



The beet farm
by Christian collins

Rural Community Planning in Action

This article profiles two communities who practice good rural planning—Atlas Township in Genesee County and Moran Township in Mackinac County. Through creative and thoughtful planning and zoning, they have successfully crafted solutions to address local needs.

Atlas Township

Atlas Township is a distinctly rural community in southeastern Genesee County, with growth pressures coming from both the northwest (Flint) and southeast (Detroit). In this context, the Township has proactively established

plans, policies and codes that aim to enhance and protect the Township's cherished character.

The Atlas Township master plan provides the foundation for its land use and development policies and regulations. Going beyond the minimum requirements, the master planning process examined various topics of local concern, including best practices in the agricultural industry, housing affordability, senior housing needs, and gravel road capacity. Given the township's desire to support its agricultural economy, the master plan applied an "agricultural urbanism" perspective

to the rural-to-urban transect model and accepted it as the guiding land use policy. This model outlines appropriate types and scales of agricultural activities for each of the transect zones. See side bars on pages 6 and 7 for more on agricultural urbanism.

Based on this model, the plan established a new "Atlas Center" future land use category surrounding the unincorporated hamlet of Atlas to accommodate a pedestrian-oriented blend of residences, civic institutions, local commercial, and farming-related service uses. Following adoption of the plan, the township made various modifications to its zoning ordinance



and map, including the creation of a new zoning district encompassing Atlas Center, in order to implement the agricultural urbanism/transect model.

Through robust community engagement, the township learned that there was widespread opinion that gravel roads greatly contribute to rural character. So the master plan featured a gravel road capacity analysis, which employed the methodology outlined in *How Much Development is Too Much? A Guidebook on Using Impervious Surface and Gravel Road Capacity Analysis to Manage Growth in Rural and Suburban Communities* (the July Michigan Planner E-dition will have links to this publication). The analysis includes three basic steps:

1. Classification of existing gravel road segments into five types, based on characteristics such as surface type, width, drainage, roadside clearance, and reasonable travel speed
2. Assignment of a maximum traffic volume to each road type
3. Comparison of existing traffic volumes against the maximum traffic volume, resulting in the determination of road segments that are over or under capacity, based on a percentage rating

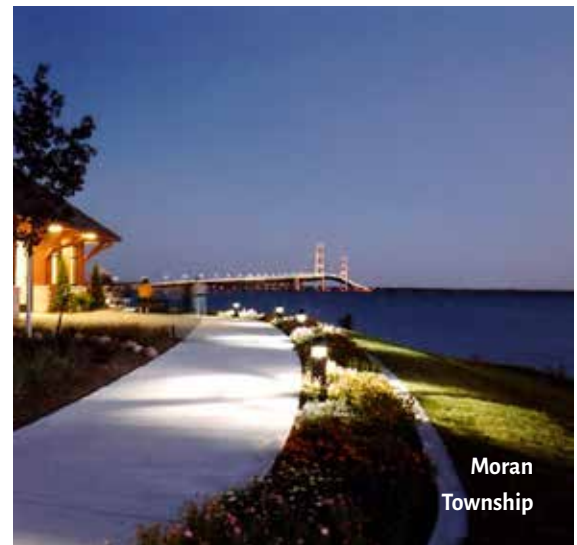
The gravel road capacity analysis found that 30% of gravel roads were nearing, at or above capacity. One obvious remedy to

“fix” an over-capacity gravel road is to pave the road. However, this would not necessarily align with Atlas Township’s goal to protect rural character. Therefore, the master plan established policies designed to avoid gravel road paving and instead focus development in areas where road capacities are sufficient. The zoning ordinance was later changed to require a traffic impact study to be submitted for certain development along gravel roads, giving the township authority to coordinate with the road commission for an appropriate design solution.

Moran Township

Located on the north end of the Mackinac Bridge, Moran Township encompasses more than 130 square miles of land, the majority of which is publicly owned. U.S. Highway 2 extends west from St. Ignace along approximately 30 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline within Moran Township. The Township features an urban segment adjacent to the City of St. Ignace, but is rural otherwise.

During a master plan update process, township leaders and citizens uncovered key community concerns to be addressed through customized policies and regulations. These concerns included the impact of tourism development on Township character, protecting sensitive natural areas such as dunes, marshes and wetlands, and protecting the aesthetic



and scenic qualities of the U.S. 2 Corridor, including its exceptional views of the Mackinac Bridge.

Given its varied geography, the master plan established unique future land use classifications, each with specific purposes and development parameters. These ranged from a classification for the Ozark Agricultural Community (Ozark is an unincorporated place within Moran Township), to Lakeshore Residential, to an Urban Growth Center. To protect the natural and aesthetic qualities of the U.S. 2 corridor while facilitating high-quality development, the master plan proposed the creation of a new mixed-use corridor district, as well as a scenic view preservation overlay district.

Soon after adopting the plan, the township crafted and adopted two new zoning districts. The Mixed-Use Corridor (MUC) Zoning District applies to a stretch of the U.S. 2 corridor which transitions between rural lands and the commercial development west of St. Ignace. The MUC allows for a greater variety of uses, including limited commercial, institutional and light industrial development. While the township felt that it was important to accommodate these uses to encourage economic growth, the district was carefully crafted with site development standards that limit the scale of development and ensure compatibility with adjacent environments. The new Corridor



Rural to Urban Transect

Source: Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company; Smart Code Central¹

RURAL AG		PERIURBAN AG	INTRAURBAN AG	
FORAGEABLE LAND				
	LARGE FARMS			
	SPECIALITY FARMS			
	COMMUNITY GARDENS			
		FRONT GARDENS		
		KITCHEN GARDENS		
			ROOF GARDENS	
			BALCONY BOXES	
			WINDOW BOXES	

Rural to Urban Transect: Agricultural Urbanism Application

Source: Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company; New Urban News²

RURAL ATLAS: Preserves; Wetlands; Forestlands; Other environmentally significant areas;	RURAL ATLAS: Farms; Pastures; Orchards; Homesteads; Very low density residential homes;	SUBURBAN ATLAS: Small farms; Low density residential homes; Low density subdivisions; Institutional uses;	ATLAS CENTER (Gale & Perry)/ VILLAGE OF GOODRICH: Medium density neighborhoods; Specialized services; Parks; Institutional uses;	VILLAGE OF GOODRICH: High density neighborhoods; Multiple-family residences; Mixed use central business district;	NOT PRESENT IN COMMUNITY Dense central business district;

Rural to Urban Transect: Atlas Township Application

Source: Wade Trim

Footnotes:

1. SmartCode Central. Accessed December 2008. <http://www.smartcodecentral.com/about2.html>.
2. Newest Eco-Development Model: Agricultural Urbanism. By Philip Langdon. New Urban News, June 2008.

Viewshed Protection Overlay District (CVP) applies to all U.S. 2 fronting properties in the township. To protect views of Lake Michigan and the Mackinac Bridge, the CVP established height restrictions and site plan review standards granting township discretion regarding the placement and orientation of buildings. The CVP overlay district also includes standards related to access management, signage, and lighting.

Moran Township's zoning administrator, Craig Therrian, reports that both the MUC and CVP districts have been successfully applied to new development within the U.S. 2 corridor. Most recently, the township worked with a property owner to relocate a proposed structure in order to prevent obstruction of a scenic view. The new regulation provided the township with the necessary leverage to negotiate that site plan amendment.

Adam Young is a Senior Project Manager and AICP certified planner at Wade Trim. Specializing in land use planning and zoning regulations, he has been working with communities of all sizes and characteristics throughout Michigan over the past 21 years. He is passionate about helping local leaders and citizens improve their quality of life through a responsible and creative approach to the management of land and resources.



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FROM APA PLANNERS LIBRARY

Agricultural Urbanism: Handbook for Building Sustainable Food & Agriculture Systems in 21st Century Cities Its 15 contributors cover all aspects of the topic in 24 chapters. The editors are Janine de la Salle and Mark Holland of the British Columbia-based planning and design firm HB Lanarc. Agricultural urbanism is presented here as a new movement incorporating many old movements and not replacing any. It's a vision in which all aspects of food are integrated into the city: farming, processing, packaging, distribution, transportation, storage, retail, wholesale, eating, celebrating, waste recovery, and education — providing all this is done “sustainably,” which in this case means not brought from too far away and not too much meat.

The most relevant chapter for planners is also by far the longest: “Urban and Open-Space Design for Food and Agriculture,” by Steven Clarke, Kelsey Cramer, Joaquin Karakas, and Mark Holland, all of HB Lanarc. It discusses growing food on rooftops and facades; food festivals and farmers markets; fishing piers; and other unexpected places. The authors also provide a sort of food transect, suggesting appropriate designs for rural, suburban, “urban village,” and inner-city locales.

Rural Planning Primer

Michigan's rural communities are rural by design and circumstance. Often, they are not communities that envision themselves growing into a suburban satellite. Even rural communities that do seek greater development are keenly aware of sprawl and would like to restrain its impacts as much as possible. But often the tools provided to rural communities are suburban or urban tools that are not customized to address the unique needs of a rural community.

Many of Michigan's zoning ordinances were originally developed in the 1960's and 1970's, when much of Michigan became more suburban and less rural. Planners often borrow regulations from one community and "tweak" it to fit a different community. But cutting down a suburban regulation to fit a rural community is a poor fit at best.

Regulations in any Michigan community are a balancing act of need (is this regulation going to solve a problem that we all agree is a problem) and capacity (do we have the time and money to enforce this regulation).

Rural Capacity

Funding for all local units of government continues to be an issue. Even more so for communities with a lot of land area and a small population. Michigan's Headlee Amendment and Proposal A continue to draw down municipal coffers across cities, villages and townships. Rural townships often have staff working only a couple half days per week. Usually, the elected township board is most of that in-house staff. Furthermore, the very small staff are generalists who wear many hats and do not necessarily possess the skills and expertise to implement a master plan or enforce a complex zoning ordinance. Likewise, planners must recognize that many communities, particularly rural ones, desire a limited role for government and advocate



strongly for private property interests.

There is also a small pool of volunteers to tap to participate on various commissions and review boards. While many communities struggle to find volunteers for their boards and commissions, this is more acutely felt in rural settings where the population is much smaller.

A master plan with 30 to 40 implementation choices is not a good fit for most rural communities. A daunting "to do list" creates paralysis and results in plans just "sitting on the shelf."

Rural Needs

Residents of rural Michigan love where they live and want to keep it that way. They are willing to accept reasonable regulation to protect their natural resources and communities from blight and inappropriate development. But one person's blight is another person's way of making a living. The Right to Farm Act and the conflicts it attempts to resolve are a spotlight on the difference between the suburban idea of rural life and the reality of rural life.

For example, rural Michigan's economy is largely based on farm and forestry work which requires large machinery. Suburban

style planning and zoning that prohibits outdoor equipment storage miss the mark when applied to rural areas. Storage of equipment can be managed in a flexible way that accepts the needs of landowners as well as the wide open spaces and land area available for such storage.

Often, job creation and new development have been portrayed by outside experts as "necessary at all costs." While underemployment is a problem for many parts of Michigan, economic development must be realistic and contextual. Many rural/small town residents were gig workers before the term was coined, working multiple part-time or seasonal jobs, including working the land in some manner. Residents, who are also the community's business owners *and* its developers, are busy, often with limited resources and they need plans and regulations that are easy to implement. Complex requirements that are seen as unnecessary will not be implemented or enforced.

This reality leads to some very specific planning and zoning needs. Unfortunately, many master plans and implementation regulations often do not consider the unique needs and challenges that rural and

small-town Michigan communities face. Rural communities need master plans that distill down what is important in a few goals, along with zoning ordinances that can efficiently implement those goals.

Arthur Mullen, AICP is a planner at Wade Trim with 26 years of experience. He is qualified as an historian and architectural historian, specializing in master planning, land use, zoning, downtown management and historic preservation. He is confident that planning is vital and necessary for the development of communities that residents and business owners desire and deserve.



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And our rural community members, many without a large staff—or any staff!—perhaps gain even greater benefit since MAP might be the only source for planning and zoning information you have access too.

This year, communities like West Branch and Wakefield took advantage of onsite training via Zoom. And both Mayfield and Vassar Township have been MAP members for years and understand how vital it is to connect their leaders with our content. Perhaps a MAP training product is what YOUR community needs this year? We make it convenient for you, and MAP can provide training to your community in person or virtually. We offer a number of workshops that can assist a community needing basic training, master planning guidance, zoning administration and much more. Contact MAP staff today at (734) 913-2000 or info@planningmi.org to learn more.