

Chapter 2: Gaining a Feel for the Community

Gaining a Feel for the Community

During the first phase of the MAP project, an extensive public participation program was conducted in order to gain an understanding of the community's perception about the past, present, and future of Muskegon County. A number of public involvement techniques were undertaken as a result. The techniques include the following activities:

- Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis,
- Stakeholder Interviews,
- Community Survey, and
- Community Forums.

The results of these public participation techniques are outlined below and summary reports are included in the Appendix. The results of the public participation efforts have had a tremendous effect on the formulation of the MAP Visions and Goals.

SWOT Analysis

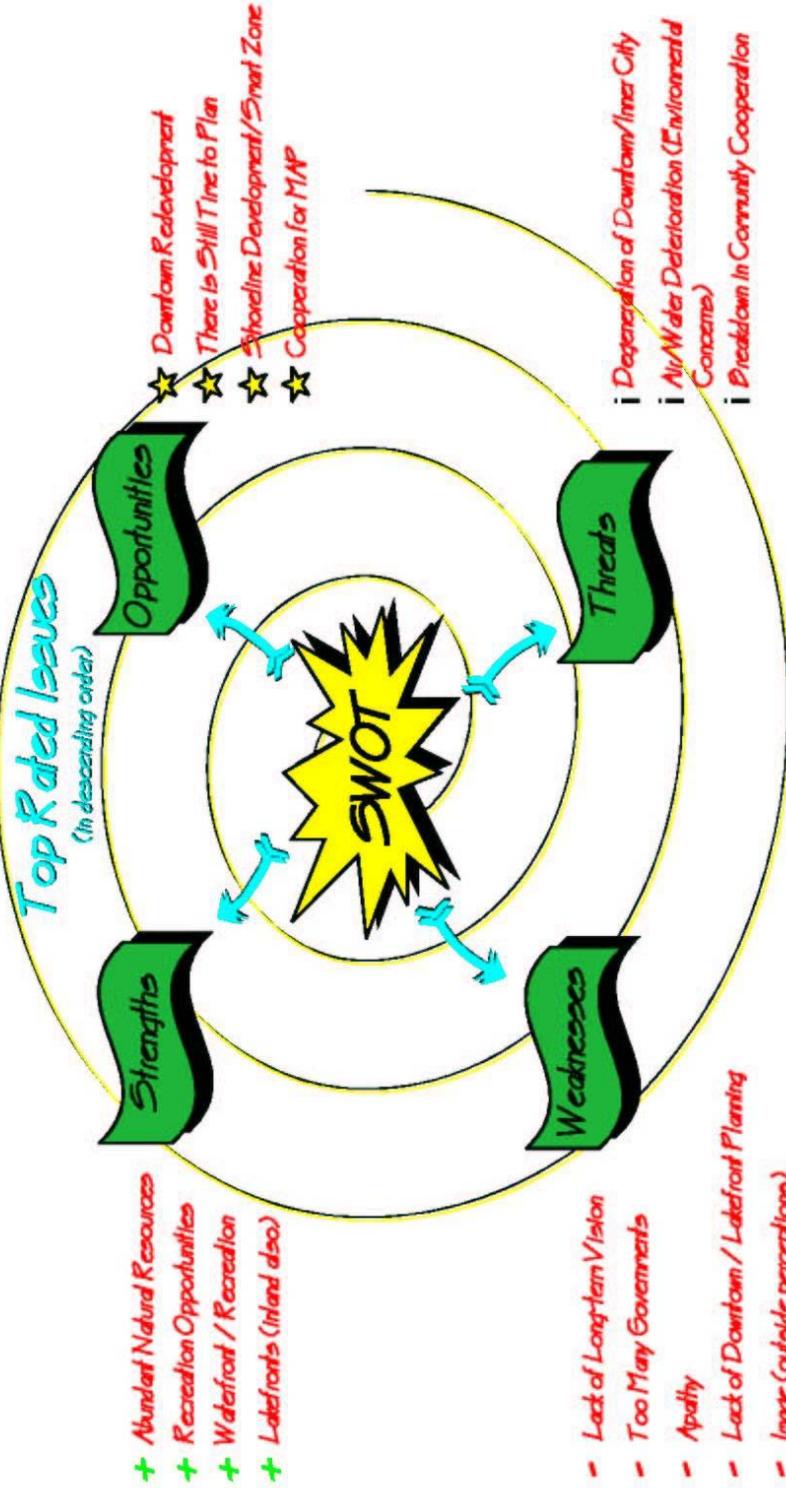
During the summer of 2002, the MAP Steering Committee conducted a SWOT Analysis exercise to assess the existing and future conditions of Muskegon County. A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis is a highly effective way to identify a community's existing conditions/attitudes and possible future direction, as well as, assist a community to focus on the areas where it is strong and where its greatest opportunities lie. Following is a list of the top issues identified by the Steering Committee for each of the four SWOT Analysis categories. A complete report of the SWOT Analysis can be found in Appendix C.



Muskegon Area-wide Plan: Steering Committee SWOT Analysis

Assessing Your Current and Future Situation

July 30th, 2002



Stakeholder Interviews

In August 2002, 19 persons who have a vested interest in the future of the Muskegon area were interviewed by HNTB Michigan Inc. The list of persons interviewed was generated and agreed upon by the MAP Steering Committee and includes individuals that have been highly involved in Muskegon County from both the public and private sectors. The purpose of the Stakeholder Interviews was to gain additional information about the area's history along with the existing conditions. The 19 stakeholders interviewed, collectively have 830 years of experience in the county and local knowledge of the Muskegon area. They were generous with their time and eager to see the potential of the Muskegon area be realized.

The majority of the stakeholders interviewed were aware that many planning studies have taken place, not only in Muskegon County, but also at the regional level. The stakeholders were eager to see the outcomes of these studies and plans, as well as the MAP project. For this reason, implementation became a primary focus of the MAP. The stakeholders also noted that there have been positive strides towards a collaborative atmosphere between the municipalities, but also noted that there is still room for improvement. Of all the issues identified during the interview process, the five that were heard most frequently are identified below, in no particular order. A complete report of the Stakeholder Interviews can be found in Appendix B.

Key Issues

What is the future of Downtown Muskegon?

What will become of the Muskegon Mall property?

The Muskegon area needs an identity that celebrates and encompasses all that Muskegon has to offer.

The quality of life in the Muskegon area is outstanding and therefore must be protected and enhanced in order to be recognized as a great place to visit, work, live, and play.

There is a necessity for a collaborative approach to this project – the entire community and all decision makers must take ownership in order to make the Muskegon Area-wide Plan a successful document that will lead to Muskegon's future identity and health.

Community Survey

A community phone survey was conducted in November 2002. The survey was prepared with assistance and final approval from the MAP Steering Committee. EPIC-MRA, a full service firm with expertise in public opinion research and analysis conducted the survey. A total of 302 adult residents of Muskegon County participated in the 20-minute phone survey. Respondents were selected utilizing an interval method of randomly selected records of households with publicly listed phone numbers. The sample was stratified so that every area of the county was represented in the sample, proportionate to its population within the county.

The results of the survey now serve as a clearing house for the concerns, likes, and dislikes of the residents of Muskegon County. This information is an invaluable source of data to help plan for future growth and development in the county. The

following are some of the main results from the community survey.

When respondents were asked what they liked most about Muskegon County, 34 percent of respondents cited, “water” (the proximity of lakes, rivers, and activities related to them) as their top choice. In a related question, when asked what they disliked most about Muskegon County, 21 percent of respondents stated that there was, “nothing” they disliked about Muskegon, and 16 percent were undecided or did not know what they disliked about the county.

According to EPIC-MRA, it is indeed good news for Muskegon County to have one feature identified by more than one third of all respondents as something they liked, with no particular items jumping out as something they disliked about Muskegon County.

Results of the survey are summarized in the chart below. The Executive Summary and Demographic Analysis of the Community Survey can be found in Appendix C.

Survey Results

Why do you live in the community where you reside?

To live in a place that is quiet	88%
Safety from crime	79%
A strong sense of community	77%
Less traffic congestion	76%
The availability and quality of affordable housing	73%

Community issues of highest personal concern:

The out-migration of good paying jobs..	79%
Water pollution	78%
The quality of schools in the area	73%
Air pollution.....	68%
Future planning and development of the downtown and lakefront areas	68%
The ability to expand and develop the existing manufacturing base.....	68%

Most important factors that would attract future development to the county:

Many beautiful beaches.....	94%
A skilled labor force.....	94%
Good retail opportunities.....	92%
People willing to work together	92%
Strong school system and opportunity for higher education	92%

Top policy goals identified by residents:

Encourage the creation and expansion of businesses and industries creating new jobs	96%
Continue to provide more investments in higher education and job training.....	91%
Provide tax and financial incentives for the reuse and redevelopment of the inner city areas	81%
Strengthen Muskegon County’s image as a tourist attractions.....	81%

Community Forums (First Set)

A total of seven community forums were held through the duration of the MAP process. The first set of three community forums was held in January 2003, with approximately 175 community members attending. The forums were held in three different locations throughout the county including Ravenna Township, Muskegon Township, and Whitehall Township. The purpose of the first set of forums was to gain additional knowledge and viewpoints of Muskegon County residents and to concentrate on establishing a vision for the future of Muskegon County. During the forums, attendees learned about past trends in Muskegon County and then participated in a highly effective mapping exercise. The map exercise was based on past trends and growth rates in which future development trends were projected. Attendees were informed that by the year 2020, an additional 20,500 acres of land was projected to be developed in Muskegon County, in three major land use categories:

Land Use Categories	
Residential Land	18,000 acres
Commercial Land	1,800 acres
Industrial Land	700 acres

Attendees, grouped into tables of between six and eight people, were given a map of Muskegon County with currently developed land identified and color-coded into land use categories. Participants were then given packages of Legos® in three different colors representing the projected residential, commercial, and industrial lands to be developed. With each round peg of a Lego® representing 40 acres, the groups were asked to place the Legos® on a map of Muskegon County where they believed the development should occur in the county.

Once the exercise was completed, the attendees were asked to respond to the exercise by stating what they liked and disliked about how the map looked with the future development in place. Below are the top reactions from the map exercise:

Top Reactions

- There is too much sprawl.*
 - We need to preserve open space and farmland.*
 - Density should be increased.*
 - We need to redevelopment the inner cities.*
 - What is the impact on existing infrastructure?*
 - What is the cost of new infrastructure?*
 - We need to develop around existing infrastructure*
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Upon the completion of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis; Stakeholder Interviews; Community Survey; and Community Forums, it was evident that the hundreds of participants who provided the valuable information have extremely strong opinions and ideas about the past, present, and future of Muskegon County. Some of the main underlying themes that arose during this process are the need to capitalize on the area’s assets, including Muskegon County’s proximity to water and its high quality of life, protection and preservation of the county’s abundant natural resources, secure economic viability, and the creation of balance between development in urban and rural areas.

Defining the MAP Principles

The following graphic was created based upon the compiled information from the public participation process. It identifies the four MAP principles, the five visions areas, and key focus areas addressed in the objectives.

The four guiding principles encircling the outer ring of the graph serve as the framework and foundation for the visions and goals of the MAP. Every vision and goal was written with the idea of striving for each of the four guiding principles within Muskegon County.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Economic Viability

Muskegon County has rode on an economic roller coaster over the past few decades as have many counties across the United States. This is further described in Chapter 3, Trends and Analysis. In recent years,

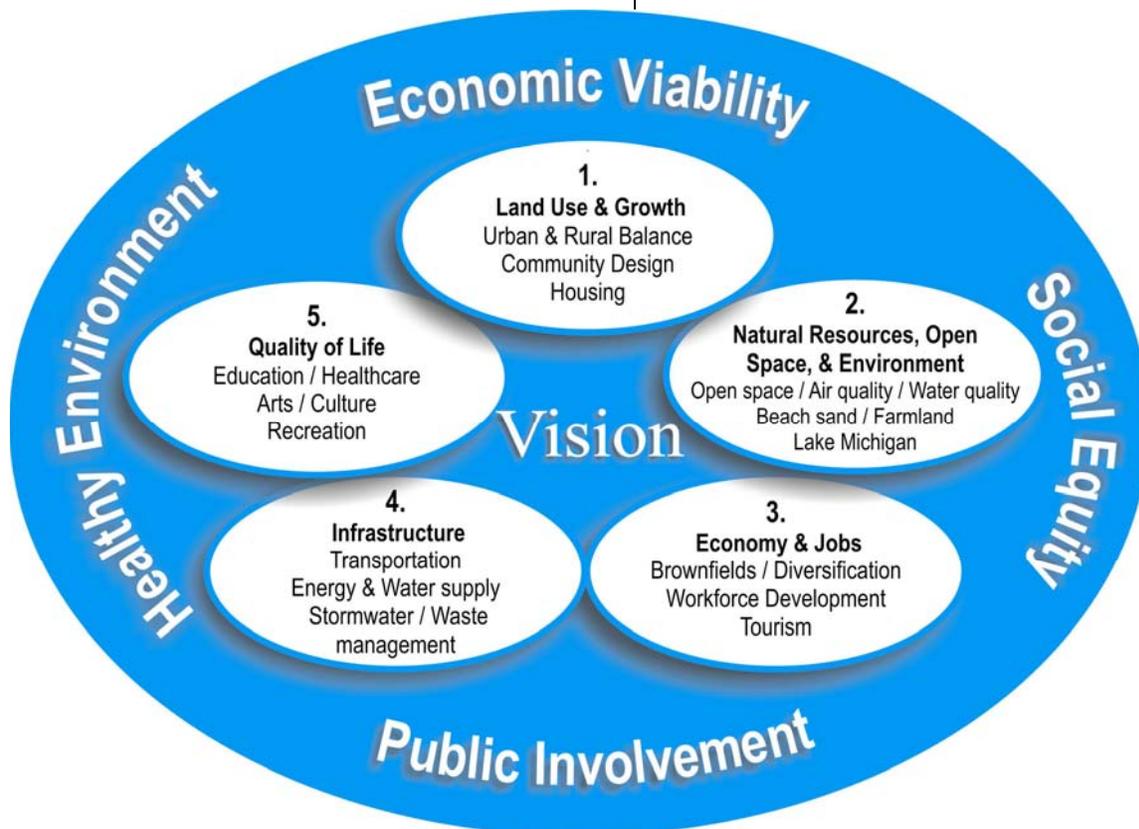
county and community leaders have made great strides to diversify the area’s economy. However, in order to foster economic viability within Muskegon County, leaders should also provide better choices in transportation, housing, and jobs for all residents.

Social Equity

Muskegon County is blessed with ethnic and social diversity. In order to embrace and achieve social equity within Muskegon County, it is necessary to provide fair growth outcomes and shared benefits for all people.

Public Involvement

Public involvement is critical not only in creating a vision for Muskegon County, but also for making that vision a reality in the years to come. Therefore, greater citizen participation must be encouraged in local government and community planning.



Healthy Environment

Muskegon County’s unique and abundant natural resources are one of its greatest assets. Because of this, it is crucial to protect and preserve the area’s natural resources and provide livable, safe, and healthy communities.

Creating a Vision and Identifying Goals

The five visions and attached goals were created, approved and are supported by the MAP Steering Committee. They were presented to and well received by the 150 attendees of the second set of community forums held in September 2003.

VISION 1: Land Use and Growth

Encourage and promote land use and growth patterns that sustain and improve quality of life in Muskegon County, while maintaining a strong sense of place, community, and responsibility.

Coordinating land-use planning poses challenges for both urban and rural communities alike. Small communities may lack the resources and urban communities may be overcome by development decisions and pressures by neighboring communities. The goals are designed to strengthen local land use planning by supporting coordination across political jurisdictions. New strategies such as open space preservation programs and in-fill redevelopment are promoted.



GOALS:

- Develop integrated and coordinated land use planning in rural areas to revitalize small towns. Link natural resource protection with residential development and maintain working landscapes (agricultural, natural resource tourism, forestry, etc.).
- Develop policies to ensure land is available to provide employment opportunities, variety of housing types, open space and natural areas, and access to goods and services based on future projected needs.
- Limit adverse impacts on environmentally sensitive lands by encouraging redevelopment and by increasing densities in cities, where necessary and desired.
- Identify strategies that will manage growth and support reinvestment in urban areas and promote rural viability.
- Encourage compatible land use plans between adjacent jurisdictions by updating land use plans, zoning ordinances, and regulations.

VISION 2: Natural Resources, Open Space, and the Environment

Protect and preserve natural resources and continually improve the quality of air, water, and land resources found in Muskegon County.

Recognition and wise use of natural resources defines what many people value about Muskegon County. Each goal seeks to enhance development in local jurisdictions and quality of life for all residents. State, federal, and local programs will leverage coordination to achieve the goals. Best practices, such as conservation zones, would incorporate preservation and protection in new development. In addition, the protection and enhancement of both the

quantity and quality of natural resources will be emphasized in the implementation strategies of the MAP.



GOALS:

- Protect the valuable farm and forestlands, wetlands, surface and groundwater resources, wildlife habitat, and opportunities for passive and active recreation.
- Develop policies and regulations to address the quantity and quality of water resources.
- Link natural resource protection with development to reduce the loss of important natural resources and open spaces in urban and rural areas.
- Mitigate environmental and human health impacts to important natural resources.
- Foster increased environmental sensitivity and voluntary stewardship through public-private partnerships, federal-state-local cooperation, and public education and outreach.
- Protect the watersheds and shorelines of Lake Michigan and the inland lakes of Muskegon County.

VISION 3: Economy and Jobs

Promote economic development and diversity that ensures access to jobs, goods, and services throughout Muskegon County.

It is vital to create a healthy balance between development in urban and rural areas. Abandoned main streets and employment

centers lead to dispersed development and community decline. To minimize sprawl and decline, urban communities will need to identify economic assets (land, skilled labor, etc.) to foster redevelopment and investment. By marketing historic, cultural, and natural resources attributes, rural areas can develop local strategies to strengthen economic opportunity.



GOALS:

- Encourage partnerships with government, local organizations, and businesses to help achieve local and regional economic development goals.
- Work collaboratively to encourage economic diversity throughout the region and reduce competition between communities.
- Enhance and retain “human capital” in the region, fostering a skilled, educated labor force.
- Develop strategies for the redevelopment of brownfields, adaptive reuse of existing structures, and in-fill development in urban and rural areas.
- Retain and expand agricultural businesses to maintain synergy and a diversified economy.
- Promote natural resource based tourism and the county’s quality of life as an economic development tool.

VISION 4: Infrastructure

Develop a county-wide approach to improving and maintaining infrastructure, transportation, public facilities, and community services.

The quality and availability of existing infrastructure (water and sewer), transportation, public facilities, and services affects quality of life and determines where development occurs. As development continues in rural areas, greater and expanded services are expected by residents. New residents are often looking for a lifestyle that offers the best of both city and country living. Strategies to promote wise investment, planning, and land use will be encouraged to be utilized by local governments to control costs and minimize impacts to the environment.



GOALS:

- Work collaboratively to ensure the availability of a full range of infrastructure and services to meet the needs of all residents in Muskegon County.
- Prioritize water and wastewater facility improvements consistent with the distribution of the region’s population, employment, and planning while emphasizing water conservation and reuse.
- Provide safe and efficient alternate modes of transportation to reduce auto dependence and promote high air quality.
- Maintain and improve the existing transportation system to provide safe and efficient mobility and access.
- Provide infrastructure systems in both urban and rural communities utilizing existing infrastructure capacity where it exists before developing new infrastructure.

VISION 5: Quality of Life

Promote high quality of life by recognizing Muskegon County for its diversity, environmental, educational, arts, cultural, and recreational assets.

Quality of life overlaps both individual and community needs and is closely intertwined with the first four visions. It is important to promote a high quality of life by providing a better understanding of the health, education, cultural assets, and needs for all citizens. Coordination between local agencies, non-profits, service providers, and local governments would be strengthened.



GOALS:

- Promote coordination and enhancement of arts, cultural, recreational, and historic resources in the county.
- Develop a regional strategy to improve and maintain access to high quality educational services throughout the county, including elementary, secondary, and alternative schools.
- Develop partnerships between government and non-government organizations to improving the health of the environment and individuals.
- Improve access to healthcare services and develop strategies to maintain Muskegon County as a regional healthcare provider.