

## Chapter 6 TRANSPORTATION & OTHER INFRASTRUCTURE

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter briefly examines the infrastructure policy necessary to implement the vision described in Chapter 2, the best practices described in Chapter 3, the economic development recommendations in Chapter 4, and the land use policies in Chapter 5. The word “infrastructure” is used broadly to refer to the large-scale public systems, services, and facilities within the county that are necessary for economic activity and improved quality of life, including: roads, airports, rail, public transportation, non-motorized transportation, public sewer and water, communications, power, schools, medical facilities, police and fire facilities, local government facilities, and parks and recreation facilities. For a description of existing Montcalm County infrastructure, see Chapter 6 Transportation and Chapter 7 Public Facilities and Services in the **Montcalm County Fact Book**.

### TRANSPORTATION

#### Countywide Transportation Plan

A coordinated and well-integrated transportation system is the backbone of any economic development program. A quality system of interconnected city streets, county roads and state highways is critical for efficient commerce. Rail and air service are essential for a diverse economy. Alternative transportation options including public transit and an integrated non-motorized system are important options for workers, children and the elderly. These elements should all be carefully considered and addressed in a new county transportation plan. The plan should identify short and long range road connections, bypasses, lane additions, road closures, intersection and bridge improvements. It should focus first on maintenance of the existing paved road system and not on newly paving existing gravel roads, except where necessary to achieve other economic development objectives. It should support the preparation of access management plans for each state highway and necessary transportation improvements for new economic developments. It should be a top priority in 2006.

#### Roads

The road system in Montcalm County is well established, and largely in good condition. It is very important that this system be properly maintained and incrementally expanded according to a county transportation plan when the need for such expansion is evident. In most cases, road (as well as sewer and water) expansion costs should be borne by the private sector as each new business, subdivision or condominium development is constructed.

It is very important that new commercial development not simply strip along existing state highways and county primary roads. This usurps the road capacity for businesses that is paid for by all travelers. Two, much better alternatives, are commercial node development where commercial development builds back from a highway with its own internal street system. The second is that as each new strip commercial development takes place, it builds an increment of a parallel connecting road system, so that short trips can be taken between businesses without going back onto the major arterial. These alternatives will be most important to pursue on the state highways around Greenville,

Stanton, Edmore, Lakeview and Carson City. It may be necessary for developers to build longer segments of these parallel roads and then enter into payback agreements with abutting property owners, or for the county to bond for some of the segments and be paid back by special assessment of the benefiting properties. These and other financing options should be explored at the appropriate time.

#### Access Management

Along the 2-5 lane state trunklines throughout Montcalm County (and in particular on M-57, M-91, M-66, and M-46), are hundreds of unnecessary existing driveways, poorly designed driveways, driveways that are too close to intersections and other driveways, unconnected parking lots and few service drives. This leads to unnecessary risks of traffic crashes, congestion and reduced traffic flow. Over time, these problems can all be corrected, or at least improved, and future problems can be prevented through a coordinated system of local access management regulations. That means vehicular crashes can be minimized, damage to vehicles reduced, and personal injuries and deaths can be prevented. Such a benefit cannot be readily calculated, but it is huge, well worth doing and well within the ability of local governments in the county to achieve. Montcalm County should work with local governments along M-91, M-46, M-57 and M-66 to lobby the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) to finance access management plans for each of these corridors. MDOT finances 6-8 such projects each year. MDOT requires local governments to agree to adopt uniform access management regulations (based on an MDOT model ordinance) at the completion of the corridor study. These studies are very effective at achieving intergovernmental cooperation and coordination as well as at saving lives and preventing future property damage. However, given the status of local zoning in the county (several townships do not have zoning), this means that only M-91, M-46 and M-57 from the Kent County line east to Greenville would presently be available for funds for such a project. Unzoned townships do not typically qualify for assistance. Often MDOT funds such studies for 15-30 mile segments, so local governments in adjoining counties may also need to be involved in order for such a project to receive funding priority for access management studies by MDOT. The MDOT Transportation Center in Howard City is the office that would need to initiate a funding request for an access management plan in Montcalm County. The County Planning Commission should be alert to future opportunities to reduce the negative impacts of poorly designed highway access through various land use planning and access management techniques and share these with local governments so they can be incorporated into local zoning ordinances.

#### Highway Noise

A little considered, but very important future issue will be the impact of noise that comes from high speed highways—and in particular, the freeway portion of US-131. Currently, traffic volume on US-131 is fairly high for a rural freeway segment. Existing land use adjacent to the freeway is largely limited to farming, forest management, very low density residential—so few people are negatively affected by highway noise. But highway noise will rise as traffic volumes increase. While existing land uses are not proposed to be changed over the life of this Plan, it will be important to understand that if any new subdivisions are approved within 1/6 mile of the freeway portion of US-131, that those developments are not eligible for future noise walls or other noise mitigation assistance from MDOT, should highway noise become a problem. This is because both federal and state policies do not cover highway noise mitigation in the situation where a noise sensitive land use (like a residential subdivision) moves in close to the highway noise source—after the highway was constructed. The cost for any future noise

mitigation measures would have to be borne by the landowners in the subdivision.

Of course such a situation is highly preventable by only allowing noise compatible land uses next to high volume highways. These include land uses like farms, forestry, and open space uses (among others). If noise sensitive land uses like homes, churches and schools are proposed next to the highway, they should be required to be sound proofed and designed to minimize highway noise impacts. MDOT is working on sample zoning regulations and design guidelines to assist local governments with this task. The County Planning Commission should be alert to future opportunities to reduce the negative impacts of highway noise through various noise compatible land use planning and regulatory techniques and share these with local governments so they can be incorporated into local zoning ordinances.

### **Airports**

Airports are important for attracting some types of economic development. As a result, airports are an important local asset that should be carefully managed and maintained to meet the demand for future air travel and air freight shipment. The Greenville Municipal Airport and the Lakeview Airport are low volume local airports (about 39 aircraft operations/day). Mayes Airport in Carson City has about 48 operations a month. These facilities provide an important opportunity for specialized aircraft and single engine airplanes that is convenient and relatively cheap for the users. These attractive features should be nurtured and used to attract additional users with air service related economic needs. Local zoning ordinances should include airport overlay zones to ensure the height of future structures in the area of the airport (up to ten miles away) do not exceed allowable maximum heights as established by the FAA.

### **Public Transit**

Presently Greenville has a limited “dial-a-ride” service that provides public transportation to a small clientele in the southwest part of the county with four daily stops in Stanton, Monday through Friday. While few people are served, for many of those served, the bus is an important lifeline to work, medical care, shopping and education. As the existing population ages, and as new jobs develop in the county, the demand for fixed route, short headway, public transit service between the small cities in the county will grow. It is important for the county to stay on top of this rising demand and to take the necessary steps, in cooperation with other benefited parties and jurisdictions, to provide public transit at a level of service necessary to meet the needs of an expanding ridership.

### **Non-Motorized Transportation**

A well coordinated and integrated system of pedestrian sidewalks, bicycle trails and pathways that link common destinations is critical to a high quality of life and to active healthy living. The most important livability improvement a city or village can usually make is to add an integrated sidewalk system if it does not already have one. Similar livability benefits can occur in townships—even very rural ones—if the pathways are connected and lead to common destinations like schools, recreation facilities and retail areas. Key parts of such a system are already in place in some parts of the county, with the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail and the White Pine Trail State Park being the skeleton for a much larger system. But expansion is necessary in order to reach critical mass where use levels are high. In rural areas, trails should be designed for bicycle and pedestrian use in the summer and snowshoeing, cross country skiing and snowmobile use in the winter. This is the kind of quality of life improvement that can help attract new jobs and residents to a community.

## **PUBLIC SEWER AND WATER**

For most new commercial, office or industrial development in Michigan, and for all higher density residential development, the presence of both public sewer and water is an essential element for economic viability. In most rural communities, these public services are either in limited supply, or are not associated with a quality road system that has unutilized capacity. Yet in Greenville, Stanton, Lakeview, Carson City, Edmore, Sheridan, and Howard City, these elements are all in place. Pierson and Crystal Township have public sewer systems but no public water systems and the serviced area is not on a state highway. Rather than spending significant public and private resources to build new sewer and water infrastructure elsewhere in the county, it is most cost-effective to wisely use the infrastructure that is already in place. The vision, goals and strategies in Chapter 3 and the future land use pattern presented in Chapter 5 proposes new high density residential and economic development largely in those seven communities in the county that already have existing public sewer and water systems.

As each new increment of development takes place, the sewer and water would be extended out from existing lines and linked to create loops with adjacent development. This would occur as the new streets in this area were constructed. It will be necessary to ensure that the site plan review standards in each local zoning ordinance adequately require use of public sewer and water by extending existing public sewer and water infrastructure as each new development occurs in order for this vision to become a reality. It is also important to ensure that new development does not underutilize property. Since property served by both sewer and water is a relatively scarce commodity, and several of the municipal systems are nearing capacity (notably Carson City and Lakeview with 20 and 30% remaining capacity respectively), it is important that as each new development occurs, it is dense and intensely uses these vital urban services so that there is little pressure to develop on rural land elsewhere in the county where there are limited public services. Another important policy is to not extend public sewer or water into any areas not shown as a community service area on Map 5-1.

Small settlements and lakefront owners interested in protecting lake water quality that lack sewer or water service and wish solve a contaminated groundwater problem with public sewer and/or water service may need financial assistance from the county in backing sewer or water bonds. These should all be independent facilities, rather than lengthy extensions of existing facilities.

## **COMMUNICATIONS**

The lines between traditional communication competitors such as television, radio, internet and telephone, are rapidly being obscured. The lines will continue to blur for some time. The important concern for Montcalm County is to not get lost in the transformation. High speed communications are essential to contemporary business models and to a high quality of personal and family life. Any opportunities the county has to assist in upgrading communication options should be seized. A dozen urban communities in Michigan are in the process of offering high speed wireless service to all businesses and citizens. Oakland County is among them. While the resources available to Oakland County far outpace those available to Montcalm County, the benefits to future job and residential growth in the county cannot be overlooked. While no rural county in Michigan has yet gone down this path, some will. When the opportunity is ripe, Montcalm County needs to be ready. The early adapters will have a significant leg up on the last ones in, and when it comes to attracting new high tech economic development

(every community's dream), high speed communications is essential.

### **NATURAL GAS & ELECTRIC**

The presence of natural gas and 3-phase electric service is another critical component of new job producing development and higher density residential development. Again, these services are already available in the cities and villages of the county, but not in many of the rural parts of the county. Public resources should not be spent to promote improvements to natural gas or electricity service outside existing cities and villages unless there are extenuating benefits (such as an agricultural processing facility needed there and could not locate elsewhere, and the business would generate many jobs for a long time).

### **SCHOOLS**

High quality K-12 educational facilities have long been a factor in attracting new businesses to a community, because it is easier to attract employees to an area with a reputation for quality schools. This reason alone (and there are many more) justifies a huge public effort to build and maintain quality schools. It is at least as important to ensure that the Montcalm Community College remain a viable institution which produces graduates with skills that employers need. New businesses are attracted to areas that have a well-trained workforce, and the necessary vehicles (like a community college) to quickly train many more workers. Continuing education opportunities are also of growing interest to retired persons and few sources of local circulating income are more stable than the pensions of retired persons. In short, there is never too much importance placed on building and maintaining a quality educational system in a community. While the county has little ability to influence decisions related to improvements to public schools, it should always help facilitate decisions that improve the economic competitiveness of the county and that help to better meet the educational needs of its citizens. When it comes to siting new school facilities, the county should be an active player and attempt to strongly influence siting decisions so that new school facilities are located in already developed or developing areas and strongly discourage, the location of new schools in rural locations without adequate public roads, sewer and water facilities.

### **MEDICAL FACILITIES**

Rural communities are often at a significant disadvantage when it comes to attracting new jobs because they have limited medical facilities. However, Montcalm County has a much broader range of medical facilities (and even four hospitals—in Greenville, Lakeview, Carson City and Sheridan) within the county than is typical. Again this is an economic development and quality of life asset that should not be overlooked. As with schools, the county has little direct ability to influence the scope and quality of available medical facilities, but it should always try to facilitate improvements that enhance the ability to attract new jobs and better meet the medical needs of its residents.

### **POLICE AND FIRE FACILITIES**

Presently the police, firefighting and EMS services within Montcalm County are being adequately met through a series of inter-jurisdictional cooperative agreements. This is a great way to cost-effectively provide the needed services. However, future physical facilities like fire halls and police stations should be located within established developed areas so that these new public facilities do not contribute to sprawl. Continued cooperation in the provision of these services is key to keeping them fiscally viable.

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACILITIES**

The same can be said about city, village, township and county general government buildings. They should be located within established cities, villages or well developed suburban areas—not in the "middle of nowhere." Where and how the public spends infrastructure dollars greatly influences private sector spending on new development. The public sector should lead by engaging in new facility siting practices that result in locations that are consistent with the policies of this Plan. Similarly, the public should always build buildings using quality materials that last, and use well designed exteriors so as to set the bar on quality design for the private sector to emulate.

## **PARKS & RECREATION FACILITIES**

Last but not least, the number, size, location and characteristics of public parks and recreation facilities in the county has a lot to do with citizen contentment over quality of life. The five state game areas and Huron-Manistee National Forest land in Montcalm County are very important resources in this regard, but alone they cannot meet the daily recreation needs of local citizens. Active living leads to healthy people and high satisfaction over living choices. It also leads to fewer and often less serious medical needs. Thus, it is important that local parks and recreation facilities be constructed and maintained in locations that best meet the needs of the people who will use them. The county has a County Park and Recreation Plan that contains an inventory of existing county park and recreation facilities, needs and a strategy for future improvements. The county owns five recreation areas totaling about 100 acres, but they are concentrated in the northwest part of the county and not all areas of the county are adequately served with park and recreation facilities. The County Park and Recreation Plan is a prerequisite to eligibility for state and federal funds targeted at park and recreation facilities. It is very important for the county to continue to prepare and update the County Park and Recreation Plan at least every five years, and then to pursue state and federal funds to help pay for future parkland acquisition and improvement. Of course some county and local funds will be necessary to meet match requirements on grants, but parks are basic elements of local quality of life which are essential to citizen happiness. This is true, whether you are a local resident, a visitor or a potential new employer eyeing the area for quality of life indicators. Besides, paying for a fraction of a park or recreation facility while another governmental level pays for the rest, is only fiscally sound common sense if the facility is properly designed and located for cost-effective future use.