



Executive Summary: The Basis for Planning

Introduction

The Michigan Planning Enabling Act states that the purpose of the Master Plan is to guide and accomplish development that satisfies all of the following criteria:

- Is coordinated, adjusted, harmonious, efficient, and economical
- Considers the character of the planning jurisdiction and its suitability for particular uses, judged in terms of such factors as trends in land and population development
- Best promotes public health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity, and general welfare

The Master Plan is also meant to promote or adequately provide for the following:

- A system of transportation to lessen congestion on streets
- Safety from fire and other dangers
- Light and air
- Healthful and convenient distribution of population
- Good civic design and arrangement, and wise and efficient expenditure of public funds
- Public utilities and improvements such as sewage disposal and water supply
- Recreation
- The use of resources in accordance with their character and adaptability

To this end, master plans address issues relating to land use and infrastructure, projecting 20 years or more into the future. Land use plans classify and allocate land for such uses as agriculture, residences, commerce, industry, recreation, public buildings, schools, and natural resource utilization or conservation, etc. To do this, it is important to understand existing conditions and relationships between the natural environment (soils, wetlands, topography, forests, waterways, open spaces), built environment (transportation infrastructure, housing, waste and water supply systems, public utilities), and social environment (population, employment, activity centers, governance, sources of wealth).

However, community planning is not simply a technical, academic process that turns data inputs into obvious recommendations. A Master Plan is a living document that rests upon the foundation of community vision—what the people of a community envision for their collective future. This master plan will incorporate significant community and regional input which will aid in the creation of appropriate goals and strategies that are consistent with a regional identity. Today, as resources are thinly stretched, it is more important than ever to look for beneficial collaborations with neighboring communities, and adopt an attitude of support for initiatives that benefit the greater region as a whole, therefore benefitting the City of Houghton in the process.

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Master Plans also establish a framework for zoning and other public policies which serve to enforce the community vision. Community goals relating to growth, economic development, recreation, environment, education, historic preservation, and water resource management provide criteria by which to evaluate recommendations. All viable communities meet some minimum level of public service provision; however, the most desirable communities implement policies that are true to their collective vision and that convey a strong sense of identity and pride of place, stimulating private investment through attention to a sustainable future.

Summary of Previous Planning Efforts

The City of Houghton has a strong community planning tradition going back many years. However, this planning effort is the first comprehensive master plan process undertaken since the early 1970's.

In 1972, a Future Land Use Plan was published for the cities of Houghton and Hancock. This document has provided general direction for city development for the last 40 years.

Since that date, the City of Houghton has responded to its needs and opportunities by focusing planning efforts on a number of specific area studies and plans. These area plans have focused primarily on the downtown district, the Portage Lake waterfront, recreation plans, and the M-26 highway corridor.

What is especially significant in the City of Houghton is that extraordinary efforts have been made to implement the area plans. In Houghton, planning efforts have resulted in success, and because of this direct relationship of the plan to funding and implementation, there is strong support in the community for planning.

Other significant planning efforts in Houghton include:

The CIP

The City of Houghton maintains a five (5) year Capital Improvements Program to budget and implement infrastructure and major capital projects.

Water, Sewer and Street Improvements

The City has maintained, upgraded and improved efficiencies with its infrastructure through on-going water and sewer studies and improvement programs.

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The Downtown

A major effort to revitalize the downtown district was initiated in recent years and included a guiding plan by Hyatt-Palma and subsequent plans focusing on the downtown streetscape and building facades. Together, these planning efforts focused public attention on the downtown, resulting in significant private investment in new businesses. The City was able to secure major funding for rebuilding downtown's infrastructure, including a historic streetscape enhancement. A Historic Façade Study and Guidelines report was completed just in time for the city to use this as the basis for securing major grant funding to provide incentives for historic rehab and restoration of downtown's building facades.

Recreation Planning

Houghton has maintained its eligibility for the Michigan DNR Recreation Grant Programs by establishing and maintaining a Recreation Plan. This plan involves the public in determining recreation needs and opportunities, providing the basis for a five (5) year listing of recreation capital improvements. The city has achieved a high level of success of leveraging local expenditures for recreation with grants from the Michigan DNR.

The Waterfront

Houghton's first Waterfront Development Plan was prepared in 1982 and provided direction for a transformation of the Portage Lake waterfront from abandoned industrial sites and rail yards to mixed use and recreation land uses. The waterfront plan has been updated with special area plans focusing on the downtown waterfront.

Of special significance is the fact that in 1982, the City of Houghton owned less than 100 feet of shoreline; today, the city has a significant amount of frontage that provides parks, open space and public access, along with a three (3) mile long multi-use paved pathway.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Planning

Houghton was way ahead of a national trend to improve pedestrian and biking facilities. A Walkability Plan for the City of Houghton in 2002 focused attention on improving pedestrian conditions, and was immediately followed up by a planning effort involving citizens and MTU students to improve bicycling. Current planning efforts are focused on creating "complete streets" when constructing or rebuilding roads in Houghton.

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Watershed Planning

A major planning effort was conducted on the Huron Creek watershed by a group from MTU. This study identified opportunities to enhance Huron Creek and improve water quality in the stream and Portage Lake. The study was perhaps the first to identify storm water management as a concern in the city.

Winter City Houghton

Houghton's identity as a "winter city" has been strengthened by efforts to position the city as a great place to live in all seasons. A 1997 planning effort by internationally recognized winter cities experts focused attention on winter opportunities in Land Use, Access and Mobility, the Visual Environment and Public Space.

Enhanced winter livability is evidenced by attention to pedestrian conditions, site design considerations, street, roadway and walkway design, winter recreation facilities such as the Nara Nature Park, and special events like the Jibba Jabba Rail Jam, Yooper Luge, as well as the support of major winter events like the MTU Winter Carnival and the Junior Olympic Nordic Skiing Championships.

Other Planning Efforts

A number of special studies and plans are conducted by students from Michigan Technological University who use city issues and opportunities as a living classroom experience. These studies and plans have provided the City with unique ideas and perspectives.

Trends, Changes and Issues in Houghton

Listed below are some trends and changes that are occurring in the City of Houghton

- Downtown has evolved once again into a desirable place to live, work and shop, and is recognized as a factor in positioning the City for attracting new business and residents.
- All season pedestrian and bicycle mobility has become an important issue.
- Residential growth in west Houghton has slowed considerably but there are strong sales of property in the older part of the city.
- There has been unprecedented growth in the development and occupancy of new multi-family, market rent housing units in the last few years.
- The Houghton regional retail market may have reached a saturation point for the development of new big box stores and retail space.

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- Changes in the economy and the uncertainty of State and Federal funding are presenting new financial challenges for Houghton and most communities in the nation.
- The City of Houghton is stretched thin maintaining existing public facilities, parks and recreation areas.
- Attitudes about US 41 traffic through the city have changed; there is interest in improving pedestrian and bike conditions, calming traffic and reconfiguring traffic flows in and around downtown.
- There are growing concerns about storm water management in the city of Houghton, but also how impacts of storm water outside the city limits affects is interest in exploring options

National Trends in Planning

There are national trends and attitude shifts that have and/or will impact the City of Houghton. It is important to keep these trends in mind while developing a new Master Plan for the City.

Attracting the “Creative Class”

A strong national trend has developed that defies old thinking about attracting business, industry and new residents to a community. Quality of life factors; arts, recreation, diversity, community vibrancy, positive attitudes; now play the most important role in determining where jobs are created. The City has experienced this with the SmartZone developments in recent years.

Complete Streets:

Streets serve many functions, including:

- Connecting various parts of the community
- Providing surface transportation (accommodating all modes of transportation including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit, motor vehicles, emergency services, etc.)
- Accommodating public access to destinations
- Providing space for utilities and other public infrastructure hidden underground
- Helping to define a place and create a sense of place. For example, streets provide a place for people to interact as venue for parties, parades and other community events.

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Due to the varied functions of streets, the National Complete Streets Coalition has defined a *Complete Street* as a street designed and operated so they work for all users; pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Communities that adopt *Complete Streets* policies are asking transportation planners and engineers to consistently design and alter the right-of-way with all users in mind. Designing and building *Complete Streets* fosters livable communities and provides many benefits to the community such as:

- Providing children with opportunities to reach nearby destinations in a safe and efficient environment
- Encouraging healthy and active lifestyles through wide, functional, and attractive sidewalks and well-defined bicycle routes consistent with the context of the community
- Allowing everyone, especially people with disabilities and the elderly, to reach destinations and travel around the community
- Reducing pedestrian risk by as much as 28 percent by implementing *Complete Streets* design elements such as raised medians, sidewalks, and other traffic-calming measures (according to the National Complete Streets Coalition)
- Promoting a cleaner environment. The *Complete Streets* approach encourages people to walk or bicycle to their destinations around the community, which may help reduce vehicle trips. Many *Complete Street* designs also include increased green space along the roadway which also helps the environment.

Storm water Management:

Almost all components of the urban environment have the potential to provide better management of stormwater—this includes not only open space, but also rooftops, streetscapes, parking lots, sidewalks, and medians.

One important goal is to filter stormwater runoff with vegetation before it moves into water bodies. Care must be taken to appropriately design and maintain these systems so that they work in an appropriate manner, and cold climate conditions must also be managed so that proper filtration occurs.

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In cold climates, the large quantities of sand and salt used to treat roadways may limit groundwater recharge techniques such as infiltration, vegetative swales, bioretention facilities, filter strips, aquatic buffers, etc. It should be cautioned that these techniques are not always appropriate if there is any risk that contaminants in runoff will not be filtered, and will, instead, penetrate directly to the water table.

Stormwater management techniques are designed around two goals: protecting and restoring natural areas, and designing development that minimizes imperviousness and maximizes permeability. Some techniques include preserving open space, daylighting creeks and restoring wetlands, protecting and planting trees, clustering development to maximize unpaved areas, using pervious paving materials, minimizing street widths, reducing the area of parking lots, designing recreation areas to hold runoff, and directing runoff from pavement and buildings to vegetation-lined channels.

Above-ground or shallow infiltration systems, such as vegetated swales, rain gardens, filter strips, bio-retention areas, oil/water separators, and constructed wetlands, allow more time for contaminants to be filtered through the soil. Many of these systems, planted with salt-resistant vegetation, can serve as snow retention areas in the winter, although salt should be minimized near wetlands.

Riparian buffers are vegetated areas next to water resources that protect them from nonpoint source pollution and provide bank stabilization and aquatic and wildlife habitat. Design is important, because runoff must be sufficiently slowed to allow sediment and pollutants to settle out. Streams and rivers should be protected and riparian buffers enhanced to protect water quality, utilizing hardy native plants when possible.

Smart Growth:

Smart Growth is really another name for sustainable development practices and planning vibrant communities. The principles of Smart Growth include:

Create a Range of Housing Opportunities and Choices

If more housing opportunity and choice is a desired goal, we will need to examine the existing zoning districts and requirements to determine if there are constraints.

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Create or Enhance Walkable Neighborhoods

Are people currently walking to work, school or the store? Does our current non-motorized system accommodate all users? Should the pace of multi-use paths and sidewalk improvements be increased? Should regulations for new development include provisions for sidewalk connectivity?

Encourage Community and Stakeholder Collaboration

This is really about getting more people involved in the planning process, as well as seeking out cooperative opportunities with adjoining jurisdictions.

Foster Distinctive, Attractive Communities with a Strong Sense of Place

What is Houghton's sense of "place"? Do the standards and requirements for commercial development create projects that contribute to this feeling?

Make Development Decisions Predictable, Fair and Cost Effective

This would include providing clear direction to developers through streamlined zoning regulations, development application checklists and timelines for review and approvals, as well as requiring zoning and site plan review applications to be complete before the review process and timeline is started

Mix Land Uses

Many zoning ordinances today segregate land uses. Consider permitting mixed-use clusters at key intersections along main corridors close to residential concentrations. Amend the zoning ordinance to allow mixed use development. Create employment and shopping opportunities closer to residents by supporting home occupations, local businesses, and institutions.

Preserve Open space, Farmland, Natural Beauty and Critical Environmental Areas

Tools include public land acquisition, conservation subdivision design requirements and the use of scenic and conservation easements.

Provide a Variety of Transportation Choices

The City of Houghton was one of the first communities in Michigan to adopt a Complete Streets ordinance. In addition, other activities in support of this principal include:

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- Houghton should continue to collaborate with MDOT in supporting increased opportunities for multi-modal transportation systems including carpool lots, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, heritage routes, long-distance bicycle trails, and snowmobile trails
- Support public transportation services to assist those with limited mobility or means, and to conserve energy (collaborate in a county-wide millage if necessary). Encourage residents to voice their needs to accurately estimate demand for services and possibly improve service.
- Place high priority on the planning and funding of non-motorized transportation facilities as an alternative to automobile transportation, a recreational amenity, and benefit to public health.
- Require walkable designs including non-motorized connections, bike lanes, and bicycle facilities in all new development and with road improvements when possible and desirable to support the goals of this plan.
- Incorporate complete, integrated, clearly-marked, non-motorized transportation networks as a priority in Capital Improvement Planning.
- Make pedestrian systems complementary to planned or existing regional trail systems.

Take Advantage of Compact Building Design

A major goal of Smart Growth is making communities more compact and efficient, walkable, bike able and livable. Possible actions include:

- Update the zoning ordinance to encourage compact housing development in areas currently served by public utilities.
- Allow greater density, encourage a mix of uses, and include pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure
- Encourage the creation of compact business parks and corporate campuses that can include personal services such as child development centers, fitness centers, restaurants, and alternative housing.
- Plan for trail-connections
- Increase density by allowing taller buildings that require a smaller footprint.

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Community Food

It is important for communities to build local resilience, thereby improving the ability of the community to respond to energy, economic, or social shocks. This means enhancing community self-sufficiency and creating a collaborative community framework.

A community's Master Plan should support the creation of a community food system to enhance food security and support a local food economy. While it is difficult to construct a self-sustaining food system with the challenges of climate and short growing season in the Upper Peninsula, there is a unique opportunity to create a "northern" model for local food production with community greenhouses, hoop-houses, or aquaculture or aquaponics facilities. Local production opportunities such as community gardens, edible landscaping, and appropriate urban farming can be supported in the community's ordinances, as well as local distribution opportunities such as farmer's markets, food stands, and small neighborhood stores.

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