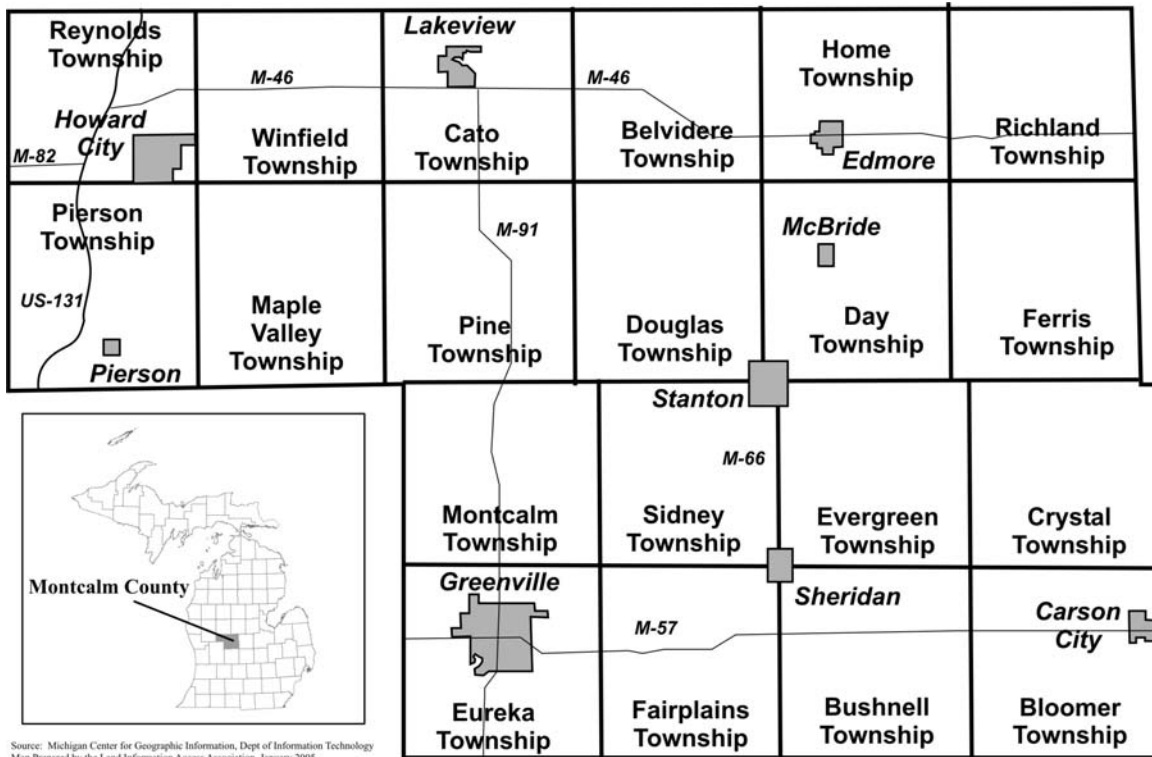


Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Montcalm County is in the heart of mid-Michigan. It is located just north of the Grand Rapids and Lansing metropolitan areas, and south of the Big Rapids and Mt. Pleasant economic areas. Montcalm County is one-quarter larger than an average county and has 20 townships and 9 incorporated cities and villages. See Map 1-1. Montcalm County has long been the home of farms and 5 state game areas, traditional Michigan small towns and the refrigeration capital of the world. While recent global economic changes have resulted in the closure of Electrolux, a refrigeration factory in Greenville, putting more than 4,500 people out of work (including supporting industries), the people of the county are resilient and looking for guidance on how to begin building a new future for the county. This Plan can be one of the foundation stones to that new future.

Map 1-1
Montcalm County Location and Local Jurisdictions



This chapter explains the purpose of the Montcalm County General Plan and describes the process by which the Plan was prepared. It also explains the relationship of the Plan to supplemental studies such as the Montcalm County Fact Book, the 2003-2008 Montcalm County Recreational Plan and other related studies.

This is the first County Plan addressing land use and infrastructure on a countywide basis since 1971. Montcalm County is now in transition, economically, politically and from a land use perspective. This Plan explains the importance of protecting the small town and rural character of Montcalm County as well as its agricultural economic base and gives guidance on how to do that. This Plan is based on the Ten Smart Growth Tenets and the Community Planning Principles of the Michigan Association of Planning (see Appendix A). These principles focus on conservation of renewable resources for their economic development and rural character values, and contiguous compact development around small towns because of the economic efficiency of public services, and social benefits a compact land use pattern offers. This Plan has a key policies map in Chapter Five with a description of generalized future land use. The Plan largely relies on the informed action of the local units of government and property owners in the county for its effective implementation.

This Plan is based on the authority granted to County Planning Commissions in P.A. 282 of 1945, as amended. Generally, the purpose of this General Plan is to provide policy that guides decision making for future land and infrastructure development within Montcalm County. Specifically, a vision, goals, objectives and strategies are outlined; key planning issues in the context of best practices and economic development are identified; community character, existing and future land uses are described; transportation and other public infrastructure policies are identified and specific implementation measures are recommended.

Overview of the Plan and its Uses

This Plan is of the General Plan variety. That is because Montcalm County does not have county zoning and this Plan does not recommend that the County adopt zoning. However, this Plan encourages units of government to work cooperatively to achieve the common vision for Montcalm County described in this Plan. This General Plan takes a county-wide view, in contrast to local plans which tend to only look inward. As a result, this Plan looks at the whole county from the standpoint of land use, economic development, infrastructure and intergovernmental cooperation. It proposes compatible land uses along jurisdiction borders. Local governments are encouraged to prepare local plans and zoning ordinances consistent with this Plan. Detailed local plans and local zoning should guide site specific decisions in every local unit of government in the County.

This Plan is adopted by the Montcalm County Planning Commission to promote public health, safety, and welfare through planning for the appropriate use of land and water resources and the provision of adequate public facilities and services. Although this Plan states specific land use and development policy and proposes specific land use arrangements, it has no regulatory power. It will be implemented by local zoning decisions, public facility and infrastructure improvements and the actions of private property owners acting consistent with the Plan.

The land area covered by this Plan includes the entire area of Montcalm County and all 29 incorporated units of local government in the county. It is intended to promote sensible and sustainable interjurisdictional land use planning. It is hoped that this Plan will guide the formation of township, city and village plans consistent with it and that subsequent local zoning and infrastructure decisions will also be made consistent with it.

This Plan has a time orientation of twenty years into the future (through 2025). It is heavily influenced by the “Concept of Sustainability” that a community should make decisions today that meet the needs of the present without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Photo 1-1
Flat River in Montcalm County



Photo provided by the Montcalm Alliance

Specific Purposes of the Montcalm County General Plan

- To prepare a plan that is consistent with the County Planning Act, P.A. 282 of 1945, as amended;
- To provide the framework for the Montcalm County Planning Commission to serve in a proactive, coordinating capacity for all land use and infrastructure planning committees and commissions within the county;
- To prepare a plan that is technically sound, internally consistent, and that focuses on current issues and future needs;
- To provide a legal basis for County Planning Commission review of local master plans, and county park and recreation plans (a mandatory responsibility);
- To provide a legal basis for County Planning Commission review of township zoning ordinances and zoning amendments (a mandatory responsibility);
- To provide a legal basis for County Planning Commission review of proposed PA 116 (Farmland and Open Space Preservation) contracts (a mandatory responsibility);
- To provide a basis for County Planning Commission review of future County infrastructure proposals (a mandatory responsibility);
- To provide a basis for future county grant requests;
- To provide a countywide economic development/infrastructure development framework for local planning (a valuable asset when seeking grant assistance and encouraging new business development in the county);

- To provide an incentive for joint local planning;
- To serve as an educational tool to assist with education of local government officials and citizens on smart growth;
- To provide a basis for provision of technical assistance to local governments on contemporary local planning and zoning tools (such as those related to farmland protection and provision of affordable housing);
- To provide a means for county residents to participate in determining the future of their county;
- To provide a broad framework for the county's decision-makers to assist them in both long-term and day-to-day matters;
- To minimize land use conflicts and inappropriate uses of land;
- To designate areas of land for uses in keeping with the natural soil properties, vegetation, terrain and availability of public sewer and water in anticipation of future development;
- To provide for an improved system of public services according to current and projected needs.

In early 2003, Michigan's Governor, with the assistance of the head of the House and Senate appointed a 30+ member Michigan Land Use Leadership Council comprised of heads of all the major state departments and representatives of the major stakeholder groups. Their challenge was to prepare a set of recommendations on ways to improve land use policy and decisions in Michigan. Early in the process, the Council settled on the following Ten Smart Growth Tenets as critical to guiding future land use in Michigan. Those tenets are incorporated into this Plan as important to guiding future land use in Montcalm County.

Ten Smart Growth Tenets

1. *Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration;*
2. *Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place;*
3. *Preserve farmland, open space, natural beauty and critical environmental areas;*
4. *Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective;*
5. *Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities;*
6. *Create a range of housing opportunities and choices;*
7. *Provide a variety of transportation choices;*
8. *Create walkable neighborhoods;*
9. *Mix land uses;*
10. *Take advantage of compact development design.*

Source: Michigan Land Use Leadership Council Final Report, Aug. 2003

Smart Growth Definition

Smart Growth is a term that may not be familiar to all readers.

Smart Growth means using comprehensive planning to guide, design, develop, revitalize and build communities for all that:

- *have a unique sense of community and place;*
- *preserve and enhance valuable natural and cultural resources;*
- *equitably distribute the costs and benefits of development;*
- *expand the range of transportation, employment and housing choices in a fiscally responsible manner;*

- *value long-range, regional considerations of sustainability over short term incremental geographically isolated actions; and*
- *promotes public health and healthy communities.*

Smart Growth is characterized by compact, transit accessible, pedestrian-oriented, mixed use development patterns and land (re)use which epitomizes the application of the principles of smart growth.

In contrast to prevalent development practices, Smart Growth refocuses a larger share of regional growth within central cities, urbanized areas, inner suburbs,[small towns], and areas that are already served by infrastructure. Smart Growth reduces the share of growth that occurs on newly urbanizing land, existing farmlands, and in environmentally sensitive areas. In areas with intense growth pressure, development in newly urbanizing areas should be planned and developed according to Smart Growth principles.

Adapted from American Planning Association Smart Growth Policy 2002
<http://www.planning.org/policyguides/smartgrowth.htm>

Vision-Based Plan

This Plan is vision-based, with strategies intended to guide future county actions and decisions. It is not intended to establish precise boundaries of land use areas or exact locations of future types of developments. Maps should be considered as general guides, and the Plan's function is to guide growth toward long-range, broad-based goals, and only generally indicate the location of future development. Site specific decisions are left to local units of government.

A primary challenge of a vision-based General Plan is to combine the needs and desires of the citizenry with the land's suitability and capability for sustaining those needs and desires, as matched by the ability of a municipality to provide public services throughout its jurisdiction. Such planning will minimize the potential for land use conflicts and inappropriate uses of land, for the long term betterment of all residents. This is a very substantial challenge given the over zoning for low density residential development revealed in the buildout analysis of existing zoning ordinances and published in the **Montcalm County Fact Book**. Most local units of government in the County have zoned land at a density far greater than current use, and far beyond the ability of existing public services to meet the need inherent in the thousands of new dwellings permitted by existing zoning. It is hoped the alternative future vision and land use pattern in this Plan will help guide changes to local zoning that are more realistic than existing zoning as reflected in the buildout analysis.

Legal Basis

The County Planning Act (Act 282 of the Public Acts of 1945), states, in part, that:

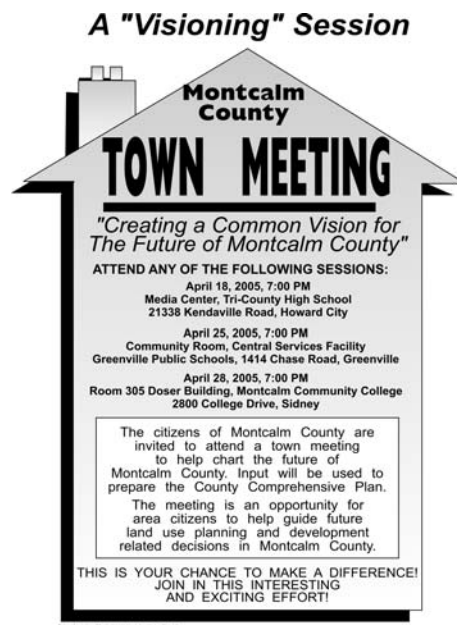
- *“Sec. 1. Any county is hereby authorized and empowered to make, adopt, amend, extend, add to, or carry out a county plan as provided by this act and create by ordinance a planning commission with the powers and duties herein set forth.”*
- *“Sec. 4. It shall be a function of the county planning commission to make a plan for the development of the county, which plan may include planning in cooperation with the constituted authorities for incorporated areas in whole or to the extent which, in the commission's judgment, they are related to the planning of the unincorporated territory or of the county as a whole. The county planning commission may serve as*

a coordinating agency for all planning committees and commissions within the county.”

OVERVIEW OF PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process followed to prepare this Plan carried on a Montcalm County tradition of providing broad public input opportunities. Stratified random sample opinion surveys of residents were conducted in 1999 and 2002. A survey of local leaders was conducted in 2004 and three “visioning” town meetings were held in 2005 at the Tri-County High School outside Howard City, at the Community Room in the Central Services Facility of the Greenville Public Schools, and at the Montcalm Community College. Notices of each meeting were announced in the *Greenville Daily News*, and posted locally (see Figure 1-1). These town meetings allowed citizens an opportunity to identify prouds, sorries and images of the future that they would like to see become a reality. The planning process also included many meetings of the County Planning Commission, presentations to the Montcalm County Townships Association and to the Montcalm County Board of Commissioners.

Figure 1-1
A Notice of Three Futuring Town Meetings



As part of the planning process, the Montcalm County Fact Book was prepared in order to update demographic, economic, natural resources, transportation, and public facilities information. The Montcalm County Fact Book includes data, tables, charts and maps that provide a snapshot view of the county in 2005 that serves as the basis for formulating goals, policy and strategies for the future. It is available on the County website at www.montcalm.org.

HOW TO USE THE PLAN

There are seven critical components to using this Plan as a decision making guide.

- First is the background information in the Montcalm County Fact Book, as a separate document that provides basic information and trends in demographic, economic, land use, natural resources, tax base, transportation and public facilities of the county.
- The second component is the vision, goals, objectives and strategies in Chapter Two. These are based on public input, and reflect where citizens want their county to be over the next twenty years.
- Third are the best practices available to local governments to implement the Plan in Chapter Three.
- Fourth are the ten guidelines for effective county economic development in Chapter Four.
- Fifth are the future land use policies in Chapter Five necessary to achieve coordinated land use decisions in Montcalm County.
- Sixth is the discussion of transportation and other infrastructure in Chapter Six. The importance of improving roads, sewer, water and other infrastructure over the next 20 years is emphasized.
- Seventh are the implementation strategies and interjurisdictional coordination steps found in Chapter Seven. They outline the roles and responsibilities of the county, townships, cities and villages in carrying out the recommendations of this Plan.

This Plan is a statement by the County Planning Commission regarding the present and desired future character of the county and strategies to assure that character. As a formal and tangible document, this Plan is intended to instill a sense of stability and direction for county, city, village and township officials, and for Montcalm County citizens and businesses.

Every effort has been made to present factually correct and up-to-date information in this Plan and the accompanying Montcalm County Fact Book. Information was obtained from local, state and federal sources. Ultimately though, this Plan is a general document, and any site-specific decisions should be thoroughly investigated with original research materials before proceeding. The Plan is not regulatory like zoning. It is a policy guide to give direction to many future actions, including changes to local plans and zoning ordinances.