



# Historic Districts Master Land Use Plan



## INTRODUCTION

Muskegon had a long pre-European history as the home of Native Americans. The original indigenous population was attracted to the area by the abundant ecosystems which provided a wealth of food sources associated with the extensive freshwater marshes; the two large Lakes, Muskegon and Michigan; and the tremendous forests.



European-derived peoples started moving strongly into the region in the late 1800's, although sparse settlements existed for about 200 years prior to that time. Beginning about the turn of the century, Muskegon's economic growth was based on the lumber industry which derived its wealth from the surrounding forests, and used the waterways as transportation routes. This industry boomed into the 1920's.

Starting soon after the decline of the local lumber industry, Muskegon, like many urban areas in the northern mid-west became a heavy industrial town. The primary basis of this industrial growth was the automotive industry and associated

defense needs of our nation during World War II and the subsequent cold war. This legacy lives on in the highly skilled metal and foundry workers that still reside here, though the economy has and continues to diversify.

The result of this history is excellent examples of late 1800 and early to mid-1900 architecture, much of which is unique to Midwestern towns in the United States. The City of Muskegon has a strong commitment to safeguarding, stabilizing and maintaining many of these historic structures. To this end, the City Commission adopted a Historic District Ordinance in 1973, and designated eight Historic Districts within which important distinguished structures will be preserved, maintained and protected. The ordinance created a specific approach to ensure the appropriate preservation of Muskegon's Historic Districts. The Historic District Commission publicly discusses and oversees these preservation efforts, and is supported in this effort by the City Inspections Department and the City Planning Department.

These historic districts fall into two classifications. Class A covers districts exhibiting structures that are worthy of preservation, but are neither rare nor of pristine character. Class AA covers districts exhibiting the most pristine and meaningful buildings, sites and environments.

## PRESERVATION ISSUES

**Preservation and Costs.** A major concern in historic preservation is the cost and burden of building maintenance. In order to preserve the unique and notable aspects





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District	Classification
1. Clay-Western	Class AA
2. National Register	Class AA
3. Houston	Class AA and A
4. Campus	Class A
5. McLaughlin	Class A
6. Jefferson	Class AA
7. Clinton-Peck	Class A
8. Selected Downtown Structures	Class A

Class AA - Pristine and Meaningful Buildings and Environments  
Class A - Worthy of Preservation

**Table 6.1** **Muskegon Historic Districts**  
**As Adopted in the Historic District Ordinance of 1973**

of historically important architecture, specific types of reconstruction and maintenance need to be limited or controlled. Maintenance and preservation places a financial burden on the owners or responsible parties. Not only is the upkeep of old structures a continuous venture, but controls on reconstruction and modifications limit the options available to the property owners. Modern code requirements and building laws can also have significant impacts on the use and cost of historic structures. Balancing this concern is the asset that historically important and interesting buildings provide their owners and the community. Living, working, visiting, shopping, eating in, or just looking at these structures and environments can be fun and provide workplaces and business opportunities in and of themselves. Cost and preservation issues are not unique to Muskegon.

**Adaptive Reuse.** Many historical structures are no longer viable for use in the original intended manner. Old, Downtown homes may now be in commercial areas, or commercial buildings may not be able to turn a profit in the original business for which they were designed. Finding

productive uses for these structures can ensure preservation and help mitigate the burden of maintenance costs.

**Occupancy.** Other than Historic District 1 (Clay-Western), there appears to be a high rate of occupancy throughout the Muskegon Historic districts. Very few buildings are empty, although some are underutilized. The number of buildings listed for sale are consistent with any thriving neighborhood. As further renovation and restoration work are undertaken in the districts, the neighborhoods between them will continue to benefit and prosper as well.

**Trees.** The architectural and historical significance of many of the buildings, including residential structures, is strongly emphasized in the numerous mature trees that survive to frame them. The maintenance of trees should be continued and specifically protected through district legislation. The historic facades are reflected and emphasized in the natural dignity of the mature trees. New trees of similar species should be planted to infill where trees have been removed and incentives should be provided to encourage





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this type of tree replacement.

## HISTORIC DISTRICTS

An overview of the City's eight Historic Districts and land use recommendations follow; general recommendations are provided at the end of this section.

### Clay-Western Historic District #1 - Class AA Historic Structures

The historic structures along Western Avenue are generally in good to excellent shape with a few exceptions. The style of the architecture is unique to smaller Midwestern Downtowns represented by one and two story commercial and multi-story industrial buildings exhibiting quality brick and terra-cotta work, and storefront windows. Typically as a City increases in size, these older, non-monumental buildings have been destroyed and replaced by featureless contemporary structures. Muskegon is unique and fortunate in that buildings along Western Avenue remain with only minor changes to their original facades. Clay is similar to Western in many respects, though more transitional to residential. Clay has some beautiful examples of old residential houses.

Many buildings along Western Avenue are kept in excellent condition, and are clean and in continuous use. A few of the buildings detract from the quality of the district only because they are not being

used to their full potential. Others detract from the quality of the district because abundant and grand windows have been boarded over. As discussed in the City's Downtown Plan, with minor, sensitive architectural renovations, historic structures within this district can make significant contributions to the Avenue's former glory. Mixed uses, including various commercial, retail, professional offices and services, and residential (especially upper floors) remain viable options for these buildings.



Gaps in the current streetscape should be sensitively infilled with buildings similar in size, scale, materials and character to existing historic structures, and existing street parking should be maintained.

Facades should be opened up by the removal of improvements made in the 1970s that cover large windows and storefronts. Sensitive and human scale lighting, benches, and plantings should be added, and awnings can be provided to add texture, color, and charm to the district. When possible, upper story views to the Lake should remain open.

### National Register Historic District #2 - Class AA Historic Structures

This district includes many landmark commercial or monument public buildings as well as some of the best preserved and most architecturally significant residential buildings in the City. Important historic buildings and environments in this District





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that remain community landmarks include the Hackley Public Library, the Hackley Museum, the Hackley and Hume Homes/Museum, Hackley Park, and the stately Board of Education building.

The commercial/public buildings are kept in excellent shape and are typically true to their architectural heritage. The view of many facades is partially obscured by very mature maple and oak trees during the six months of the year in which the trees have leaves. Many of the trees appear to be close to the same age as the buildings and some line the sidewalks in regimented patterns. Because of their maturity, location, and character these trees become part of the architectural experience. Some of the smaller, less mature trees could be removed to allow more space for the larger trees; although, this should be limited to trees with diameters less than 16 inches.



These buildings were meant to be experienced and enjoyed on foot. It is not recommended that trees be removed to afford a better view from passing vehicles. The grandiose and majestic facades are reflected and emphasized in the natural dignity of the mature trees.

There are few empty lots between the commercial buildings and the residential homes in this area. Any infill in this area

should be strongly geared to the residential neighborhood and help to soften the transition between commercial and residential uses. For example, some of the homes along Webster and Clay have been converted to Bed and Breakfast establishments. Because of the proximity to the Downtown GEMS Guest and Maritime functional centers discussed in the City's Downtown Plan, encouragement of this use should be continued. Small restaurants, specialty shops, or service businesses could also be encouraged.

The professional restoration of the Hackley and Hume Homes/Museum in this district has helped bolster homeowners to undertake restoration projects on numerous homes in this neighborhood. Many of the homes are architecturally significant enough to potentially foster historic walking tours for visitors. With its proximity to Historic Districts 1, 3, and 8, this could be an important area of focus as a tourist attraction.

### **Houston Historic District #3 - Class AA Prime historic structures and Class A Historic Structures**

This is a much more diverse District, providing retail uses along Third (though most are currently outside the District) and parts of Houston, some commercial development along Muskegon Avenue, and an architectural variety of residences







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surrounding the long established, heavily attended St. Joseph's Catholic Church. Because of this diversity, this district has the most potential for remodeling and re-energizing of all the historic districts.

Most of the residences are in good to excellent condition, with much renovation/restoration progress taking place. This should be continued and encouraged, possibly through incentive programs for one and two family owner-occupied homes. Strict upkeep controls should be placed and upheld on multi-tenant residential facilities. Although the homes along Muskegon Avenue are also in good to excellent condition, some of these require the most amount of work in this district. This work may be due to a higher vacancy rate because of their use as rental homes and/or heavy traffic on Webster and Muskegon.

The redevelopment of the Devonshire Hotel into the Nelson Place senior housing complex will present opportunities for additional revitalization of this neighborhood. This site will serve as a transition between the commercial and residential developments. Empty or underdeveloped sites along Muskegon Avenue should also be used in this transitional manner with attention paid to the architectural suitability of the infill design. Bed and breakfast hotels, small restaurants, specialty shops, service businesses, or professional offices could be encouraged in existing structures or new construction.

The ongoing relocations of historic homes between Muskegon Avenue and Webster should continue as long as the quality of

the design remains consistent with others along these streets. These could be residential or be allowed to make the transition between the commercial areas of Downtown and the residential neighborhood. Infill in the denser residential neighborhoods should remain residential with an emphasis on sensitive architectural design and character. The infill could also include small neighborhood or community parks.

St. Joseph's Catholic Church should be encouraged to remain in the neighborhood, despite the fact that much of their congregation commutes from other parts of the City and county. They will continue to be a potential partner for the City and neighborhood when developing projects and programs for re-energizing this district.

The City should consider expanding the Historic District to include the buildings currently used for retail along Third Street. These businesses would benefit from incentive programs for the revitalization of their storefronts. Most are in good condition but could use cleaning, tidying, or the removal of architecturally inappropriate renovations. Many of these businesses have become landmarks in this area and they should be encouraged to remain by efforts to entice complimentary businesses.

## Campus Historic District #4 - Class A Historic structures

This is primarily a residential neighborhood adjacent to the Muskegon Senior High School, the large First Congregational Church, and similar residences. It is densely developed with single family homes, leaving no room for infill. If reconstruction





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becomes necessary, we highly recommend that it be residential in nature.

The architectural quality of this district is solid late-19th to mid-20th century middle income working class homes. They are well kept and typify a top quality urban neighborhood. Restoration and sensitive renovations should be encouraged when work is undertaken on any of these homes. This historic district has a strong potential to expand into the surrounding neighborhood which is filled with similar housing stock.

Further encroachment on the neighborhood by the school should be severely limited. Any temptation to provide commercial or retail development complimentary to the school should be strongly avoided for the continuity of the neighborhood.

### **McLaughlin Historic District #5 - Class A Historic Structures**

This district is diverse in its make-up in a manner similar to District 3. The District consists primarily of residences, some of which are used as professional offices along Peck Street, and is adjacent to commercial businesses along Hartford and McLaughlin School on Catherine Avenue. Numerous historic and well-kept churches are located throughout the district.

The architectural quality of the buildings in this district is good to excellent. A great sense of pride is exhibited by the care given to many homes and yards. Residences are typically one and two-family requiring only minor repairs. Because it is near the elementary school, this area could be attractive to many young families and provide them with a quality stock of larger

homes. The district could be actively marketed in this manner in an effort to boast its revitalization efforts.

Most of the buildings requiring more restorative work are along the major thoroughfare of Peck Street. These could be encouraged for use as professional offices, small specialty shops, or similar occupancies as well as higher-end owner-occupied residences.

The adjacent businesses along Hartford should be encouraged to remain part of the area by efforts to entice complimentary businesses and professional services. Infill could also be developed to provide services specific to the neighborhood, such as a grocery store. The many churches in the district appear to be readily adaptable, many drawing on their surrounding population for their congregations rather than relying on commuters. As such, they should be encouraged to remain active in the neighborhood and will be potential partners for the City and neighborhood when developing projects and programs.

### **Jefferson Historic District #6 - Class AA Prime Historic Structures**

This district is filled with well maintained, top quality homes on very large lots. Architecturally, there are a few gems, many typical period styles, and a few undistinguished contemporary homes. Some space exists for infill in the district's southern portion near Laketon Avenue, though the homes are smaller and less distinguished.

Quality restoration and renovation should be continued with strict emphasis on





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architecturally beneficial design. Any future infill should be contextual with the historic homes, and not pay homage to the existing contemporary structures. Because of commercial development along Laketon Avenue, infill development in the district's southern portion should be transitional in nature, respecting the character and significance of existing development.

Many of these homes are architecturally significant enough to potentially foster historic walking tours, and could be an important area of focus as a tourist attraction.

### **Clinton-Peck Historic District #7 - Class A Historic Structures**

This district is unique in its adjacency to the Hackley Hospital campus and its bisection by Peck Street, one of the City's significant thoroughfares. Many of the buildings in this district are single and multi-family residential in nature, however most have been converted to other uses. The architectural quality of the District is similar to District 6, but with smaller lots and homes. A few undistinguished contemporary structures exist, but there are also numerous architecturally significant early-20th century structures.

Because of the heavy traffic flow and the adjacency to the hospital, continued emphasis should be placed on the use of homes along Peck Street as professional offices or multi-family dwellings; one and two single family homes would also not harm the historic nature. Some of these buildings could also be used as bed and breakfast or guest facilities associated with these offices or the hospital. They could

service out-of-town patients by providing temporary facilities in which the patients or their families could stay within walking distance of the offices and hospital prior to or following treatment. Several buildings on various corners of Peck were also built to be small stores and businesses, and these residential support-type businesses fit within the structure of this neighborhood.

Residences throughout the district not fronting on Peck Street are of good quality and mostly well maintained. Their continued use as one and two-family residences should be encouraged. The currently empty church facility adjacent to the hospital should be used as a church, day care, educational, or senior center for the neighborhood or at worst, be redeveloped for non-patient oriented offices associated with the hospital. This site should not be considered for an extension of treatment or patient facilities because of its infringement on the neighboring residences.

Further encroachment on the district by the hospital should be severely limited. Any temptation to provide commercial or retail development complimentary to the hospital other than offices and guest houses should be strongly avoided for the continuity of the neighborhood.

### **Selected Downtown Structures - Historic District #8 Class A Historic Structures**

This district is limited to the Central United Methodist Church, the Women's Club and the beautiful Frauenthal Theater. All are architecturally significant, but the Methodist Church and Women's Club have sustained additions and less than sensitive renovation





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work over their long lives. Their proximity to other important landmark and monumental buildings should be maintained and emphasized. Any further work on the buildings should be scrutinized for architectural and design sensitivity, and parking areas should be appropriately screened.

benches, walkways, signage, and plantings can enhance the historic feel of the neighborhoods, and facilitate the development of the Downtown as a destination. Such planning and design standards/guides may be integrated with similar efforts recommended for the other portions of the Downtown.

### GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ The City should perform a more comprehensive evaluation of its historic areas and buildings and develop a more detailed plan. Modifications, including possible expansions (e.g., Third Street) of the existing Historic Districts should be considered and discussed with the community. Financial incentives for preservation and maintenance should be evaluated, including methods for bringing buildings up to current code requirements.
  - ◆ As the City continues its efforts to make better use of its Downtown, consideration of Historic Buildings and environments should be incorporated in the planning and implementation. Western Avenue presents an excellent opportunity to address Downtown development needs and preserve and make better use of architecturally important structures. Other areas provide opportunities for Bed and Breakfast, specialty retail, and restaurant uses, all of which can protect and make good use of historic structures.
  - ◆ Further planning and thought needs to be done on streetscaping and the environments around the historic areas. Appropriate pedestrian scale lighting,
- ◆ Further promotion of the City's Historic Districts should be undertaken. An informal review appears to indicate that beyond the most visible monumental structures, few people are aware of the City's historic beauty. Promotional efforts can help preserve the historically important items, and increase tourism.