

The Master Plan

Northwest Michigan is one of the fastest growing regions in the Midwest, and is contending with development pressures that are changing both its landscape and its lifestyle. New homes, sewer and water lines, widened roads, and new shopping centers are spreading out from our villages and cities and changing the face of the countryside.

To keep up with shifts in population and development while maintaining our region's unique character and natural resources, our communities must plan for these changes. Planning prepares our communities for changing needs, allowing us to make informed decisions about how best to manage limited resources, where to direct growth, and how development should be designed to protect the parts of our communities we value the most.

A master plan—sometimes called a comprehensive plan or land use plan—is a guide that's intended to help shape these decisions. Plans help the community understand current conditions and build a vision for the future—and identify what actions they need to take to achieve that vision. To do this, plans make recommendations about the development of land and public services like schools, roads, and sewer and water lines. In communities that are zoned, they also serve as the foundation for zoning ordinance regulations, which control how land and buildings are developed and used.

Creating a Plan

State law allows all local governments, including townships, cities, villages, and counties, to adopt plans. They're created by the

community's planning commission, with help from staff or consultants.

Because the purpose of the plan is to create a shared vision of the community's future, public participation in the process of creating a plan is one of the most important steps in the planning process. To obtain public input, the planning commission may conduct a survey, hold a visioning session, or invite citizens to be part of a steering committee.

Public input is used, along with background studies and analysis of the community's population, environment, transportation systems, and other features, to develop goals and objectives for the next 20 years or more. The goals and objectives are the "heart" of the plan: they identify the community's priorities for the future and how it will achieve its goals.

Goals and objectives include recommendations on the future development of land, which is shown on a **future land use map**. For communities that have adopted zoning, the plan must also include a **zoning plan**.

Putting the Plan Into Action

It's important to remember that, as a guide, the master plan is not the rule

Plan Adoption Process

Planning Commission sends out "notice of intent to plan"

Public input, background studies, plan development

Planning Commission sends draft plan to legislative body

Legislative body approves distribution of draft plan for review by the public, county planning commission, other governments

Planning Commission reviews and considers comments

Planning Commission adopts plan

Legislative body adopts plan (optional)

Key Phrases

Future Land Use Map

Map showing the land use or development types planned for the community over the duration of the master plan.

Infrastructure

Public services and facilities provided by a government to support the population, including roads, schools, sewer, water systems, and services such as police and fire protection and waste management.

Planning Commission

A group of residents appointed by the local government to consider land use planning matters.

Purchase of Development Rights

A voluntary program where landowners are paid for selling a property's development rights to a land trust or public body. In return for the development value, restrictions are placed on the property to protect it from future development.

Zoning Ordinance

Local law that regulates the use and development of property. The zoning ordinance divides the community into different zones, or districts, that regulate the types of uses, building and property dimensions, and other features for all properties in the district.

Zoning Plan

A section of the master plan that recommends how zoning regulations should control the design and use of buildings and properties.

of law. A community might adopt an excellent master plan, but it will only be effective if the public and the local government are willing to put its goals into practice. While zoning—which regulates how and where development occurs—is the most common means of implementing a master plan, there are many other ways communities can achieve their master plan goals:

- Goals to preserve environmentally sensitive land, farmland, or open space can be implemented in a number of ways. Some lands may be bought outright by local governments as park land. In other cases, conservancies or other natural resource organizations may raise funds to buy the property for conservation purposes. Some communities may also use publicly-funded **purchase of development rights** (PDR) programs to permanently preserve some farmland.
- Tax breaks or other economic incentives available through brownfield authorities, land bank authorities, economic development corporations, and other governmental entities can encourage development in certain areas.
- Recommendations that are beyond the scope of the local government may require partnerships with nonprofits or other community partners.

- New or remodeled public buildings, parks, and major equipment are all considered capital improvements. These projects or improvements should be outlined in a capital improvements plan (CIP), which identifies public projects that should be built in the community over a number of years. A CIP can be a good way to implement some parts of a master plan, while making the most of limited financial resources and coordinating projects.
- Other local ordinances can also be used to implement parts of an adopted plan—such as junk ordinances, housing inspections, erosion prevention, solid waste management, or land division and subdivision ordinances.

The policies and ordinances that are guided by local plans have tremendous impacts on our communities—including the price of our homes, the views out our windows, the quality of our air and water, and the amount of time we spend in traffic. In order for these policies to reflect the values and priorities of citizens, it's imperative for the public to become involved in the planning process. For more information on how to get involved, contact your local government or consult the resources listed below.

Where can I find more information?

This series is intended to provide basic information to citizens that haven't been closely involved in the planning process, but would like to shape future changes in their community. **This is introductory information only.** There are many additional resources available for those that need more in-depth information or would like to be more closely involved in the planning process.

The remainder of this planning series is available on the New Designs for Growth website, which also includes links to a variety of local, state, and national planning resources. Visit www.newdesignsforgrowth.org, or contact the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments at (231)929-5000 for more information.

We encourage you to take advantage of additional planning resources, or to contact your local planning department to learn more about specific issues and get involved.