

Chapter 8

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This Chapter provides a short summary of important data presented in earlier chapters of this Fact Book. It also discusses the general implications of that data as it relates to community planning in Montcalm County.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Population

The total population increased in Montcalm County between 1970 and 2004, but the size of families fell and the population grew older. The greatest population increase is largely associated with communities along US-131 that connects to Grand Rapids and Big Rapids and along M-57 which connects the Greenville area to Grand Rapids. These routes allow residents of Montcalm County an easily accessible and less time-consuming commute to and from these cities.

- The 2004 population estimate for Montcalm County by the U.S. Bureau of the Census was 63,627 persons. The County's population increased 60% between 1970 and 2004, an increase of 23,967 persons from 1970.
- The City of Greenville and Villages of McBride, Pierson, and Sheridan, experienced a small combined decrease of population during that period of over 200 persons. Several townships also had very little or no change in population including Day, and Home Townships as well as the City of Stanton and the Village of Lakeview.
- The County person per household average fell from 2.85 to 2.65 persons per household from 1980 to 2000, a decline of 7%. This is consistent with state and national trends.
- These trends suggest there will continue to be a need for a greater number of residential units, but with fewer bedrooms per unit. Impacts will be most cost effective and have the fewest negative effects, if new homes are close to public services and commercial areas, close to transportation and close to recreational facilities.
- The demand for suburban and rural housing will likely remain for families with children, but demand for housing for single parent families, singles and couples without children may be strongest close to existing cities and villages.
- As the aging trend continues, there will be less need for schools as there will be fewer young persons and more need for emergency services, health care, and a wider range of housing for the elderly.

Housing

Housing in Montcalm County mostly consists of owner-occupied (70%), older (80% prior to 1980), single family homes (75%), and mobile homes (17%).

- As with population growth, the greatest increase in housing growth was also in the communities with easy access from US 131 to Grand Rapids and Big Rapids.
- Montcalm County had 3,083 new housing units constructed from 1990 to March 2000. That is an average of 308 units per year.
- Few of the vacant housing units (14% of total housing) are used for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use. Over the past three decades many seasonal

homes have been torn down or converted to year around use since many of the lakes in the County are close to job providing areas.

- A large stock of older homes can mean that housing is more affordable. However, older homes require more maintenance and repair. Housing conservation programs may be necessary over the next twenty years to ensure the housing stock is properly maintained.

ECONOMY

Employment and Unemployment

The available labor force can be a crucial determinant in the decision making process for business attraction and retention.

- According to the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth, Montcalm County saw an increase in employment of 2,375 persons between 1990 and 2000, but a slight decrease of 50 persons between 2000 and 2004.
- The decreased number of employed persons between 2000 and 2004 in Montcalm County is in part due to the closing of many manufacturing plants and major reductions in others in the region.
- Employment change in Montcalm County will be much worse after 2005 with the closing of Electrolux (2,700 persons) and Hitachi Magnetics (100 persons). Electrolux contributed about 20% of Greenville's tax base, and for the region the overall economic impact each year is estimated to be \$243 million, including the impact on the service industry and Electrolux suppliers.
- Montcalm County has a higher proportion of its population employed in the manufacturing, agriculture, public administration, and construction sectors than the State as a whole. With such a strong reliance on the manufacturing sector, Montcalm County's economy rises and falls with the fate of that sector.
- Unemployment rates in Montcalm County have generally been high in comparison to surrounding counties and the State of Michigan.

Labor Force

The Montcalm County labor force (all persons employed or unemployed who are able to work) has grown from 23,600 in 1990 to 25,975 in 2004, an increase of 2,375 (10.1%).

- Assuming the rate of change continues to the year 2016 as it has between 2000 and 2004, the labor force would increase by only 1,000 persons between 2000 and 2016 which is a very small increase of 3.8 percent over twelve years.
- If recent trends were to continue, employment would decrease from 95 percent of total labor force in 2000, to 91.5 percent in 2004, and 81 percent by 2016 and unemployment would increase to 17 percent of the total labor force by the year 2016. Such a large increase in unemployment assumes little new job creation, and long-term continuation of a statewide trend that usually cycles more rapidly into an upswing. It is more likely that the existing trend of fewer manufacturing jobs and more service industry jobs will continue.

Business Establishments

There is an array of employment opportunities within Montcalm County, with retail trade establishments being the largest in number and "other services" (mostly professional services) second, followed by construction, education and health establishments.

- These businesses will become increasingly important if the number of people who work outside of, but live in Montcalm County continues to rise.

- The location of new service businesses will be important decisions for Montcalm County communities to make. If they contribute to, or destroy the attractive natural character of roads, the small town character of cities and villages and efficiency of existing roads will be injured.

State Equalized Values (Sev) of Property

Property tax values are important indicators of the relative strength of different sectors of the local tax base and local economy. The most significant change in Montcalm County is a loss in relative value of agricultural land and a rise in industrial land, from 1990-2004. However, the rise in industrial land value will soon be a significant decline as large factories close.

If Montcalm County wishes to diversify its tax base, it will need to provide for more industrial and commercial growth, and rely less on residential development. This is not the trend the county is experiencing. The residential sector can require more in public service costs than it provides in taxes. Unless the commercial and industrial sectors, which tend to provide more in revenues than they cost in public services are sufficiently strong, it will be difficult to continue to provide the same or an improved level of public services. This is especially true if the pattern of development is widely spread and low density.

Travel Time and Commuting Patterns for Workers

The length of time it takes for one to travel to work can be used as an indicator for traffic congestion and can be used to gauge the degree to which a community is a “bedroom” community or an employment center.

- Montcalm County had a mean commute time of 28.2 minutes which suggests it is largely a bedroom community where people live in one place and work in another.
- Although the percentage of those using public transit nearly doubled, the amount of public transit usage, in comparison to the total workforce, is extremely small.
- Workers commuting outside of the county increased by 5,459 or 10.4% between 1990 and 2000, which means an increase in travel time and travel distance.
- If these trends continue, there will be an increased demand for road improvements to ease travel-related problems. This is particularly true of M-57 from Greenville to US-131.

NATURAL RESOURCES, LAND AND ENVIRONMENT

The natural environment of Montcalm County is vital to the health of its citizens, to the quality of life in the County, to tourism opportunities and recreational economy and to the life of future County residents and businesses. Montcalm County natural resources include surface and ground water, air and soil, plants and animals in farms and forests.

Water Resources

Montcalm has a number of important water resources. All of these are located in one of four major watersheds. To protect these resources, it is important to address the land areas within the watershed because as water drains off the land or leaches down into the groundwater it carries with it the wastes, by-products and effects of human activities throughout the watershed.

- The four major watersheds in Montcalm County are the Muskegon River, Lower Grand River, Maple River, and Pine River. Within the Lower Grand River

Watershed is the Flat River and portions of the Flat River are designated as a Country-Scenic River. This designation provides for higher levels of protection from erosion and visual blight.

- Among the many concerns for the watersheds in Montcalm County are loss of habitat and degradation, nonpoint source pollution, and PCB contamination. A number of endangered animals live within these watersheds as well as a greater number of threatened plants and animals.
- The many rivers and streams in Montcalm County can overflow their banks following snowmelt or heavy rains. Only the City of Greenville, Eureka and Reynolds Townships have participated in the FEMA floodplain mapping and regulatory program.

Current Land Use/Cover

Montcalm County is comprised of nearly 460,900 acres. According to 1978 aerial photography, supplemented by aerial photography for three townships in 1998, over half (52%) of the land is currently being used for agriculture. Forest land covers 27% of the county, while rangeland, urban and built-up land, water and wetlands together make up only approximately 20% of the county.

Pa 116 Farmland Preservation

As of 2003, there were over 73,000 acres of land in Montcalm County enrolled in the Farmland and Open Space Preservation program (PA 116 of 1974, now Part 361 of PA 451 of 1994, the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act). This is a land area equivalent to approximately three townships. While a PA 116 agreement helps preserve farmland, and thus farming in Montcalm County, it is only saving farming for as long as the farmer holds a PA 116 contract with the state. More permanent farmland protection tools are available, such as purchase of development rights (PDR). Farmers are paid for the development rights which are then permanently extinguished and while the land can thereafter be farmed, it cannot be used or sold for other non-agricultural purposes. In order to apply for state PDR funding, the county needs to prepare a PDR Plan, or to have a PDR Plan as an element of the county Comprehensive Plan.

Land Divisions

Montcalm County has experienced the rapid fragmentation of large tracts of rural land into 5 and 10 acre parcels for use as large lots for single family dwellings.

- This practice results in the rapid transformation of farm and forest land and dramatically changes the character of rural areas over as little as a decade.
- It also results in new and growing public service costs as new non-farm residents demand a higher level of public service costs than farm residents, yet the growth in residential tax base is rarely enough to pay the full cost of the demanded new services.
- The unrestricted division of parcels of land can also result in complex patterns of narrow, tiered lots, creating illogical development. This can also create problems for emergency vehicles, road maintenance, and overall general access. This pattern can generally be prevented by requiring a reasonable lot width and frontage on a public or well-designed and constructed private road, lot depth-to-width ratios, prime and unique agriculture land preservation, as well as by using PUD and private road provisions.

Build Out Analysis

A buildout analysis illustrates the potential impact of existing master plans and zoning policy, if all land develops at the maximum permitted density. Eighteen jurisdictions in Montcalm have a master plan (according to an Institute for Public Policy and Social Research 2003 survey) and 18 have a zoning ordinance (according to Montcalm County).

- A buildout analysis of zoning ordinances of local governments in Montcalm County revealed a potential future population of 759,476, which is an increase of 695,849 over the 2004 estimated population. This shows tremendous “over zoning,” especially in the rural parts of the county.

TRANSPORTATION

Traffic on County Roads

The state trunkline system is the spine and the county road network is the arteries in the local transportation system in Montcalm County. This network is extensive and in generally good condition.

- The highest average daily traffic on federal and state trunklines is on the US-131 Expressway (24,975), M-57 (10,000) and M-91 (9,866).
- The highest average daily traffic on county roads in the County is on Federal Road (old US-131) in Pierson Township (7,448), followed by Stanton Road in Day Township (6,108), and Federal Road in Reynolds Township (5,801). Federal Road runs parallel to US-131, which results in the high volume of traffic in the adjacent communities.
- Despite the township contributions to improving the county road network, there are more road repair and improvement needs than current revenues can pay for.
- If future development of residences along county roads continues at recent rates, the increased traffic will widen the gap between needs and available revenues.

Trails

Montcalm County’s bicycle and non-motorized paths or trails offer users a variety of recreational opportunities in safe areas that provide the space and accessibility for activities such as biking, walking, jogging, in-line skating, roller skating and cross country skiing. Trails can provide a connection between communities. The major trails in Montcalm County include: the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail, White Pine Trail State Park and the Fred Meijer Flat River Trail.

PUBLIC FACILITIES AND SERVICES

Montcalm County and local jurisdictions maintain a wide variety of municipal, utility, public safety, educational, health and recreational facilities and provide a variety of services. The extent of future growth, and the pattern of that growth will both be influenced by the future capacity of sewer and water systems and the extent of those systems. How efficiently the county and local communities can provide those services will affect the pattern of future growth.