

INTRODUCTION

What Is Community Planning?

Community planning is planning by municipal (Township) government. It is concerned with the solving of existing physical, social and economic problems as well as providing for the optimum environment for those components of the community over time. Community planning operates under the general objectives established by state enabling legislation. The Township Planning Act (Act 168 of 1959) provides for the creation of Township planning commissions, the development of comprehensive plans and the regulation of land. Under this Act, a Township may create a planning commission to make plans for the unincorporated areas of the Township. Such plans are intended to provide the framework for public capital improvements, zoning and other land use controls administered through the Township, County and State governments over the life of the plan. The aim of community planning is to achieve optimum compatibility and efficiency among the various elements that make up the community. Community planning can prevent duplication of effort among the various levels of government and avoid unnecessary competition for limited financial resources. Just as important, community planning can influence the stabilization, conservation and improvement of private property and natural resources.

What Is the Comprehensive Development Plan?

The Comprehensive Plan is a product of the planning process. Through text, maps and other graphic aids, it explains the philosophy and desires of the Township about its future. The Plan seeks to express an ideal community in terms of existing conditions, growth potential and accepted planning standards. Yet it is flexible enough so that changing conditions will allow Ross Township to adapt as necessary to accomplish the general precepts of the plan. To be most effective, the plan must reflect the joint participation of citizens, businesses and public officials in the orderly development of the Township.

Ross Township's proximity to Kalamazoo and Battle Creek, its rural atmosphere, and its institutional resources make it an ideal place for people to live. The need to balance development demands with the desire to retain the Township's rural atmosphere prompted the Township's Planning Commission to update its Master Plan.

While land use issues are the central focus of the Plan, it also identifies issues related to public services, roads, community facilities, recreation, agriculture, institutional land holdings, and the area's natural environment.

Most of the issues identified in the Plan are a direct result of the types of public participation used during the planning process. Methods of public participation included a community survey, issue identification workshops, interviews, open meetings and public hearings. The Planning Commission used all of these forms of local input to identify issues, develop goals and create policies to guide the Township towards those goals.

This Plan represents the efforts of the community to set goals and an overall vision for the Township. This Plan will guide Ross Township's development through the year 2020, when the Plan will require updating. The Township should frequently review the Plan (at a minimum, once every five years by law) to ensure the goals still match the community's desires and to ensure the responsible parties are following the established policies.

Plan Summary

Ross Township is a community of rich and diverse natural resources. It is also home to over 4,000 people who strongly value those resources and desire to protect and preserve them. At the same time, it is inevitable that change (physical, social and economic) will occur. With its close proximity to both Kalamazoo and Battle Creek, the Township is in a geographic location that is undergoing development pressures. The Township's population is substantially older than other townships in Kalamazoo County, has a higher level of income and in general is employed outside of the Township, making Ross Township a "bedroom" community – one where residents live, and commute elsewhere to work.

Historically, row crop and orchard farming have played an important role in defining the Township's character, as a number of large landholders engaged in farming as a full-time occupation. Over time, as the economics of agriculture have changed, farmers have retired, and transportation improvements have made people more mobile, the amount of land in agriculture production has been declining. Concurrently, the larger lakes in the Township, primarily Gull Lake, have traditionally been a summer vacation spot for people who lived in other communities. Within the past 20 years, as those summer residents became older and retired, many turned their summer home into a year-round residence.

A number of other related factors have contributed to the changing character of the Township. Those factors are allied to the "push-pull" model of community change. There has been a long-term trend among households to move out of urban areas for a variety of reasons (traffic congestion; small, older homes; crime; taxes) to more rural areas that appear more attractive because those conditions either don't exist or are substantially less pervasive in those areas. The negative conditions create a "push" factor. The attractive conditions create a "pull" factor. Ross Township's rural character, relatively low density of development, variety of natural resources (especially lakes, wetlands and woodlands) and overall natural beauty combine to attract new residents. At the same time, Township representatives and residents understand that the very environment that makes the area an attractive place to live is always in danger of being diminished unless the resources that make up that environment are protected. Ross Township is in an envious position in one sense because about 20 percent of its land area is owned and managed by institutions and nonprofit organizations, the great majority whose focus is the preservation of open space, forests, wetlands and agricultural lands for research, education and recreation. On the other hand, such a large amount of land in tax-exempt status substantially limits local property tax revenues.

That is the focus of this Plan – to prepare for changes that are likely to occur in the man-made environment while providing the means to protect, and even enhance, the natural environment. The Plan is essentially divided into two major parts. Sections I through V pertain to existing conditions and the public's perceptions of those conditions, as well as their preferences about the future of the Township. Sections VI through VIII contain the Township's aspirations for the future, as reflected in its adopted goals and objectives, the description of how land uses are proposed to be distributed within the future, and recommended policies and activities that are intended to enable the Township and its residents to implement this Plan.

The Ross Township Master Plan is intended to provide a framework for managing change within the Township to the year 2020. That consists of providing for development while preserving and protecting the environment that could otherwise be easily diminished through uncontrolled development.

The following goals were adopted as part of this Plan:

Overriding Goal – Ross Township will preserve its rural character.

Supplementary Goals – Ross Township will:

- Conserve the Township's Farmland
- Preserve the Township's Open Space
- Protect the Township's Natural Resources
- Protect the Quality of the Township's Ground and Surface Waters
- Facilitate Residential development That Will Maintain the Rural Character of the Township
- Develop and Apply Innovative Development Standards and Techniques
- Assure a Safe and Efficient Network of Streets and Roads
- Provide Adequate Public Services and Facilities
- Assure a Planned, Concentrated Approach to Commercial and Industrial Development

The following are highlights of the elements of the Plan that are contained in Section VII - Future Land Use.

- The "target" population for the year 2020 is 6,000
- Based upon that target population, there will be an estimated 837 additional households living within the Township by the year 2020.
- Those households will require 837 additional housing units, of which 92% will be single family, 4% will be duplex and 4% will be multiple-family, similar to the distribution existing in the year 2000.
- Seventy percent of the new single-family residential development will be within cluster/open space configurations, encompassing 862 acres.
- Thirty percent of new single-family development will occur in traditional single lot or plat configurations along, or within close proximity to, County roads. These will encompass 462 acres at an average density of two acres per unit.
- Duplex and multiple-family housing will cover about 17 acres.
- In total, approximately 1,340 acres should be set aside for new residential development.
- New single-family residential development (particularly cluster/open space development) will be focused on currently undeveloped areas within the eastern and southern portions of the Township. Duplex and multiple-family housing will be concentrated around the Village of Augusta.
- New commercial activity will be focused around the M-89/38th Street area on the south side of the lake. A "village center" concept with mixed use/pedestrian oriented commercial uses is called for.
- Industrial development will be limited to an area north of Custer Road in sections 35 and 36. It is not the intention of the Township to actively promote industrial development.
- Residential, commercial and industrial development will be encouraged, through land use control standards in local ordinances, to adopt site design elements that minimize impacts upon the natural and scenic environment.

These components are in keeping with the overriding goal of preserving the Township's rural character. That is to be accomplished through the preservation of its natural resources (lakes, wetlands, woodlands, and viewsheds), the conservation of its agricultural lands, and the retention of as much of open space as possible while accommodating new development within a managed growth framework.