

## ***Chapter 7 – Recommendations and Goals***

In conclusion, Van Buren County is committed to understanding its demographic characteristics, natural landscape, services offered, and the state of its economy. Through the gathering and interpretation of data, the planning commission, county officials, and others can increase awareness of their surroundings and strategically plan to meet current and future needs for sustainable communities.

In order to assist Van Buren communities effectively plan to achieve their goals, the county planning commission promotes the use of smart growth techniques, coordinated planning, and continuing education.

### **Smart Growth**

“Smart growth” is a term that is often misconstrued. Many people falsely believe that smart growth initiatives produce overly dense, rather costly designs or that smart growth is actually a no growth policy. This is not the case. Smart growth is a means of developing that seeks to boost the economy, protect the environment, and preserve or improve quality of life for residents. Smart growth promotes flexibility and encourages reinvesting in cities, creating compact, walkable, transit-oriented communities.

In 2003, the Michigan Land Use Council developed a report entitled, “Michigan’s Land, Michigan’s Future.” In it, ten tenets of smart growth were identified. They are as follows:

- Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.
- Create walkable neighborhoods.
- Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration.
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.
- Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective.
- Mix land uses.
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.
- Provide a variety of transportation choices.
- Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities.
- Take advantage of compact building design.

According to the Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2005) out of British Columbia, the benefits of smart growth are multifaceted. In the economic sphere, smart growth can reduce development, public service, transportation costs; increase service efficiency; and support industries that depend on high quality environments, such as tourism and farming.

Socially, benefits include improved transportation options and mobility, particularly for non-motorized transportation; improved housing options; enhanced sense of community; preservation of cultural and historical resources;

and increased physical exercise and health. In “smart” communities, services are better in terms of quantity and quality.

Environmental benefits include green space and habitat preservation, reduced air and water pollution, and increased energy efficiency.

Communities that use smart growth are highly connected and attractive, with minimal land use conflicts. Development decisions are strategic and predictable. For additional resources visit [www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org).

### **Coordinated Planning Initiatives**

The following Summary of the Coordinated Planning Act was prepared by the Michigan Association of Planning in March 2001, shortly before enactment of the Coordinated Planning Act, and is also available at [vbco.org/planningeduc0154.asp](http://vbco.org/planningeduc0154.asp).

Michigan’s four existing planning enabling acts date back to 1931. Very few changes have been made since their adoption. The existing laws do not address the planning issues and problems of today. The proposed Coordinated Planning Act would take the three existing planning enabling acts (for cities, villages, townships, and counties) and create one unified Coordinated Planning Act which provides the mechanisms and tools for a local government to address today’s planning-related issues.

The lack of integrated and coordinated planning has been called by several state level reports the greatest threat to Michigan’s environment and to a sustainable economy. The Coordinated Planning Act would establish a process and incentives for cooperative, coordinated and compatible planning while preserving home rule principles and the right to local determination for land use planning and decision-making.

The Coordinated Planning Act would provide a clear and comprehensive set of purposes for planning. It borrows ideas from many of the successful statutes in other states but it is not modeled after any of them. It is not a “one size fits all” planning act, but fits Michigan’s unique governmental structure, offering different types of plan options to meet the wide variety of community types, population sizes, capabilities and needs in Michigan. It even provides for the voluntary creation of a joint planning commission by two or more contiguous units of government.

The proposed Coordinated Planning Act does not require a state land use plan, nor is it a “top down” approach to planning, but it clearly defines the roles of each level of government (local, county, region, state) as they relate to coordinated planning. It would establish a process for coordination of all related entities with plans within a community (like a DDA, Historic District Commission, airport authority, etc.), as well as between contiguous communities, with the county, the region and with affected state and federal agencies.

The coordinated planning process would require notice to all these affected entities that a community is going to prepare or amend a plan, and would require a draft copy of the plan or amendment be sent for review and comment. All comments must be responded to and attached as an appendix to a plan. The governing body of the local unit of government, county or region proposing the plan would retain the right to final approval of the plan.

Communities that choose to plan would have 7 years to come into conformance with the new Act (the existing planning enabling acts would be repealed after 7 years). It would establish incentives for developing and maintaining a plan including a state grant program for 7 years; initial funding of regional and county data collection and mapping to be used by all jurisdictions, grants for the preparation of local plans, and state technical assistance and data sharing.

The Coordinated Planning Act would establish the minimum contents of and a menu of different types of plans ranging from a basic future land use plan to sophisticated growth management and redevelopment plans. Plans would be labeled based on their contents. It includes implementation authority to address contemporary planning issues.

Plans prepared under the Coordinated Planning Act would be required to have a 20-year focus and be reviewed every 5 years. Plans could be amended not more than once a year.

The Coordinated Planning Act would place considerable emphasis on infrastructure planning and coordination of infrastructure decisions at all levels of government. It would require the adoption, and annual update of a six-year capital improvements program (CIP) to implement a plan adopted under the Act. The CIP would be based on an analysis of the land use plan and its requirements for public facilities and services to support the quality of life (as measured by level of service) as envisioned in the land use plan. The CIP cannot be a "wish list" but must be "real" (i.e., it must be affordable with a realistic finance plan and time frame for the provision of facilities and services).

The proposed Coordinated Planning Act clearly defines and enhances the role of the planning commission as the entity preparing the plan and reviewing the capital improvements program (CIP) for consistency with the plan. The local governing body adopts the plan and CIP, elevating the status of the plan and CIP as public policy, and bringing a greater level of accountability to the planning process. The proposed Act also requires that zoning, subdivision regulations, condominium regulations, and capital improvement programs be based on a plan adopted under the Act.

A common and flexible set of requirements for establishing a planning commission are included, as are clear guidelines on planning commission

powers, functions and operational responsibilities. Any existing zoning commission or zoning board (not board of appeals) would be eliminated and its powers transferred to the planning commission.

It is the intent of the county planning commission to serve as a coordinating body to help local units of government achieve the goals and underlying purpose of the Coordinated Planning Act. In doing so, it is hoped that local units will collaboratively plan beyond their own borders and begin to feel a part of the bigger picture.

### **Education and Training**

In order for communities to be able to make responsible decisions and to effectively utilize smart growth and coordinated planning initiatives, it is essential for local appointed and elected officials to continue to receive education and training. Workshops and seminars are offered regularly by organizations such as MSUE, Michigan Townships Association (MTA), Michigan Association of Planning (MAP), Michigan Municipal League (MML), Michigan Association of Counties (MAC), and many others. Local units are encouraged to assist their decision-makers to attend these trainings in any way they can.

Communities who plan are communities who succeed. The county planning commission supports local planning efforts and encourages local units to maintain the relevance of their master plans through regular updates. Through the use of smart growth, coordinated planning, and continuing education, Van Buren County can maintain the rural character it desires while providing opportunities for economic development needed to promote diverse and healthy communities.

## **References**

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**Appendix**

**County PDR Ordinance and Local Program Information**