

KEY PERSON INTERVIEW SUMMARY REPORT

Muskegon Area-wide Plan
August 26, 2002

OVERVIEW

On August 14th, 15th, and 16th HNTB Michigan, Inc. interviewed 19 persons who have a vested interest in the future of the Muskegon Area. The purpose of these sessions was to provide HNTB with information about the area's past and existing condition. The HNTB interviewers were:

Leslie Kettren, AICP, PCP – Project Manager
Kathleen Fitzpatrick – Public Involvement Coordinator

The participants were very informational and generous with their time. Not only did all of them have a vested interest in the area, but also they were eager for the potential of the Muskegon Area to be realized. The following report summarizes their impressions, concerns and praise about the Muskegon area.

The outline of questions that were asked include:

1. How long have you lived/worked in the Muskegon area?
2. Describe your work and involvement in the area.
3. Why did you decide to live in and/or work here?
4. Are there particular places and people that represent the area to you?
5. What do you know about the Muskegon Area-wide Plan? (Describe how you learned about the project and what you have heard from others).
6. Thinking back, what have been significant moments in Muskegon County for you or for your organization? What do you value most about Muskegon County?
7. What problems/issues/areas of concern do you think exist in Muskegon County?
8. What effect do you think or hope the Muskegon Area-wide Plan will have?
9. In your opinion, what individuals and/or groups will have objections to the approval and implementation of the Area-wide Plan?
10. Do you have any comments or questions that you haven't had the opportunity to address today?

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The following aggregate information is in no particular order and summarizes the issues discussed by frequently mentioned theme.

Frequent Themes:

- Recreational/Cultural Opportunities
- Area Identity
- Economic Development
- Housing
- Downtown Muskegon's Future
- Development/ Land Use
- Coordination & Cooperation for Local Units of Government
- Education
- Infrastructure
- Environment
- General Comments

Years of Experience

Most of the persons interviewed have either been raised in the area, or have moved in and said they wouldn't think of moving somewhere else. Amongst the 19 participants we were drawing on over 830 years of experience and local knowledge in the Muskegon area. That is an average of 44 years per person, which is outstanding. The Muskegon area attracts people for many reasons, but it is noteworthy that even through difficult economic times, people have stayed.

Background Information – Community Involvement

There is an outstanding dedication to the area by those in the community. People take part in many different organizations, interest groups, and governmental processes in order to contribute to the health and viability of the Muskegon area. Some of these organizations include:

- Muskegon Area First
- The Chamber of Commerce
- Western Michigan Strategic Alliance
- Various planning commissions
- Labor Management Committee
- UAW
- Muskegon High School Foundation
- The Y Board
- Various Charitable and Church organizations
- The United Way
- Labor Management Committee
- The Muskegon Conservation District
- Storm Water Committee
- Rural Task Force
- Every Woman's Place
- Mission for Area People
- Family Coordinating Council

There are many others, which demonstrates the immense commitment and investment made on the part of the county's residents to their community.

PARTICIPANTS

Wednesday, August 14th, 2002

Bob Carter
Sheriff
Muskegon County Office of the Sheriff

Christopher L. Kelly
Attorney
Law Offices of Parmenter O'Toole
Lakefront Development, LLC

Rillastine Wilkins
Mayor
City of Muskegon Heights

Nick Tensen
Supervisor
Township of Ravenna

Bill Lowrey
Publisher
MI Biz

Merrill Bailey
Economic Development Consultant
County of Muskegon

Thursday, August 15th, 2002

Roger Wade
UAW

Terry Grevious
Director
Muskegon County Airport

John Snider
Attorney

Kathy Evans
Water Quality Coordinator
Muskegon Conservation District

Greg Mund
Resource Conservationist
USDA – Natural Resources Conservation
Service

Harold Drake
Ravenna Township

Don Hegedus
President
Tridonn Development Co

Gloria Lewis
Superintendent
Reeths-Puffer School District

Gary Ostrum
Publisher
The Muskegon Chronicle

Friday, August 16th, 2002

Harold Workman

Retired Human Resource Director
CWC Foundries

Roger Anderson

West Michigan Strategic Alliance

Paul Bouman

County Highway Engineer
Muskegon County Road Commission

Lois Williams

President
NAACP

Rev. Don Mathews

Pastor Emeritus
First Presbyterian Church

RECREATIONAL/CULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES

- Wide variety of activities during both summer and winter.
- Many great golf courses
- Michigan's Adventure draws many people to the area – even more will likely visit since Cedar Fair purchased it (also owners of Cedar Point) – many improvements planned.
- Hunting opportunities
- Great art museums (city and county).
- Many cultural opportunities – Freunthal Theater, museums, etc.
- Beautiful beaches
- Great state park system, not only the public access to the beaches, but also the trails through the wooded areas.
- The area's ethnic diversity needs to be more appreciated and celebrated through more coordination efforts for festivals. Ethnic groups include African Americans, Asian Americans, Polish, Italian, Hispanic, Irish and many others.
- Great sports teams
- Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp – great cultural asset
- Summer festivals – Tall Ships, Summer Celebration, and Party in the Park – attract huge crowds of people from all over the state! Many success stories.
- Cherry Playhouse – many plays
- Many trails, bike paths to encourage pedestrians to get out and build appreciation for the abundant natural resources.
- Bass tournaments and Charter boating offer tourists and residents recreational opportunities.

AREA IDENTITY

- The identity of the area must be changed from a “smelly foundry town” to a viable community with diversity of business opportunities and high quality of life.
- Need to get the “good word” out about the area.
- The perception of the area by residents is a positive one, whereas the perception of those who do not live in the area is less than positive. It’s necessary to turn this around SOON.
- Those outside the Muskegon area view it as a community that has a large minority population, few business opportunities and unsafe. A developed perception of an area is like the inertia of a large ship – takes a long time to stop it and turn it around, but have to start soon.
- Identity has been closely linked with the type of jobs it offered. Originally a logging area, then tourism became a focus in the 1920’s-1930’s, then a Foundry town during World War II, what will it be next? Appears that its moving to a focus of smaller privately owned businesses and tourism – must have diversity in the area to be viable and healthy.
- Need a branding theme for the area

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- There's a spirit of competition for business development and industry – it is difficult to be collaborative when this spirit exists.
Recommendation:
 - ⇒ Revenue sharing. The core (city) cannot be poor and empty while the fringe (suburbs) is becoming very rich in new development.
- Need for a Technical Training Center in order to attract new businesses/corporations that require workers with technical skills.
- Need to strengthen the collaboration between the UAW and Businesses – Necessary to have open dialogue between these two entities.
- The extension of the sewer lines to the northern municipalities is the “first step” for development in that area.
- There must be equal opportunities for executive and leadership roles in the community to be held by those of ethnic backgrounds.
- Inexpensive land will be attractive to businesses looking to relocate.
- Skilled, and inexpensive work force (compared to other states with similar quality of life opportunities) – should be able to attract new businesses and manufacturing.
- Need to capitalize on the benefit of the natural port of Lake Muskegon – one of the largest ports on Lake Michigan, should be able attract foreign ships and.
- If economic development is to become a reality, there must be a change in attitudes towards change and new development.
- The area is changing from mostly union jobs/blue collar jobs to smaller privately owned businesses – the area needs to accept the reality and create a plan for attracting these types of businesses.
- Large companies are pulling up stakes and moving out of the area – should be working with them and helping to meet their needs, whether it be labor issues, or skills training – area workers have helped these companies make profits, and now they are leaving.
- Many area residents have stayed in Muskegon through times of high unemployment, but commute to Grand Rapids, Holland, Ludington, Fremont, and Grand Haven for other jobs. They have had to accept inferior jobs that do not offer benefits.

DOWNTOWN MUSKEGON'S FUTURE

- Something must be done with the old Muskegon Mall in downtown.
 - Recommendations:
 - ⇒ Bring in a casino – will act as a destination for people to come and create an environment of economic revival.
 - ⇒ Rehabilitate the existing building for mixed use
 - ⇒ Create an Urban Village with mixed uses
 - ⇒ The Casino is not the answer to downtown redevelopment
- The Smart Zone in downtown will be watched closely and must be successful! It will contribute to downtown's identity. How it goes, so goes the county.
- The Cross Lake Ferry will be instrumental in bringing people to the downtown, but first it must be made a destination town.
- Muskegon Lake has the ability to bring in the big ships and to be used as a port – this needs to be capitalized upon.

Absentee ownership in downtown Muskegon and Muskegon Heights. There is a correlation between the level of crime and absentee ownership since there is little or no vested interest.

Recommendation:

- ⇒ Target drug houses, buy out, rehabilitate them, and sell through the housing commission, or other housing entity
- People need to feel safe in the downtown – must become a “hub” of activity for it to become a safe feeling place.
- Organizing the Cross Lake Ferry is of vital importance – will bring people to Muskegon area and open up the possibilities.
- Investing in downtown Muskegon by the private sector is very difficult.
- There are 200 acres of lakefront property in the City of Muskegon that is owned by only six property owners – may cause difficulty in redevelopment opportunities in the future.
- Pere Marquette Park beach should be developed and turned into a business district that offers visitors and residents various unique dining, shopping, and recreational opportunities – similar to Grand Haven...hub of activity

DEVELOPMENT/LAND USE

- Wastewater Treatment Plan in the County is the key to allowing future development, both residential and industrial
- Development happening only in the suburbs, not in the core city. The health of the core directly relates to the health of the suburbs.
- Need to think ahead when planning for subdivision developments – need to plan for road sharing.
- Land use planning is needed at the county and regional level.
- Very sporadic development patterns – can't just follow roads and schools, planning needs to happen.
- There have been many obstacles to development in the past – officials (city and township) do not know what they want for the area and thus have difficulty in making decisions about proposals for development – very frustrating for the development community.
- Overall frustration and negative view on part of developers towards working within the county.
- Lack of appreciation for new ideas and development potential for the area – instead there should be incentives for development to come in – new development brings many benefits to the area – job, revenue, etc.
- No more neighborhood grocery stores or shops of any kind – have to drive to outlying areas to shop at the large retail stores and big grocery stores (Meijer's, Plumb, etc.).
- Industrial development should not occur near populated areas – location could be near Wastewater plan
- Need to preserve open spaces in the rural communities – zoning ordinances can assist with this – too much land is wasted on housing, parcels are too large, need to densify
- Conservation methods need to be used (i.e. contouring the land)
- Open space Fractionalization and Fragmentation – urban sprawl causing the splitting of large parcels
- Forest areas are also being fragmented – a “stewardship” mentality needed in order to preserve and create a sense of responsibility for these lands.
- Industry should be near the centers where there are people – don't make people drive too far to work.
- Examine all the factors before developing – if there are poor soils, wetlands, and/or various other restraining factors...don't build there.
- History of land development has been “helter skelter” – each unit of government has been deciding their own destiny – there's a need for a regional approach to planning for the future.
- City of Muskegon and Muskegon Heights should create a partnership for water systems and future development – should have a consistent vision and plan.

COORDINATION & COOPERATION FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

- Outlying municipalities must be involved for the Muskegon Area-wide plan to succeed!
- The Muskegon Area-wide Plan must set the precedent as a genuinely collaborative planning process.
- Protective strategies need to end turf jealousies
- Teamwork attitude must be promoted in order to accomplish more for the whole – need to look beyond the end of their noses/backyards.
- Need to change the adversarial relationship between builders and planners/elective officials/etc.
- Outlying municipalities need to be included in decision-making about the future of the area. They are part of the whole and need to be treated as such! Feel as if they are the “step children” of the area – this view has to be changed.
- There's good cooperation amongst some of the townships/cities, but many need to improve relationships and thing outside of their jurisdictional boundaries.
- There should be more coordination between the Road Commission and Environmental organizations – teaming should occur on projects in order to have a complete understanding of the morphology, hydrology, water shed issues prior to road design and.
- There's a need for creative and innovative approaches to addressing issues – an open mind is necessary to try unconventional methods

EDUCATION

- Great educational system! High number of school districts may present coordination difficulties.
- Need for a Technical Training Center with access for not only students, but also the workforce in the area for continuing education. Muskegon needs a skilled labor force in order to attract companies that will bring new jobs to the area.
- A concerted effort needs to be made to retain the talent produced at the universities in the state of Michigan – need to create atmospheres and business opportunities that will make them want to stay in the area.
- Tailored, locally-oriented education for elected officials regarding environmental issues needs to take place on a regular basis for proper and wise decision making.
- There are 28 Areas of Concern (AOCs) in the United States, and 14 of these are in Muskegon – much attention needs to be given to cleaning up these sites and then protecting them from similar situations in the future.
- Lots of environmental studies are taking place, but there needs to be implementation and use of these studies in all aspects of county development – land use especially.
- Need to train more minorities to become leadership and representatives (i.e. Intercultural Leadership Academy). Use Muskegon Community College, create awareness and encourage more citizens to take an active role in their communities.
- Great partnerships between secondary education institutions and the Intermediate School District (Baker College, Muskegon Community College)
- Should be educating children about land use management – don't continue teaching them the same laws and programming them to automatically accept the way things are. Instead they should be encouraged to think differently – this type of thing should be included with the MEAP tests – Education is the key to changing attitudes and mind-sets about land use management.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- Route 31 should not be redirected – needs to bring people through the Muskegon area in order for them to see the area
Recommendation:
 - ⇒ Add a level to the freeway in order to preserve open space
- Great Roads!
- Roads need a lot of attention, many in disrepair, especially in rural communities
- Intersection of US-31 and M-120 is very congested and needs reconfiguring due to the large amount of development in this immediate area.
- Very progressive approach to handling the waste water in the area (reference to the Muskegon County Wastewater Management System).
- County is divided by the Muskegon River – limits the North/South access. Only three ways to cross the river so congestion naturally occurs at these points.
- High water table throughout the County, which limits economical home and road building.
- Hydric soils and wetlands are prevalent so there are many constraints on locating new roads or making improvements to existing roads.
- Infrastructure is having a hard time keeping up with the growth.
- Growth is being allowed to happen in illogical areas causing strange road configuration and unnecessary loads on roads that are not designed for that type of use. Development needs to happen close to roads that are designed to handle the pressures new development incurs.
- Many are moving into the area from “high-service” areas and expect Muskegon County’s Road Commission to keep up. The Road Commission is under-funded and cannot provide “city-like” levels of service.
- There is a definite need for land use planning on the county and regional levels – need to have the “big picture” at the forefront.
- Shoreline Drive Extension project has an objective of having people near the lake as they drive through, but the way things are developing people will still not be near the lake – won’t be able to see through the high buildings.
- Continuing education for municipal leadership in regards to what types of requests they can make to developers for road improvements – but keep in mind that their improvements do not include maintenance.
- Transportation Planning needs to be based on where roads are likely to fall apart first, not only where they hope to have development occurring.
- US-31 needs to run through the County and not bypass it; otherwise many will just use US-131 instead and avoid the area altogether.
- The Musketawa Trail is a great resource, but the county must help with financing its maintenance
- Transportation with a senior focus needs to be addressed (in the rural areas especially).
- Airport expansion must take place! (Lengthening of runways for more commercial flight activity). Could become more popular than the Grand Rapids airport in the future.
- Public transit needs to be improved – great distances between “centers” and “nodes”, have to get the people there in an efficient way.
- Roads in downtown Muskegon and Muskegon Heights need quite a bit of attention.
- Need for a larger jail – not nearly enough beds as needed.

ENVIRONMENT

- The Muskegon area is highly noted for its many environmental resources – these must be protected and cared for in order to maintain this image.
- The resource of the Lake Muskegon has been squandered for years – must heal it and protect it – no more business on the lakeshore.
- Area resources have been exploited for decades, but it's starting to turn around – must learn from the past and avoid similar situation for future generations.
- Recycling programs should exist in every municipality.
- Unique that Muskegon area has inland lake, Lake Michigan, a natural port, forest lands, wetlands – all need to be protected, enhanced, or cleaned up.
- Loss of aquatic habitat in lakes and rivers
- Natural corridors need to be maintained
- Heritage Landing is a great example of reclaiming brownfields!
- Need a holistic approach to resource management.

GENERAL COMMENTS

- There are many strong and viable organizations with many members of the community working hard for improving the area and planning for the future.
- Many of those interviewed expressed that the area's main resources are the great people who love the area and want to see it receive the recognition it deserves.
- It would be beneficial to the community if they had their own TV station to report local news and happenings – only get recognition through the Grand Rapids media and it's not usually the positive news or fair advertising time for the Muskegon area (i.e. weather is reported from Gerald R. Ford airport and not the Muskegon County airport – different levels of advertising).

SUMMARY

Generally participants were enthusiastic about the Area-wide Plan. Many planning studies have taken place, not only in Muskegon County, but also at the regional level. People are eager to see something come out of all these studies and plans. Implementation is the prime focus. There are positive strides towards a collaborative atmosphere amongst the municipalities, but there is still room for improvement. Of all the issues identified, there are five that were heard the most frequently. These were:

- Downtown Muskegon's future,
- What will happen to the Muskegon Mall property,
- The area needs an identity that celebrates and encompasses all that Muskegon has to offer,
- The quality of life in the area is outstanding and therefore must be protected and enhanced in order to be recognized as the great place to visit, work, live and play that it truly is, and
- The necessity for a collaborative approach to this project – the entire community and all those in leadership roles must take ownership in order to make this Area-wide Plan a success and a document that will lead to Muskegon's future identity and health.