

LONG-RANGE PLANNING

How Master Plans Provide Guidance for Land Development

The master plan is the community's blueprint for the future. It is a comprehensive document that examines land use, transportation, infrastructure, natural resources, housing, economic development, agriculture, and other key elements of the community. Master plans include long-range goals and objectives, intending to guide development in the municipality over a planning horizon, often 10 to 20 years. The plan sets forth public policies that will be followed regarding growth, development, and redevelopment.

A community defines its goals in a master land use plan that anticipates what will be needed to be encouraged, managed or prohibited in the future. The zoning regulations are created based on the community's master plan. Zoning rules from one community may not work in another community, because each community has different goals.

In Michigan, master plans are to be reviewed and, if necessary, updated every 5 years. While major updates may not be necessary, it is important that communities review their plans and make sure they are relevant to the current and projected needs and wants of a community, as well as coordinate with county and regional plans and reports.

The master plan process must follow certain requirements, such as review and comment periods, notification of adjacent and affected communities, and holding a public hearing.

How Do Communities Create an Effective Plan?

A plan for a community should be clear, easy to read, easily understood by its citizens, and most importantly be effective. Commissioners should ask themselves the following questions to ensure the plan will be effective and beneficial to the community:

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The Sterling Heights Master Plan creates a vision for redevelopment in its key development nodes.

Authority for a Master Plan

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Local governments get their authority to prepare long-range master plans from the state. In the case of Michigan, the Michigan Planning Enabling Act is the legislation that allows for planning at the local level. This state law also includes the rules that local municipalities must follow when creating master plans. Many of these rules involve the process for planning, like when and how the public is notified of the planning process and draft plans. Importantly, the act says that the rules for development (zoning) shall be based on a valid master plan. Further, the act says that communities shall review their plans every five years to affirm that they are still valid.



Chesterfield Township, MI

Chesterfield Township, MI is a growing suburban community in Macomb County. Its Master Plan provides for areas of growth and areas for preservation.



Bingham Farms, MI

In 2020, the Village of Bingham Farms adopted a Master Plan that explores opportunities to provide more flexibility for its office corridor. Some of these opportunities could include adding residential and other commercial uses.



Madison Heights, MI

The City of Madison Heights is a largely built-out community whose Master Plan includes strategies to create community identity through improvements and enhancements to walkability, arts/culture and neighborhoods.

- Is our plan based on a shared vision for the community? Consider what the community hopes to be in the future. It should describe specific qualities that either maintains or improves the quality of life for community members.
- Does our plan incorporate public feedback and participation in the planning process? Conducting productive public outreach during the planning process can lead to meaningful results and positive community support for a plan. Community members want to be involved in the making of a place's future and will want their needs and concerns to be addressed. The public can also offer different perspectives, helping ensure the plan as well-rounded as possible.
- Is our plan consistent? It is important to eliminate any contradictions in the plan. Remember—the plan is about how the community will achieve its vision. All the parts of the plan should be working together
- Is our plan realistic? Plans are created to serve as a guide and element should be achievable, given the availability of resources to your community. When developing goals and objectives, considering if your community could achieve them within the time period given for the plan. Do not hesitate to include the “big dreams” for your community! But keep in mind to incorporate reasonable steps to work toward those dreams.
- Is our plan financially feasible? There should be financial resources to fund the strategies of your plan.
- Are our plan's objectives, policies, and strategies appropriate for our community? The purpose of the plan is to serve as a guide for the community's future. Ensuring consistent, realistic, and feasible contents will help ensure that this guide is appropriate for your community.

What Can't Master Planning Do?

- Predict the future. Master Plans are a snapshot in time and use available data to forecast and anticipate the future. Plans are made on the basis of trends and models of how things may change, but it is impossible to predict exactly the way the population, environment or technology will be different in 5, 10 or 15 years.
- Change the rules for the way property is developed. Master Plans and Future Land Use Maps are guides to the future but are not legally binding. Keeping plans current ensures that the community is prepared to make and defend land use decisions.

Additional Resources

- MSU Extension – [To plan or not to plan? Minimum contents of a master plan](#)
- MML – [Mastering the Updating Process](#)
- RRC – [Master Plan Update Guide](#)