

POLITICS

# Conservative GOP Reformers Have 'Wokeness' on Run in a Michigan County



The swearing in of newly elected members of the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners on Jan. 3, 2023. (Courtesy of Ottawa Impact)



By [Steven Kovac](#)

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The forced masking of grade schoolers during the COVID-19 pandemic ignited a peaceful political uprising that swept eight incumbent, establishment GOP Ottawa County commissioners from office in the August 2022 primary election.

The electoral coup, which is still commanding statewide attention, was engineered by a handful of angry parents who banded together to form a grassroots group called Ottawa Impact (OI).

After careful vetting, Ottawa Impact put forth a slate of nine county commission candidates concerned about the disregard for parental rights and the promotion of a woke agenda in their solidly Republican and very Christian community.

The woke agenda, which locals said crept in gradually over ten years, includes things like supporting comprehensive sexuality education, the sexualizing of children as young as three, promoting the distribution of thousands of free condoms, and teaching the precepts of critical race theory through school and county government diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.



Ottawa Impact activists pause to pray before going to campaign in the Independence Day parade in Allendale Township on July 4, 2022. (Courtesy of Ottawa Impact)

In the Aug. 2, 2022, primary election, eight out of nine of the candidates backed by OI won seats on the eleven-member board.

In Ottawa County, winning the Republican primary is tantamount to election to office. This lakeside county of 300,000 people hasn't been carried by a Democrat running for president since Abraham Lincoln lost it to General George McClellan in 1864.

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One of the group's candidates was defeated by a GOP incumbent. One Republican incumbent did not have opposition.

A single Democrat was elected to the county board in the general election held last November.

## Hard Won Successes

Since the 1960s conservative Republicans in Michigan have had to battle left-wing Democrats, as well as what they describe as a "Fifth Column" within their own ranks called "Republicans in Name Only," known as RINOS.

Conservative successes are always hard-won in the deep blue Great Lakes State—which got a lot bluer in the recent midterms; when Democrats won majorities in both houses of the state legislature for the first time in decades.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer, Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, and Attorney General Dana Nessel, all progressive Democrats, were reelected to a second term last November.

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Both of Michigan's United States Senators have long been Democrats. Neither was up for reelection last year.

But beneath the surface of Michigan's recent blue wave, local grassroots conservative groups like OI captured scores of seats on school boards, as well as won many county and municipal offices.

OI-endorsed candidates won six school board seats spread over three Ottawa County school districts, and five other conservative, parent-backed candidates not formally affiliated with Ottawa Impact, won five seats spread over three different school systems in the county.

## Elections Have Consequences

The reformers on the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners convened the new board's first meeting on Jan. 3, 2023.

They promptly elected Hudsonville businessman and OI co-founder Joe Moss as board chairperson.

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Before the gavel fell to adjourn their first meeting, the OI commissioners fulfilled nearly all of the group's main campaign promises.

They eliminated the County Department of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, an office focused on determining implicit bias within county government and developing a racial equity plan.

The Ottawa Impact approach is to “honor all people equally.”



Chairman of the Ottawa County, Mich. Board of Commissioners and conservative activist Joe Moss. (Courtesy of Ottawa Impact)

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Moss told The Epoch Times, “The divisive DEI program cost the people of Ottawa County an estimated \$630,000 during its first five

years of operation.”

Moss said that when the dust settles, eliminating the DEI Department will “save the taxpayers approximately \$286,000 per year.”

He added, “Abolishing the department should do away with the requirement that in order to work for Ottawa County, all employees must espouse diversity, equity, and inclusion values.”

Another couple of promises the OI candidates kept are the firing of the county attorney and the county administrator.

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“The current administrator is a nice man, but the majority of the board felt he was not aligned with the new direction we are setting for the county.”

As for the county attorney, Moss said, “When the county health department director and the governor and attorney general were harshly trampling parental rights during the pandemic, the county attorney sided with them.

“He took the position that parents resisting the mask mandate for young school children and opposing school closures were following an ignorant, conservative, political agenda rather than the science. He even ripped into dissenting elected officials for having no appreciation for the rule of law.

“The county attorney, the then-administrator, and the health department director believed they ran things. Those are unelected positions. They regarded the people’s elected representatives, the commissioners, as merely there to approve their actions.

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“The board was dominated by its hired attorney and hired administrator.

“We flipped that idea on its head on Day One,” said Moss.

The board of commissioners hired former Trump administration official John Gibbs as the new county administrator.

Gibbs was the Third District Republican nominee for Congress. He fell victim to Michigan's blue wave, losing a solid Republican seat to Democrat Hillary Scholten last November.

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Moss said that the health department director will retire in a couple of months and will be replaced with someone more respectful of individual liberty.

Before long, the OI commissioners intend to withdraw the county from membership in the Government Alliance on Race and Equity, according to the group's website.

The reformers also rewrote the county's mission statement and changed the county's motto from "Where You Belong," to "Where Freedom Rings."

## What it Took

According to Moss, it took a "Herculean effort" by moms and dads who realized they had to defend their piece of America.

"It took multiple, very talented, team members who were willing to sacrifice their time, money, businesses, and their personal lives for two years in order to bring about the victory. Many became full-time volunteers," he said.

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Moss stated that Ottawa Impact had to persistently combat determined bureaucrats supported by corporate donations of over half a million dollars, who led the “big push” to establish a DEI agenda in the county.

“We went through a period of watchdogging and organized advocacy with the health department, the county board, and area school boards during the pandemic,” said Moss.

To their surprise, OI volunteers experienced hostility and “harsh treatment” by authorities who, backed up by state officials, were dedicated to “making sure Ottawa County wasn’t allowed to shirk the pandemic mandates,” according to Moss.

“The response to parents’ concerns from officials was zero. They would not listen whatsoever,” Moss said.

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Non-compliance meant being served with cease-and-desist orders along with threats of fines and jail time.

When more than 1,000 people showed up at a board of commissioners meeting in 2021 protesting mask mandates for young children and school closures, one commissioner told Moss the public outcry was nothing but a passing “blip.”

“Right then we knew advocacy and watchdogging wasn’t going to work, so we decided to go the electoral route and replace the commissioners who refused to protect individual freedom and parental rights in the face of harsh pandemic restrictions.”

## Intense Pressure

Newly-elected Ottawa County Commissioner Sylvia Rhodea, one of the founders of Ottawa Impact, told The Epoch Times that there is a deep divide between conservatives and liberals in the county.



Ottawa County, Mich. Board of Commissioners member and Ottawa Impact co-founder Sylvia Rhodea. (Courtesy of Ottawa Impact)

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She said a public university filled with committed progressives is located in her hometown of Allendale.

“These opponents are putting great pressure on OI elected officials and activists,” she said.

According to OI leaders, two of the group's newly elected school board members in Allendale have had their employers contacted by progressives making disparaging comments about them.

Moss said that because OI members elected to office “reject passivity, act decisively, and do what we promise, we are hated for that.”

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“When our officials were going woke, the leftists held up the county as a sort of trophy. It seemed even this conservative Christian community was accepting their ideology.”

On Jan. 4, the day after OI commissioners passed their conservative reforms, Dana Nessel, Michigan’s progressive Democrat attorney general, announced that her office was looking into possible violations of the state’s Open Meetings Act by the new board.

## ‘Shining City on a Hill’

OI’s website describes the residents of Ottawa County as people who love God, work hard, and love their families and their community

—“beautiful people, not deplorable or extreme.”

Ottawa Impact community relations director Anne Vrugink told The Epoch Times, "This freedom movement goes well beyond the lines of Ottawa County.

"The people of our nation are rallying in every county and every state under a common love for freedom and family. We will make it through this storm with a renewed appreciation of what it means to be free."

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Rhodea said, "An engaged citizenry is critical in preserving a healthy, moral society."

The announced goal of the group is to make Ottawa County an example of a fiscally conservative government that treats everyone equally and honors the faith of others.

“We want to govern with the least force and least authority required,” said Moss.

“We want to be that ‘Shining City on a Hill’ that President Reagan spoke about,” said Rhodea.



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