

Master Land Use Plan

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Section B: Housing & Neighborhoods

Introduction

Muskegon's 15 neighborhoods each offer a unique character, and build on one another to shape the city as a whole. A neighborhood's character is embodied by its houses, streets, and parks, but other, less identifiable features – the view of the lake from a particular spot, an annual community event held at the local school, neighbors barbecuing on summer weekends – are often just as much a part of a neighborhood as any component of the built environment. Each neighborhood's strengths must be identified, celebrated, and enhanced through the recommendations of this plan.

Future land use is a key consideration when improving upon a neighborhood's strengths, as is identifying the conditions that originally created them. Strictly in terms of land use, those conditions have been overlooked in favor of land use policies that attempted to transform these areas into something they were not. Following a series of well-intentioned zoning changes in the early 2000s, many of Muskegon's neighborhoods – especially those closest to the city's core – were blanketed with uniform regulations that largely overlooked their historic development patterns and existing land use.

The policies of the past may not necessarily align with the needs and desires of today's residents, but there is also much to be learned from a neighborhood's history. Federal policies and programs that led to urban renewal, slum clearance, redlining, and major infrastructure projects like highways often cast a long shadow on parts of Muskegon that have yet to recover. At the same time, some of the city's most beloved places arose from former policies and regulations (or lack thereof), hindering the creation of such places today.

Boundaries separating neighboring municipalities play a formal role throughout this plan, as they are jurisdictional limits beyond which the City of Muskegon has no legal authority. While Muskegon's neighborhoods also have geographical boundaries, they are merely recognized in this plan for the sake of organizing information, recommendations, goals, and projects. In instances where such boundaries follow existing physical or geographical boundaries – creeks, highways, and railroads – they may be more recognizable, but rarely, if ever, do neighborhood boundaries segment the city in any real, physical way. With the aim of providing a comprehensive analysis of each neighborhood, this plan often looks slightly outside neighborhood boundaries, incorporating nearby amenities – parks, civic buildings, and business districts – that residents may use regardless of the specific neighborhood in which they live.

The Neighborhood Sub-Plans inventory of existing resources and amenities in the area and provide recommendations on land use. When analyzing each neighborhood, the plans follow a format that addresses zoned land use, housing stock, commercial and industrial inventory, parks/recreation opportunities, civic buildings, community nodes, transportation, and historic preservation.

Goals & Recommendations

1. Adopt policies that provide housing choice within all neighborhoods.
 - H1.1 Evaluate existing land uses throughout the city to determine where housing options can best be integrated into the city's neighborhoods.
 - H1.2 Study the needs of neighborhoods as well as shortcomings and weaknesses in the city's housing stock.
 - H1.3 Foster public-private partnerships that assist in the creation of affordable housing units.
2. Infill vacant residential lots with new housing options.
 - H2.1 Track vacant property in the city and utilize the information in marketing pieces and sale policies.
 - H2.2 Educate and partner with other groups or individuals that own large quantities of vacant land in the city to create additional opportunities for infill housing construction on vacant lots, regardless of ownership.
 - H2.3 Partner with developers to construct infill housing.
 - H2.4 Involve a wide range of developers to ensure variety in housing products and to provide architectural diversity.
3. Create walkable community nodes within a short distance of all residents.
 - H3.1 Identify existing or potential community nodes in each city neighborhood to serve as a strong center(s) from which the neighborhood can orient itself and build upon.
 - H3.2 Update land use regulations to permit better integration of different land uses at identified community nodes.
4. Require new development to provide identified public amenities for existing and future residents.
 - H4.1 Work with developers of major projects to incorporate needed amenities as identified by neighborhood residents.
 - H4.2 Create a database that identifies the public amenity needs of certain areas. Developers that are seeking information on potential investments can be notified early on about the needs of the community.
5. Encourage participation in neighborhood associations to create strong neighborhoods with invested residents empowered to address their common needs.
 - H5.1 Provide staff assistance to neighborhood associations so they have the ability to meet regularly and have the knowledge to legally operate.
 - H5.2 Offer financial incentives to neighborhood associations that partner with the city on general maintenance and services that would otherwise go unaddressed.
6. Strive to protect existing neighborhood residents from displacement and safeguard the cultural practices of diverse groups within the same space.
 - H6.1 Create programs and partnerships with neighborhood associations and neighborhood task forces to limit the negative effects of reinvestment and ensure that existing residents benefit from such changes.
 - H6.2 Continue to offer and expand housing stability programs.
 - H6.3 Continue to provide affordable housing units in all neighborhoods.

Goal 1: Adopt policies that provide housing choice within all neighborhoods.

Discussion

Muskegon was once home to a wide array of housing options at various price points. Early development regulations were far simpler, and enabled the city to accommodate periods of rapid population growth with equally fast-paced expansion of the housing stock. Further, diverse housing types across the city provided flexibility in housing choice for residents.

Past regulations permitted greater flexibility allowing existing buildings and houses to adapt to add additional units in a variety of formats. Unfortunately, insufficient codes and inadequate enforcement of those codes regarding issues like trash, parking, yard space, and storage exacerbated the negative aspects of this era of development and resulted in a disdain for multiple-family housing that still exists today.

Subsequent rezoning of large areas in the urban core outlawed all housing types aside from single-family detached houses and applied large minimum lot size requirements to these areas. Such downzoning resulted in many nonconformities that restricted access to bank loans for property maintenance and upkeep, limited building additions, and designated countless vacant lots as legally unbuildable.

The resulting limited investment in nonconforming properties accelerated deterioration and, in the worst cases, led to demolition of housing units. As existing nonconforming housing types are removed, they are not legally permitted to be rebuilt. In one example, the loss of a fourplex to a fire in a single-family restricted zoning district led to a net loss of three housing units. Such outcomes – multiplied many times over – equate to hundreds of lost housing units; this remains an ongoing problem in many neighborhoods.

Today, Muskegon finds itself with a shortage of housing units – both for sale and for rent – across all price points. A large supply of additional housing is needed throughout the city to keep pace with demand, and a range of housing types are necessary to provide flexibility in housing choice for residents.

Aside from immediate need for additional housing, this goal calls for a future of housing choice for Muskegon residents. To prosper, all people and all places need housing for all income levels, and paired with a general shortage of units, local aversion to multiple-family housing creates issues of affordability.

Despite making up the majority of housing units in Muskegon, single-family detached houses are not always a feasible housing choice nor are they always the preferred choice for residents. Many simply cannot afford the up-front costs or ongoing maintenance associated with a detached single-family house, nor does everyone want to.

Fortunately, Muskegon offers an impressive stock of housing types from which to pull inspiration for context-sensitive infill redevelopment. Missing Middle Housing types are found throughout the city with a notable concentration in the neighborhoods closest to the city core. Allowing for the flexibility embodied by Missing Middle Housing types can achieve a number of goals including direct revenue streams from additional on-site units that can make homeownership more attainable, generational housing that allows the elderly to age in place and creates the conditions to retain the city's youth.

When done well, the density level attainable by providing a range of Missing Middle Housing types can support local services and amenities and public transit without sacrificing the built character of existing neighborhoods. Existing and future housing must balance supplying quality, affordable housing options and building on the strengths of Muskegon's neighborhoods.

Missing Middle Housing is a range of multi-unit or clustered housing types compatible in scale with single-family houses. These housing types were commonly built before WWII, but land use regulations have since made them illegal to build in most neighborhoods.

Recommendations

H1.1 Evaluate existing land uses throughout the city to determine where housing options can best be integrated into the city's neighborhoods.

Action Steps

- Inventory various conditions – such as alleys, infrastructure connections, and access to public transportation – that support diverse housing options including Missing Middle Housing types. Create and maintain methods of tracking alley conditions, trash pickup routes and overhead/underground utilities, and existing housing types.
- When conditions exist to support diverse housing options but current land use regulations do not allow for them, update regulations to permit them.

H1.2 Study the needs of neighborhoods as well as shortcomings and weaknesses in the city's housing stock.

Maintain updated housing studies to evaluate the condition of the city's housing stock and to track neighborhood needs.

H1.3 Foster public-private partnerships that assist in the creation of affordable housing units. Identify potential sites for affordable and/or senior housing options near existing transit and services. Incorporate affordable housing options in every neighborhood.

Goal 2: Infill vacant residential lots with new housing options.

Discussion

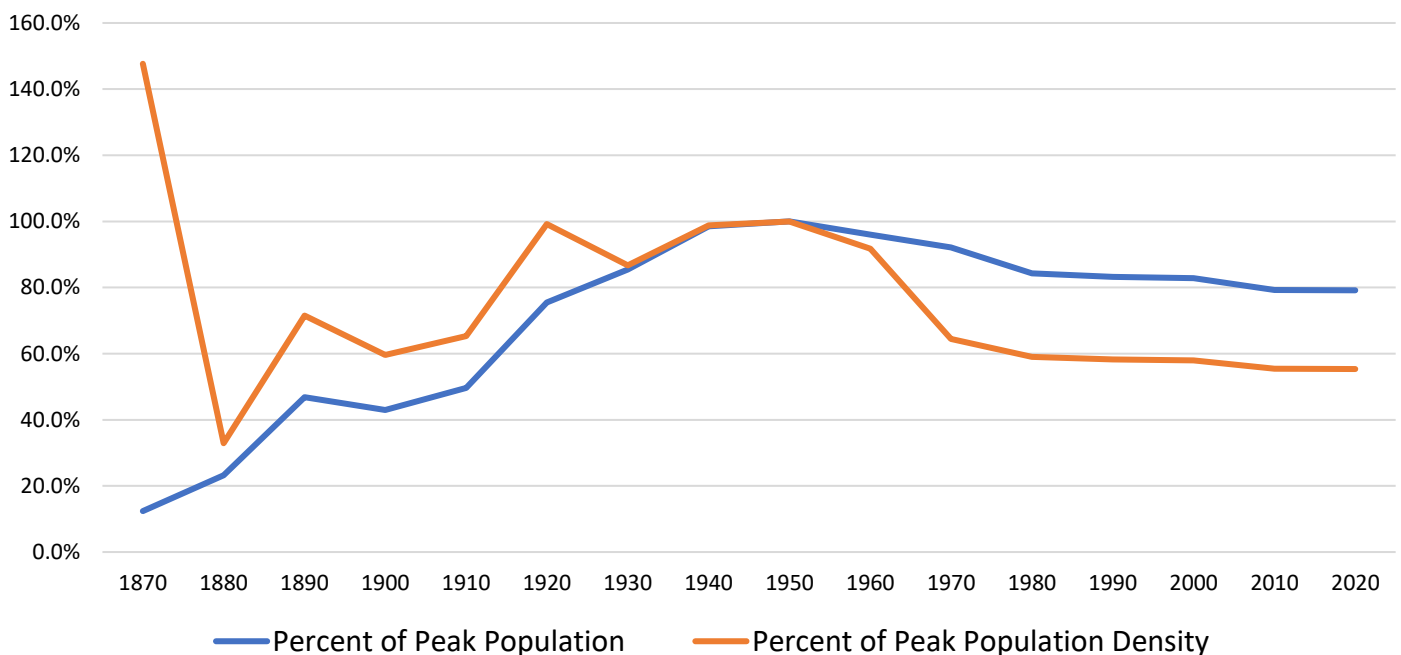
Like any developed city, Muskegon has a limited supply of developable land and few opportunities for greenfield housing development. While this plan touches on interim measures for managing the city’s significant supply of publicly- and privately-owned vacant residential lots, the long-term strategy is to return these properties to productive use through the construction of infill housing. This is easier said than done, and a multifaceted approach to efficient use of available land is needed to achieve the many other interrelated goals of this plan.

As discussed in Goal 1, a reduction in Muskegon’s housing stock can be partially attributed to housing demolitions outpacing construction of new housing. As the hundreds of vacant residential lots throughout the city once contained houses, their redevelopment will be critical in addressing the current housing shortage.

When considering how to efficiently develop the city’s remaining available land it is worth revisiting Muskegon’s historic population statistics. The city’s peak population was reported in the 1950 census at nearly 50,000; in the decades since, the population has steadily declined, but what is often overlooked is the substantial growth in the city’s total land area in that same timespan.

While Muskegon’s total population has declined to just under 80% of its 1950 peak, the gross population density has declined at an even greater rate. It is estimated that current population density – about 4.23 people per acre – is about 55% of Muskegon’s population density in 1950.

“Density” is a term that can be unclear in its definition. When used in this plan, density typically refers to the number of dwelling units – i.e. houses or apartments – per acre of land developed. One house on a lot that is an acre in size has a density of one dwelling unit per acre (often written 1 DU/Acre). One house on a lot that is 1/10th of an acre in size has a density of ten dwelling units per acre (10 DU/Acre) as does a ten-unit apartment building on a lot that is one acre in area. The more dwelling units existing or planned within a given area of land, the higher the residential density.



With such a drastic reduction in population and population density, it is critical that Muskegon better utilize existing infrastructure. Having been built out for a far larger population, the vacant land found in many areas does not contribute to the expenses associated with existing infrastructure and services, and instead shifts those costs onto the remaining residents.

Requests from property owners to purchase adjacent vacant lots for larger yards may sound reasonable, but it is imperative that the cost of the services and infrastructure for those properties be considered. Additional yard space generates little additional property taxes, whereas building a new house would replenish the property taxes lost when the previous house was demolished. This loss can be significant for an individual lot, so it is critical to calculate the cost when the same situation happens many times over.



A residential lot containing a single house that has grown to be nearly 1.5 acres through acquisition of surrounding vacant lots that formerly contained houses. This property does not contribute nearly enough in property taxes to pay for the infrastructure serving it – in this case, 475 total feet of street. The community as a whole is subsidizing the private, almost rural, quality afforded to this lot.

Recommendations

- H2.1** Track vacant property in the city and utilize the information in marketing pieces and sale policies.

Maintain maps of vacant residential properties and develop marketing initiatives to educate and inform potential developers and homebuilders on development opportunities. Maintain a lot sale policy that incentivizes projects that meet the City's current housing goals.

- H2.2** Educate and partner with other groups or individuals that own large quantities of vacant land in the city (Muskegon County, State of Michigan, private property owners) to create additional opportunities for infill housing construction on vacant lots, regardless of ownership.

The City, State, and County have separate lot sale policies and differing reasons to dispose of property, which complicates redevelopment efforts. Improved communication efforts between governmental agencies should help make each aware of the others' goals.

Establish an intergovernmental policy addressing the sale of vacant property that ensures appropriate redevelopment and responsible use of the city's limited supply of land.

Land use regulations and lot sale policies should prohibit combining multiple properties without appropriate development. The City of Muskegon Policy for the Use & Sale of City-Owned Residential Property serves as a step in the right direction, but codifying this policy would need to come in the form of maximum lot size regulations incorporated into the zoning ordinance.

- H2.3** Partner with developers to construct infill housing. Explore unique development agreements that utilize the City's resources that pair with a developer's strengths to construct new housing in established residential areas.

Structure development agreements to enable new housing that addresses the range of needs and price points seen in the community (affordability, accommodating various family sizes, etc.).

- H2.4** Involve a wide range of developers to ensure variety in housing products and to provide architectural diversity. Require individual developers to provide multiple floorplans and interior layouts that draw from the needs and architectural styles of the immediate neighborhood.

Create Request for Proposals that seek developers that provide Infill housing in neighborhoods that contribute to the diverse architectural history of the city's neighborhoods and avoid creating repetitious floorplans and/or designs.

When building new housing in concentrated areas, it is important to encourage diversity in architecture. While home styles should fit in with the rest of the neighborhood, it will be best to avoid duplicated designs within close proximity to one another.

Goal 3: Create walkable community nodes within a short distance of all residents.

Discussion

Efforts to better connect residents and visitors to the destinations that can serve their needs. Commercial, civic, and recreational community nodes.

This plan calls for the revitalization of existing community nodes or establishment of new ones where feasible.

Downtown Muskegon and the Lakeside Business District are easy to point to as the city's primary, traditional urban centers. As popular and welcoming as these areas of the city are, they will be less accessible to some neighborhoods simply due to the distance between them. The idea of community nodes is always a popular topic of discussion by residents and neighborhood organizations during planning discussions. With the benefits of having daily needs met within a short walk of one's home, fewer vehicle trips would need to be made outside the immediate neighborhood, spending could increase within neighborhoods and residents could feel better connected to their community.

Due to the timeframe in which most of Muskegon was developed, many former community nodes still exist and, in varying capacities, function throughout the city. Some of the oldest centers line up along former streetcar routes, while others formed organically as neighborhood residents created the demand for services and amenities in a time before widespread automobile use. Further rooted in reality, this is a vision of what could be, not necessarily what will be. The reality of many neighborhoods is that they contain few areas where the population density reaches what is commonly deemed necessary to support a community node. Achievement of many other goals outlined in this plan will be necessary to make community nodes a reality for many neighborhoods.

The farthest distance most feel comfortable walking for daily needs encompasses about a 1/4-mile radius. Known as the pedestrian shed, this is about a five-minute walk. When mapped, many of Muskegon's identified community nodes are generally spaced at this 1/4-mile distance, or a half a mile from center to center (see future land use map). Not all centers historically or presently contain retail uses, but they still stand to offer communal benefits. Along with commercial corridors, parks, churches, schools, and social clubs often serve as gathering spaces for neighborhood residents.

It must also be acknowledged that any sort of commercial or civic community node requires an adequate population to support it. Speaking strictly in terms of population, it is often noted that a minimum density of 16 dwelling units per acre is the threshold at which a neighborhood can support local services and amenities within walking distance. This equates to about 2000 housing units located within a 5-minute walk of these services and amenities.

Additionally, this plan recognizes that the origins of these community nodes lie in a very different world dating far into the city's past. In present day Muskegon, with the dominant mode of transportation being the private automobile, these centers are bound to look and function differently than they have historically.

When a parking lot is expanded at any one of these sites, the center's value shifts from the immediate neighborhood to the larger region. ...improvements to the neighborhood park add to the quality of life, but expanding the parking in the park – converting greenspace to asphalt – shifts the value of those improvements from the neighborhood to the region, diluting that value in the process.

A neighborhood could have multiple centers, a single center, or it could share one with an adjacent neighborhood. Community nodes will vary in size and focus – some may only be a couple of small commercial buildings, others may include an entire business district, while others may be a concentration of civic buildings like religious institutions or a school.

In many cases, community nodes will be concentrated in the various sub-areas identified by this plan. Busy streets commonly serve as borders between neighborhoods and develop as business corridors. Such areas can be incrementally improved to better serve the immediate neighborhood, drawing relevant businesses and services closer to nearby residents.

Some historic community nodes still exist today though in varying levels of condition. Some community nodes are thriving, while others have not fared as well, facing vacancy issues, but still contain former commercial and mixed-use buildings. This plan strives to identify which of these nodes are still viable and which should be considered for removal in favor of more viable uses.



The Barclay/Hackley intersection offers neighborhood-scale commercial and recreational opportunities to residents living in multiple-family housing. Despite a relatively minor amount of vehicle traffic, nearby recreational opportunities, and community-oriented buildings help keep these commercial uses viable.



Once a thriving industrial and commercial area, Washington Avenue between Franklin Street and Beidler Avenue has struggled since industry left. A recent resurgence boasts the mixed-use redevelopment of a former industrial building and a popular restaurant opening in an existing commercial building. Residents occupying a range of housing options support neighborhood-serving businesses, while small industrial buildings offer opportunities for new commercial options. Flexible zoning regulations could allow reuse of existing commercial and industrial buildings for higher-intensity uses or conversion to residential.



This once-vibrant commercial intersection at Terrace Street and Irwin Avenue has struggled with vacancy in recent years and minimal neighborhood-serving commercial activity. Flexible zoning regulations could continue to allow for commercial or residential use of existing or new buildings.

Recommendations

H3.1 Identify existing or potential community nodes in each city neighborhood to serve as a strong center(s) from which the neighborhood can orient itself and build upon.

Identify areas where residents would most likely congregate or walk to and potential destinations/resources/amenities needed in each neighborhood.

H3.2 Update land use regulations to permit better integration of different land uses at identified community nodes.

Rezoned identified community nodes to allow for land uses deemed appropriate to each.

Ensure that design requirements inherent to chosen zoning designations are reflective of business and building types that are neighborhood-serving. Differentiate between this and regional business/building types.

Amend the tax abatement policy to incentivize these developments.

Goal 4: Require new development to provide identified public amenities for existing and future residents.

Discussion

Several large parcels throughout the city are identified as key redevelopment properties throughout the Neighborhood Sub-Plans. These parcels will likely incorporate a variety of land uses simply due to their size, making it difficult – and less advantageous – to shoehorn development into current zoning regulations. The best path forward for many of these properties is a Planned Unit Development (PUD).

During the process of creating a PUD, the City and developer are able to negotiate certain requirements that help to achieve a development that is satisfactory to both private and public stakeholders. In more recent PUD negotiations, the City has sought amenities meant to benefit existing and new residents such as waterfront access, sidewalk and street connections, public parks, multi-use pathways, and retention of existing recreational amenities.

While such amenities are crucial to determine up front in development discussions, no record is kept containing the types of amenities needed in a specific area. Efforts to improve public engagement to this end have started to take hold, though negotiations would benefit from an established process that is clearly understood and publicly supported.

Recommendations

- H4.1** Work with developers of major projects to incorporate needed amenities as identified by neighborhood residents.
- Amend zoning ordinance requirements, especially for Planned Unit Developments, to require amenities needed in specific areas. For non-PUD projects, consider incorporating zoning incentives to achieve similar goals.
- H4.2** Create a database that identifies the public amenity needs of certain areas. Developers that are seeking information on potential investments can be notified early on about the needs of the community.
- Create maps and marketing materials for developers that indicate the public amenities needed, and incentives for providing them, around priority redevelopment sites.

Goal 5: Encourage participation in neighborhood associations to create strong neighborhoods with invested residents empowered to address their common needs.

Discussion

Neighborhood associations have many benefits for their residents as well as Muskegon as a whole. They improve neighborhood life by building community and respect, giving residents a collective voice when addressing targeted concerns and issues, and coordinating events and initiatives.

Longstanding programs like dumpster days and National Night Out events have been met with more recent partnerships such as the Adopt-A-Lot program and Neighborhood Empowerment grants to provide multifaceted support to neighborhood associations. Maintaining and expanding such programs and events stands to strengthen the relationship between the local government and residents.

Too often, neighborhood associations include a few active residents while many other neighbors remain uninvolved in their association's projects, goals, and events. Efforts to grow interest and involvement among residents with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints is an opportunity to represent a broader cross section of each neighborhood and the entire community.

Neighborhood associations serve as the direct connection to departments at city hall and improving that relationship is an opportunity to build trust between citizens and their local government.

Recommendations

- H5.1** Provide staff assistance to neighborhood associations so they have the ability to meet regularly and have the knowledge to legally operate. Continue to host monthly neighborhood association meetings at city hall as opportunities for neighborhood association presidents to learn about current developments and affairs.
- H5.2** Offer financial incentives to neighborhood associations that partner with the city on general maintenance and services that would otherwise go unaddressed.

Goal 6: Strive to protect existing neighborhood residents from displacement and safeguard the cultural practices of diverse groups within the same space.

Discussion

A number of factors have coalesced in recent years to spur reinvestment and redevelopment in Muskegon. Large amounts of available vacant property, a growing interest in urban living, and decades of disinvestment or stagnation throughout the city have created conditions that welcome reinvestment.

New investment in areas that have weathered long periods of disinvestment can be transformational, and while that can undoubtedly be a positive thing, such changes are understandably concerning for existing residents. Issues of affordability, protection and celebration of neighborhood identity and cultural practices, and racially equitable investment are at the forefront of topics facing Muskegon residents now and in the coming years.

Rising housing costs threaten longtime residents who rent as historically affordable rental housing face upward pressure if the average rent increases in a neighborhood or across the city. The issue of displacement is less prevalent among homeowners as state law limits annual property tax increases. Fear of displacement can, and often does, lead to opposition to new development, and addressing these fears and making the city welcoming to everyone requires the cooperation of existing and future residents, city leaders, and private developers.

While many programs already exist to this end, continued support for these programs must keep pace with the level of reinvestment being experienced in the city.

Recommendations

H6.1 Create programs and partnerships with neighborhood associations and neighborhood task forces to limit the negative effects of reinvestment and ensure that existing residents benefit from such changes.

Create programs that include adopting inclusive zoning, forming Community Land Trusts, improving police-community relations, establishing community benefit agreements (in the form of zoning incentives), expanding housing stability programs, and providing a wide range of affordability in housing units.

H6.2 Continue to offer and expand housing stability programs.

H6.3 Continue to provide affordable housing units in all neighborhoods.