

Chapter Two Planning Issues

Introduction

The development of goals, objectives and policies to address the future of the Cass County community requires a recognition of the primary planning issues present. A number of key planning issues are present today. These issues vary in scope and are clearly inter-related. The future quality of life and character of the county and its local communities will be impacted by the actions taken in response to these issues. This chapter summarizes important planning issues.

Planning Issues

Growth Management and Smart Growth

Cass County's character and quality of life will be impacted by the way its local communities manage growth. Successful growth management includes minimizing unnecessary loss or degradation of natural resources including farmland, woodlands and water resources; coordinating the amount and rate of new development with adequate public services including emergency services; accommodating growth and development in a manner that preserves the desired community character and its environmental integrity; encouraging economic development; and ensuring compatibility between adjacent land uses.

The "Smart Growth" movement surfaced more than 20 years ago in response to past growth practices including sprawl, unnecessary and excessive public infrastructure costs, and loss of open spaces and natural resources. The result has been a growing interest in charting more sustainable futures for our communities, both regionally and locally.

This Plan supports the ten principals of Smart Growth, recognizing that the relevance and application of each principal on the local level must be context-sensitive to the particular community according to the discretion of local officials.

Smart Growth Principals

Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities

Take advantage of compact development design

Create a range of housing opportunities and choices

Create walkable neighborhoods

Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas

Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration

Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place

Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective

Mix land uses

Provide a variety of transportation choices

Clearly, the application of smart growth principals in the villages of Edwardsburg and Vandalia will not be same as in the rural townships of Pokagon, Silver Creek, Volinia and Wayne where the level of public services and existing and planned urbanized areas are not as great. Still, interests in both farmland preservation and accommodating opportunities for growth open the door for context-sensitive application of smart growth philosophies.

Community Character / Sense of Place

Cass County is a community, as is each of its local municipalities. The role of a community's character in contributing to quality of life and creating a sense of place in which residents, families and business want to surround themselves is vital. A community's character is defined by the attributes and assets that make the community unique, and that establish a sense of place that is unlike most other places. These assets may include neighborhoods and business areas, natural resource systems, recreation and other public services, and the residents themselves and their heritage. Cass County is enriched by greater racial diversity than commonly found in predominantly rural Michigan, including the presence of a Native American population. The county's important role in the Underground Railroad, and the many museums in the county that celebrate this element of its heritage, help to shape local community character and sense of place.

Community character and sense of place can:

- Instill community pride and upkeep of properties
- Enhance property values
- Encourage persons and businesses to invest in the community
- Attract young knowledgeable workers and entrepreneurs
- Instill a sense of comfort among residents and families.

Community character and sense of place is more than just, for example, the rural assets of the townships of Pokagon, Silver Creek, Volinia and Wayne and the small town character of Vandalia and Edwardsburg.

Community character and sense of place can be enhanced and defined by:

- Attractive business centers with public spaces for gathering
- Business centers that attract people day and night through mixed-use activities
- Building architecture
- Streetscape images
- Ease of mobility throughout the community
- Close-by natural open spaces and recreation options.
- Social integration and equality
- Attractive neighborhoods

Efforts to enhance sense of place in Edwardsburg and Vandalia will have an urban flavor while those of the townships of Pokagon, Silver Creek, Volinia and Wayne will be open space and natural resources preservation based. Both must recognize the sense of place that each contributes to the other and the region as a whole.

The economic prosperity of a community is directly linked to community character and sense of place.

Community character and sense of place is a function of specific actions by both the public and private sectors, and it does not evolve by chance. The importance of these community features has never been so important as communities battle the recent economic downturn and find their individual roles and places in the "new economy."

Natural Resources and the Environment

One cannot speak of community character and sense of place in Cass County and its local communities without recognizing the presence of abundant natural resources and their benefits. These resources include, in part, its abundant farmland, forest lands, wetlands, streams, rivers, and lakes.

These resources provide critical benefits including shaping the character and sense of place in the area; providing vital environmental roles such as wildlife habitats, flood control, water purification, groundwater recharge, and air quality enhancement; and offer special recreation opportunities including hunting, hiking, boating and swimming.

Just as these resources make for desirable places to reside, their attractiveness also elevates their risk of degradation in response to growth and development pressures. This condition is perhaps best illustrated by the extensive lakefront development throughout the county including the townships of Silver Creek, Volinia and Wayne.

This condition significantly elevates the potential for environmental degradation of the water resource and shoreline resources, in addition to the recreation experiences enjoyed on the lakes and the values of nearby properties. The practice of "keyholing" to afford lake access to backlot owners can further exacerbate these conditions.

While local, state and federal regulations support preservation efforts, public education about the role and importance of the preservation of natural resources and available measures to the general public, is an important part of the effort.

Farmland and the Farming Industry

Farming has always been part of the Cass County landscape since its settlement. Today, farming occupies nearly 60% of the county. The industry is critical to the county's and state's well being:

- Farming produces the food and fiber our society relies on and those of other countries.
- Farming has long been recognized for contributing to local economic prosperity and is the second leading industry in Michigan.
- Farmland has been found to be one of the few land uses that typically produce more revenue than the cost to provide such land with services.

The market value of all county farm products sold in 2007 was \$101,549,000 (20th in state ranking), and ranked first among the state's 83 counties for acreage devoted to snap beans and second for the number and sales (\$) of hogs and pigs.

The importance of farmland preservation is illustrated by the considerable attention the matter has received by the state legislature including the authorization of the purchase of development rights (PDR) and the transfer of development rights (TDR).

While the farming industry is strong today, it none-the-less faces challenges.

- Competing land uses, particularly residential, consume important farmland.
- Residential encroachment leads to conflicts among responsible farm operators and non-farm residents.
- Transportation costs are increasing as processing and distribution centers are becoming more distance.
- Local regulations can undermine farmers' efforts to capitalize on market conditions including value-added opportunities such as farm markets, farm tours, corn mazes and wineries.

The accommodation of 1,000 new residents need not occupy more than 200 acres where public services are present, or may consume thousands of acres of farmland where controls are not in place.

A healthy farming industry will greatly encourage farmland preservation, and a healthy farming industry requires cooperative efforts on the local, county and state level. Facilitating the availability of locally produced farm products in schools, government and business centers, and close-to-home markets, is an example of the multi-faceted efforts necessary to encourage the continued growth of the Cass County farming industry.

Housing

Residential development will likely be the major land use change throughout Cass County in the coming ten to twenty years, and it will have the greatest long-term impact on natural resources, demand for public services, and overall community character.

Opportunities for rural housing abound throughout much of the county – in many cases at the cost of farmland and natural resources consumption and excessive infrastructure improvements. Dowagiac, the villages of Edwardsburg and Vandalia, and the county's other settlement area where potable water and sanitary sewer systems are in place are in the most advantageous position to offer alternative housing opportunities to meet the varying housing and lifestyle needs of current and future residents. The extent that new housing can be targeted for these enhanced public services areas, the less pressure will be exerted on the county's farmland and resource-based regions including the townships of Pokagon, Silver Creek, Volinia, and Wayne.

Cass County's identity is shaped by the diversity of its residents. Ensuring attractive, affordable, quality housing options must be a vital part of planning.

Ensuring varied options is just one piece of the housing puzzle. Housing must be conveniently located, be in-scale with surrounding conditions, be accessible to all income groups, emphasize walkability and open space areas, and be of sound construction and enhances community character and sense of place.

Commercial Services, Industry and Economic Development

The county’s welfare, and that of its local communities, requires economic prosperity. The route to economic prosperity has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. Some of the changes between the “old economy” and the “new economy” include:

Old Economy	New Economy
Locating businesses where business costs were inexpensive.	Locating businesses where talent and innovation is abundant.
Attract businesses.	Attract educated people.
Economic development of government reliant.	Economic development relies on public, private and nonprofit partnerships.
Manufacturing based. (and fossil fuel dependant)	Diversity is critical as is communications technology and smart energy use.
People follow jobs.	Educated people choose where to live first.
Location is priority.	Quality of “place” and life takes priority.
Environmental integrity and resources secondary.	Environmental integrity, open spaces and recreation opportunities are a priority.

(Based on literature prepared by the Michigan State University Land Policy Institute)

This new economy requires an increased emphasis on:

- Enhancing the skill set of the labor force and attracting talented people.
- Ensuring local communities are desirable places in which to live and exhibit a “sense of place” that is both exciting and comforting.
- Fostering an environment that is friendly for existing businesses and start-up businesses.
- Regional initiatives that recognize and support interdependency between urban and more rural areas, the assets that each offers and the mutual gain available to all.

Perhaps most important in ensuring Cass County’s economic prosperity is the recognition that the county and its 20 local communities must maximize their collective assets and coordinate strategies to reap the benefits of the “new economy.”

Cass County is largely an agricultural and bedroom community and relies heavily on the metropolitan areas of Elkhart, South Bend and other regional urban centers for employment. But the county does have its urban pockets that can enhance their own economic prosperity and the county and region as a whole. Workers and their families need places of residence and convenient consumer services. While some of the consumer services may be met during daily commutes, the county and its local communities have assets to be appropriately exploited to facilitate the infusion of economic development dollars.

In urban areas, this may be a mix of convenient office, retail, and specialty shops, evening entertainment opportunities, urban park spaces for special events that bring people together near commercial services, and sports facilities. In more rural areas, pastoral sightseeing with destination points, farm markets and tours, and outdoor recreation events can have positive economic impacts while making the area more attractive to potential regional workers. Also in rural areas, appropriately located commercial nodes can stimulate economic activity.

Cass County as a whole has assets that can be marketed in an effort to attract business and a skilled labor force including its abundant lakes and other natural resources, Southwestern Michigan College, and its overall “town and country” character.

While accommodating traditional industry in the county may be challenging in light of the opportunities offered by larger regional urban centers, light industry and emerging technologies do not typically demand the same level of public services, and may be more viable and advantageous. Ultimately however, providing workers with desirable communities in which to live, and work, is a critical piece of the economic prosperity puzzle.

Transportation and Mobility

The provision for the safe, efficient and convenient movement of vehicles has far reaching implications.

- Economic development including the movement of goods and commuters and access to commercial centers.
- Access to neighborhoods and other property.
- Movement of and access for emergency vehicles.

In more recent times, the importance of mobility has taken on much broader implications beyond motorized travel. The mobility needs of all persons of all ages and physical capabilities have become recognized as a critical and necessary component of transportation planning. Accommodations for equally safe and convenient travel for pedestrians, bicyclists, and other non-motorized travelers has been directly linked to improved health and leisure time, improved opportunities for economic development, reduced reliance on the vehicle and fossil fuel consumption and reduced cost of living.

The importance of accommodating all travel modes is reflected by the “complete streets” movement that has become so prevalent across the state and which has been made a planning consideration under the Michigan Planning Enabling Act.

“Complete streets” provides for the accommodation of all intended users of the street, but this does not mean that all streets are equally appropriate for the same scope of “complete streets” measures.

“Complete Streets” measures are wide in scope and may include:

- Sidewalks
- Traffic light timing
- Pedestrian cross walks
- Ramped corners
- Visual/audible signals
- Speed inhibiting measures
- Lighting
- Streetscape furniture
- Bicycle lanes
- Limited road widths
- Limited curb cuts

“Complete streets” in Edwardsburg and Vandalia, for example, are very different from “complete streets” in the county’s rural communities. Implementation of “complete streets” must be context-sensitive. It must also be recognized that transportation infrastructure is costly. The inclusion of complete streets measures will be slow and incremental, within the limitations of transportation funds and in association with broader road improvement projects. However, commitment by all parties is critical to enhance mobility throughout the county.

Community Facilities and Services

The quality of life one experiences is shaped of many variables and what is a priority variable for one may not be so for another. Cass County and its local communities have and will continue to have the potential to enhance the quality of life for local residents through the facilities and services they provide. These facilities and services may include open space and recreation, emergency services, special services to the elderly and disadvantaged individuals, regional and economic planning initiatives, court services, and more.

The extent to which services are provided, and can be enhanced, is dependent on local tax revenues and other income sources. The link between economic prosperity and the provision of public facilities and services is strong. But there are also strategies that are not so dependent on economic prosperity to enhance services:

- Minimize duplication of services and other unnecessary public services and facilities costs.
- Target facilities and services where it can impact the greatest number of recipients.
- Regularly monitor satisfaction levels among residents and target identified deficiencies, including emergency services and the scope of and access to recreation opportunities by all age, income and physical condition groups.

The improvement and expansion of sewer and water services should be incremental, orderly and based upon a current long range plan that recognizes county and local policies regarding land use and designated growth areas.

Regional Coordination

Cass County abuts the Indiana state line and is surrounded by seven other counties in Michigan and Indiana. It is part of the South Bend–Mishawaka Metropolitan Statistical Area and is heavily reliant on the greater Elkhart and South Bend regional areas. Cass County and each township, city and village in the county exists within a regional network of communities, none of which are islands unto themselves. The county and its local communities can greatly benefit by cooperatively pursuing common goals in such areas as:

- land use planning
- public services
- natural resources preservation
- open space corridor preservation

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- regional trail systems
- economic development initiatives
- farm industry enhancement

It should be recognized that some if not many local communities cannot offer important facilities and services on their own, and must rely on inter-governmental coordination and regional agencies to assist in realizing the community's vision. Land use and public services planning should seek to establish a common vision and foster compatibility and efficiency across local and county borders.

Social Equality

There is no universally recognized meaning of “social equality.” Within the context of this Master Plan, social equality refers to the condition whereby all county residents have an equal opportunity to pursue goals that are important to them. These goals are often associated with safety, freedom of speech, education, employment, income, housing, health care, personal possessions, and more.

Social equality is very important. Not only is it viewed as a philosophical foundation upon which the United States was founded (Declaration of Independence – “all men are created equal”), but more and more research has uncovered links between heightened social equality and the well being of individuals and the communities in which they reside.

This “well being” is reflected in:

- Lower crime rates.
- Lower imprisonment rates.
- Less reliance on illegal drugs.
- Increased spending and economic prosperity.
- Decreased mental illness.
- Improved performance in educational pursuits.
- Decreased obesity rates.
- Improved health and life spans.

Enhancing social equality requires actions by many and on many different levels including individuals, communities, states and federal agencies. Cass County, and its 20 municipalities, have direct contact with local residents as part of the services and facilities they provide and in doing so, have the opportunity to contribute to enhancing the well being of all.

Social and other public services, and land use policies and decisions, have social equality implications.
