property tax conundrum may be the large assortment of foundations, nonprofits, community organizations, academic institutions, religious organizations, and the two major nonprofit teaching hospitals. Many of these entities throughout the community are exempt from property taxes.

The Strategic Vision planning document, which I discussed in the previous chapter, summarizes the budget conditions and actions taken to identify options for "sustainable revenue for the city that fixes the broken model that is created by Michigan's current law" (Strategic Vision 2017:11). In 2015, a "Blue Ribbon Revenue Panel" was commissioned by the city in order to "[r]esearch, study and explore revenue options that, when considered together, will address the structural imbalance of the City's General Fund" (City of Kalamazoo 2015:1). One option was a city

income tax, for example, which is not uncommon in Michigan cities that are the size of Kalamazoo or larger. After a series of panel meetings, a report was produced that included a list of revenue options, which were labeled as “recommended” and “not recommended.” The institution of a city income tax, although considered a viable revenue option, was ultimately “not recommended” by majority vote of the twenty-one member panel (City of Kalamazoo 2015:10). The Strategic Vision describes the circumstances around the origin of the FFE:

Although the Revenue Panel did not recommend an income tax, the Administration investigated this option as it was the one available solution that had the potential to meet the city’s structural revenue needs. To proceed, an income tax would need to be placed on the ballot by the City Commission and approved by the voters. In response to this uncertainty, the Mayor and City Manager approached philanthropic leaders in the community to explore their willingness to donate sufficient dollars to a new foundation that would provide the revenue that the City needed to stabilize its budget and make strategic investments to inspire economic growth. These discussions resulted in the creation of the Foundation for Excellence (Strategic Vision 2017:13).

An initial Memorandum of Understanding was drafted in October 2016, which acknowledged the background revenue challenges of the city and outlined the commitments by the “lead donors” and Kalamazoo’s city government. The document laid out the three stipulations that would come to define the “philanthropic approach” of the FFE: budget deficit stabilization, property tax reduction, and funding for aspirational projects (FFE 2016b). For budget deficit stabilization, funds would first be directed toward reducing the city’s growing debt and stabilizing its budget. For property tax reduction - the largest proportion of funds - Kalamazoo’s above average property tax rate would be reduced and funds would be provided to make up the difference for lost property tax revenue. For the open category of “aspirational projects,” funds would be used for projects and programs at the discretion of the city, in line with goals and projects affiliated with the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative.

In August 2017, the FFE was incorporated with a 500 million dollar fundraising goal, the

presumed amount to allow the FFE to be a self-sustaining endowment through its invested capital. With the FFE spending about 25 million per year (and new donations only totaling in the tens of thousands), the 500 million dollar fundraising goal was not expected to be achieved in the predicted three-year timeline. In order to sustain the FFE through 2022, an additional 57 million dollar and 28 million dollar grant donations were respectively announced in late 2019 and early 2020. Shortly after in April 2020, an 86 million dollar anonymous donation was given directly to the FFE, unlike the previous donations that were grant agreements with the city from known sources (Devereaux 2020b). Prior to the 86 million dollar donation (and corresponding investment return), the FFE had about fifty thousand dollars in total assets (FFE 2021a). Then, in August 2021, a 400 million dollar anonymous donation was committed over ten years (Devereaux 2021a).

*Philanthropic reckoning: Narratives of the Foundation for Excellence*

Periodically attracting local, regional, and national media attention, the FFE model of municipal finance raises questions about the role of philanthropy in urban governance. In the interviews conducted for this study, participants expressed a range of views on the FFE and the circumstances surrounding the public-private partnership. Through personal accounts, “storytelling,” and speculations about the effect of the FFE on the city and inhabitants, participants constructed contrasting narratives about the FFE and, by extension, the role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo. There was a general consensus that the FFE was the alternative response to a possible city income tax; a philanthropic budget solution in lieu of a city income tax. Many participants were open to the possibility of a city income tax, which would require approval by voters, although some indicated an income tax would be divisive and may not pass the ballot initiative. A typical observation was that there is a substantial number of persons who live outside the city, but work within the city (and use city services and infrastructure). An income tax might therefore remedy the problem of “citizens of Kalamazoo [who] are disproportionately funding the city” whereby the

“success and financial safety, security, rests on the backs of our residents, many of whom are struggling with poverty” (ID20).

Many participants recounted the “origin story” of the FFE similarly to the Strategic Vision, yet others provided alternative accounts of the circumstances that led to the FFE. While participants reiterated that the Blue Ribbon Revenue Panel did not recommend the income tax, for example, there were reports of “false statistics” distributed prior to the vote to not recommend the city income tax (ID28). Even so, the city was reportedly tasked with moving forward with an income tax. According to multiple participant accounts, the city was on the verge of instituting an income tax, but was thereafter informed by intermediaries of Kalamazoo’s donor families that they were “not allowed to pursue” the income tax and “hundreds of thousands of dollars would go to defeat this on the ballot” (ID20). Accordingly, the FFE was provided as an alternative remedy. One participant concluded:

So if you’re looking at it from that perspective, and you’re understanding the fact that like the disproportionate tax structure that has existed and impacted communities, particularly communities of color in Kalamazoo since white flight, there was the possibility to do something about that. And the FFE came in as a ‘don’t you dare’ (ID20).

Moreover, there were conflicting accounts about how the stipulations of the FFE were laid out in the meetings between the mayor, city manager, and the philanthropic leaders of Kalamazoo, with some participants asserting that the “aspirational projects” were later added to garner support by the public and city commission. With a five-to-two vote in favor, the FFE ultimately gained enough support from the city commission to be incorporated.

The FFE emerged in the context of Kalamazoo’s deep history of giving and institutionalization of philanthropy. Building on narratives of Kalamazoo as a “giving community,” the history of philanthropy may have helped facilitate the emergence and support for the FFE. The Kalamazoo Promise was often mentioned when participants spoke about the FFE, along with the

widespread influence of the many foundations, nonprofits, and community organizations that made use of Kalamazoo’s philanthropy. While Kalamazoo’s city government has no official involvement with the Kalamazoo Promise, several participants suggested the Kalamazoo Promise may have helped build community trust in Kalamazoo’s philanthropy and the FFE. Relaying this sentiment, one participant explained: “So you know, people are going ‘well, billionaires promised us before and they haven’t let us down, so we trust them again’” (ID28).

FFE was also promptly affiliated with the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative. Shortly after the announcement of the initial 70 million dollar donation in 2016, a fact sheet was produced with the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 logo and the heading “Fact Sheet: How We Make Our Vision a Reality” (FFE 2016a). Under the section titled “An Innovative Solution,” there are three bullet points worth quoting at length (FFE 2016a):

At a time when partisanship and stubborn problems seem like the norm, this community has shown its ability to rise above differences and come together to solve big problems.

That’s what we did with the Kalamazoo Promise. And with the Foundation for Excellence, we are trying to offer a unique, innovative solution once again.

An income tax was and still is an option, but with the Foundation for Excellence, we believe that we have a unique solution to help us shore up our finances and make critical investments needed to build the Kalamazoo we all want.

This section draws on the “Kalamazoo can-do” community narrative, while also associating the FFE with the Kalamazoo Promise (the next section in the document also describes the FFE as “modeled after the Kalamazoo Promise”). The city income tax is left open as an option, which some participants envisioned as a possibility should the FFE fail to remedy Kalamazoo’s budget challenges.

When the FFE was incorporated in August 2017, a “Statement of Donor Intent,” was signed by the lead donors of the FFE, William Johnston and William Parfet (FFE 2017). The lead donors are colloquially referred to as “the Bills” by inhabitants and, reportedly, city staff. Perhaps

attempting to quell any remaining concerns, the Statement of Donor Intent more explicitly associated the FFE with Imagine Kalamazoo. Many participants I interviewed made the connection between the FFE and Imagine Kalamazoo, which in some ways developed alongside each other. The FFE was announced during the initial public input phase of Imagine Kalamazoo, which ran from January 2016 through April 2017. Moreover, the FFE was incorporated a little over a month after the Strategic Vision was adopted in July 2017. Some participants emphasized that the goals established by the Strategic Vision and Imagine Kalamazoo would not be achievable without the FFE, as shown by the following passage:

So that's when people, if they criticize the Foundation for Excellence - well without the Foundation, we wouldn't have that Imagine Kalamazoo 2025. We wouldn't. This takes resources to put these things in place, and we wouldn't be able to do that. So yeah, it's for sure not just smoke and mirrors, this is legitimate, like we are working the plan. And we're all held accountable to the plan. As a leader in the city, I'm held accountable to make sure I'm doing my pillars...I better be doing my part to move this forward (ID26).

At the same time, there were objections to this association and “conflation” of Imagine Kalamazoo with the FFE. After applauding the work of Imagine Kalamazoo and the city staff involved in the planning initiative, one participant explained the “mixed feelings” that loomed:

It's gotten conflated now with the Foundation for Excellence, as if Imagine Kalamazoo was a gift given to us from the FFE, which is completely false, right. Imagine Kalamazoo already existed, it was like already halfway through its phases, it was the brainchild of a really awesome staff person. And now because the FFE...became so contentious, they started conflating the two...And so that's where my mixed feelings come in, is that now [Imagine Kalamazoo] is being used as a way to bolster a really, really problematic unjust new system of government that we've established here. That is like in the opposite direction of sustainability (ID20).

The contrasting accounts cited above hint at a general spectrum of views about the FFE and, by extension, the role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo. On one end, the FFE was described as empowering the city. On the other end, the FFE was described as disempowering. Participants were familiar with either “side” of the FFE “debate,” although this dualism is more useful for the purpose

of illustrating contrasts rather than for categorical generalization. Some participants aligned more closely with one view, but many expressed mixed views that treated the FFE with cautious optimism, impartial pragmatism, or general uncertainty.

Among those who viewed the FFE as disempowering, concerns were expressed about what the FFE represents and what it accomplishes. In this view, the FFE reflects a threat to democracy with the undue influence of private donors in urban governance and municipal finance. Participants speculated about the motives behind the FFE and Kalamazoo's donor families, such as personal ideology, private gain, or maintaining political (and cultural) influence in the community. Some argued the FFE is premised on "economically conservative ideals" and "neoliberal" strategies and governing philosophies. Others objected to the structure of the FFE, such as the makeup of the FFE board of directors, public representation, transparency, and the allowance of donor-restricted funds. The net effect of the FFE was also questioned, with speculations about whether the impact is as beneficial to the community as advertised. Multiple participants, for example, contemplated the implications of the property tax reduction. "So not being a homeowner at this time," one participant remarked, "I don't know, have they really offset property taxes? I don't know" (ID36). Others similarly questioned whether landlords will transfer the property tax savings to renters through, for example, rental rates or rental property upgrades. Even so, participants who aligned more with this view still agreed on the many direct benefits that the FFE would bring to individual neighborhoods and the community on the whole.

Among those who viewed the FFE as empowering the city, the extra resources and investment in the community were emphasized, providing ample opportunities that place Kalamazoo in a very unique, uncommon, and fortunate situation. The FFE was treated as advantageous, addressing the city's budget challenges while providing funds that otherwise would not exist or would be directed elsewhere. Participants spoke about the lead donors' generosity and

genuine desire to see the community grow and succeed. Some rejected the notion that Kalamazoo's donor families would see direct personal or financial gain as a result of the FFE. Others were apathetic to the donors' motives as long as the community was reaping the benefits. Many participants depicted the FFE and Kalamazoo's donor families as "saving" the city. "Literally saved the city," in the words of one participant (ID27). Commenting on Imagine Kalamazoo and the FFE, another participant explained:

Some people think it doesn't do anything, they think the rich people bought Kalamazoo, and I'm like 'are you out of your mind?' And I shouldn't say it like that because a lot of people didn't know just how far under Kalamazoo was - that the rich people didn't buy Kalamazoo, they helped save Kalamazoo...But I don't think people really, really realized where Kalamazoo would be probably in five years had that not happened (ID32).

Multiple participants pointed to budget cuts, reduction in city staff, and overall downsizing of Kalamazoo's city government that preceded the FFE. Others pointed to the many programs, services, and grants that have drawn on funding from the FFE, including "anti-gentrification" grants to multiple core neighborhood associations in order to, for example, purchase property and rehabilitate buildings for various purposes.

To be clear, many participants expressed uncertainty and mixed views about the FFE. Several treated it as a non-issue, a financial-managerial solution to the city's revenue problems, while others viewed the FFE as a potential springboard for greater economic independence of the city, neighborhoods, and inhabitants in general. Overall, these contrasting and disputed accounts reflect wider views about the role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo and the influence of Kalamazoo's donor families. If the FFE fails to meet its fundraising goal, or the rounds of lump sum donations come to an end, then the city's budget challenges will resume and revenue options may once again be up for debate.

## *Conclusion*

Kalamazoo is a community with a unique philanthropic backdrop, marked by a deep history of giving and a broad institutionalization of philanthropy. Participants' contrasting narratives and sense-making provide key insights to the role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo. Various "storytelling" accounts of Kalamazoo's philanthropy and the FFE were illustrated throughout this chapter. Some of these accounts were contradictory, at times operating as "counter-storytelling." The circumstances around the FFE are perhaps much more complex than presented here, and the implications and lasting effects on the community are yet to be fully observed. As a "philanthropic interlude," this chapter has nonetheless supplied an important piece to Kalamazoo's sustainability story. For some inhabitants, Kalamazoo's "philanthropic bent" and "deep pockets" may reflect intrusive barriers that hinder sustainable development. For other inhabitants, Kalamazoo's philanthropy may be viewed as a convenient and possibly necessary springboard to the realization of a sustainable Kalamazoo. And still, for others, Kalamazoo's philanthropy may be viewed as a unique feature with some advantages and some disadvantages.

With a broad interpretation of sustainability, Kalamazoo's philanthropic backdrop bears most directly on the presumed economic dimension of sustainability, although there are implications for the presumed environmental, equity, and governance dimensions as well. The spatial politics of urban sustainability are apparent, particularly with the tax implications for Kalamazoo property owners and the large share of workers who reside in regional communities. Similarly, the multi-scalar politics of urban sustainability are highlighted with the State of Michigan's municipal finance structure, which helped shape the circumstances that led to the FFE. In terms of the post-politics of sustainability, Kalamazoo's philanthropy is highly politicized, with overt divisions and criticisms about the philanthropic influences in the community and urban governance. At the same time, Kalamazoo's philanthropy is depoliticized, politically subdued, or "post-political." The deep history

of giving and institutionalization of philanthropy have, arguably, normalized the sway and influence of Kalamazoo's philanthropy and donor families.

Given the size of the community, the renowned presence of philanthropy in Kalamazoo is especially unique. The philanthropic interventions that have manifested are even more unusual. Regarded as an economic development strategy, the anonymously funded Kalamazoo Promise reflects a curious amalgamation of philanthropy and local growth coalitions. The case of the FFE, on the other hand, reflects a more direct intervention of philanthropy in urban governance. Rather than large-dollar donations to help fund a specific social cause, the FFE involves large-dollar donations to help fund local government.

The case of the FFE raises questions about the role of philanthropy in urban governance and capitalist economic systems. In some ways, the FFE signifies the neoliberalization of urban governance, a “neoliberal experiment” where new market-oriented institutional arrangements are forged that will presumably address public sector problems. Some scholars describe the global rise of “philanthrocapitalism” and “effective philanthropy” (Rogers 2011; Eikenberry and Mirabella 2018; Thompson 2018; Haydon, Jung, and Russell 2021). In the academic literature, there are numerous interpretations of these remodeled forms of philanthropy. Often focused on the international scale, analyses of philanthrocapitalism direct attention to the philanthropy and foundations funded by the multi-billionaire global elites. Emphasizing “philanthro-policymaking” and agenda setting powers, Rogers (2011) describes philanthrocapitalism as “the use of business tools and market forces, especially by the very wealthy, for the greater social good” (376). Eikenberry and Mirabella (2018) consider philanthrocapitalism as one approach to “effective philanthropy,” whereby donors “increasingly seek out new approaches dedicated to ‘solving the world’s problems’ through market-like, individualized means and data-driven solutions with measurable outcomes” (43). Shaped by neoliberalization, philanthrocapitalism and effective

philanthropy play a larger role in governance and social policy. In Kalamazoo, these appear to manifest at the local level.

However, these remodeled forms of philanthropy potentially ignore the structural causes to the ecological, economic, and social crises of cities. Scholarly criticisms emphasize that philanthrocapitalism facilitates market logics and economic relations that exacerbate the problems philanthrocapitalism seeks to address in the first place (McGoey 2015; Eikenberry and Mirabella 2018; Thompson 2018; Haydon et al. 2021). Similarly, the limitations of philanthropic interventions to address global urban environmental problems have been highlighted in various international and urban contexts (Thompson 2018; Montero 2020; Webber, Leitner, and Sheppard 2021). Overall, philanthropic interventions in urban governance are arguably *unsustainable* in terms of environmental, economic, and social transformation in cities. While the environmental dimension of sustainability was largely absent from Kalamazoo's philanthropic interventions, the FFE's "aspirational projects" may indirectly address environmental or ecological goals. In the next chapter, "governance sustainability" and the activities of Kalamazoo's city government are further examined.

## CHAPTER VII

### GOVERNANCE SUSTAINABILITY: BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE URBAN SUSTAINABILITY GOVERNING APPARATUS

#### *Vignette: Planning Natural Features Protection*

From the back corner of the city commission chambers at city hall, I waited in anticipation as the room gradually filled. This April 2019 meeting was not a city commission meeting, however, nor was it the first of its kind. In a room dominated by environmental advocates and neighborhood inhabitants, this Planning Commission meeting was the penultimate culmination of months of “negotiations” around the city’s pending Natural Features Protection (NFP) ordinance and zoning overlay district. The NFP ordinance would set development standards for areas with natural features as identified on a newly mapped overlay district (a zoning overlay entails a set of development standards that apply in addition to any existing zoning regulations). Throughout the meeting, public comment and dialogue occurred between residents, property owners, city staff, and members of the Planning Commission. City staff reiterated that NFP is about “thoughtful development” rather than “no development.” Expressing support for the ordinance, meeting attendees spoke passionately about the integrity of the city’s nature preserves and the impact on biodiversity and wildlife. Some advocated for increasing the minimum setback from certain natural features (the distance of development sites from natural features). Others voiced concerns about the specific language used in the ordinance text as well as the formation of the NFP review board, which would handle requests for projects and changes to sites covered in the overlay district.

The few dissenters at this meeting were the last ones to approach the podium. One commercial property and business owner indicated eleven parcels do not fit the NFP criteria and swiftly asked for the removal of the NFP designation. A fashionably suited attorney immediately followed, unenthusiastically noting that his attendance and objection were on behalf of a client. After waiting patiently in the line for public comment, a determined business owner soon faced the Planning Commission. The nearly silent audience seemed to grow quieter when he recited his prepared speech about his planned car wash business. At first, I assumed the stillness of the room was simply because his opinion was not that of the majority. However, my interviews promptly revealed that the site of the planned car wash business was a contentious issue. The property under question bordered the Asylum Lake Preserve, a nature preserve in close proximity to a flourishing commercial corridor. During the process of drafting the NFP ordinance, neighborhood groups and environmental activists argued that development on the site would be detrimental to the preserve. With some property owners objecting to the NFP standards, and others pleading for more stringent standards, the city was faced with the balancing act of environmental preservation and economic development.

Prior to drafting the NFP ordinance and overlay district, Kalamazoo’s city government had refined its public participation techniques with *Imagine Kalamazoo 2025*. Throughout my research, I attended a handful of neighborhood and citywide

meetings advertised with the Imagine Kalamazoo logo. Rather than in city hall, these meetings were typically in alternate locations depending on the place and issue at hand, ranging from parks and community centers to various locations in the central downtown. Drawing on similar techniques and tools to solicit public input, the drafting of the NFP ordinance was a robust continuation - and test - of the city's renewed commitment to public participation. Over six months, a series of public meetings were held that involved city staff, neighborhood inhabitants, environmental organizations, and business and development interests. Many interview participants praised the numerous meetings, revisions of drafts, and receptive city staff. City commission members contemplated the future of the NFP ordinance in May 2019, a little over a month after the Planning Commission meeting. In a crowded meeting, the balancing act of environmental preservation and economic development resurfaced again. Following hours of largely supportive public comment, the NFP ordinance and overlay district were adopted.

### *Introduction*

In chapter four, the concept of governance sustainability was introduced as one possible dimension of sustainability, whereby participants emphasized the role of Kalamazoo's city government. For my purposes, governance sustainability refers to: (1) city government actions and concrete policies deemed relevant to sustainability or enacted in the name of sustainability, and (2) the institutional and organizational capacity to govern sustainability. In this chapter, I examine these two components of governance sustainability for Kalamazoo's city government. Drawing on interviews, observations, and documents, I canvass the strategies, activities, and challenges around Kalamazoo's efforts to build an effective urban sustainability governing apparatus. The first component of governance sustainability involves "sustainability policy-making," such as policies and actions that more or less affect inhabitants, groups, organizations, nongovernmental entities, and the internal operations of Kalamazoo's city government. The second component involves "sustainability government-making" with regards to Kalamazoo's city government organization, which has sought to "reorganize" and "rebuild" its organizational capacity as a municipal government entity. As an illustrative example, the case of Natural Features Protection is presented, where Kalamazoo's city government crafted an ordinance to establish development standards for properties and areas with

identified natural features. The case shows the convergence of sustainability policy-making and sustainability government-making, highlighting in particular the ways that Kalamazoo's city government managed tensions between various sustainability stakeholders.

*Sustainability Policy-making: Planning and Pursuing Urban Sustainability Policy*

Kalamazoo has recently strengthened its urban sustainability planning efforts, as many participants proclaimed. The city of Kalamazoo, one participant remarked, "has been more active in actually doing sustainability planning. It was really loose at first and kind of rough I would say" (ID25). The ongoing development of a citywide "Sustainability Strategy," which I discussed in chapter four, is one of the most recent urban sustainability efforts helmed by Kalamazoo's city government. With a tendency to cast sustainability in environmental and climate terms, several other recent urban sustainability "moments" preceded the Sustainability Strategy. In 2009, for example, the Southwest Michigan Regional Sustainability Covenant was signed by leaders in the city, surrounding communities, and regional academic institutions among other community entities. This "covenant" reportedly produced little action following its ceremonious adoption. With periodic references to sustainability, the 2010 Master Plan outlines several "sustainability initiatives" whereby "[a] sustainable city is one that addresses the 'triple bottom line' of environmental health, economic vitality, and social equity" (City of Kalamazoo 2010). The city has also been a signatory to multiple mayoral climate pledges and compacts that profess a commitment to reducing carbon emissions. Over the last few years, multiple climate action plans have offered recommendations to the city, as outlined in chapter four. Lobbied for by the newly formed Kalamazoo Climate Crisis Coalition and sanctioned by the city's Environmental Concerns Committee, the city approved a resolution to declare a climate emergency in 2019. The Environmental Concerns Committee, the city's citizen advisory board, also provides recommendations to the city commission on various environment-related issues.

The Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative, with its contributions to the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan, may reflect sustainability policy-making efforts given a broad interpretation of sustainability. Imagine Kalamazoo, after all, arguably constructed a holism framework of sustainability. In addition to serving as the basis for the Sustainability Strategy, the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan helped usher in the 2019 Natural Features Protection ordinance. The circumstances that led to the adoption of the Natural Features Protection ordinance are reviewed later in this chapter. Kalamazoo’s sustainability policy-making has also been shaped by the many nongovernmental entities, community organizations, and mobilizing coalitions throughout the community, which are discussed in the next chapter. Overall, the city has organized urban policy-making around many issues in the name of sustainability or deemed relevant to sustainability. Next, I describe participants’ general evaluations of city government policies and activities pertaining to urban sustainability, including the strategies, activities, and challenges around various issues.

#### *Evaluating Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability efforts*

When discussing Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability efforts, many participants made comparisons to other cities or communities. Otherwise, participants were asked to provide examples of urban sustainability efforts elsewhere that they admired or considered achievable in the city of Kalamazoo. In some instances, these comparisons served as a frame of reference for evaluating Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability efforts, such as pointing out where the city is “ahead of the curve” (ID26), “how far behind we are” (ID06), and “things the city could do” (ID30). Some participants applauded specific urban sustainability efforts, such as transitioning to alternative-fuel public transit, energy efficient buildings, or assessing environmental impacts of buildings. Others offered criticisms of specific issues. Primarily referring to environmental sustainability, the following exchange reveals one assessment of city government efforts. The exchange is lengthy, but demonstrates the scope of issues that participants mentioned when speaking about urban sustainability efforts in Kalamazoo:

ID30: The city is doing a lot of things around the edges. The city has done some things to promote energy efficiency, which is good. The city has installed some machinery in wastewater treatment to increase efficiency. And a few things here and there, but I mean the city is just not really doing anything. And there's so much, so many things that the city could do.

RR: Yeah, what could or what should they do?

ID30: Green infrastructure for stormwater, I think is an easy, cheap way to start. It saves tons of money actually. The city of Philadelphia has done this and saved millions and millions of dollars, and it would help us with a lot of the flooding problems that we have in the city. Another thing that we could do that would save us a lot of money, and seems really trivial, but replacing all of our city landscaping with [native] species. Now I'm not saying tear it all out, but as it needs to be replaced... The city could follow examples of other cities in the state. Even like Petoskey, which has committed to a 100% renewable energy plan. There's no reason why we don't have solar panels on every single city-owned property. There's lots of things we can do in terms of promoting more alternate modes of transportation - whether it's biking, walking, public transit - that we're just not doing well enough. So there's a lot of things the city could do.

With other cities as a reference point, this participant pointed to several city government actions taken for different issues, yet also listed a number of issues that the city could address. The statement that the city of Kalamazoo is "doing a lot of things around the edges" fits with remarks by several other participants.

One distinction made by participants for urban sustainability policy-making was addressing city operations and infrastructure versus addressing community-wide conditions. Mentioning electrification of the city's fleet and switching to renewable energy sources, one city official emphasized that "at least sort of getting our own house in order would mean a lot," which could also place the city in a better position to coordinate with regional governments (ID05). "I know there's so much interest throughout the community that the city sort of lead more outside of city operations," this city official added, "[and] help lead those residences and business and institutions into a sort of citywide sustainability strategy. And the city can play that role to a degree" (ID05).

One issue frequently discussed by participants was parks and greenspace. In terms of obstacles to expanding access to parks and greenspace, some spoke about the limited amount of

greenspace in Kalamazoo, the unequal distribution of expansive greenspace across neighborhoods, and “competing interests for open space” in the face of limited financial ability for the city to purchase property for greenspace (ID19). Several spoke about park improvements and management, such as keeping up with general maintenance, upgrading playground equipment, expanding the tree canopy, connecting greenspaces and waterways, “fixing up the parks” to “bring neighborhoods together” (ID21), and ensuring the “underserved are served” in terms of quality and desirability of parks and greenspace throughout different neighborhoods (ID19). Also related to land use and greenspace, some suggested Kalamazoo’s city government could become involved in the development of local food networks. Many participants were in agreement with the prospects for community gardens, although identified various limitations and obstacles to the city maintaining community gardens, such as community interest, longevity, and funds for staffing and operation costs (ID19). City officials spoke about ordinances that could help ensure affordable and healthy food access, or expand the allowable scale of individual food production (ID01).

Relatedly, multiple participants noted the changes to the Kalamazoo River, which meanders along the edge of the central downtown. Many participants recounted family stories about the quality of the river several decades ago. Second-hand familial accounts were given, for example, about how the Kalamazoo River “was white every day from paper mill, all that paper product in the river. And then later on, they had PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyls]. And now you look at it, you can do pretty much anything but drink it” (ID29). Such improvements were attributed to established city ordinances and enhanced management practices around the river network as well as groundwater sources of drinking water. Also with regards to water infrastructure, participants credited the city with speeding up replacement of lead service lines within the water system. At the same time, concerns were expressed about the existing stormwater infrastructure as well as the extent of flooding that occurs throughout multiple core neighborhoods.

For city operations, city officials and participants spoke about how “the city has made their buildings much more sustainable” (ID04), including efforts to assess environmental impacts of buildings. In terms of “green” housing citywide, many participants pointed to city efforts to increase energy efficiency for the “aging housing stock” including weatherization of homes. “We’ve got aging housing stock in our community,” one participant observed, “and rather than try to improve that housing stock and help people become more energy efficient, we’re still very much in the mindset in this community of investment properties and landlords. And they come and squeeze every penny that they can” (ID31). Like many others, this participant concluded that improving energy efficiency is where the city “has an opportunity to step up a little more” (ID31). Participants agreed that various types of incentives should be expanded for developers, businesses, organizations, landlords, or homeowners. Many expressed the desire for the city to pursue renewable and alternative energy sources (e.g. solar), both for city operations and citywide. Participants also spoke about the need for the city to devise unconventional ways and “get out of the box” to facilitate behaviors and activities that improve energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions.

Mobility and Kalamazoo’s transportation infrastructure were prevalent topics across the interviews. Many participants spoke of the need for “complete streets” throughout the central downtown and neighborhoods. In the context of decades of imbalanced transportation design, the idea of complete streets is about (re)designing streets and transportation networks for the safety, accessibility, and ease of all “users” and modes of transit. “I think if you Google complete streets,” one participant remarked, “you’re going to see how far behind Kalamazoo is on the curve” (ID06). Building on Imagine Kalamazoo, the Strategic Vision, and the 2025 Master Plan, a “Complete Streets Policy” was approved by the city commission in early 2019. Accordingly, the policy is “intended to provide for safe and convenient access to all parts of the city by respecting the needs, capabilities and limitations of all users of city rights-of-way, including but not limited to pedestrians,

bicyclists, transit riders, motorists, emergency, freight and commercial vehicle operators” (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021c). The Complete Streets Policy specifically addresses how “poor street design” and “incomplete streets” disproportionately affect different populations, whereby “people of color, older adults, children, and those living in low-income neighborhoods...suffer disproportionately from poor street design in many ways” (City of Kalamazoo 2019). For example, likelihood of injury and death, or access to employment and health care, among others. For various reasons, many participants indicated the city should place more investment in “sustainable transportation systems” rather than a “paint and pray strategy” as one participant described the city’s approach (ID24). Numerous obstacles to complete streets and sustainable mobility were acknowledged by participants, such as a prevailing “car culture” or the degree of local control over roads maintained by the state government.

#### *Translating urban sustainability holism into practice*

As discussed in chapter four, participants on the whole did not typically separate the presumed environment, economic, and equity dimensions of sustainability. Accordingly, different issues were not always distinctly treated as “environmental sustainability issues” or “economic sustainability issues” or “equity sustainability issues.” The issues addressed by participants are interwoven in the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan, which have in turn facilitated numerous city plans designed around specific concerns. At the same time, the city may still face the ultimate task of translating a holistic framework of urban sustainability into practice. One city official, for example, described how “we’re not in that balance yet” in terms of the practice of urban governance:

So I think about grants that we get or support that we get or road funding and all of these things. Usually it’s like ‘Priority, priority, priority’ and then like the ‘And you can get a couple extra points if it’s got some sort of environmental sustainability.’ So we’re just - we’re not there with the balance of like you were saying - sustainable economy, environment, and social - we’re not in that balance yet (ID05).

Describing how some departments and programs are “all about social” whereas others are “all economy,” this city official added: “And very rarely, just a little, they’re like: ‘Oh, you know, we’re going to sort of wander into the environment part.’ But it’s all sort of - oh, it should all overlap, right” (ID05). The Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative perhaps moved Kalamazoo’s city government closer to that “balanced” holism framework, emulated by the Strategic Vision - the document slated to be “the guide to shape all plans in the future” as well as city staff and departments in general (Strategic Vision 2017). At the same time, it seemingly ushered in shifts in the practices and processes of urban governance itself, a topic to which I now turn.

*Sustainability Government-making: Rebuilding Municipal Organizational Capacity*

Kalamazoo inhabitants are witnessing a transformation of urban governance. In the last decade or so, the city of Kalamazoo has evolved how it operates as a municipal governing apparatus. In the words of participants, “a changing of the guard” (ID34) has occurred alongside a departure from the inefficient and less responsive “old school Kalamazoo style” (ID11) of urban governance. As Kalamazoo’s city government refines its sustainability policy-making goals, it has also sought to “reorganize” and “rebuild” its organizational capacity as a governing apparatus. The realization of a sustainable Kalamazoo, participants stressed, requires a city government that is capable of governing sustainability. In other words, a municipal governing apparatus with the ability to craft sustainability policies that are effective and desirable to the populace. Across the interviews, city officials and participants alike pointed to the various strategies, activities, and challenges to urban governance and “sustainability government-making.” For example, participants spoke about: (1) shifts in internal organizational structures and institutional processes of city government, (2) funding city government, (3) enduring “scalar interplay” between regional and higher-level government entities, and (4) managing community relations between city government and citizen-inhabitants. I describe these next along with the city’s recent efforts to expand public participation in urban planning.

*A new style of urban governance*

Shifts in how Kalamazoo’s city government operates were propelled by the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative, which produced the Strategic Vision planning document and contributed to the 2025 Master Plan. The Imagine Kalamazoo process was organized around expanding public participation efforts in order to create a shared “vision” for the community. At the same time, it was organized around improving bureaucratic practices and institutional processes in order to more effectively implement city plans. One city official remarked, for example, that while Imagine Kalamazoo may have generated success in expanding public participation efforts, it also helped forge “success with having the internal infrastructure to be ready to support the plan on the outside” (ID07). In a sense, Imagine Kalamazoo helped the city to improve accountability, communication, and collaboration among city departments. “In order for the city to move forward with a sustainability plan, or any part of the vision from Imagine Kalamazoo,” remarked one city official, “we kind of needed to get our house in order” (ID01). Describing how the products of Imagine Kalamazoo impact various departments throughout the city government organization, this city official added:

We needed to make sure that everybody was kind of in line with that vision. All of our people knew about it, everyone was trained, right, our citizen’s board knew about it. All of our processes, meaning our budget. You know, if you’re asking for budget money, how are you furthering the vision that the community just gave us. So how is it all tied together in every plan we make (ID01).

City officials and participants alike described various changes in how the city operates, such as “setting objectives” and “running things more efficiently” like a business (ID29). City officials and participants recalled the deficiencies of past city plans and planning processes, where there may have been less accountability and communication around goal fulfillment. Some participants described examples of city plans that were never acted on despite approval, which Imagine Kalamazoo aimed to remediate. “They’re very clear,” one participant commented, “like it’s not a plan that is just sitting

on a shelf. They're constantly updating, and reporting out, and sharing impacts and projects that have come from it" (ID37).

Many city officials and participants expressed optimism about the city's new approach and shift in priorities since the inception of Imagine Kalamazoo, at times singling out "renewed leadership" among city staff and departments. Especially with regards to the Community Planning and Economic Development Department, several participants attributed recent hires and changes in city staff as driving forces, as the following passage shows:

These people all believe in the city. And they're hires within the last ten years, if not even within five or so. But they believed that the neighborhoods could be bigger than what their predecessors believed. And again, I'm not here to begrudge their [predecessors], but I think that whole idea of Imagine Kalamazoo and [the neighborhood plans] - those were blueprints that gave us a great idea of where to go forward (ID11).

Similarly, another participant indicated that "master plans historically collect a lot of dust, but I have a different feeling about the commitment at least by city staff" (ID03). Participants noted the challenges and public pressures on city staff. "City staff has got the toughest job in the community," one participant stated, "everyone's mad at them from literally all directions...and I respect that of them, there's some great people that work there" (ID24). At the same time, some participants expressed skepticism and "mixed reviews" about city leadership and the purported changes brought about since the inception of Imagine Kalamazoo. For instance, the previously cited participant added:

A lot of these things now are just a way to kind of kick the can down the road, come up with a new plan, you know. As far as I can tell...their kind of big thing is like 'we know we don't need another plan, but here's another plan, just trust us, this time will be different.' I feel like that's a fair assessment of what I'm hearing. I've heard them say that (ID24).

Some participants also described the city's tendency to create additional city plans and devote excessive time and resources toward studying and experimenting with policies and programs.

“Kalamazoo is very good at one thing: studies,” observed one participant (ID32). Similarly, another participant elaborated:

At the end of the day, they’ve got a lot of lofty ideas that are very disconnected from reality, and even further disconnected from the people that need to do it. I often hear them like ‘well we need to experiment with doing this.’ And I’m like literally you have like three partner agencies to do that. When you talk to them, you don’t need to experiment. Because an experiment on your part means you’re going to spend another two or three years experimenting (ID28).

Other participants commented on general continuities within the city government organization, such as the “reactive” approach of city commission, clinging to tradition, and a city government organization that internally “can be a really hostile culture, a really hostile environment” (ID20). Overall, the shifts in organizational practices and institutional processes since Imagine Kalamazoo are relatively new and the long-term implications are yet to be fully realized.

There are additional governance challenges to urban sustainability government-making, such as the issue of funding city government in the context of the various tax obstacles and financial burdens discussed in the previous chapter. When asked about the greatest challenges to making Kalamazoo a sustainable city, participants and city officials often concluded that “it always comes down to money” (ID19) and how funds are directed amid the lingering structural deficit of the city’s budget. Funds from the Foundation for Excellence (FFE) were viewed as one potential means to fulfill sustainability policy-making goals, although some suggested that the FFE “has not been setup to do that kind of work, but in some respects there may be lots of good overlap” (ID05).

The relational influence and “scalar interplay” with regional and higher-level government entities reflect additional challenges to urban governance and the realization of a sustainable Kalamazoo. The historical and present regional relations with surrounding communities were highlighted by participants. For example, the competition with neighboring cities and townships to build a tax base, especially with the neighboring city of Portage, which “probably, mostly, only exists

because of white flight” (ID22). The tax implications of the worker-residency ratio were discussed in the previous chapter, along with the influences of state legislation on municipal finance. The general role of county, state, and federal government entities were characterized by participants as influential to the governing capacity of Kalamazoo’s municipal government. For example, with regards to funding resources, responsibility, or specific legislative and administrative actions (or inactions) of the federal, state, and county governments.

*The “Pandora’s Box” of public participation*

Managing community relations between city government and citizen-inhabitants was another evident challenge to urban governance and the realization of a sustainable Kalamazoo. In many ways, Kalamazoo’s city government has sought to reconcile community relations through its renewed efforts at public participation, breaking away from past trends of lesser public involvement in urban planning. Participants were asked about the public participation component of the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative, which produced the Strategic Vision and contributed to the 2025 Master Plan. “Overall, I think it was a great success,” concluded one participant, “I think it reached a lot more people in the community than any of these other master plans have in the past. If you look at the quantity of people they reached, it was huge compared to past master plans” (ID02). Noting that master plans are legally required in the State of Michigan, another participant commented that “it’s probably the first - I know it’s the first time our city has really tried to engage the neighborhoods, engage the city as a whole” (ID06). Many expressed admiration for the expansive public participation efforts fostered by Imagine Kalamazoo and the newly established Public Participation Plan. As mentioned in previous chapters, the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative involved a series of citywide and neighborhood specific meetings and events from January 2016 through April 2017. Centered around “meaningful engagement,” residents were presented with the opportunity to interact with city staff and provide input in various ways (Strategic

Vision 2017). Participants and city officials spoke about the difficulties with structuring public participation and devising strategies to maximize participation and representativeness. Describing the extent of outreach efforts for Imagine Kalamazoo, one participant reflected on the implications:

They tried to do more than one meeting at a different time, they were offering transportation for people, they had daycare for people, they were serving food so people could bring their kids and make sure their kids had dinner. You know, that's huge. You're going to get a lot more people who are willing to come when those basic services for their evening are provided and then they can concentrate on actually talking about these issues on hand when they know their kids are fed and being watched for and they have a ride home (ID02).

For the Imagine Kalamazoo process, the number and variety of opportunities for public input were often cited by participants, along with attempts to make participation more accessible, representative, interactive, responsive, and ongoing. Given that Imagine Kalamazoo was intended to serve as a long-term planning framework, city officials described the need to develop an expansive public participation strategy that could be routinely and systematically implemented across departments. The public participation strategies developed with Imagine Kalamazoo may bear implications for future planning processes, as one participant observed in the following passage:

I think the city has unwittingly opened a Pandora's Box, I say a good Pandora's Box, in allowing the neighborhoods on paper to have feedback. And my feeling and our neighborhood's feeling - and as you talk to people - it's like now you're telling us you want to listen, so let's set up the infrastructure to make that happen (ID06).

Referring to the Greek mythological metaphor, this participant hinted at how the city's recent public participation efforts may have unleashed new standards and expectations for public involvement in urban governance ("a good Pandora's box"). With commitments to be responsive to public input, the ensuing task at hand is translating public input into concrete policies and actions.

At the same time, a number of participants offered varied criticisms of the city's recent public participation efforts. In the following passage, for example, one participant characterized Imagine Kalamazoo in a different light:

The Imagine Kalamazoo plan that the city loves to brag about - yes, it was an effort at outreach, an effort at listening to the community, but it was a half-hearted effort. Yeah, I went to several of them and whenever I was at any of those meetings, it's all the same faces in the room. It's the same handful of people who come to all of them. So it's not really getting the public's opinion, it's getting a very small component of the very engaged public, who would probably have provided their input no matter what the city did. And so I think it was a failure, it was good intentioned, but I think the planning execution of that public input didn't work (ID30).

Other participant assessments alluded to broader issues of decision-making power and the influence of public participation. "There was a lot of citizen input, let's not be wrong about that," one participant noted, "but who ultimately controls the decisions about how Imagine Kalamazoo would be laid out? 'We will take your input.' But do you control how these things actually [went] out?" (ID08). Similarly, other participants explained how "sitting at the table" does not guarantee a community-driven agenda, where "they're going to do what they're going to do anyway" (ID10). Some participants pointed to "check the box" meetings that occurred in order to fulfill public participation requirements, while others described instances of continuously holding meetings "because they know the people won't keep coming out," as the following exchange elaborates:

ID32: This concept of going and saying 'well we'll ask you what you want, but we'll keep having meetings so when you're not there, we can say 'hey at that last meeting, they said this.'

RR: Yeah, so you kind of mentioned that yesterday. I mean, how did you feel about that whole Imagine Kalamazoo process?

ID32: Yeah, but that isn't the Imagine Kalamazoo process. That's the system. It isn't just the process. Imagine Kalamazoo is one thing. It is the money. You can't call it anything else. Imagine Kalamazoo is that there was dollars set aside so that some of the things that are told - [people] said they wanted in Imagine Kalamazoo - can be paid for. People have always imagined Kalamazoo, there just was no dollars available.

This participant characterized Imagine Kalamazoo as funds allocated based on community identified projects and goals; any slanted public input strategies or "check the box" meetings were not necessarily viewed as unique to Imagine Kalamazoo, but rather routine practices attributed to "the system." Others expressed frustrations with insufficient responses in terms of following through

with meaningful action. In contrast to the Kalamazoo “can-do” narrative described in chapter five, some participants described accounts of a Kalamazoo “can’t-do” narrative in terms of explanations from the city and city staff. While various limiting factors such as budget or staff resources were acknowledged, some participants spoke about instances of the city “making excuses” for not addressing certain issues.

People that are elected, people that are hired - they don't have to do everything we ask, it's not a demand, but we live in our neighborhoods, we know I think more of what's going on and the city should be more of a resource...we can give you suggestions, but we need something done. Not reasons why we can't do it, all the way up to the city commission and the city manager (ID06).

Regardless, many participants and neighborhood inhabitants considered Imagine Kalamazoo as another helpful resource or tool, specifically with the neighborhood plans that were drafted soon after the approval of the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan. Imagine Kalamazoo in some ways served as a model for the 2019 Natural Features Protection ordinance, a zoning ordinance that set development standards for areas mapped out as natural features. With insights that bear on the research interests for this study, the case of Natural Feature Protection demonstrates the features of governance sustainability as outlined in this chapter.

#### *The Case of Natural Features Protection*

In early 2018, the city began working on a project to protect areas with “natural features” throughout the community. The effort was largely inspired by the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative and aligned with the “Environmental Responsibility” goal in the Strategic Vision. Additional development standards were to be codified for areas with existing natural features, such as water resources, wetlands, woodlands, rare species, and areas with steep slopes (in order to mitigate erosion, for example). The 2025 Master Plan initially identified these areas with the Future Land Development Map (Master Plan 2017:26). Approved in October 2017, the 2025 Master Plan indicated that “the City will work with property owners, key stakeholders, and conservation minded

organizations to achieve the long term protection of these areas for such ends as public enjoyment and environmental health” (Master Plan 2017:28).

In December 2018, a six-month moratorium on development permits was approved, which paused new development and redevelopment for areas with natural features as identified in the Future Land Development Map. The moratorium provided the planning department a short window to draft the Natural Features Protection (NFP) ordinance and zoning overlay map, which ultimately placed additional development standards on properties within the newly mapped NFP overlay district. Building on the public participation strategies developed with Imagine Kalamazoo, the NFP process involved a series of “focus group meetings” in order to “present, discuss, and revise the draft ordinance with the community” (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021). Four meetings were “dedicated to different stakeholder groups in the community” and included one meeting for environmental and conservation organizations, two meetings for neighborhoods on the West and East sides of the city respectively, and one meeting for the “developer and construction community” (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021d). A number of other meetings were held thereafter, including community-wide meetings as well as a Planning Commission meeting, when the NFP ordinance and zoning overlay map were recommended for approval by the city commission (Imagine Kalamazoo 2021d).

The NFP ordinance and overlay district were approved by the city commission in May 2019, which concluded the first “phase” of the NFP process. For any properties that fall into the NFP overlay district, any development projects or changes must be approved by the newly established NFP Review Board, with different levels of review depending on the scale and type of changes (NFP Fact Sheet 2021). In the second phase of NFP in the city, the NFP Review Board proposed changes to the ordinance and expansions to the overlay district map. Multiple rounds of mapping analysis, drafts, and public participation occurred until July 2021, when the Planning Commission

recommended the city commission approve the updates to the NFP ordinance and overlay district map. The third phase of NFP in the city will involve “Public Education and Stewardship” (NFP Fact Sheet 2021).

### *Negotiating Natural Features Protection*

My interviews for this project occurred in the wake of the first NFP phase. This section is based largely on my interviews with participants who were familiar with or involved in the first NFP phase. The process of “negotiating” NFP was essentially centered around the city balancing environmental preservation concerns and property development. Throughout the process, the city attempted to manage tensions between multiple “sustainability stakeholders” made up of development interests, neighborhood inhabitants, and environmental and conservation organizations. Various areas throughout the city became the focus of the NFP ordinance and overlay district, such as the multiple nature preserves scattered throughout the city. “At those meetings,” one participant recounted, “you could really see the conflict between environmentalists, capitalists, and all this stuff” (ID08). Referring to the drafting of the NFP ordinance, one participant elaborated:

There was a lot of that kind of tension of how do we kind of plant the flag that Kalamazoo cares about these particular spaces. And that we can identify these resources as in need of protection and that they should have special designation and special consideration when development is going to happen - but at the same time, in a way that still allows development [to] happen and still allows for economic opportunity. And it’s a hard tension (ID23).

The environment-development tension was especially made visible with debate over potential commercial development on the border of Asylum Lake Preserve. The 274-acre nature preserve is owned by Western Michigan University and safeguarded by the Asylum Lake Preservation Association, a volunteer association committed to protecting the preserve (ALPA 2021b). Referring to the Future Land Development Map in the 2025 Master Plan, one participant commented on how

the city hastily mapped out natural features areas and was thereafter faced with a dilemma involving a covered property. A development project was planned along the edge of the Asylum Lake Preserve, which included the construction of a car wash that many inhabitants argued would invariably impact the preserve. One participant described the city's approach to NFP thereafter:

And now the city is like 'We got to do something about this because it's covered.' So for a year they tried to run parallel tracks - 'Well, let's satisfy the landowner and also try to come up with a citywide Natural Features Protection ordinance' (ID06).

An environmental coalition was placed in opposition to private development interests (and individual property owners in general), with the city seeking to fulfill its commitments in line with the 2025 Master Plan and holism framework espoused by Imagine Kalamazoo. Seeking to maintain the health and ecological integrity of the preserve, some activists and inhabitants in the surrounding neighborhoods reportedly advocated for no development along the preserve. "Their issue is that even with the overlay," one participant speculated, "the restrictions weren't severe enough to prevent development that would affect it" (ID03). Discussed in chapter four, others agreed with the city's "thoughtful development" approach to NFP in the city, where the goal is to not prevent development, but "enhance it" by factoring in environmental preservation. Moreover, many participants and city officials alike pointed to the need to retain property rights of landowners, including individual homeowners as well as development interests.

In January 2020, the Planning Commission contemplated the path forward for the disputed property. The developer requested that the NFP designation be removed and to rezone the property for commercial development. With a room full of opposition and hours of public comment, the Planning Commission voted to not recommend the city commission approve the request. Referring to phase one of NFP, one city official concluded: "I think, as staff, what we have brought forward is absolutely a balance between the development interests we heard and the preservation concerns we heard" (ID01).

The NFP process was “very technical” and involved “bringing in the experts” from various professional fields pertinent to the environmental standards set by the ordinance. However, one of the most notable features of Kalamazoo’s “new style” of urban governance is a professed commitment to ongoing public involvement in urban planning. In the NFP process, this public involvement was directly related to sustainability in the bio-physical environmental sense of the word. One city official recounted how the NFP process was “incredibly robust for a very discreet ordinance; that level of engagement is what you would probably see for a city doing their whole zoning code - and that was like a chapter” (ID01). Noting the legislative limitations of urban governance, another city official reflected on the NFP process:

I was pleased that the public felt like they had a role to play, that they were listened to, they felt like there was transparency. They asked lots of questions and we could sort of have this back and forth. I mean, am I completely satisfied? I still think there’s a huge portion of those folks who like are pro-environment who still don’t understand what regulations can and cannot do (ID05).

Some participants expressed discontent around the circumstances that led up to the NFP ordinance and overlay district, including the “huge public backlash” to the potential commercial development along the edges of the Asylum Lake Preserve. “That’s not what anyone who had been involved with Imagine Kalamazoo had approved,” one participant remarked (ID30). In the following passage, this participant described the NFP ordinance as reactionary to citizen discontent:

So the Natural Features Protection ordinance was a reaction to the city residents’ reaction. So we would never have had that if the residents of the city hadn’t risen up and said: ‘We are going to oppose, with every fiber of our being, the destruction of Asylum Lake by the development of this corner with a car wash and oil change and other commercial development’ (ID30).

The extent of “bottom-up” organizing, mobilizing coalitions, and grassroots activism are further discussed in the next chapter. Even so, many participants nevertheless applauded the extent of public involvement, repeated drafts, multiple meetings, and other opportunities for

public participation. For example, after expressing discontent with the circumstances that led to the NFP ordinance and overlay district, another participant added:

Now to be fair, I think that that whole process...that to me was a model of how every issue should be run with this city. They had public meetings, they took feedback, they posted online. Not only were they taking feedback, but they were rewriting the drafts as they went. So if you still go to the NFP [website], you'll see there were five different drafts for that. And there was a lot of heat, but there was a lot of light...there's a lot of people that put a lot of thoughtful and intelligent fact-based feedback into that (ID06).

Overall, the case of Natural Features Protection illustrates the features of governance sustainability as outlined in this chapter. With the approval of the ordinance and completion of “phase two” in 2021, Kalamazoo’s city government organization advanced its urban sustainability policy-making goals while facing the trials of its “new style” of urban governance. In the next chapter, I continue to draw on the circumstances around the NFP process, the city government’s relationship with its inhabitants, and the prospects for a sustainable Kalamazoo.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter examined Kalamazoo’s efforts to build an effective urban sustainability governing apparatus. I first discussed sustainability policy-making as one feature of governance sustainability, including the historical precursors to Kalamazoo city government policies and activities deemed relevant to sustainability. Participants shared their assessments of the different issues pertaining to Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability efforts, including the successes and shortcomings of Kalamazoo’s city government organization as it seeks to concretize a holism framework of sustainability. Kalamazoo’s sustainability government-making was examined, whereby the city government’s efforts to “reorganize” and “rebuild” its organizational capacity were fully displayed. Participants spoke about shifts in how the city government organization operates, including changes and continuities in city staff and leadership. In addition to funding city government and managing relations with regional and higher-level government entities, public

participation was identified as an important piece to sustainability government-making. Participants evaluated the city government's public participation strategies, speculating about the implications of cultivating relations with its citizen-inhabitants.

The case of Natural Features Protection was especially relevant to several research interests. In some ways, the NFP ordinance was a "test" of sustainability policy-making for Kalamazoo's city government organization. The pursuit of "thoughtful development" involved the crafting of environmental policy in the face of economic development, property rights, and a commitment to the holism framework espoused by the Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative. At the same time, the NFP ordinance was a "selective" form of sustainability policy-making given that certain areas of the city with natural features were targeted for additional zoning requirements, although some inhabitants expressed the desire for the NFP requirements to be expanded citywide (and for sustainability policy-making to generally expand beyond natural features and land use).

The NFP process was also a "test" of sustainability government-making, a trial of the city government's capacity to craft and implement policies deemed relevant to sustainability. With "thoughtful development" and the commitment to public participation guiding the NFP process, the city government organization sought to quell the tension between economic development interests and those concerned with environmental preservation. Multiple participants acknowledged and witnessed this tension at the NFP meetings, including myself, as the opening of this chapter relayed. To an extent, NFP was also treated as a managerial issue that built on a win-win narrative between environmentalism and economic development. Natural features and natural resources were treated as manageable not only through professional expertise, but also through crafty legal parameters and zoning code. While the NFP process involved building consensus among environmentalism and development, it did not fully reflect the "post-politics" of urban sustainability as observed in the literature. Technical and professional expertise helped produce the NFP

ordinance, but the possible outcome did not appear to be “narrowly defined in advance” (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:6). Instead, public participation definitively shaped specific policy features of the NFP ordinance. Furthermore, it was neighborhood groups and environmental activists who prompted the lengthy NFP process in the first place. By politicizing natural features protection, inhabitants compelled the city to impose a development moratorium on affected sites while the ordinance was drafted.

In some ways, the case of Natural Features Protection points to a “strategic sustainability fix,” whereby the economic valuation of nature was weighted with its ecological value. Furthermore, the NFP meetings may have operated to build consensus around a “thoughtful development” framework, aligning environmental preservation with economic development while satisfying the public appetite for involvement in urban planning. Initially, the interests of private capital and development appeared to supersede bio-physical environmental concerns. With the Asylum Lake Preserve as the point of discontent, however, the codified protection of natural features was heavily lobbied and influenced by environmental and neighborhood organizing. Rather than an “active remaking” of urban ecologies, the NFP ordinance more closely resembled a reactive “non-making” of urban ecologies as sites for accumulation and future economic growth. In the next chapter, the activities and undertakings of relatively “top-down” actors are contrasted with relatively “bottom-up” actors as they seek urban sustainable transformation. Together, an examination of these concerted forces helps round out Kalamazoo’s sustainability story.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SEEKING URBAN SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION IN KALAMAZOO

#### *Vignette: Mobilization at City Hall*

Passing by a lightly populated Bronson Park, I crossed the one-way street toward city hall. Searching for insights to my dissertation research project on urban sustainability, yet another summer evening would be spent at a Kalamazoo city commission meeting. The meeting agenda I downloaded on the city's website did not appear too lengthy or controversial, so I assumed the Monday night meeting would be sparsely populated. A small gathering of people stood at the front steps to city hall, a few with homemade signs. One person held an oversized replica of a Michigan driver's license. Instead of a printed photo of a licensed driver, however, there was a rectangular cutout that the sign-holder could peer through to complete the document replica. "Driver's Licenses for All" read one sign while another read "¡protección permanente!"

There were more people gathered inside the building. When the city commission meeting commenced on the second floor, the city commission chambers was crowded with members and allies of Movimiento Cosecha, "a national, non-violent movement fighting for permanent protection, dignity, and respect for all undocumented immigrants" (Movimiento Cosecha 2021). During the public comment period, delegated speakers for Movimiento Cosecha explained their presence. They were opposed to a 2008 Michigan law that prevents undocumented persons from obtaining a driver's license and state identification card. "The undocumented community of Kalamazoo is organizing," declared one of the speakers, "so as not to be invisible anymore." The delegated speakers read aloud (in English and Español) a fully drafted resolution that objects to the 2008 Michigan law. In order to make clear the city's stance on the issue, members and allies of Movimiento Cosecha urged the city commission to pass the resolution at the next meeting.

Two weeks later, members of the mobilizing coalition expressed support one-by-one at the podium in the four minutes of public comment allowed per person. After a few issues with the resolution text were addressed, the resolution was unanimously approved by the city commissioners. The meeting had yet to adjourn and the general public comment period remained, however attendees began clearing the room. The number of occupants quickly downsized within a matter of minutes. The air cleared and the thickness of a crowded room dissipated. A handful of Movimiento Cosecha members and allies remained, along with a few regular attendees and those who wished to comment on their issues of concern, ranging from the climate crisis and carbon taxes to zoning and various neighborhood issues.

In October 2019, a few months later, the pattern of clearing the room similarly transpired at another city commission meeting. On this night, however, the room was populated with a seemingly different mobilizing coalition and demographic subset of the community. Channeled by the newly formed Kalamazoo Climate Crisis Coalition and sanctioned by the city's Environmental Concerns Committee, a resolution to declare a climate emergency was the highlight of the

meeting agenda. The climate emergency declaration would formally reaffirm the city's commitments to addressing the climate crisis. Delegated speakers and allies voiced their support for the resolution, emphasizing its significance and advocating for a favorable vote. Upon unanimous approval by the city commissioners, the crowd thinned and the meeting proceeded to the next items on the agenda. When the general public comment period opened up, other citizens and representatives of community organizations spoke about a number of community issues. Several speakers were leaders and allies of Interfaith Strategy for Advocacy and Action in the Community (ISAAC), "an interfaith organizing network of congregations and strategic partners working together to build a more just community" (ISAAC 2021). Members of ISAAC periodically vote on the most crucial issues facing Kalamazoo County in order to strategize and form "task forces" (such as anti-racism, housing, and gun violence prevention). Relaying their experiences as fair housing advocates, nonprofit employees, and landlords, the leaders and allies of ISAAC voiced their concerns about housing equity and housing discrimination in the community. With a dwindling audience, they pleaded for the city to support fair housing and non-discrimination ordinances, which would soon be introduced after the upcoming local election.

At one of these meetings where the pattern of "clearing the room" was observed, one woman approached the podium to praise the organizers and mobilizing coalitions who show up at city hall for different causes. Acknowledging the challenging work that city commissioners and staff confront, she proclaimed that "if we all work together, 'cause we all got issues in this town." With a much lighter audience, there were few left to reciprocate the pronouncement of solidarity. Before returning to her seat, she indicated she had comments for the mobilizing coalition who previously filled the room, "but they all left...they're not here no more."

### *Introduction*

The opening of this chapter demonstrates the successes of multiple mobilizing coalitions. The mobilizing coalitions and supporters who attended these and other city meetings likely share similar motivations and goals; many collaborate and partner with each other in various ways. Rooted in a shared sustainability ethics and holistic conceptualization of sustainability, the concerns of these mobilizing coalitions were largely deemed "sustainability issues" by city officials, neighborhood and community leaders, and residents I interviewed. Movimiento Cosecha and its supporters mobilized around fair treatment of undocumented persons and "Driver's Licenses for All," successfully advocating for a resolution to support the reinstatement of driver's license eligibility for undocumented persons. The Kalamazoo Climate Crisis Coalition (KCCC) and its supporters

mobilized around the city declaring a climate emergency, successfully advocating for a resolution that also emphasized participation, inclusion, and recognition of vulnerable populations. Guided by its Housing Task Force, Interfaith Strategy for Advocacy and Action in the Community (ISAAC) and its supporters mobilized around fair housing and non-discrimination ordinances. After months of meetings and collaboration with stakeholders, changes to city housing ordinances were in fact unanimously approved in September 2020, which included additional protections against discrimination (such as those based on criminal background or sources of income), limits on rental application fees, and the creation of a Civil Rights Board for enforcement and complaints (Jones 2020).

The mobilizing coalitions of Movimiento Cosecha, KCCC, and ISAAC all made clear that the significance of their approved resolutions and ordinances cannot be overstated. Likewise, their mobilizing activities and successes cannot be diminished. Community organizers, neighborhood leaders, and other advocates work tirelessly to build and sustain momentum toward urban transformation, many whom I was fortunate enough to interview for this project. Their supporters are commendable themselves, given that people only have so much time, energy, and resources to commit to a movement or community issue. Mobilizing inhabitants to rally at city hall is not an easy task. Yet the pattern of what I refer to as “clearing the room” seemed to signify something, even if it bears little on the values, activities, and goals of any particular mobilizing coalition. Without undermining the activities and successes of any group, the pattern of clearing the room may suggest there is limited overlap among different mobilizing coalitions and their supporters who show up in numbers at city hall. There is potential ideological and discursive unity among mobilizing coalitions and various “bottom-up” actors, yet disconnections linger in practice - or at least there remains ample opportunity for cross-over.

This chapter focuses on a consortium of “sustainability stakeholders” who are seeking urban transformation and the realization of a sustainable city. In some ways, the mobilizing coalitions at city hall reflect the meeting of relatively “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches to urban transformation. In this chapter, the strategies and struggles of these approaches are considered throughout the community. I first discuss the strategies and struggles of the institutionalized, centralized, and relatively “top-down” approaches to urban transformation. Kalamazoo’s philanthropy and Kalamazoo’s city government have been influential forces in this regard, as previous chapters explored. Yet a handful of community foundations, major nonprofit organizations, and academic institutions have also been influential forces of urban transformation. Alongside the activities of Kalamazoo’s dominant institutional players, segments of the community have begun deliberating their own self-determined pathways toward urban transformation. Perhaps in response to the perceived shortcomings of institutionalized and relatively “top-down” approaches, there appears to be an impulse toward more unconventional, somewhat decentralized, and relatively “bottom-up” approaches to urban transformation and sustainability. A few key insights are briefly mentioned at the end of the chapter. The concluding chapter, chapter nine, offers a comprehensive synthesis and draws major conclusions for this project on the whole.

#### *Sustainability and “Top-Down” Urban Transformation*

In 2009, the Southwest Michigan Regional Sustainability Covenant was signed, “a joint initiative of several organizations in the Southwest Michigan Regional area that are committed to promoting the development of a sustainable infrastructure by the interconnection of economic, social and environmental sustainability principles throughout the region and within their respective community and organizations” (SWMRSC 2009). Invoking the three pillars framework of sustainability (i.e. environmental, economic, social equity), the one-page “sustainability covenant” professed a commitment to creating a “regional and community sustainability vision statement, goals

and objectives” (SWMRSC 2009). The list of commitments also alluded to measurement standards for sustainability indicators, information-sharing, and collaboration among the participating organizations. Major institutional players and organizations in the Kalamazoo area signed on, representing a variety of sectors in government, education, health care, and business among others. The city of Kalamazoo and the neighboring cities of Portage and Battle Creek were represented in addition to the county government and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. The three major academic institutions were signatories (Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo Valley Community College, and Kalamazoo College) along with the local public school districts and regional educational service agency. Other participating organizations included Kalamazoo’s two major hospitals (Borgess Medical Center and Bronson Methodist Hospital), the Kalamazoo Chamber of Commerce, the Southwest Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, and the Kalamazoo Nature Center.

The editorial board for the Kalamazoo Gazette (a local news media organization) wrote about the initiative shortly after its inception, simplifying the aspiration: “Share information - what works and what doesn’t work - across all sectors in the region to leverage that knowledge and expertise in a way that benefits the region” (Kalamazoo Gazette Editorial Board 2009). Quoting a few of the signatories, the editorial adds that “[t]he next step for the group is to draw up a blueprint that identifies sustainability indicators and methods for monitoring progress” (Kalamazoo Gazette Editorial Board 2009). According to a meeting report obtained from a Western Michigan University website address, a “general assembly” meeting occurred the following year and was “intended to bring together covenant signatories to discuss their vision and goals for the covenant, next steps, and commitments for the future” (Glasser and Hollander 2010:2). The report discusses the results of a survey given to representatives of the participating organizations, which were also discussed at the meeting. Competing interpretations of sustainability are apparent, and the report alludes to some

disagreements with the definitions and characterizations of sustainability. The authors of the report attest that “covenant signatories could greatly benefit from engaging in more discussion on what they and their member organizations mean by the term ‘sustainability’” (Glasser and Hollander 2010:13). Noting conceptual disconnections, the report concludes that upon reaching a “mutually agreeable vision, we can create a common measurement platform to influence policy and practice - and thereby improve quality of life for all” (Glasser and Hollander 2010:13).

Multiple participants I interviewed spoke about this initiative, which at the very least displays an intent toward urban sustainable transformation. There are few indications of an official reconvening of the participating organizations and signatories, perhaps depressed by the problems of conceptualization, inter-organizational cooperation, and various bureaucratic and institutional constraints. Reflecting on the Sustainability Covenant, one participant remarked:

We pledged to do a lot of stuff together, and we did do some things, but there was nothing transformational. It was transformational to get people together to talk about it, it was transformational to commit to something, but it’s of course a lot more difficult to commit to something - and do something (ID14).

Regardless, each of the respective signatories have since advanced their own independent sustainability agendas, collaborating among each other in numerous ways. Countless pledges, commitments, and plans have been devised by the major academic institutions, health care organizations, and regional governments. Various officiates, committees, and programs have been instituted in the name of sustainability.

#### *Governing institutional actors and organizations*

In pursuit of urban sustainable transformation, such institutionalized “top-down” approaches are faced with various struggles. The dynamic relationships among institutional actors may be complex, unbalanced, and at times difficult to maintain in terms of collaboration. Some participants I interviewed commented on the influence of Kalamazoo’s “anchor institutions” over

Kalamazoo's city government and throughout the community in general. "The city has proven that they will not push or advocate for some of these bigger nonprofits to contribute," one participant remarked, thereafter providing a second-hand account about "the amount of work [the city does] for Western and [Kalamazoo College] and Bronson, that we're not even obligated to do, but they ask us and we do it. We ask for nothing in return" (ID06). For example, city work on infrastructure or sidewalk projects.

In general, participants assigned differential responsibility to the major institutional players in terms of supporting the neighborhoods and community. "It's a very grasstops community, you know," observed one participant, "I think we put a lot of trust and expectation in organizations and institutions to do that work for us" (ID09). Some participants spoke about the expectation that the many nonprofits will address various community issues. Speaking about economic issues such as employment and "people's ability to be financially healthy," one participant explained how "there's a lot of pressure, and like 'oh the nonprofits will do it.' And yet, they can't because they don't have the resources, even though people think they're giving them the resources" (ID34). At the same time, another participant cited the city's struggles with self- implementing certain programs in spite of many presumably capable nonprofit organizations and service agencies. "They can't connect the dots," referring to the city government organization, adding that "they have weird beliefs about giving agencies too much money. Like 'well you guys have been getting money already.' And it's like, that's irrelevant. I don't care who gets money, it's not like it's going to my pocket" (ID30). When asked about the Foundation for Excellence, another participant suggested some funds have been directed to "organizations that I know they don't have the capacity to actually pull it off" as well as organizations that are "not actually doing the work in the community that really, really is going to make the difference for poor people" (ID10). Overall, these accounts highlight the complicated relationships between city government, nonprofit organizations, and other institutional actors.

### *Managing institutional and organizational distrust*

Participants also alluded to some general level of institutional and organizational distrust among the many nonprofit organizations, community foundations, and Kalamazoo's city government on the whole. "There's a lot of distrust, it's been really hard for people to be convinced to share data" one participant observed, commenting on the possibility of organizations sharing databases given the number of organizations working toward similar goals (ID34). This participant noted that one deterrent may be the "the amount of relationship building" required for "collective impact" (ID34). City officials spoke about drawing on models from other communities and "bringing in the experts" from universities or professional fields, yet also needing to balance technical-professional expertise with public demand and local community knowledge - especially given the renewed efforts for public involvement in urban planning.

In terms of institutional distrust, multiple participants spoke about policing in the community. Some described the perceived police presence throughout the core neighborhoods, such as the heavier presence in the Northside neighborhood or the lighter presence in the Eastside neighborhood. One participant described an account of a "suspicious person" reported in a dead end cul de sac of the Vine neighborhood, where there are a handful of near million-dollar homes. Noting that the neighborhood housed the President of Western Michigan University, this participant explained the public safety response:

The amount of police that they had there was incredible. They had probably upwards of like thirty police...you wouldn't see that anywhere else. They're really trying to protect those people that are there, because it will look really bad on that side of the city, that they can't protect their president of the university (ID18).

Upon moving to the Northside of Kalamazoo, one participant observed that "certain parts of the city was just - I don't know that I want to say it's driving while Black...but I noticed that certain parts of the city were more heavily occupied" (ID13). Describing multiple experiences of being

pulled over for traffic stops “just out of sheer suspicion,” this participant continued:

Okay, I don't know if I can just say Northside because I see a lot in all of the city. I can say when I'm on a certain side of town, I feel more safer. And when I say safer, I'm not talking about from crime. I'm talking about for me, I know the biggest issue is getting pulled over. And that seems so crazy. I'm more afraid of getting pulled over than getting shot by someone. Yeah, I can walk down the street at two or three in the morning and don't have to worry about getting shot. You know, somebody's more likely going to speak to me - 'hey homey, hey big brother'...but it's not going to be a threat or anything, whereas if I'm driving at a certain time of day (ID13).

Several participants spoke about the various programs and initiatives by Kalamazoo's Department of Public Safety, which combines law enforcement, fire, and emergency services. For example, partnering with different nonprofits and agencies to run programs around education and job training opportunities, or programs that involve more community policing oriented approaches. The previously cited participant, for example, praised the “Pastors on Patrol” program, where local religious leaders accompany Kalamazoo Public Safety officers. “Policing an urban community is a challenge,” commented one city official, noting a historical mistrust between communities of color and law enforcement. “I mean it's a historical component to it that we're struggling every day to get over. And that creates a challenge, but we're putting things in place to help build those relationships and improve that trust” (ID26). In addition to these institutionalized and relatively “top-down” approaches, segments of the community are forging their own pathways toward urban sustainable transformation, which I discuss next.

#### *Sustainability and “Bottom-Up” Urban Transformation*

Kalamazoo's many nonprofit and community development organizations play an influential role in urban sustainable transformation. Some nonprofits are affiliated with national organizations or have a longstanding sway in the community, although there are also many small-scale and relatively young organizations working toward communal impact. At the same time, an ensemble of neighborhood associations, community groups, mobilizing coalitions, and grassroots activism appear

to be seeking out pathways toward urban transformation. These sustainability stakeholders face their own set of imminent obstacles and systemic barriers, as the interviews made clear, especially in the face of overcoming disconnect and forging relatively “bottom-up” approaches to urban sustainable transformation.

### *Neighborhood development*

Neighborhood associations have been key movers of community development, especially in the core neighborhoods that include the Northside, Eastside, Edison, Vine, Douglas, and Oakland Drive-Winchell neighborhoods. Each neighborhood more or less prioritizes certain issues and goals, at times working closely with the city government. The Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 planning initiative called for neighborhood plans to accompany the 2025 Master Plan. Some neighborhoods had previously published neighborhood plans, although the new rounds of neighborhood plans were more intentionally aligned with Imagine Kalamazoo and its products, such as the strategic goals set forth by the Strategic Vision. The neighborhood plans largely follow a uniform structure and organization. Each neighborhood plan, for example, contains a table that demonstrates how the neighborhood plan aligns with the city’s strategic goals. The neighborhood plans list the actions that will be taken to fulfill their respective goals. For each action listed, the neighborhood plans identify the role of the neighborhood and its residents, the role of any community partners (such as nonprofit or community organizations), the role of the city, the timeline, and the costs or funding. Most of the neighborhood plans address issues of housing, commercial development, streets and mobility networks, environment, and neighborhood culture (City of Kalamazoo 2018d, 2018e, 2018f, 2019d, 2019e, 2020b, 2020c). However, the specific actions and strategies identified are tailored to each neighborhood. For example, several actions related to affordable housing are listed in the Northside, Eastside, Edison, and Vine neighborhood plans. Expanding resident owned businesses is emphasized in the Northside neighborhood plan, especially businesses owned by

residents who are African American and low income. Actions related to improving the quality and accessibility of street infrastructure are prominent in several plans such as the Edison and Oakland Drive-Winchell neighborhood plans. While environmental goals are addressed in most of the plans, such as improving and expanding parks and greenspaces, certain actions are distinct to specific neighborhoods. For example, actions related to improving park trail connections in the Eastside, Edison, Oakland Drive-Winchell, and Parkview Hills neighborhood plans; enhancing biodiversity in the Vine and Oakland Drive-Winchell neighborhood plans; and maintaining the deer population in the Oakland Drive-Winchell, Oakwood, and Parkview Hills neighborhood plans. Several plans address food access such as the Eastside, Edison, Vine, and Oakwood neighborhood plans, ranging from actions related to edible planting to the availability of affordable, healthy food options. With its proximity to the Asylum Lake Preserve and role in the Natural Features Protection (NFP) process, the Oakland Drive-Winchell neighborhood plan contains a section on NFP and “sustainable development” around the Asylum Lake Preserve.

The actions listed above are only a few examples and do not necessarily represent the scope of each neighborhood plan. One commonality across the neighborhood plans was fostering the neighborhood identity and neighborhood culture through events, open community spaces, and local art. Several of the plans also advocate for changes to city zoning code in order to allow for mixed-used development that combines residential and commercial spaces. In general, participants reported that the neighborhood plans have been useful tools and frameworks that serve as a “road map for a neighborhood” (ID06). When I interviewed participants affiliated with neighborhood associations and neighborhood organizations, they usually had a copy of their respective neighborhood plan within reach. As addendums to the 2025 Master Plan, the neighborhood plans may reflect assurances and means to hold the city government accountable. “It doesn’t mean that they are going to do every single thing in there,” one participant remarked, but “if they start doing something that’s

not part of your neighborhood plan - that's not part of what everybody has agreed upon - you've got a pretty good argument" (ID06).

The neighborhood associations have each developed their own programs and paths toward neighborhood development and urban sustainable transformation. Often coordinating with the city government or other local organizations, the neighborhood associations run a variety of programs, workshops and events for inhabitants and youth. Multiple neighborhood associations have also sought to acquire properties to develop or repurpose for a variety of uses. Emphasizing the importance of land ownership, one participant described the recent activities of the neighborhood associations:

Each neighborhood association is now starting to try to capture houses, commercial buildings - so that people in their areas can be able to live and work in them. It doesn't mean that we don't want to partner with the developers, we just have to be able to come to the table with the developer so you can negotiate. Where before, you're hoping that they morally will do something (ID32).

Working with community development organizations and drawing on grants, these neighborhood associations are seeking to facilitate neighborhood development that is self-determined by its neighborhood inhabitants and leaders. For example, the Vine Neighborhood Association acquired several units for residential and commercial space. The neighborhood association for the Northside, the Northside Association for Community Development (NACD), was involved with the construction of low-income senior housing and a grocery store. The NACD also advocated for and established the Northside Cultural Business District, in order to support resident owned and African American owned businesses, support affordable housing and infrastructure, and build and retain the cultural identity of the neighborhood (Jones 2021). Drawing on Foundation for Excellence funds, "anti-gentrification" grants were approved by the city commission for the Northside and Edison neighborhood associations (Devereaux 2020). The funds allow for properties to be purchased and rehabilitated, potentially bringing in commercial and retail proceeds that benefit the neighborhood.

### *Environmental organizing*

A number of hyperlocal, regional, and nationally affiliated environmental organizations and groups exist in Kalamazoo. There are local chapters, for example, of nationally affiliated organizations such as Citizens Climate Lobby, Sierra Club, and Wild Ones. In addition to the Kalamazoo Nature Center, there are a handful of regional organizations such as the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, Audubon Society of Kalamazoo, the Kalamazoo River Watershed Council, and the Kalamazoo Environmental Council. While some of these are older and more established, others are younger and more organic. More recently, local chapters were formed with the globally-derived Extinction Rebellion and youth-based Sunrise Movement, which are both younger organizations involved with political lobbying and direct action around the climate crisis. A handful of student groups associated with Kalamazoo's academic institutions also exist, such as Western Michigan University's Students for a Sustainable Earth.

Despite the number of environmental organizations, participants struggled to agree that Kalamazoo has ever maintained a strong grassroots environmental movement, let alone an environmental justice movement. Many participants nonetheless pointed to the collection of longstanding environmental organizations and groups in Kalamazoo as evidence of a historical community affinity for the bio-physical environment. Some participants described different historical moments where there were organizing efforts related to environmental conditions. For example, neighborhood organizing in opposition to a planned oil recycling plant in the Northside neighborhood several decades ago. In the 1990s, the Asylum Lake Preservation Association was formed in the wake of plans for a business, research, and industrial park on the southern edge of the property (ALPA 2021a). Discussed in the previous chapter, the Asylum Lake Preservation Association was also involved with the first phase of Natural Features Protection in 2018 and 2019. Citing the recent activities and environmental organizing of several groups, participants described a

growth in environmental organizing and community interest, as the following exchange displays:

ID23: I will say, and maybe that's just through a factor of me working [at this organization] in the last year, but I am seeing a real community appetite for environmental progress in a way that I haven't necessarily seen as much in the past.

RR: You mean like in the past few years?

ID23: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I'm just thinking, for instance, like the Climate Strike that's on Friday. And like I am hearing things constantly about it, and there seems to be so much energy around it, and I don't think that would have happened just a few years ago.

In 2019, the Kalamazoo Environmental Council brought together a host of organizations at the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit, which was introduced in chapter four. Formed in 2019, the Kalamazoo Climate Crisis Coalition (KCCC) has likewise helped coalesce inhabitants and organizations, aimed at mobilizing “collective action to achieve immediate and drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and rapid adoption of renewable energy through a transition grounded in social, racial, economic, and environmental justice” (KCCC 2021). The KCCC, for example, was involved in successfully advocating for the city of Kalamazoo to declare a Climate Emergency in 2019. Among other environmental organizations and community groups, the KCCC also participated in the 2019 global “Climate Strike” in downtown Kalamazoo, which was mentioned in the previous exchange with a participant.

Many participants described this “community appetite for environmental progress” (ID23) and growth in environmental organizing, but also acknowledged the struggles of transforming the rhetoric of environmental progress into tangible actions and outcomes. Environmental progress and transformation fundamentally depend on the translation of rhetoric, plans, and resolutions into concrete practices. In terms of city government, a few environmental programs in recent years range from tree planting, new recycling programs, and voluntary public-private programs to reduce energy usage in large buildings (Devereaux 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; Miller 2021; Williams 2021). In 2020, a one-week composting pilot program was launched in the Vine neighborhood, which may be trialed

in other neighborhoods (Dever 2020). The city’s “Environmental Responsibility” goal in the 2025 Master Plan, however, proposes various actions that address stormwater mitigation, invasive species mitigation, renewable energy use, climate resilience, natural features protection, sustainable buildings, and reduction of fossil fuel dependence and preparation for alternative transportation (City of Kalamazoo 2017a:144-146). Several recommendations around “sustainable zoning” are also outlined in the Master Plan, such as changing requirements or incentivizing various practices related to stormwater mitigation (e.g. rooftop gardens, rainwater gardens, surface materials), energy (e.g. solar panels or wind turbines), landscape (e.g. native species or edible landscapes), and walkable urban environments that allow accessibility to other modes of transportation (City of Kalamazoo 2017a:122-123). In addition to the NFP ordinance that was adopted in 2019, the much-anticipated Sustainability Strategy plan may help translate the rhetoric of environmental progress into practice.

#### *Community activism and cooperatives*

In terms of relatively “bottom-up” approaches to urban sustainable transformation, waves of community organizing are evident in Kalamazoo’s recent history. A “living wage movement” gained momentum in the early 2000s, for example, and culminated with a defeated ballot initiative about wage requirements for city workers and government contracts (Anonymous 1998; Schau 2015). In more recent years, there have been instances of marches, protests, and direct action, such as the homeless encampment protest at Bronson Park in 2018 or the series of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. Various organizations also focus on a number of issues related to housing, anti-racism, immigration, and environmental issues among others. There are a few organizations that operate as cooperatives and run on the principles of cooperative ownership. In the Northside neighborhood, for example, there is the People’s Food Co-op of Kalamazoo (PFC), “Kalamazoo’s community-owned, locally grown natural grocer since 1970” (PFC 2021). The PFC recently relocated to the downtown edge of the Northside neighborhood, a predominantly Black neighborhood with some of

the lowest-income census tracts in the city. The move was reportedly intentional to help overcome disconnection given the predominantly white middle-class clientele, although some participants expressed concerns that the area was increasingly vulnerable to gentrification. In the Vine neighborhood, there is Kalamazoo Collective Housing, which runs a handful of group and single-family units of “permanently affordable, democratically controlled rental housing” (Kalamazoo Collective Housing 2021). Participants mentioned other small-scale neighborhood organizations and “many grassroots groups who are functioning in that way” (ID24). Most agreed with the idea of cooperatively run organizations, citing the potential of agriculture, housing, real estate, or nonprofit and business collectives. Yet an array of obstacles and barriers to cooperative development were identified across the interviews, along with the broader struggles of “bottom-up” urban sustainable transformation, which I outline next.

*The struggles of “bottom-up” urban sustainable transformation*

With regards to the environmental, economic, and equity dimensions of sustainability, the struggles of what might be considered “bottom-up” urban sustainable transformation are wide-ranging. Several participants spoke about the historical deficiencies of environmental movements that have excluded communities of color and the economically vulnerable. Contemplating whether there were any indications of environmental or environmental justice movements in Kalamazoo, one participant indicated “there are definitely a lot of people organizing on behalf of the environment in Kalamazoo. They are largely middle and upper-class white folks” (ID32). The Natural Features Protection (NFP) ordinance process was, after all, seemingly emblematic of “white middle-class environmentalism.” Some participants also pointed out the whiteness of the city’s Environmental Concerns Committee and Sustainability Strategy team. Moreover, the need to meet everyday needs was deemed a necessary precursor to mobilization around urban sustainable transformation. Noting the importance of a “stable economic foundation,” one participant speculated that some people may

view environmental sustainability “as a luxury; like if we can’t put food in our mouth, we’re not gonna be worried about stormwater retention or driving an electric car or whatever” (ID37).

Similarly, another participant elaborated:

When you are not worried about paying your bills, it’s very easy for you to start thinking about the environment...when you’re not worried about the car breaking down, you know, you’re not worried about being pulled over because of the color of your skin, it’s very easy to say ‘we’ve got to save the planet’ (ID32).

Another participant contrasted “communities of color and low-income communities who are dealing with survival mode” with “a very white privileged movement” advocating for environmental issues and climate crisis issues (ID20). Noting that there are segments of Kalamazoo’s environmentalists “who understand the need to shift to more of a justice lens,” this participant concluded that “we’re getting there, but I wouldn’t say that it’s fully like developed and functioning and moving” in terms of Kalamazoo’s prospects for environmental justice movements (ID20).

Aside from general disconnection among different organizations’ mobilizing coalitions, other struggles of “bottom-up” urban sustainable transformation may involve what some participants referred to as “cultural” disunity and a “polarized society” that spans across social class or race and ethnicity.

A number of participants spoke about practical challenges to creating cooperatively owned organizations, such as funding, the time required of individuals, or legal barriers. One participant described a stalled effort to form a regional cooperative alliance in 2014-2015, which was named the Kalamazoo Cooperative Business Association, “a network of Kalamazoo-area co-ops working to promote the ideas and values of cooperative business. We’re using education and outreach to support existing co-ops, with a long-term vision toward seeding the local economy to allow new co-ops to get started” (KCBA 2021). Although the website is operational, the effort was reportedly “hard to get traction” among the local and regional cooperatives in grocery, agriculture, housing, and

banking (credit unions). For example, time commitments or “philosophical tension” whereby different types of cooperatives are “coming from very different mindsets” (ID25). Lacking a “productive next step,” the initiative stalled:

We were able to kind of strike at a time when, you know, we would have forty people come to these meetings and talk about, learn about each other’s co-op’s style, structures, all of that. But then we just really struggled to know with what to do next (ID25).

Other participants cited various pursuits for cooperative models, but were hindered by funding limitations or “state policy issues” with forming and operating different types of cooperatives (ID33).

Participants grappled with the role of city government or more well-established institutional actors in terms of “bottom-up” urban sustainable transformation. Many participants emphasized mass mobilization and strengthening community organizing as a means to urban sustainable transformation, pointing to the limits of systemic change induced by institutionalized “top-down” approaches to urban sustainable transformation. Others advocated a combination of institutionalized “top-down” and decentralized “bottom-up” approaches to urban sustainable transformation. Spotlighted in chapter six, one divisive topic was the Foundation for Excellence (FFE), where a number of participants strongly opposed the philanthropic model of municipal finance and urban governance. Yet some communicated a degree of pragmatism in terms of drawing on the funding opportunities provided by the FFE. Referring to the FFE and Kalamazoo’s donor families, one participant summarized:

So that’s why you don’t see me being against them. I’m talking about a system and we have to get money from the system until we don’t need the money from the system. And so if there are some that’s willing to try to help us do that, why would I knock them because they had money? (ID32).

Noting that neighborhood associations should be “grassroots oriented” rather than a “check” on city government, one participant suggested the city should “encourage and help us to develop our

grassroots organizations” (ID06).

Some participants described efforts and policies of the city as “episodic feel-good stuff” in order to “look good” (ID24), whereby “the city looks cosmetically better and there’s these kind of surface improvements, but it doesn’t deal with any of the systemic issues and inequities of the city” (ID08). One participant indicated how one of the incarnations of a climate action plan provided a framework for the city government to implement, but instead “the city just sat on it.” This participant continued:

And so when does the city start to move? When groups like Extinction Rebellion start committing acts of civil disobedience, and when other groups - Sierra Club and Citizens Climate Lobby...start using the mechanisms of government, they start working within. And groups like Extinction Rebellion are working on the outside and pressuring the city. So the city is only pursuing a climate action plan now as a reaction to the intense level of criticism that it’s getting (ID30).

Like this participant, many people I interviewed spoke about the need to influence institutionalized “top-down” actors and organizations, including Kalamazoo’s city government, but also acknowledged the adversities. “You don’t even get minor concessions without a lot of people making a lot of noise about it,” observed one participant (ID08). Several speculated about the potentially detrimental outcomes had the Asylum Lake Preservation Association and neighborhood organizing coalitions not actively opposed the planned development along the nature preserve.

Along with the NFP process, the organizing efforts around the Climate Emergency Declaration reflect one instance of organizing efforts that influenced the city’s agenda. Referring to the climate crisis, one city official suggested that “activism in the community has really put it on the city’s agenda” (ID04). The activism of Movimiento Cosecha and Interfaith Strategy for Advocacy and Action Network (ISAAC) at city hall reflect additional examples, which were described in the opening of this chapter. At the same time, participants also recognized and grappled with the limited systemic impact of community organizing. With the NFP ordinance, for example, segments of the

community initially mobilized around the implications of technical zoning stipulations. The outcome of the mobilization around the Climate Emergency Declaration was precisely that - a resolution to declare a climate emergency. Likewise, Movimiento Cosecha succeeded in lobbying the city to pass a resolution declaring an objection to state law, while ISAAC helped move the city toward fair housing and non-discrimination housing ordinances. Facing wider systemic challenges and political-economic obstacles, from local to global, the long-term social and material outcomes are yet to be determined. The potential implications of their successes, however, cannot be overstated. While the Climate Emergency Declaration is not necessarily transformative in itself, for example, the resolution text proclaims the significance of the city formally declaring a climate emergency (City of Kalamazoo 2019b):

[A] formal Declaration of a Climate Emergency by the City of Kalamazoo is the critical and courageous first step in laying the foundation to address the climate crisis. A formal declaration will provide the catalyst to mobilize residents, businesses, institutions, faith and community organizations to work together to prioritize the immediate reduction of CO2 emissions and support the City in current efforts to plan for community resilience and adaptation while keeping the concerns of vulnerable populations central to a just transition.

Despite the varied criticisms and shortcomings of both institutionalized “top-down” and relatively “bottom-up” approaches to urban sustainable transformation, many participants agreed that such approaches were generally headed in the right direction.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, institutionalized “top-down” approaches to urban sustainable transformation were contrasted with relatively “bottom-up” approaches to urban sustainable transformation. The Southwest Michigan Regional Sustainability Covenant was one coordinated effort that attempted to align Kalamazoo’s major institutional players under the banner of sustainability. Managing and governing relationships among Kalamazoo’s institutional actors and “anchor institutions” brings challenges, especially for Kalamazoo’s city government. Participants I interviewed identified some

level of distrust between nonprofit organizations, community foundations, and city government. Several mentioned the spatialized and racialized policing in the community, but also welcomed Kalamazoo Public Safety's programs and partnerships with different community organizations and neighborhoods.

Among relatively "bottom-up" approaches to urban sustainable transformation, Kalamazoo's neighborhood associations have played a role in facilitating self-determined neighborhood development, including activities such as acquiring properties for housing and commercial enterprises. A handful of environmental organizations have also left their mark in the community. Amid a growth in environmental organizing, scattered community activism and grassroots organizing have worked toward urban sustainable transformation, including isolated endeavors for cooperative development. Among other obstacles, these organizing efforts and movements are striving to overcome historical disconnect and social exclusion. There is arguably a degree of disconnect between mobilizing coalitions in the community, which was alluded to at the opening of this chapter. At the same time, fragmented coalitions may be looming with potential for cross-over. Weighing the viability of city government and "top-down" institutional actors, Kalamazoo's inhabitants have sought to mobilize around select issues in order to steer the course of urban sustainable transformation.

With regards to the research interests for this study, this chapter first reiterates the difficulties and differences in how sustainability is conceived by different actors - and the implications for coordination and crossover among institutional actors and organizations' goals. For instance, the conglomerate of signatories to the Southwest Michigan Regional Sustainability Covenant, which sought to establish a shared vision and measurement system for urban sustainable transformation. The different "bottom-up" actors may also have differential understandings of the extent of sustainability, where some mobilizing coalitions center around the bio-physical

environment and others concentrate on issues that are arguably relevant to economic or social equity dimensions of sustainability. The sustainability “covenant” also highlights the spatial politics of urban sustainability, whereby major institutional players in Kalamazoo debated sustainability at the regional scale. A substantial focus of this chapter was also the role of relatively “bottom-up” approaches to urban sustainable transformation, represented by the activities of neighborhood associations, environmental organizations, community activists, and movements that aimed to shape the urban agenda. Perhaps in response to the inadequacies of “top-down” actors - or the deficiencies of existing political and economic systems - some segments have sought alternative means of urban sustainable transformation. Neighborhood associations have pursued self-determined development strategies while other groups and coalitions have struggled with arguably post-capitalist strategies of urban sustainable transformation. In the following discussion and conclusion chapter, I reflect and expand on the research insights drawn from each chapter, summarizing the key lessons and implications of Kalamazoo’s sustainability story.

## CHAPTER IX

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: THE CASE OF SUSTAINABLE KALAMAZOO

This study examined the urban sustainability agenda unfolding in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The objective was to investigate the discourses and practices of urban sustainability in Kalamazoo, including the locally constructed narratives, activities, and implications in historical context. I focused on how Kalamazoo's inhabitants and institutions understand, plan, and act on urban sustainability. The role of Kalamazoo's city government was a primary focus, although Kalamazoo's many "sustainability stakeholders" were also considered. While multiple methods were employed in a case study approach, the in-depth interviews largely shaped the descriptive and analytical content for this study. This study was guided by three overlapping questions:

- (1) How is Kalamazoo imagining, planning, and implementing urban sustainability?
- (2) How and why do certain spaces, issues, and people come to be included in Kalamazoo's urban sustainability agenda?
- (3) What logic(s) of urban sustainability are unfolding in Kalamazoo?

In chapter two, I provided a detailed review of the literature, problematizing the concept of sustainability in the urban context and surveying the labyrinth of "sustainable cities' debates." Multiple case studies related to urban sustainability were sampled in the context of shifting urban sustainability discourses and logics. Several key areas of interest were also presented in the literature review: (1) the meanings and discourses of urban sustainability, (2) the spatial politics of urban sustainability, (3) post-political sustainability, knowledge, and expertise, (4) the role of equity and justice in urban sustainability, and (5) contested urban sustainability agendas and alternative responses. Chapter three described my methods, research design, and my "mixing paradigms" methodological approach. Supplemented with opening vignettes and several "cases" within the overall case study, each of the following thematic chapters (chapter four through chapter eight)

presented a different piece of what I refer to as Kalamazoo's sustainability story.

In this chapter, I first summarize the main points of each thematic chapter. In connection with the research objectives of this study, I then consider how the case of “sustainable Kalamazoo” on the whole relates to the empirical literature and key areas of interest identified in chapter two. Attending to the larger goal of identifying the “logic” or logics of urban sustainability, I propose three co-operating logics in Kalamazoo: the holistic sustainability logic, the philanthropic fix logic, and the community self-determination logic. These logics are discussed in relation to the empirical literature and theoretical insights presented in chapter two. The limitations and implications of this study are also considered. A brief afterword on the global pandemic completes this dissertation, where I reflect on the pandemic's implications for my research and the conclusions drawn.

#### *Kalamazoo's Sustainability Story: A Summary*

As highlighted in chapter two, previous case studies have focused on official government-led sustainability policies, activities, and comprehensive plans enacted in the name of sustainability. Sustainability as a central policy feature is only beginning to take hold in Kalamazoo, which contrasts with several other cities examined in the literature (While et al. 2004; Checker 2011; Temenos and McCann 2012; Vallance et al. 2012; Tretter 2013; Béal 2015; Mössner 2015; Long 2016). The developing “Sustainability Strategy” may ultimately qualify as the “official” urban sustainability agenda advanced by Kalamazoo's city government, at least once it is finalized and adopted. However, prior to work on the Sustainability Strategy, Kalamazoo's city government less widely embraced the sustainability idea in urban planning. This study therefore also examined urban sustainability efforts beyond the official government-led agenda. The perspectives of numerous “sustainability stakeholders” in Kalamazoo's unfolding urban sustainability agenda were considered. As previously defined, Kalamazoo's “urban sustainability agenda” refers to the whole collection of initiatives, plans, and activities of governmental and nongovernmental institutions, organizations,

groups, and inhabitants who seek urban sustainable transformation. In this sense, Kalamazoo's urban sustainability agenda is more appropriately characterized as numerous, co-developing agendas that are advanced in the same urban context.

The first thematic chapter, chapter four, focused on the meanings and discursive frameworks around the concept of "sustainability" in the Kalamazoo context. Sustainability is often ordered by environmental, economic, and social equity dimensions. Among the participants I interviewed, the sustainability concept was interpreted "beyond the pillars" in multiple ways. The "scope" of sustainability, for example, was deemed important to participants. Several conceptual layers characterized participants' sense-making of sustainability, which took on a different meaning based on the issues, scale, time frame, and level of abstraction or analysis under consideration. A pattern of "thinking holistically about sustainability" was observed among participants, whereby any presumed dimensions, pillars, or categories were treated as overlapping, interconnected parts-of-a-whole. The case of the Sustainability Strategy spotlighted the development of a citywide sustainability plan.

The circumstances around sustainable development were considered in chapter five. Multiple community narratives of Kalamazoo were identified: the "thriving community" narrative, the "two Kalamazoos" narrative, and the "Kalamazoo can-do" narrative. These community narratives occurred alongside discourses and practices of sustainability. Multiple dilemmas of development were also described, whereby participants demonstrated contrasting perceptions and viewpoints related to gentrification, homelessness, and housing. The chapter presented the case of Imagine Kalamazoo, the ongoing city planning initiative that created a community "Strategic Vision" and reinvigorated public participation in urban planning.

Chapter six examined the intervening role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo, which holds implications for urban sustainability in Kalamazoo. The "deep history of giving" and the influence

of philanthropy were discussed. The chapter presented the mixed viewpoints of Kalamazoo's philanthropy and donor families. Contrasting narratives of philanthropy were further exemplified with the case of the Foundation for Excellence, whereby a unique philanthropic model of municipal finance was incorporated. The circumstances and contrasting community perceptions of this unconventional public-private partnership were highlighted.

Chapter seven examined the concept of "governance sustainability," which was separated into two components: sustainability policy-making and sustainability government-making. Participants' evaluations about sustainability policy-making in Kalamazoo were presented, as reflected by specific policies and actions taken by Kalamazoo's city government. Sustainability government-making was also described, including Kalamazoo's "new style" of urban governance amid organizational shifts toward greater efficiency, inclusiveness, and responsiveness to residents. The two components of governance sustainability were also highlighted with the case of Natural Features Protection, which involved the creation of a citywide ordinance to protect natural features in designated areas. The corresponding process of "negotiating" Natural Features Protection in the city made visible the tensions among sustainability stakeholders.

From the perspectives of Kalamazoo's sustainability stakeholders, the strategies and struggles of urban sustainable transformation were discussed in chapter eight. Institutionalized and largely "top-down" approaches to urban sustainable transformation were compared with decentralized and relatively "bottom-up" approaches. The influence and relationships among Kalamazoo's major institutional players were considered alongside the reach of neighborhood associations, environmental organizing, and community activism.

#### *The "Full Concept" of Sustainability*

This study is especially informative to the sustainability concept in the urban context. The sustainability idea is perpetually negotiated in the construction of urban sustainability agendas. There

are virtually unlimited meanings behind the sustainability concept, which some scholars have suggested is an “empty concept” (Eden 2000; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012). The sustainability concept is routinely susceptible to bio-physical environmental interpretive frameworks, as in environmental sustainability (Vallance et al. 2012; Agyeman 2013). Among the participants I interviewed, interpretations of sustainability typically extended beyond the bio-physical environment. Participants often drew on the many “three’s” frameworks of sustainability, yet they treated the sustainability concept in multifaceted, nuanced ways. As shown in chapter four, participants moved “beyond the pillars” by distinguishing the “scope” of sustainability while also “thinking holistically about sustainability.” Accordingly, “real sustainability” involved the treatment of sustainability as made up of interconnected parts-of-a-whole.

The notion of hierarchical holism was advanced in chapter four, which I contrasted with one variation of the proposed concept (Schrader-Frechette 1998). Unlike the ethics-derived version of Schrader-Frechette’s (1998) rendition of hierarchical holism, I described how participants “centered” different dimensions of sustainability (e.g. environmental, economic, or equity) in terms of the perceived weight, influence, or degree of consequence rather than intrinsic value. Sustainability *ethics* were widely shared whereas there were divergent views on sustainability *pragmatics* and how to achieve “real” sustainability. Some participants “centered” economic sustainability in their holistic framing of sustainability while others placed equity at the center of holistic sustainability. Some participants may have placed greater weight in the proposed “governance” dimension of sustainability, or what may be referred to as governance sustainability (which I expanded upon in chapter seven). In this re-envisioning of environmental, economic, and social equity relationships, “real” sustainability melds these presumed dimensions while still leaving room for the “ordering” or “ranking” of these dimensions in terms of perceived weight, influence, or degree of consequence.

While sustainability remains interpretively open in Kalamazoo, it is much less an “empty concept” and rather a “full concept” endowed with nuanced meanings and meticulousness. Any presumed typology or framework of the sustainability concept may be artificial designations perpetuated by academics, researchers, businesses, or policymakers. These artificial designations may be useful for measurement or visualization, but it may not reflect how the concept is understood or, for that matter, acted upon in the urban context.

*Whose Sustainability? Sustainability Fixing, Consensus Building, and the Politics of Urban Sustainability*

Beyond the concept of sustainability, this study addressed the canon of “sustainable cities’ debates” in urban planning. One goal was to explore how and why certain spaces, issues, and people come to be included in Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability agenda. In other words, *whose sustainability?* Within Kalamazoo’s historical, political-economic, and cultural context, the thematic chapters demonstrated the processes, conflicts, and moments of consensus around *whose sustainability* and the “elusive ideal of sustainable development” (Campbell 2013:83). Previous research on urban sustainability planning has underscored various forms of “selective” rather than inclusive or holistic urban sustainability agendas (While et al. 2004; Béal 2015; Long 2016). For example, specific spaces may be targeted for environmental, economic, and social transformation. In Kalamazoo, there was not the same degree of “spatial selectiveness” described by Béal (2015) or Long (2016). Although several areas within or along the edges of specific neighborhoods were targeted for development or “green” practices, Imagine Kalamazoo (including the Strategic Vision, 2025 Master Plan, and affiliated neighborhood plans) provided a platform for different spaces to be considered, ranging from the central downtown to specific neighborhoods. The NFP process focused primarily on those areas with natural features, especially nature preserves, yet the evolving Sustainability Strategy is expected to be a citywide plan.

In terms of whether certain issues were prioritized, or what might be referred to as “thematic selectiveness,” there was a wide range of issues considered by sustainability stakeholders. This was facilitated by the pattern of thinking holistically about sustainability, however thematic diversity was also demonstrated by the tenets of Imagine Kalamazoo, the Strategic Vision, and the 2025 Master Plan. The evolving Sustainability Strategy further normalizes environmental concerns into urban sustainability planning, yet does not have a selectively environmental focus. There may be stronger calls toward one issue or another, such as mitigating carbon emissions, but such advocacies operate within the realm of sustainable cities’ debates and the construction of a comprehensive urban sustainability agenda.

Urban sustainability agendas may exhibit “social selectiveness” by privileging some people or groups over others. At least in terms of *discourses* and *narratives* of sustainability, there remains a focus on equity and justice in Kalamazoo. In Kalamazoo, there does not appear to be a widespread “equity deficit” (Agyeman 2005b), whereby urban sustainability agendas privilege or exclude certain spaces, issues, and populations. The widely shared framework of thinking holistically about sustainability retains the equity dimension of sustainability while integrating other dimensions such as environmental or economic sustainability. This framework begins to materialize in Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 and culminates with the evolving Sustainability Strategy. The public participation efforts, moreover, reflect attempts at procedural equity in urban planning. There are some signs of the potential for environmental gentrification, whereby displacement occurs as a result of new environmental amenities and the higher costs of living associated with “green redevelopment,” but not to the full extent described in the literature (for example, Dooling 2009; Checker 2011; Anguelovski 2016; Long 2016; Rice et al. 2020). Combined with neighborhood environmental efforts and strategies to curb potential gentrification, the city’s plans and initiatives largely incorporate *discourses* of environmental equity. However, it may be too soon to draw conclusions

about the impacts of recent activities, let alone the impacts of city plans that have yet to be finalized, such as the Sustainability Strategy.

Several scholars also examined the “sustainability fix” (While et al. 2004; Macdonald and Keil 2012; Temenos and McCann 2012; Montgomery 2015; Long 2016; Walker 2016; Jocoy 2018; Martin et al. 2019; Winter and Le 2020). In the urban context, While et al. (2004) interpret the sustainability fix as the pairing of entrepreneurial imperatives of urban governance with ecological pressures, whereby ecological goals are pursued as a “fix” to the need for accumulation and economic growth. In Kalamazoo, the closest resemblance to the sustainability fix is the case of Natural Features Protection, however it reflects a sort of “inverted” sustainability fix. Instead of advancing ecological goals as a means for accumulation and future economic growth, the Natural Features Protection (NFP) ordinance and overlay district advanced ecological goals for the more accustomed purpose of environmental preservation (e.g. “protection of natural features”). Rather than a *proactive remaking* of urban ecologies as sites for accumulation and future economic growth, the NFP process more closely embodied a *reactive non-making* of urban ecologies as sites for accumulation and future economic growth. Emerging from Imagine Kalamazoo, the NFP ordinance and overlay district were shaped by neighborhood and environmental coalitions mobilizing around the planned development near the Asylum Lake Preserve. These actors sought to avert the remaking of urban ecologies as sites for development and accumulation. In the end, the NFP ordinance and overlay district were more about environmental “checks” on future development and accumulation rather than a means to promote development (although the language of “thoughtful development” was used to assure NFP was not intended to prevent development).

Overall, the NFP process did not entirely mirror a “sustainability fix” as described in the literature, yet it still (to an extent) “fixed” tensions between competing discourses of sustainability. The conventional environment and development conflict was evident; neighborhood and

environmental coalitions were placed in opposition to development interests (and perhaps private property owners in general). Capitalizing on the notion of environmental-economic compatibility, Kalamazoo's city government attempted to build consensus between environmentalism and development. Although specific interpretations of the phrase varied, the narrative of "thoughtful development" was largely accepted as a legitimate environmental preservation and economic development framework that would retain property rights and allow for development.

The ability for urban sustainability agendas to build consensus was reviewed in chapter two. The "thoughtful development" narrative, and the NFP process on the whole, are examples of "consensus building exercises" around urban sustainability. The making of Kalamazoo's urban sustainability agenda involved consensus building in numerous other ways and among a wide range of actors. In the case of Imagine Kalamazoo, the city government sought to unify community members around a collective "strategic vision" to guide city plans, policies, and personnel. The public participation efforts affiliated with Imagine Kalamazoo essentially served as consensus building exercises. The case of the Sustainability Strategy also involved a degree of consensus building around an official city government-led sustainability plan. To settle on the objectives of a sustainability plan, the Sustainability Strategy team facilitated dialogue and debate among city staff, professionals, activists, and other members of the community. Consensus building more generally occurred within the internal city government organization amid efforts to "reorganize" and "rebuild" organizational capacity while enhancing interdepartmental communication. Preceding the incorporation of the Foundation for Excellence, the Blue Ribbon Revenue Panel may have served to build consensus around potential remedies to Kalamazoo's budget challenges and financial position.

Beyond city government, consensus building was evident in the activities and aims of Kalamazoo's many sustainability stakeholders. Kalamazoo's "anchor institutions," organizations, community and neighborhood groups, and mobilizing coalitions have striven to identify shared

goals of urban sustainable transformation. The Kalamazoo Environmental Summit, which opened chapter four, represented a consensus building exercise among Kalamazoo's environmental organizations and groups. Similarly, the Southwest Michigan Regional Sustainability Covenant served as an institutionalized and relatively top-down approach to build consensus around urban sustainable transformation. Among others, these numerous efforts aimed to mend - and overcome - the discursive and institutional disconnect around urban sustainability.

Among official city government-led urban sustainability agendas, some scholars have suggested that urban sustainability agendas may be “post-political” (Checker 2011; Vallance et al. 2012; Mössner 2015; Long 2016). The sustainability concept is “de-politicized” and treated as a technical, apolitical idea to be managed by expert knowledge. Accordingly, this deflects opposition and restricts participation to the level of “vision” (Long 2016). Technical-professional expertise and “expert knowledge” were drawn upon by Kalamazoo's city government, including models and “best practices” imported from other urban experiences. In crafting the NFP ordinance and overlay district, for example, the city relied on expert knowledge, imported models, and technical planning and zoning tools to manage the bio-physical environment. Yet the NFP process was far from apolitical, even if Kalamazoo's city government succeeded in building consensus among environmentalism and development. In part, it was the *politicization* of natural features that bolstered the extensive NFP process. Furthermore, instead of restricting participation to the level of “vision,” the NFP process was organized extensively around specific policy features related to the ordinance and overlay district map. The Sustainability Strategy, similarly, involved a reckoning of sustainability discourses and the goals of a citywide sustainability plan. Imagine Kalamazoo was largely organized around generating discussion and civic discourse in the public sphere. In line with Kalamazoo's “new style” of efficient and responsive urban governance, there was a renewed role for public participation with Imagine Kalamazoo.

Overall, there was only minor indication that “any concern, debate or discussion about the goals and objectives of the sustainable city have been silenced” (Mössner 2015:191). Of course, discussion and debate are different from policy and program, a distinction that numerous participants made clear about the city’s public participation efforts. Yet through the planning initiatives and activities of Kalamazoo’s city government, the politics of sustainability were difficult to avoid and were otherwise actively embraced by Kalamazoo’s many sustainability stakeholders. The concept of sustainability was arguably *re-politicized* as sustainable cities’ debates resurfaced in urban planning, which may ultimately shape the course of city plans and initiatives such as the Sustainability Strategy.

The unique role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo supplies additional insights to the broader urban sustainability agenda. “Post-political” conditions may take shape with Kalamazoo’s newly incorporated philanthropic municipal finance structure. In the case of the Foundation for Excellence, the philanthropic model of municipal finance was outwardly incorporated as a technical, apolitical model of municipal finance. As shown in chapter six, there are divisive viewpoints on the Foundation for Excellence (FFE) and the general role of philanthropy in Kalamazoo. While the persons I interviewed represented a small segment of inhabitants, most affirmed that such divisions existed in the broader population. The circumstances around the FFE are politicized among many inhabitants, yet the deep history of giving and institutionalization of philanthropy have also served to normalize and de-politicize the FFE as a new model of municipal finance. Thus, while there is little indication of the conventional “sustainability fix” as described in the empirical literature, there may be a “philanthropic fix” that bears on environmental, economic, and equity dimensions of sustainability. I discuss the “philanthropic fix” logic in the next section alongside two other “logics” of urban sustainability in Kalamazoo.

### *The Logics of Urban Sustainability in Kalamazoo*

Another wider goal for this study was to identify the “logic” or logics of urban sustainability operating in Kalamazoo. In other words, the overall strategy of urban sustainability, as reflected by the discursive frames and practical actions that embody those discursive frames. In this section, I propose three co-operating logics of urban sustainability in Kalamazoo: the holistic sustainability logic, the philanthropic fix logic, and the community self-determination logic. I argue these logics characterize the unfolding urban sustainability agenda in Kalamazoo. These logics are discussed in relation to the empirical literature and theoretical insights reviewed in chapter two.

#### *Holistic sustainability*

The logic of “holistic sustainability” entails a broad and inclusive treatment of sustainability. The holistic sustainability logic embraces assumptions about the interconnectedness of environment, economy, and equity. This was first exhibited by participants’ nuanced conceptualizations and interpretations of sustainability as made up of interconnected parts-of-a whole. I argue holistic sustainability represents a “logic” given that abstract discursive frameworks of holistic sustainability were accompanied with concrete practices that embodied those discursive frameworks. Holistic sustainability, as an overarching strategy, was displayed by various city government-led initiatives and plans. Sustainability was not the banner of Imagine Kalamazoo (or its immediate products, the Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan), yet it helped form the basis for a comprehensive holism framework. As an evolving citywide plan that explicitly uses the language of sustainability, the Sustainability Strategy appears to solidify holistic sustainability as a “strategy” or logic. The Sustainability Strategy team was made up of professionals and activists with environmental backgrounds, yet team members and city staff leading the project advocated for well-rounded goals and a holistic view of urban sustainability. Like interview participants on the whole, members of the Sustainability Strategy team sought to move “beyond the pillars” and embrace “thinking holistically

about sustainability.” While somewhat more narrowly focused on environmental preservation and development standards, the Natural Features Protection ordinance served as an extension of Imagine Kalamazoo’s comprehensive holism framework. The language of “thoughtful development” was employed in order to “balance” environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability, while at the same time building consensus among competing interests. The logic of holistic sustainability similarly manifested beyond city government-led initiatives and plans. For example, the coalescence of environmental organizations at the Kalamazoo Environmental Summit, which was introduced in chapter four, reflected an attempt to broaden the reach of environmental organizing while expanding discourses of the environment. Discussed in chapter eight, the institutional and organizational coalition around the Southwest Michigan Regional Sustainability Covenant was yet another example of moving beyond bio-physical environmental frameworks of sustainability.

Environmental sociology examines the societal-ecological interrelationship, including the variety of environmental discourses that frame social-environmental relations and guide concrete practices. The urban sustainability agenda unfolding in Kalamazoo integrates various environmental discourses and environmental paradigms. For example, the key environmental discourses of the twentieth-century identified by Hannigan (2006) such as: (1) Arcadian discourses that are rooted in preservationism and conservationism, (2) Ecosystem discourses that are characterized by eco-centrism and maintaining the “balance of nature,” and (3) Justice discourses that draw on equity frameworks, civil rights movements, and grassroots environmentalism. Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability agenda thus draws on the New Environmental or Ecological Paradigm (NEP) as well as the Environmental Justice Paradigm (EJP), as described in the literature (Dunlap and Catton 1979; Bullard 2000; Taylor 2000; Agyeman 2005b; Benford 2005; Bryant and Hockman 2005; Hannigan 2006; Sze and London 2008; Walker 2012). Along with explanations of environmental

degradation and the limits of growth, these paradigms attempt to identify avenues for environmental improvement and societal-ecological transformation. Drawing on the NEP and the EJP, Agyeman et al. (2003) advocated for a “just sustainability” framework that combines sustainable development and environmental justice perspectives. The logic of holistic sustainability that is materializing in Kalamazoo resembles “just sustainability” or “the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, while living within the limits of supporting ecosystems” (Agyeman et al. 2003:2).

In addition to multi-scalar and inter-generational concerns, Kalamazoo’s sustainability stakeholders have striven to account for different sources of inequality (e.g. environmental, socioeconomic, racial and ethnic) and different forms of justice (e.g. distributive, procedural, and justice as recognition). Procedural justice has emerged as a key feature in Kalamazoo’s urban sustainability agenda, especially in terms of city government expanding public participation, neighborhood inhabitants seeking greater influence over decision-making, and community organizations or groups forging their own self-determined pathways toward urban sustainable transformation. While injustice may not be the “master frame” shaping the urban sustainability agenda (Benford and Snow 2000; Taylor 2000), there are key segments of the population lobbying governmental and nongovernmental entities to account for equity and justice concerns.

### *The philanthropic fix*

The logic of “the philanthropic fix” primarily relates to economic, equity, and governance dimensions of sustainability. The philanthropic fix logic embraces philanthropic interventions as a means to resolve economic pressures, social inequities, and governance burdens. Enmeshed with a historical presence of philanthropy in Kalamazoo, these philanthropic interventions and endeavors of Kalamazoo’s donor families are manifold. The philanthropic fix logic was foremost apparent with the newly incorporated Foundation for Excellence (FFE). As a unique model of municipal finance,

the FFE served as a “fix” to the city’s budget challenges. At the same time, the FFE was announced as a means for addressing social inequities, reducing poverty, and “sharing prosperity” among its inhabitants. The logic of the philanthropic fix is reinforced by community narratives of Kalamazoo. The “two Kalamazoos” narrative provides rationale for a “fix” while the “thriving community” and “Kalamazoo can-do” narratives signal its appropriation. As suggested by the name, the philanthropic fix is a rendition of the sustainability fix, yet the “fix” is relatively devoid of environmental sustainability or ecological goals. Kalamazoo’s philanthropic interventions are not designed around environmentalism, although there may be indirect routes toward advancing environmental or ecological goals. For example, the FFE’s aspirational projects are intended to align with Imagine Kalamazoo. This includes the Strategic Vision’s “Environmental Responsibility” strategic goal as well as the corresponding Sustainability Strategy. At the very least, a working remedy to the city’s revenue troubles may provide opportunities to fulfill environmental or ecological goals (along with the broader goals of a citywide sustainability plan).

Various perspectives in urban sociology consider urban political economy and the prevailing modes of urban governance. In some ways, the philanthropic fix logic reflects neoliberal urbanism and the neoliberalization of urban governance, although it is a peculiar manifestation. Neoliberal urbanism is a “highly contingent process” that manifests in different ways across cities (Hackworth 2007:11). Brenner and Theodore (2002:367) describe neoliberal forms of “creative destruction” in cities. Ongoing neoliberalization processes are destructive of existing institutional arrangements, whereby existing policies and infrastructure are “rolled-back.” Yet these processes also create new institutional arrangements, whereby new policies and infrastructure are “rolled-out.” In some ways, the experiment of the FFE resembles the creative-destructive elements of urban neoliberalization. The FFE “rolled-back” property tax rates, yet also created or “rolled-out” a new philanthropic finance model that offsets the revenue lost from property tax reduction. This new institutional

arrangement also provides funds to address the city's structural budget deficit as well as funds for "aspirational projects." One defining feature of neoliberal urbanism is the privatization of public assets and infrastructure (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Hackworth 2007; Davidson and Gleeson 2013). The FFE reflects an indirect privatization of public *financial* assets by way of the philanthropic class and private donors. In other words, a *philanthropization* of municipal finance that ultimately reshapes the urban governing process. With municipal finance as an intermediary mechanism, the FFE is essentially one step removed from embracing private sector solutions to public sector problems.

The philanthropic fix logic is relatively devoid of environmental concerns. While urban entrepreneurialism may saturate the broader planning agenda, the economic valuation and entrepreneurial framing of nature were less prominent. Neighborhood and environmental organizing, however, may play a preventative role in the urbanization of nature (e.g. the case of Natural Features Protection). The mobilizing coalition involved in the NFP process, for example, made clear that unrestrained market-led development may result in environmental degradation (at least in areas with defined natural features). Overall, there is not yet a clear pattern of "green neoliberalism," whereby market forces and environmentally friendly logic converge (Gilbert 2014:160).

#### *Community self-determination*

The logic of "community self-determination" prescribes the city or community as a site of struggle for urban sustainable transformation. As both a means and a goal of the sustainable city, community self-determination is grounded in principles of independence, self-sufficiency, and deliberation. The community self-determination logic is evidenced by public demands and impositions over decision-making in urban planning. Meanwhile, renewed efforts at public participation and more inclusive urban planning are saturated with debates over transparency,

democracy, and new forms of urban governance. The logic of community self-determination is further exemplified by the scattered activities of Kalamazoo's many institutional players, community organizations, and mobilizing coalitions. These sustainability stakeholders aim to influence the urban planning agenda, yet many pursue their own pathways to urban sustainable transformation.

Institutionalized "top-down" actors aim to adopt independent plans of sustainable development. In the face of wider political, economic, and environmental conditions, Kalamazoo's city government has made concerted efforts to shape its own urban future. Comprehensive planning initiatives and renewed public participation efforts attempt to strengthen community deliberation. In the context of shifting economic conditions, the experimental philanthropic municipal finance model of the FFE serves to overcome dependence on inadequate state-level funding models. Meanwhile, Kalamazoo's nongovernmental institutional anchors and other relatively "top-down" actors pursue independent strategies for urban sustainable transformation. At the same time, relatively "bottom-up" actors navigate various channels for urban sustainable transformation. Some groups and organizations work "inside" established institutional structures, lobbying city government while mobilizing around participatory politics. Some align with regional, national, or global movements while others develop more organically. Some community organizations and mobilizing coalitions also work "outside" to pursue collaborative strategies, organize direct action, or develop alternate forms of economic and social organization.

The logic of community self-determination may involve a postcapitalist politics that reframes the economy as "a space of ethical-decision making" made up of diverse economic activities (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013:10). Some of the activities of neighborhood associations and community development organizations may reflect efforts to "take back" property as well as business enterprise (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). For example, multiple neighborhood associations that seek to secure land and develop residential properties, commercial businesses, community

spaces, and other neighborhood projects. When owned and managed by neighborhood associations, these properties may serve as potential community “commons” where there are shared and negotiated uses, distributed benefits, and community care and responsibility (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013:131-132). “Reclaiming” different aspects of economic and social organization, the logic of community self-determination may also permeate the few examples of cooperatives or community-owned enterprises in Kalamazoo (e.g. the People’s Food Co-op or Kalamazoo Collective Housing).

Social movement theories help explain the emergence and development of particular “social movement organizations” (SMOs), including the strategies used in the context of political opportunity, the strength of SMOs, and “cognitive liberation” (McAdam 1999; Buechler 2011). In terms of framing perspectives, there is movement toward a collective action frame around urban *holistic* sustainability. While there may be minor differences in how particular groups or organizations conceptualize sustainability, the wider pattern observed in Kalamazoo is a holistic thinking about sustainability. Given the vast scope of the sustainability concept, it may be more convenient and pragmatic to confine the scope of sustainability. There may be shared discourses of holistic sustainability, yet there remains a modest disconnect among relatively “bottom-up” community actors. Despite a growing environmental movement that is more or less attempting to embrace holistic sustainability, there may be limited crossover between movements, mobilizing coalitions, community organizations, and other groups. In other words, there is much *discursive* crossover (as well as shared sustainability ethics), but the activities of different “bottom-up” actors are somewhat secluded from one another.

#### *Toward an Inclusive Urban Sustainability Agenda? Implications for Kalamazoo and Beyond*

The urban sustainability logics proposed in this chapter resemble other logics identified in the urban sustainability literature. Hodson and Marvin (2017) describe the struggle between intensification or transformation of conventional sustainable cities’ discourse and logics. Altogether,

the proposed logics in Kalamazoo reflect both an intensification *and* transformation of conventional sustainable cities' discourse. In part, the proposed logics signal a return to the 1960s and 1970s critiques about whether sustainability can be achieved within existing types of economic organization. That is, whether changes in economic, ecological and social relationships are possible through the existing capitalist economic system or whether such changes require revolutionary transformation (Hodson and Marvin 2017:4).

The holistic sustainability logic represents an intensification of “three pillars” discourse by treating environmental, economic, and equity relationships as overlapping interconnected parts-of-a-whole. The holistic sustainability logic also reinforces the principles of both intra-generational and inter-generational equity, assigning special importance to the local-regional scalar context while recognizing the interconnection of scales (from local to global) as well as levels of abstraction (from individual to systemic). On the other hand, the philanthropic fix logic is embedded with critiques about the shortcomings of contemporary urban governance, especially in terms of funding capabilities and financial structures. The philanthropic fix logic may be premised on economic growth and existing capitalist structures, yet at the same time aims to radically transform political-economic relationships at the local scale. The “revolutionary transformation” is the unique philanthropic municipal finance structure created with the Foundation for Excellence. While there may be an ecological or “environmental-deficit” with the philanthropic fix logic, there is nonetheless an attempt to connect equity and justice issues with economic growth. The community self-determination logic, lastly, concedes that urban sustainability can be achieved through existing types of economic organization as well as alternate channels. Existing forms of capitalism may help facilitate economic independence and self-sufficiency, yet potentially lay the foundation for post-capitalist, alternative, or revolutionary transformation in economic and social organization.

Hodson and Marvin (2017) argue that sustainability discourses and logics have been shifting in recent decades. Accordingly, new urban logics are fragmenting and becoming much more selective in focus rather than holistic and inclusive. In this view, urban sustainability discourses are becoming hyperfocused on specific aspects of the urban environment that are potentially economically valuable while at the same time weakening concerns about equity. In Kalamazoo, however, there appears to be a mending of urban sustainability discourses and logics, especially with regards to the holistic sustainability logic. Altogether, the logics materializing in Kalamazoo indicate some movement toward an “inclusive” urban sustainability agenda, rather than a “selective” agenda that is exclusive of some spaces, issues, and people (Béal 2015; Long 2016; Hodson and Marvin 2017). There is little evidence of a “sustainability fix” as observed in the empirical literature, but consensus building processes are evident. In Kalamazoo, debate and discussion about the objectives of the sustainable city are mostly encouraged rather than “silenced” (Mössner 2015:191). Expert knowledge and technical-professional expertise are accompanied with renewed public participation efforts and growing neighborhood and environmental coalitions. The proposed logics are still evolving, however, and the full ramifications are yet to be determined in the Kalamazoo context.

This study poses several implications for urban sustainability in cities worldwide and in the United States, especially mid-sized and smaller cities such as Kalamazoo. First, the logics proposed in Kalamazoo suggest that sustainability discourses and sustainable cities’ debates are continuing to evolve. While there are unique characteristics in any given urban context, the case of sustainable Kalamazoo demonstrates how urban sustainability discourses may be re-envisioned through a holistic and inclusive lens. Furthermore, this study shows how sustainability discourses and sustainable cities’ debates may be layered with numerous other “discursive struggles.” The “contest” surrounding the “contested concept” of sustainability is further complicated by coexisting community narratives, mixed perceptions, and contrasting viewpoints on a number of phenomena.

For example, the community narratives of Kalamazoo or the different perceptions of gentrification, homelessness, and housing identified in chapter five. Altogether, these factors may shape sense-making around sustainability. While this may not be surprising or unexpected, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge in urban sustainability planning, policy, and research. At the same time, the logic of holistic sustainability suggests that a shared framework of urban sustainability is beginning to materialize. Planners, policymakers, community organizations, and social movements could work to consistently mobilize the framework of holistic sustainability in terms of their respective practices and activities.

Second, this study offers insights to urban governance with regards to the strategies and challenges of “governance sustainability” in cities. The case of sustainable Kalamazoo shows that concrete policies and sustainability plans (“sustainability policy-making”) are vital components to consider for a city government-led urban sustainability agenda, but so are the institutional processes and organizational capacity to govern sustainability (“sustainability government-making”). In terms of public influence within urban governance processes, one strategy of Kalamazoo’s city government involved revitalizing public participation efforts in order to identify community priorities and goals. As inhabitants seek greater influence over urban planning and the urban sustainability agenda, cities such as Kalamazoo could continue to explore different avenues for participatory governance. For example, increased opportunities for direct participation of neighborhoods in funding decisions of city government.

Given the recently committed 400 million dollar anonymous donation over the next ten years, Kalamazoo’s newly incorporated Foundation for Excellence will presumably remain in place for some time. Combined with the city’s renewed commitment to public participation, “participatory budgeting” models might provide a means of “compromise” between those supportive of a philanthropic municipal finance model and those seeking more deliberative involvement in urban

governance. In a sense, Imagine Kalamazoo and the city's "strategic goals" reflect a version of participatory governance, albeit participation that is one or more steps divorced from direct involvement in budgeting decisions. Participatory budgeting models, in contrast, may provide neighborhoods with greater influence over how a portion of funds are used. While there are many challenges to a participatory budgeting process, there are numerous models evolving in communities, including experiments and variations in larger cities such as Seattle, Chicago, and New York City (Stewart et al. 2014; Williams and Waisanen 2020). Of course, criticisms around transparency or the role of special interests, among other limitations, remain as key challenges to participatory budgeting processes (see Petite 2020; Williams and Waisanen 2020). At the same time, participatory budgeting may be conducive to addressing urban (environmental) sustainability and environmental justice concerns (Goldfrank 2013; Epting 2020; Gherghina and Tap 2021). In Kalamazoo, however, any participatory budgeting model in the near future would presumably require a renegotiation of the terms of the Foundation for Excellence, if such funds were used. In this case, a participatory budgeting model would resemble alternatives to "philanthrocapitalism" that have been proposed or examined in specific regional contexts, such as the inclusion and participation of communities in the process of philanthro-policymaking (Eikenberry and Mirabella 2018; Thompson 2018; Haydon et al. 2021).

Lastly, this study reinforces the imperative for cross-over or "cross-fertilization" among different social movements and mobilizing coalitions. There may be a lacking collective identity around holistic urban sustainability. Even if there are shared sustainability discursive frameworks (and shared sustainability ethics), there may be routinely siloed activities of community development organizations, community organizing, and neighborhood coalitions. Once again, this is not wholly surprising - and perhaps inevitable given the scope of sustainability. Still, concerted efforts to build collaborative relationships among relatively "bottom-up" actors may help lead the way toward a

holistic sustainability in practice. In Kalamazoo, there are some indications of movement crystallization among environmental groups and neighborhood organizing. Yet there remains much opportunity for cross-over in ways that - without undermining differences - span neighborhood, socioeconomic, and racial and ethnic lines. Cross-over might facilitate new coalitions that merge the goals of different neighborhoods and community groups, such as environmental justice movements or movements organized around alternative models of social and economic organization.

### *Research Limitations*

There are several research limitations to this study. In terms of the scope and general evolution of the project, there are a few points worth noting. The evolving Sustainability Strategy may represent the most relevant and intentional manifestation of an official government-led “urban sustainability agenda” in Kalamazoo, however the incomplete status limits the conclusions that may be drawn. At the outset of this study, there was no official government-led sustainability plan. Moreover, the term “sustainability” was only irregularly woven into the verbiage of urban planning in all its manifestations. To examine urban sustainability planning without a formal plan (or widespread use of the term “sustainability”) presented several challenges. After all, many case studies in the empirical literature centered on cities or entities where the sustainability concept was embraced or formalized. Thus, one of my original objectives was to examine Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 as a working sustainability initiative, supplemented with interviews where I could learn how inhabitants made sense of sustainability and urban sustainability planning in Kalamazoo. This remained the objective throughout my project.

After my dissertation research project was already planned, however, the city of Kalamazoo began work on the Sustainability Strategy. I quickly learned more about the Sustainability Strategy in my early interviews and thereafter became involved with the Sustainability Strategy team. This partly shifted the focus of my project, given the research opportunity to observe in real time the

beginnings of a formal sustainability plan. As my interviews proceeded, I learned the significance of other city initiatives such as the Natural Features Protection ordinance and the Foundation for Excellence. Eventually, these formed the “cases” featured throughout the thematic chapters. The series of “cases” within a “case study” expanded the scope of the project, although perhaps this was already guaranteed by the boundless nature of “sustainability.” While shifting focus toward these cases was not necessarily a weakness, it did shape the research process. For example, the persons whom I requested to interview, the topics of interviews, and the meetings I attended.

Regarding interview participants themselves, many were from similar professional backgrounds or otherwise retained similar motivations in community development and organizing. I purposefully sought to interview a large share of individuals affiliated with Kalamazoo’s city government, nonprofits, and community development organizations. However, there was a clear underrepresentation of persons beyond these diverse professional backgrounds. This was partly due to the shift in focus toward the different “cases” in the context of the evolving citywide sustainability plan. Scheduling interviews with contacts unable to meet at their work location or otherwise forgo work or family obligations was also a challenge. Some of the most unique insights came from happenstance interactions with individuals or contacts where, understandably, an interview never occurred.

Another challenge regarding interview participants was making sense of conflicting accounts. As an “outsider” who was “looking inside” the social worlds of different actors, it was my intention to believe participants’ accounts, descriptions, and worldviews. In some instances, participants provided entirely different if not contradictory accounts of events, people, or community happenings. In order to illustrate patterns and highlight variations in participants’ worldviews, I attempted to present the range of perspectives on a given subject matter or phenomenon.

### *Conclusion: Fulfilling Promises*

Kalamazoo is a community of promises. In 2005, anonymous private donors embraced the language of promises with the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise, the geographically-based post-secondary education scholarship program. In 2009, the promise of sustainability was espoused by signatories of the Southwest Michigan Regional Sustainability Covenant. Following the launch of *Imagine Kalamazoo* in 2015, community members were assured that a new style of urban governance was on the horizon: a rebuilt city government organization that is goal-oriented, operationally disciplined, and responsive to inhabitants. Shortly after, Kalamazoo's donor families consorted with Kalamazoo's city government and engineered the Foundation for Excellence, where a new form of philanthropic municipal finance was underwritten with a vision for a "vibrant, prosperous, and equitable city" (FFE 2021b). Succeeding the 2025 Master Plan, the city of Kalamazoo approved the Natural Features Protection ordinance, thereby professing its commitment to environmental preservation and "thoughtful development." The evolving Sustainability Strategy seemingly reflects a working pledge to a dynamic holism framework of urban sustainability.

To fulfill and uphold the many "promises" of Kalamazoo, the inhabitants and institutions of Kalamazoo are responding in multiple ways. Beneath shifting discourses and logics are struggles between the politics of continuity and the politics of transformation (Hodson and Marvin 2017). Given that the urban sustainability logics materializing in Kalamazoo exhibit both intensification and transformation of conventional sustainable cities' discourse, Kalamazoo may be pursuing a parallel politics of continuity and transformation. The recognized need for sweeping environmental, economic, and equity changes in pursuit of urban sustainability is mingled with the precursors of existing institutional processes, cultural frameworks, and systemic barriers. The future of Kalamazoo's sustainability story - and that of cities in the United States and worldwide - depends on how stakeholders of the sustainable city maneuver this parallel politics.

Future research should continue to explore how sustainability discourses and logics manifest in different urban contexts. This includes how different logics (such as the holistic sustainability logic) translate into concrete policy outcomes and comprehensive sustainability plans, which are demanding tasks for any city government or community. Kalamazoo's city government is still working toward its overarching "Sustainability Strategy," thus the contents and outcomes of this plan could be evaluated after its approval and implementation. Identifying and comparing the characteristics of governance sustainability in other cities are also worthwhile topics of inquiry, which entails the crafting of sustainability policies as well as the institutional processes and organizational capacity to govern sustainability policies. There is already a vast literature on "environmental governance" (Davidson and Frickel 2004) and the bridging of sustainability and governance, including in urban contexts (for example, Lieberherr-Gardiol 2009; Lange et al. 2014; Fenton and Gustafsson 2017; Nieminen, Salomaa and Juhola 2021). A recent analysis of the intersection of "governance" and "sustainability" in the scholarly literature suggests the "semantic ambiguity" of the concepts "does not give rise, at their intersection, to a fragmented array of isolated interpretations and communities, but rather to a tightly-knit field, where different meanings and interests intersect and overlap across social worlds" (Billi, Mascareño, and Edwards 2021:8).

Other avenues for research may consider the role of philanthropy in urban sustainability agendas, including the possibilities of "philanthropic sustainability fixes" in communities or local contexts. Relatedly, the local politics of urban sustainability planning in different urban contexts should be further explored. For example, how local "power" operates at the community-level or in specific settings where sustainability is "negotiated" among different actors. Several months of observations at city hall and other public forums offered a glimpse into a rich research setting, one with fragmented power dynamics among city officials, business and community leaders, neighborhood activists, mobilizing coalitions, and everyday inhabitants. The activities of community

organizing and relatively “bottom-up” movements should also be examined in greater depth. For example, the challenges of collaboration among disjunctured movements, or the potential for amalgamation of “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches to urban sustainable transformation. The barriers and strategies to crossover among movements and mobilizing coalitions could also be further explored in future research. Perhaps in response to unmet or broken “promises,” inhabitants in Kalamazoo are forging self-determined pathways of urban transformation. Future inquiry in Kalamazoo and beyond might focus on specific groups and mobilizing coalitions, especially those devising strategies for alternative forms of social and economic organization.

## AFTERWORD

### SUSTAINABLE KALAMAZOO AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In March 2020, I met with my dissertation advisor for a debriefing regarding my time in the field and to discuss the status of my dissertation research project. I planned to continue attending Sustainability Strategy team meetings, but the focus of my project had shifted to coding, analyzing, and writing up my dissertation chapters. On the day of our meeting, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. A few days later, the federal government declared a national emergency over the novel coronavirus. Rounds of shutdowns, virtual transitions, and periods of protest and organizing occurred over the next few months. Although I hoped to continue attending relevant public events and city meetings, I was fortunate to have finished conducting interviews and fieldwork. As the situation evolved over 2020, however, I soon questioned the implications for my research project. How would the pandemic complicate my findings? Any follow-up interviews would likely reveal a starkly different vision of sustainability, let alone Kalamazoo's prospects for urban sustainable transformation. The Sustainability Strategy faced new setbacks. The fulfillment of the city's strategic goals envisioned by Imagine Kalamazoo clearly encountered new challenges. In April 2020, the Foundation for Excellence received an 86 million dollar anonymous donation. Nearly a year and a half later, anonymous donors committed 400 million dollars over ten years. The next phase of Natural Features Protection was temporarily delayed, although updates to the ordinance and overlay district were eventually approved in August 2021. City meetings at city hall, where I spent many nights in 2019, shifted to virtual meetings. Public comment was amended to voicemail messages livestreamed during virtual meetings.

In the voyage beyond planetary boundaries of survival, I do not believe the conclusions drawn are any less insightful or any less applicable in a pandemic or post-pandemic world. If anything, Kalamazoo's logics of urban sustainability may be intensified. The logic of holistic

sustainability may become more deeply ingrained in sustainability discourses and practices, perhaps with renewed vigilance around health, health care, and community health sustainability. The philanthropic fix logic may be magnified given the economic, equity, and governance implications of the pandemic. The community self-determination logic may thrive with real or perceived inadequacies of existing institutional and societal responses to the pandemic-infused challenges of the twenty-first century. The pandemic has made clear the tightly knit interdependence of societal institutions, mirroring existing social relations while exacerbating inequities. In a pandemic or post-pandemic world, the imperatives of the sustainable city only become more consequential.

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Project: Dissertation  
Code:  
Date of Interview:  
Notes:

*Background*

1. How long have you lived here? (Where did you move from? Why did you move here?)
2. How has the community changed in the time that you have lived here?

*Imagining, Planning, and Implementing Urban Sustainability*

3. What does sustainability mean to you?
4. What does sustainability mean for Kalamazoo?
5. What do you think is being done about sustainability in Kalamazoo?
6. How familiar are you with the city's Imagine Kalamazoo 2025 (IK2025) planning initiative?
7. How familiar are you with the Strategic Vision and its associated projects and plans?
8. What things do you think have had an impact on sustainability in Kalamazoo?

*Conflicts, Tensions, and Challenges to Promoting Sustainability in Kalamazoo*

9. What makes it difficult to promote sustainability in Kalamazoo?
10. What needs to happen in order for Kalamazoo to be a sustainable city?
  - a. What can and should local government do to address sustainability?
  - b. What can and should community leaders and everyday residents do?
11. What does sustainability in Kalamazoo mean for global sustainability?
12. What does equity and fairness mean to you?
13. What do you think is the role of equity and fairness in urban sustainability?
14. Are there any examples of promoting sustainability that you think could work in Kalamazoo?
15. To whom should I talk to find out more about sustainability and efforts to promote sustainability in Kalamazoo?

APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY AND GENEALOGY OF SELECTED CITY PLANS AND INITIATIVES

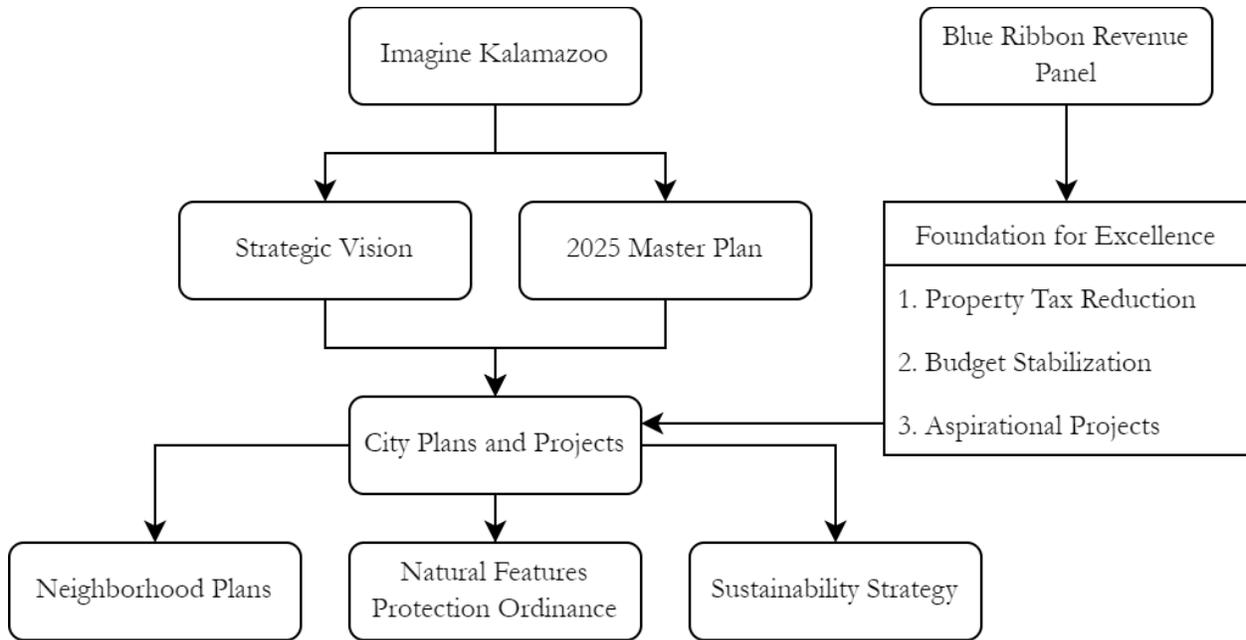


Figure B-1: Genealogical Chart of Selected City Plans and Initiatives

**2025 Master Plan:** Adopted by the city commission in October 2017, the 2025 Master Plan is a land use plan required by state law. The city’s Master Plan establishes frameworks for transportation, zoning, infrastructure, downtown development, and neighborhood needs over the next decade.

**Foundation for Excellence:** Approved by the city commission in August 2017, the Foundation for Excellence (FFE) is a unique public-private partnership and donor-funded municipal finance model. The FFE provides funds each year to reduce property taxes, stabilize the budget, and support “aspirational projects.” The FFE was preceded by the Blue Ribbon Revenue Panel in 2015, a panel of 21 appointed community members who were tasked with exploring viable revenue options for the city.

**Imagine Kalamazoo:** An ongoing citywide planning initiative that launched in 2015, “Imagine Kalamazoo 2025” is characterized by “engagement” and public participation efforts. Imagine Kalamazoo helped produce the city’s Strategic Vision and 2025 Master Plan. The principal phases of public participation occurred between January 2016 and April 2017.

**Natural Features Protection Ordinance:** Adopted by the city commission in May 2019, the Natural Features Protection (NFP) ordinance is a citywide ordinance that sets additional development standards for areas with natural features such as water resources, wetlands, woodlands, rare species, and steep slopes. The process of drafting the NFP ordinance was modeled after Imagine Kalamazoo’s public participation efforts.

**Neighborhood Plans:** As addendums to the 2025 Master Plan, the neighborhood plans outline the goals of the core neighborhoods. Shaped by neighborhood associations and Imagine Kalamazoo’s public participation efforts, the neighborhood plans align with the city’s strategic goals while reflecting the priorities of each neighborhood.

**Strategic Vision:** Adopted by the city commission in July 2017, the Strategic Vision is a formal planning document that serves as a guide to city plans, projects, and staff. Ten strategic goals were identified through Imagine Kalamazoo’s public participation efforts, including an environmental responsibility goal.

**Sustainability Strategy:** In progress since June 2019, the Sustainability Strategy is a citywide plan that aims to lay out a vision for sustainability and environmental responsibility in line with other city plans. An advisory team made up city staff, experts, and residents initially provided direction for the content of the plan.