

Chapter 1: Muskegon Area-Wide Plan

What is the MAP?

The Muskegon Area-wide Plan (MAP) is a comprehensive county-wide process integrating land use and other regional concerns. The process is a true grassroots effort to develop a county-wide vision for Muskegon County. The process was initiated and is being lead by local units of government and community leaders. As a result, each city, township, village, and the county all have an equal voice in the development of the county-wide vision.



The mission of the Muskegon Area-wide Plan is to involve citizens in creating a shared vision for the future of Muskegon County.

The MAP establishes visions and goals for the county, based on analysis of existing data sources, extensive mapping, and public participation during the process. An implementation plan completes the MAP process.

It is important to note that neither the MAP Steering Committee nor the County of Muskegon has the land use authority under Michigan law to implement the shared county-wide vision through zoning. However, the local jurisdictions who have been full participants in the planning process have that authority. Therefore, the implementation of land use policies will ultimately be under the control of the townships, cities and villages in Muskegon County. Other policies included in the MAP can be implemented through partnerships between a wide range of players within the community.

How the MAP Project Began

The MAP project began in 1999 when the supervisors of Dalton, Laketon, and Muskegon Townships were discussing the

updates of their existing comprehensive plans. During that conversation, it was suggested to include more communities and develop a regional plan. As the discussion continued, it was quickly decided to invite every unit of government in the County of Muskegon to participate in the process.

The three township supervisors then approached the West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission (WMSRDC) for assistance in coordinating the effort. The WMSRDC is a regional planning agency that promotes and fosters regional development in West Michigan through cooperation amongst local governments. The Regional Commission, under the direction of the three supervisors, called a multi-jurisdictional planning meeting with the 27 units of government plus the County of Muskegon to discuss the development of a county-wide plan in early 2000. The meeting was successful with overwhelming support for the idea. By the end of 2000, a 40-member steering committee was formed with each jurisdiction, as well as many community agencies and organizations, appointing a member and alternate to serve on the committee. The MAP Steering Committee members are community leaders representing agriculture, environmental interests, business development, local government, education, and public interest groups.

Once the MAP Steering Committee was formed, the Regional Commission was designated to coordinate the project and act as staff to the committee. After several months of organizational meetings and fundraising efforts, the project officially kicked off during the summer of 2002.

Why is the MAP Project Important?

The Muskegon area combines economic opportunity with an exceptional quality of life and unique natural resources. For

generations, Muskegon County’s inland lakes, miles of rivers, and spectacular Lake Michigan waterfront have attracted individuals from throughout the Midwest and beyond. Over the next 20 years, Muskegon County’s population is expected to grow by 13.3 percent to nearly 195,064 people. Although this does not seem startling, the amount of land that is predicted to be developed during that same time period is alarming. The rate of land consumption in Muskegon County over the next 20 years is nearly 20,000 acres of land. This disproportional consumption of land in Muskegon County is much greater in comparison to the counties surrounding Muskegon County.

Muskegon County’s urban areas struggle to attract residents and retain jobs. Township governments are challenged to finance public improvements and to provide services with limited resources. Sensitive environmental and agricultural lands are increasingly encroached upon. Resolving this problem requires a comprehensive approach: i.e., the MAP project. Simply expanding services such as roads and water and sewer lines is not feasible.

One obstacle to crafting effective solutions lies in the existing structure of our governments: most land use plans guiding future development are prepared and adopted by local units of government, while

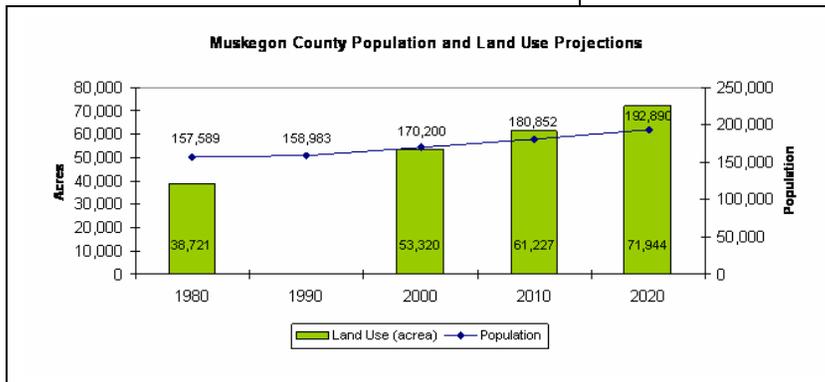


Figure 1.1: Muskegon County Population and Land Use Projections

Muskegon County shares borders with the fast-growing counties of Kent, Ottawa, and Newaygo. In addition, the past decade has been marked by growing public concern over increasing traffic congestion, air pollution, loss of farmland and green space, as well as infrastructure costs flowing from the current urban development patterns in Muskegon County. These development patterns are dominated by low-density single-use residential, business, and commercial development, usually on prime agricultural lands, with the automobile being the only viable means of transportation.

most transportation and infrastructure planning is conducted by the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which is the West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission, and the County Wastewater Authority. The region needs to view new development, land use,

transportation, and infrastructure systems at the same level to ensure any public investment decisions are smart decisions. In addition, such issues as the loss of open space and agricultural lands are directly affected by how and where Muskegon County grows.

The major challenges before Muskegon County are how to plan the best use of undeveloped and agricultural land, how to protect our natural environment, how to maximize urban redevelopment and infill opportunities, and how to coordinate these efforts throughout Muskegon County.

A History of Planning and Zoning in the State of Michigan

During the mid 1900s, the Michigan state legislature passed numerous acts granting counties, cities, townships, and villages the ability to regulate land use within their jurisdiction. These acts include the following:

- MCL 125.201 et seq. County Zoning Act
- MCL 125.101 et seq. County Planning Act
- MCL 125.31 et seq. Municipal Planning Act
- MCL 125.271 et seq. Township Zoning Act
- MCL 125.321 et seq. Township Planning Act

Currently under the above planning and zoning acts, Michigan townships, cities, and villages cannot practice exclusionary zoning. This means that each jurisdiction has to allow for a number of different land use categories including residential, commercial, industrial, and open space. For example, a jurisdiction, by law, is required to allow for industrial land within its borders, even if the residents do not wish to have that form of development in their community. This reality causes the biggest concern for the 1,241 townships in Michigan. In theory, based on current Michigan Law, townships have the potential to develop into cities, and many are over-zoned. The term over-zoned means that if a jurisdiction were to completely develop based on its current zoning ordinance, there would be more people and buildings than the existing infrastructure and land could handle.

In recent years, land use and planning has come to the forefront in the state's legislative arena. As a result, Governor Jennifer Granholm, with support from the

Michigan House of Representatives and Senate, created the bipartisan Michigan Land Use Leadership Council to study land use trends and provide recommendations to preserve and protect Michigan's environment and economy.

Where possible, the Muskegon Area-wide Plan (MAP) strives to remain consistent with the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council's Final Report.

Planning and Zoning in Muskegon County

Muskegon County was incorporated in 1859 with a total population of 3,947. At the time, the county was divided into six townships that included Muskegon, Norton, Ravenna, White River, Dalton, and Oceana. Today, nearly 150 years later, Muskegon County consists of seven cities, four villages, and 16 townships totaling a population of more than 172,000.

All 27 local units of government in Muskegon County have an active Land Use/Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance in place as allowed by Michigan Law. However, in recent years, local units of government are facing planning issues that cross jurisdictional boundaries including roads, water, sewer, air quality, school districts, etc. In addition, Muskegon County is the only county in western Michigan from the Traverse Bay area to the Indiana border that does not have an active county-wide comprehensive development plan as allowed by Michigan Law. As a result, local governments and community leaders are attempting to work together to address these challenges through the MAP project, which will shape and direct the future of Muskegon County for the next 20 years.