

The Dollars and Sense of Smart Growth

In communities across Michigan, land use decisions are making a permanent impact on rare ecosystems, fragile economies and struggling families. The “Dollars and Sense of Smart Growth” is a series exploring some of the real-world consequences—and the financial impacts—of the commonplace land use decisions being made in communities across the state.

Each issue offers two contrasting case studies facing land use decision makers in Michigan today. Taken together, these two examples show the common-sense kinds of cost saving measures that communities are realizing through Smart Growth planning and infrastructure decisions.

Part 1: Planning for Economic Development: Rising Together or Sinking Separately?

Planning for headwater protection, Springfield Township

A planning process focused on preserving the township's many natural resources, including the headwaters of the Huron, Shiawassee and Clinton rivers, has allowed Springfield Township in Oakland County to begin reducing new infrastructure costs while accommodating a massive amount of new development. By implementing an updated master plan and zoning ordinances that direct new development into clusters nearer existing roads and utility service areas, the township is getting more “bang for the buck”—reducing costs, increasing property values and using open space to help mitigate the impacts of new impervious surfaces at the site level. While working to preserve the “natural services” provided by wetlands, the township is quickly becoming a leader in promoting new low impact developments for stormwater, reducing the cost of new infrastructure and enhancing property values through strategic land protection.

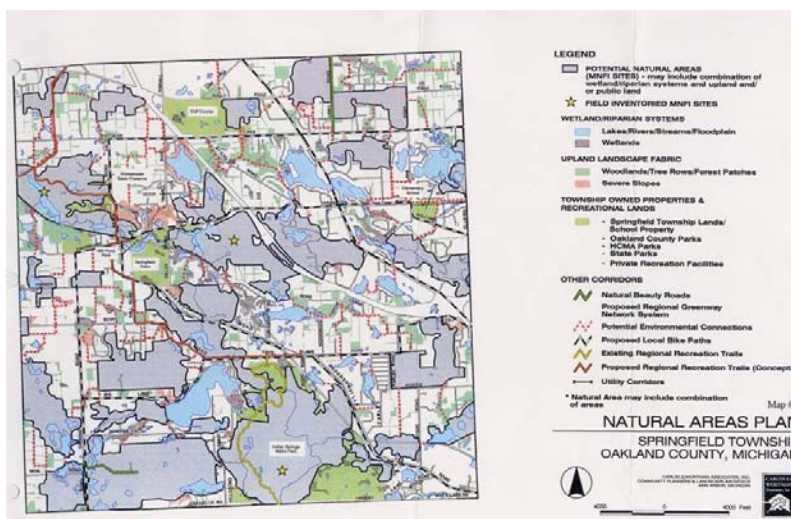
Springfield Township is located in the rapidly growing northwest corner of Oakland County, which is in the fastest growing region in the state of Michigan. The region is projected to grow by more than half a million people, or 11.7 percent, from 2000-2030.¹ SEMCOG forecasts that the Springfield Township's population in 2030 will be 20,613, an increase of 54.5 percent from the current 2000 population.² The Township is also home to some very significant natural resources. The varied landscape includes hills, wetlands, drainage systems, and vegetation cover. It also contains rivers, lakes, and streams, including the watersheds and headwaters of three major rivers, the Huron, Shiawassee, Clinton Rivers, and the watershed of the Flint River.³

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This extensive population growth has presented a development puzzle for the Township that includes protecting natural beauty, protecting water quality and avoiding the costly extension of sewer and water infrastructure associated with such a large growth in population. In 2002, the Township Board of Supervisors decided to take the value of their natural resources to heart by updating and amending Springfield Township's Master Plan, Zoning Ordinance and Design and Construction Standards to insure that "the primary determinant in any land use and development decisions will be the natural capability of the land and physical support systems".⁴

The process they went through was guided by Ann Arbor-based planning firm Carlisle/Wortman and Associates, Inc. The firm also assisted the Township in developing a Parks and Recreation Master Plan and a Native Vegetation Enhancement project. The Native Vegetation project sprung out of "the importance of native vegetation and how it can be used to create an aesthetically pleasing yet environmentally friendly landscape."⁵ All of these efforts to catalogue, highlight, restore and protect the Township's natural resources come from the Shiawassee and Huron Headwaters Resource Preservation Project, a two and a half year study (1997 – 2000) that involved six communities in western Oakland County and covered approximately 180 square miles.



Protecting Springfield Township's natural resources has environmental benefits, including protecting eco-systems, habitats and natural water filtration processes. There are also economic benefits in protecting natural resources, including higher property values, lower infrastructure costs and an enhancement of the tourism industry in the Township and the region.

Springfield Township went into their planning update process with the following goals in mind: 1) to recognize the natural capacity and limitation of land to support development and 2) to preserve the natural features and character of Township air, land, and water resources. They took steps to accomplish these goals by first comprehensively evaluating all of the natural resources in the Township and their associated values, and then setting goal and policy statements that incorporated a full array of resource protection, which were based on a long history of thoughtful study of natural resources in the Township.

The extensive Bridge Valley residential development exemplifies the positive environmental and economic benefits of good planning. The project consisted of six construction phases, spread across two townships. Phase I and Phase II were in a neighboring township and the remaining phases were built in Springfield Township.

Phase I and Phase II were typical of low-density "sprawl" housing development on 1.5 acre lots. But Springfield Township's regulations required the developer to preserve open space and natural resources through creative cluster development in the following phases. "The results were stunning!" said Springfield Township Clerk Nancy Strole, "The phases in Springfield had lots half the size of Phase I and II and people bought them for approximately 20 percent more. It just goes to show that people will pay a premium for access to preserved natural resources."

Using downtown development tools in wetlands, Oakland County

In 1991, residents of Oakland County and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) contended that protecting the intact ecological value of the remaining lakes and wetlands in the area of Oakland County between M-59 and I-96 was more important than adding development. However, there is now another major entity pushing for the Martin Road Extension and several other projects in the area. The Commerce Township Downtown Development Authority (DDA) is accessing public resources to push the development forward by financing the project locally through an expansion of the DDA boundaries and by collecting the additional revenues generated from tax increment financing. As the wetlands disappear, neighboring units of government have to deal with the increasing stormwater runoff issues.

Commerce Township, West Bloomfield, White Lake and Waterford are four townships in what residents affectionately called the “Lakes Area” of Oakland County. While these four townships have seen rapid housing and commercial development over the last decade, the environmental value of this area is immense. Home to the Huron, Shiawassee, Rouge and Clinton River Watersheds, the “Lakes Area” provides an essential cog in the ecosystem of the Great Lakes watershed. If properly planned for, the area could be a hub of eco-tourism, recreation and natural water filtration. These and other advantages in preserving a beautiful natural area only 45 minutes from Downtown Detroit are obvious.

According to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), Commerce Township alone added 5,000 to 8,400 residents between 2000 and 2005, which is approximately a 19 percent increase in just 5 years.⁶ Local governments in the area have been seeking to widen several roads and even extend a major thoroughfare in this once bucolic lake community through the use of tax increment financing (TIF) and the township’s Downtown Development Authority (DDA).

The DDA proposes using the TIF to extend M-5, an eight-lane highway, through some 113 acres of wetlands now occupied by a public golf course.⁷ The new road would be four lanes wide and it would connect with Martin Road, which is currently a two lane road. Called the Martin Road extension, it provides a telling example of the need for regional decision-making that values natural resources over the built environment and the travel of people over the travel of automobiles.



The plans for the area call for a mixed-use retail and residential development. The development will be very “green”; ostensibly it will take advantage of the existing natural resources to filter stormwater and other pollutants.

Also, the traffic running through the area will be “calmed” by roundabouts, curved streets, and extensive sidewalks. The plans also call for a connected trail system and the preservation of existing natural habitat.

However, perhaps the best green infrastructure tools would involve preserving the existing green space. In 1991, residents and the EPA surmised that the ecological value of the remaining lakes and wetlands in the area were more important than additional strip malls and housing developments, and blocked a connector between M-59 and I-96, called the “Northwest Connector.” The EPA also limited the extension of M-5 to its current end-point on Pontiac Trail. Now the Commerce Township Downtown Development Authority (DDA) is trying to finance the highway extension projects locally by increasing the DDA boundaries and collecting more money from tax increment financing.

In 1984, when the Commerce Township DDA was set up, 50 percent of the land within the DDA boundaries was vacant and 17 percent was for recreational use.⁸ The DDA and the local government decided that it was in the best interests of the township to fund light-industrial and commercial development. To do this, the DDA funded the construction of infrastructure including a public water system and a wastewater treatment plant.

This paved the way for over a 600 percent population increase between 1984 and 2003 (from 90 residents to 600).⁹ Traffic congestion is now a problem in the region; residents are often stuck in traffic during peak hours as the road infrastructure struggles to match the development patterns of the area. The key to eliminating the problem of traffic congestion is regional land use planning to control development, not the widening of these rural roads.

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Unfortunately, there are multiple road widening projects scheduled for this area. The Northwest Connector, widening Haggerty Road, the Martin Road extension and the West Bloomfield Downtown Master Plan are all major projects being pursued by individual municipalities in the region. Competition for tax base pits neighboring communities against each other and allows single governments to make decisions without considering regional and eco-system wide impacts. Building wider roads will only serve to drive development and increase congestion. However, there are solutions which can address these escalating problems.

Regional planning can preserve natural resources and tax-base by directing development to existing infrastructure systems in the region and building out each municipality to its fullest capacity. Coordinating plans across jurisdictional lines is not currently required in Michigan, though the legislature and the Governor have recognized its importance by passing PA 226 and PA 227-229 in 2003—two laws that provide municipalities the legal authority to plan together using Joint Planning Commissions. Using these, the four towns discussed above could decide collectively which areas should be preserved and which areas should have increased density. An added benefit of this approach is that participants in joint planning are not necessarily required to provide for every different type of land use—meaning some communities could focus on open space preservation while others target commercial and residential development.

Another benefit of creating a regional land use vision is that it can help residents and planners better understand and predict the major transportation needs and challenges in the region, both now and in the future. It can put the planning process and community visions in front of transportation decisions, rather than letting new roads dictate development patterns.

¹ "Population Growth Southeast Michigan", Oakland County Planning and Economic Development Services, available online: http://www.oakgov.com/peds/assets/docs/databook/2_PopulationProfile.pdf

² "2030 Regional Development Forecast for Southeast Michigan", SEMCOG, October 2001, Appendix C, p. 28, available online: http://www.semco.org/Products/pdfs/2030_RDF_report.pdf

³ *Springfield Township Master Plan*, adopted April 2002, prepared by Carlisle, Wortman and Associates Inc., p. 16

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 21

⁵ *Springfield Township Native Vegetation Project*, adopted November 2002, prepared by Carlisle/Wortman and Associates Inc. Available online:

http://www.cwaplan.com/project_pdf/naturalresources/Springfield%20Township%20Native%20Vegetation%20Project.pdf

⁶ "SEMCOG releases region's final population estimates for 2005", December 19, 2005, Available online:

http://www.semco.org/News/NewsReleases/DecPop_2005.pdf

⁷ "Foes Fight Haggarty Widening", by Mike Martindale, Detroit News, October 5, 2005

⁸ "Commerce Township Downtown Development Authority: History" Available online: <http://www.commerce-dda.com/hist-dev.html>

⁹ *Ibid*, "Commerce Township Downtown Development Authority: History"...

