

Land Use

BACKGROUND

Michigan's land area is roughly 37 million acres. Included are 75,000 acres of sand dunes and 3,288 miles of Great Lakes shoreline (including islands). The state also is home to more than 11,000 inland lakes, 36,000 miles of rivers and streams, and 38,000 square miles of Great Lakes waters.

Until World War II, land development in Michigan was characterized by rather clear demarcation between city and country. In the pre-industrial era, the state's rural areas were dedicated to forestry and agriculture, while cities were sites of commerce. In the early industrial years, manufacturers located their facilities in cities, where rail transportation was readily available and workers could congregate and live.

However, with the return of the World War II veterans, the nation and Michigan embarked on aggressive programs that resulted in a significant number of people, jobs, manufacturers, and commercial establishments moving out of cities, to the newly emerging suburbs. Tax breaks for home ownership were offered, loan programs were established, freeways and new roads were built, utility lines were installed across the country, and both state and federal government got into the business of paying for wastewater treatment plants and lines, which meant many more could be built. These public programs, coupled with manufacturing's good wages and people's growing desire to live near open spaces, contributed greatly to the city-to-suburb-to-country migration that started in earnest in the 1950s and persists today.

GLOSSARY

Housing-unit density
Number of dwelling units (DUs) per acre.

Housing Density

The trend is toward increasingly lower housing-unit density.

- Before World War II, Michigan cities averaged 5.5 dwelling units (DUs) per acre.
- The immediate postwar suburbs have 4.7 DU per acre.
- Suburbs developed in the 1960s have 3.8 DU per acre.
- Suburbs developed in the 1980s have 2.6 DU per acre.
- Many suburbs being developed in the 1990s average less than one DU per acre, and in some areas of the state one DU per ten acres is not uncommon.

In other words, the state is being developed at very low density, which means that today much more land is being consumed by far fewer persons than in the past.

Early Land Use Legislation

In the 1970s, growing environmental awareness led to increasing attention at the state level to issues concerning how land was being used in Michigan. Former Gov. William Milliken created a Special Commission on Land Use that made several recommendations to address what even then was perceived to be a growing problem.

In that decade, several laws regarding special land areas were adopted, among them the Inland Lakes and Streams Act, Great Lakes Shorelands Act, Wetlands Act, Wilderness Act, and Sand Dune Act. In addition, the Natural Resources Trust Fund was created, funded with royalties earned from oil and gas drilling on state lands and used to buy recreation land. The Farmland Preservation Act also was adopted, to give tax breaks to farmers who pledge to continued to use their land for agricultural purposes rather than selling it to developers; debate over this policy, which some viewed as inappropriate government interference in private-market decisions, proved rancorous, and the centerpiece of the special commission's recommendations—a Land Use Planning Act for the state—failed to achieve legislative approval. “Land use” virtually disappeared from the lexicon of public debate until the 1990s.

Current Assessments of Land Use

In 1992 the state engaged in the Michigan Relative Risk Analysis Project. Committees of scientists, state agency representatives, and state residents identified, investigated and ranked the risk of environmental problems in the state. The final report identifies the state's 24 most pressing environmental issues and ranks them according to the severity of risk they pose to the environment, human health, and the quality of life. Among the six issues identified as posing the greatest risk are two not normally associated with the traditional environmental focus on toxic materials and air and water pollution; they are the

- absence of land use planning that considers resources and ecosystem integrity, and
- degradation of urban environments.

Since then, numerous other public and private studies have identified land use as potentially of major concern to the future of the state's environment, its economy, and the cost of services to taxpayers. One of the most significant was completed in 1995, the Michigan Society of Planning Officials' study entitled “Patterns on the Land: Our Choices—Our Future,” which examines past and current land use development patterns and projects how the state will look in 2020 if present trends continue. For example, by 2020 the population will grow 11.8 percent (1.1 million additional people), and they will consume about three-quarters (63–87 percent) as much land as already was developed in 1990; in other words, the next million residents will occupy almost as much additional land as that currently occupied by the state's 9 million residents. These and similar findings are again focussing public attention on land use.

Michigan's Land-Based Industries

There are four industries in Michigan that require a large land area: agriculture, tourism and recreation, forestry, and mining.

Michigan's 52,000 farms generate approximately \$4 billion annually in direct economic activity. That production value balloons to \$37 billion in related economic activity each year. By some measures, agriculture is Michigan's second leading industry. According to the Michigan Society of Planning Officials, the state is losing agricultural land at the rate of ten acres every hour.

Michigan tourism provides direct employment to about 130,000 Michigan residents and about \$8 billion a year in state economic activity, including nearly half a billion dollars from foreigners traveling in Michigan.

The annual economic activity figures also are impressive for the state's forestry industry: more than 17,000 jobs and in excess of \$650 million from lumber and wood products, 17,500 jobs and \$1.3 billion from the manufacture of wood furniture and fixtures, and roughly 21,000 jobs and over \$2 billion from pulp and paper manufacturing.

Twenty-one minerals are mined in Michigan, placing it among the most diverse mineral-producing states in the nation. The state's nonfuel mining generates more than \$1.5 billion a year and employs 9,000 people. In addition, the state's oil and gas industry contributes more than \$600 million annually to the economy, providing jobs and income to 11,500 Michigan families.

Land Use Decision-Making

More than 1,800 units of local government possess legal authority to engage in land use planning and/or zoning in Michigan; in most states, only 300–500 locals have such authority.

Despite local units having the power to make land use decisions, in only some is it approached in an organized way: For example, jurisdiction-wide zoning is exercised in only 25 of the state's 83 counties, about 900 of the roughly 1,250 townships, and about 350 of the 550 cities and villages. Moreover, local land use decisions seldom are coordinated with neighboring jurisdictions, which means that land use conflicts often arise.

Michigan statutes authorizing local land-use planning and zoning date to 1921 in the case of city and village zoning and to 1945 for most of the rest. They enable but do not require local governments to plan and zone, and they provide little guidance from the state.

DISCUSSION

Case for More State Involvement in Land Use

Proponents of an increased state role and changes Michigan laws to improve land use decision-making argue that the state's current "sprawl" pattern of development contributes to nearly every other public-policy problem in the state. The Michigan Society of Planning Officials' "Trend Futures Project" defines sprawl as "low-density development that extends from cities into rural areas. It is land and energy consumptive, automobile dependent, requires a very high ratio of road surface to development served, and often

is characterized as poorly planned on an area-wide or metropolitan basis."

They point out that the state's four biggest land-based industries (agriculture, tourism/recreation, forestry, and mining) are threatened by current land use trends and policies, which they believe favor continued sprawl. In addition, they point out that continuing current land use practices will lead to increased runoff (precipitation that travels over surfaces and may be tainted from washing across fields, yards, streets, and commercial establishments) and nonpoint water pollution (diffuse, not from a specific source), therefore threatening the state's surface waters.

They also argue that the present land use decision-making structure leads to greater concentration of poverty and to segregation of the races.

Finally, they argue that permitting present trends to continue will increase costs to taxpayers in the future, because a sprawling population requires more roads, wastewater treatment lines, and other government services. In short, sprawl is inefficient and expensive.

Case against More State Involvement

Some observers believe the sprawl problem is overstated. They point to increasing productivity in the agricultural sector and argue that losing a certain amount of agricultural land is not a problem. They assert that market forces should determine how land is used; if open land is more valuable for single-family homes than for agriculture or tourism or forestry, then there is nothing wrong with selling it for that purpose.

Opponents to land use planning cite private property rights as the most important principle for determining how land shall be used. They adamantly oppose any increased regulation of property; they view state or local intervention into land use decision-making as interference in owners' rights to do as they see fit with their own property.

Many opponents cite existing state law, such as the Wetlands Act, as inappropriate intrusion into private property rights; they argue that if the state wants

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to protect special kinds of land, it should buy it, not tell private owners what to do it.

See also Agriculture; Revenue Sharing; State Lands and Waters; State-Local Relations; Urban Revitalization.

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