

Cover Story



Maintaining and creating attractive communities for a new Michigan



Editor's Note: To help Michigan regain its prosperity and thrive in the 21st century, Michigan State University's Land Policy Institute, People and Land initiative, with support from MTA and other organizations, launched the

Pillars for Prosperity initiative. By exploring the power of communities in preserving Michigan's future and helping rebuild Michigan's economy, we can work together to impact the future of this great state.

The following article—the final in a series of six articles exploring each Pillar tenet—focuses on vibrant and attractive neighborhoods and communities. This article aims to encourage and inspire townships to look at how changes in regional cooperation, policies and practices can help to encourage economic growth in the New Economy.

Visit www.michigantownships.org/MTNpillars.asp to see previous articles in the series.

Michigan's communities are faced with ever-perplexing challenges related to the state's economic problems. Michigan has had 10 consecutive years of job losses, and places near the top in national rankings of highest unemployment (2nd) and near the bottom (37th) in per capita income. Unemployment statewide hovers near 13 percent and is actually much higher in some regions if those who are not actively seeking jobs are included. As a result, townships, as well as other local governments throughout Michigan, are struggling with declining property values and tax revenues.

Much of the economic demise can be attributed to the decline of Michigan's manufacturing prowess. However, new strategies have been earmarked to help lead Michigan's communities out of the economic doldrums. These strategies include initiatives identified by the Michigan Townships Association (MTA), Michigan State University's Land Policy Institute, and the People and Land Program regarding the "Pillars of Prosperity."

This article focuses on the importance of maintaining vibrant and attractive communities, which draw and retain knowledge-based workers and industries. Knowledge-based industries have been identified as a key growth sector, which will help the

state of Michigan emerge from its reliance on manufacturing and spur local economies to new prosperity.

Knowledge-based industries, such as finance, communications, computer technology and health care, require talented workers with a unique combination of knowledge, creativity and entrepreneurship who deliberately choose to live in attractive and vibrant communities. Because of their talents, knowledge workers are very mobile and can live anywhere they want. Communities that focus upon the importance of a quality living environment with attractive neighborhoods, and also provide a wide variety of choices in recreation, shopping, transportation, cultural amenities and housing types will in turn attract knowledge-based workers who are an essential component in spurring the global New Economy.

IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY

In Michigan's new economic future, talent- and knowledge-based industries will replace manufacturing plants as the currency of economic growth and prosperity. States with the highest per capita income have a concentration of jobs in knowledge-based industries. This is where more than 30 percent of workers have a four-year degree or even higher education. This concentration of talent provides creativity and entrepreneurship, which in turn creates new opportunities for employment and economic growth.

The Michigan Economic Development Corporation has identified six potential growth sectors for the state's economy. These are:

- Alternative energy
- Automotive engineering
- Life sciences
- Homeland security and defense
- Advanced manufacturing
- Film industry

All of these sectors rely upon a pool of talented and creative workers.

However, the availability of creative workers is just one part of the equation. The other part is providing attractive communities where talented workers desire to live. In Thomas Friedman's book *The World is Flat*, it is clear that globalization and technology have changed the economic landscape as well as the way we live. The playing field has been leveled, and geographical destinations are becoming increasingly irrelevant. Talented people and the advances of technology allow people to live where they wish. People are choosing to live in attractive communities. The importance of maintaining and improving Michigan's attractive communities, including townships, is therefore an essential component of regional economic growth.

CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY COMMUNITIES

In Richard Florida's book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, the author states that the new sectors of economic growth



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will hinge upon knowledge-based workers. He also points out that knowledge-based industries and their employees will be attracted to communities with desirable amenities. Communities with attractive neighborhoods, housing, recreation, shopping, schools and cultural amenities will attract knowledge-based workers and their companies. The National Bureau of Economic Research has conducted studies that have found that knowledge-based workers prefer communities with high levels of amenities. Economic development efforts should focus not only on attracting new industries but also on maintaining the quality of life in our communities.

In past years, workers would relocate to find jobs. A new trend has emerged where companies relocate to areas where there is a concentration of talent. This, in part, explains Google's decision to locate in Ann Arbor and IBM's decision to locate their new delivery center in East Lansing.

What are the components of a "quality community" and what are the community attributes sought by knowledge-based workers? Planners and local elected officials continually strive to promote quality in our communities, but how is quality measured, and what are the principles or foundations of a "quality community"?

A variety of organizations have published standards by which to gauge a quality community. Some of these organizations promote a specific focus, such as environmental, health or urban design, while other organizations are broader-based. The organizations include:

- Smart Growth Network (EPA)
- Livable Communities
- Congress for New Urbanism
- Communities by Design (AIA)
- Healthy Communities (CDC)
- Sustainable Communities Network



Local farming and the purchase of locally grown agricultural products are assisted by the preservation of farmland and open space. If each week, every Michigan household spends just \$10 of their current grocery budget on local food products, more than \$37 million would circulate within Michigan's weekly economy.

- Michigan Association of Planning—Community Planning Principles
- National Complete Streets Coalition

After reviewing the criteria for each organization and their factors for assessing attractive communities, certain overlapping and common standards emerge (*Planning and Zoning News*, January 2008). It is no coincidence that the standards are also the characteristics that will help communities attract the knowledge-based workers of the future. These common standards include:

- Range of housing opportunities
- Walkable neighborhoods and open spaces
- Physical sense of place and placemaking
- Mix of land uses
- Open space, recreation and farmland preservation
- Alternative forms of transportation
- Compact urban form
- Access to technology

It is interesting to note that many of these standards are supported by the MTA Policy Platform statements (*see page 36*) as well as other leading planning and municipal organizations. They are also a barometer by which communities can measure their attractiveness. Michigan State University's Land Policy Institute (www.landpolicy.msu.edu) has supported these standards, and incorporated the principles in many of the findings of the New Economy Conference presentations held on Oct. 7, 2010. By incorporating these principles, communities can maintain their attractiveness and at the same time promote economic development. An elaboration of these principles and quality features are included as follows:

Range of Housing Opportunities—Knowledge-based workers desire a range of housing choices. This includes higher-density urban living as well as lower-density rural choices. Single-family housing and multi-family housing should be included. We have also witnessed a desire by young professionals and the elderly to have a wide range of housing options. This includes loft conversions, apartment buildings and rental units above commercial businesses, as well as independent and assisted housing options for seniors. Housing choices should reflect a range of housing costs.

One southeast Michigan township has a long history of creative zoning to enhance the "liveability" of its community. "**Charter Township of Northville** (Wayne Co.) has long believed that vibrant neighborhoods and planning initiatives do play a role in attracting and retaining residents and businesses," asserts **Jennifer Frey**, township director of community development.

That commitment to vibrant communities dates back to the early 1970s, when the township's zoning ordinance included a provision for a One-Family Cluster Option, which allowed the clustering of residential lots in return for preservation of open space and flexible design. The township's forward-thinking zoning expanded through the '80s and '90s, when the ordinance was updated to include increased residential options such as Lot Averaging and Open Space Communities—both of which provided alternatives and flexibility to the traditional zoning requirements, according to Frey—as well as planned unit development options and provisions for mixed use.

This planning has drawn businesses to the township. Said Frey, “In 2010, Techno SemiChem MI (TSC) purchased a building that had been vacant for over 10 years and is making extensive improvements to house their North American headquarters. TSC is a leader in the development and manufacture of components for the lithium ion battery. One of the reasons they indicated that they selected Northville Township was the quality of life and close proximity to housing options for their employees, some of whom will be relocating from Korea and have already purchased homes in the community.”

Walkable Neighborhoods and Open Space—Knowledge-based workers value communities that are walkable. Walkability promotes physical fitness and social interaction as well as a compact urban form with vitality and interest. Walkability places an emphasis on linkages to rural areas with rails-to-trails networks and connection to open spaces.

Michigan is a national leader in the rails-to-trails movement. A non-motorized trail links a community’s green infrastructure and also promotes regional recreational opportunities and regional economic assets.

Northville Charter Township has created a brochure titled “Live, Work & Play” that highlights many of the quality of life elements that are provided within the township. Such quality of life elements include a commitment to non-motorized pathways—a pathway plan was developed in the ‘90s for the entire community and continues to be implemented.

Capitalizing on open space assets can also require reaching across boundary lines. This fall, township officials from Washtenaw and east Jackson Counties gathered at a three-day regional workshop, along with their city and village counterparts, local businesses and natural resource managers to develop regional action plans for their communities centered on preserving community and recreation opportunities. The workshop, called “Partnerships for Prosperity: Linking Conservation, Commerce and our Communities,” provided training in several areas, including sustainable tourism and community practices, land conservation, tourism economics and funding sources for program development.

Sense of Place—Successful communities have a sense of place—a recognition of those characteristics that make a place special or unique—and understand the importance of parks, public streets, waterfronts, village centers, town squares and farmers marketplaces. Placemaking—the process of creating a sense of place by capitalizing on an area’s assets and amenities—promotes the social interaction enjoyed by knowledge-based workers. Successful places can be as simple as a popular coffee shop or as complex as a town center plaza or regional parks. In either form, a sense of place is an important quality component that indirectly supports social interaction and entrepreneurship.

A sense of place is not limited to a specific community or location but can also be regional in nature. Soji Adelaja,

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director of the Land Policy Institute at Michigan State University, emphasizes the importance of regional placemaking as a method of combining the assets of multiple communities—such as townships and the cities they surround—for economic growth.

Mix of Land Uses—A mix of land uses promotes vitality and interest. Communities that are attractive to knowledge-based workers include a mix of residential, office and commercial uses all within close proximity. Within mixed-use developments, there can be greater social interaction as well as concentrations of nightlife and a network of cultural activities in many cases. Mixed uses promote alternatives to driving, enhance walkability and aid public safety. Planners and local decision-makers should promote land use policies that encourage mixed-use projects as a tool toward the maintenance of local economic attractiveness.

Open Space, Recreation and Farmland Preservation—Open space provides highly valuable opportunities. It protects valuable farmlands, environmental features and the amenities often favored by knowledge-based workers. Protection of open space also directs growth to those areas more conducive to development (such as those with existing sewer and water infrastructure), and indirectly enhances the vitality and attractiveness of more densely developed areas.

Preservation of farmlands promotes agricultural production and food-based industries. Localized farming and the purchase of locally grown agricultural products are also assisted by the preservation of farmlands and open space. The Michigan Department of Agriculture reports that if each week, every Michigan household spends just \$10 of their current grocery budget on local food products, more than \$37 million would circulate within Michigan's weekly economy instead of paying for out-of-state agricultural produce.

After more than a year of planning, the Bath Farmers Market opened for business this summer in **Bath Charter Township** (Clinton Co.). The market, which is open year-round, was developed to not only provide access to locally grown produce from area farmers, but also to serve as a community meeting place—connecting local farmers with their neighbors and their community.

"In this era of tight budgets, the farmers market offers a chance, at very little cost, to boost economic activity and bring people to the Township Activity Center," noted Superintendent **Troy Feltman**. "Studies have shown that across the country farmers markets are economic engines that spur activity at businesses located nearby, even those that sell food items."

Transportation Alternatives—Successful vibrant and attractive communities are not just reliant on the automobile, but instead also provide alternative methods of transportation, including bicycling, walking and public transportation. Complete streets with varying forms of transportation can provide a wide variety of benefits to Michigan's municipalities. Successful communities, which attract knowledge-based workers, will have



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a variety of transportation alternatives including walkways, bike lanes, bus transportation and even light rail systems in large cities.

Compact Urban Form—Communities that promote denser, more compact development are often more vibrant and can provide greater community enjoyment. There is a richness of "urban form"—or more compact development—that also enhances public spaces, walkability and sustainability. In Jane Jacobs' book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs advocates denser, mixed-use communities, whose richness promotes a local fabric that stimulates the sharing of ideas and community. There is also the added benefit of reducing urban sprawl and preserving important farmlands. Social and business networking can also promote an entrepreneurial exchange of ideas.

Access to Technology—Technology access is also a factor in evaluating communities by knowledge-based workers and industries. Access to broadband and high-speed information technologies is a component that promotes the health of communities and opportunities for telecommuting, business networking, data exchange and entrepreneurial ventures. Oakland County recently adopted a "Technology Planning Toolkit," which was featured in the April 2010 *Michigan Township News'* cover story, "Planning for the Information Age." This document promotes local strategies to attract and retain high-tech corporations and the growing numbers of technology-savvy workers.

All of these elements can work together to improve the quality of life in the region for everyone, while also improving the economic competitiveness of the region. All that is required is a commitment by local governments, nongovernmental organizations and the business community to work cooperatively together to implement a few strategies that all parties agree will improve economic competitiveness and the quality of the places in the region to attract and retain knowledge-based workers and industries.

PROMOTE A CULTURE OF COOPERATION

While the above characteristics of a successful community include physical or tangible features, there are also intangible assets that should be considered. These intangible assets include community leadership and hospitality to new business enterprises.

According to **Mathew Gibb**, **Orion Charter Township** (Oakland Co.) supervisor, “Your community must be a welcoming community.” Townships should help facilitate business development. Gibb frequently organizes breakfast round table meetings with business leaders to encourage entrepreneurship, the exchange of new business ideas and networking. This networking has created a virtual business incubator, and has facilitated business expansion and job growth. The township has also created an updated website (www.advantageorion.com) that promotes economic and community development.

In addition to being a “welcoming community,” hospitality and economic initiatives should extend beyond the boundaries of a local community. Regionalism should promote knowledge-based industries. The assets of any one community are never as significant as the amenities of a region.

DeWitt Charter, Bath Charter and **Watertown Charter Townships** (Clinton Co.) have recently organized a regional partnership for economic growth (*see more on page 11*). The partnership promotes the area’s regional assets. “One of the objectives of the regional organization is to promote entrepreneurial enterprises through the recognition of the areas assets,” said Feltman. An important asset for Clinton County is the region’s agricultural base and opportunities for local food production.

Bath Charter Township also recently initiated the development of a “community kitchen,” which promotes local agriculture by allowing producers to rent commercial kitchen facilities and assists in the production of locally produced food products, such as packaged food, preserves, specialty dips, sauces, etc. These goods are then sold in local stores and at the new township farmers market, thereby spurring economic gardening and entrepreneurship. These are creative measures to retain, grow and attract new knowledge workers and industries based on the unique assets of the area.

A RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Michigan will need to be less reliant on the auto manufacturing sector of the state’s economy and more reliant on diverse knowledge-based industries. This will require attracting and keeping talented workers in our communities.

Michigan’s townships, as well as its cities and villages, have a responsibility to maintain quality urban and rural communities, which will provide vibrant and attractive living areas. Communities that promote quality housing, walkable neighborhoods, attractive public areas, open space and alternative forms of transportation will be successful in the future.

Townships that promote access to technology and opportunities for networking will provide entrepreneurial leadership and the skills necessary for the emergence of economic growth. Communities that work cooperatively together on a regional basis to prepare and implement regional strategic growth plans will position their region to be competitive in the global New Economy. ■

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