

# Cover Story



## Planning for placemaking

*Editor's note: In 2008, when **Mandy Grewal** took office as supervisor of **Pittsfield Charter Township** (Washtenaw Co.), the economy was nose diving. Grewal's township administration had inherited a budget that grossly over-projected revenues. According to Grewal, the choice, at the time, was apparent: either be swept away by the looming doom and project a sense of crisis, or make the difficult decisions to cut costs and project a sense of hope.*

*The township chose the latter course and, among other things, officially launched the "2010 Pittsfield Master Plan" project. This master plan brought together a diverse mix of local and regional stakeholders for the purpose of addressing a central question for the township: Who are they today and who do they want to be in the future?*

*The Michigan Township News asked Grewal—who also holds a Ph.D. in Urban Planning from the University of Michigan—to share her insights about her township's efforts to use the planning process to help define what they wanted their township to be—now and decades from now. This integrated planning approach can be used by townships large and small to promote community vitality and economic prosperity within their borders and their region.*

Township officials are used to being reactive to change. When the state cuts revenue sharing, officials find a way to continue providing critical services with fewer resources. When the federal government makes funding contingent upon infrastructure projects being "shovel ready," they find a way to get it done. When the county tells its local governments it can no longer provide debris clean-up services after storms, locals pool resources to meet residents' needs. When historically reliable sources of tax revenue are eliminated, municipalities find ways to partner with their neighboring communities.

The list goes on and on.

As good as local officials are at being reactive, the time has come for local units of government—at the front lines of service provision—to be proactive. At a time when Michigan communities are experiencing unprecedented change on multiple fronts—economic (disappearing manufacturing base), demographic (aging population), social (immigration and social media)—township officials must pause and take time to make some critical determinations for their communities. Officials must proactively fold in these changes into their vision for their communities for the next 10 to 30 years.

Taking on the challenge to redefine local communities proactively can place townships ahead of the curve and allow officials to respond to the impending change positively. It can also provide townships the ability to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs and desires voiced by residents and other stakeholders.

## QUESTION #1: WHO ARE WE?

In the face of sharply declining revenues, a changing economic and job base, an increasingly elderly population coupled with the need to attract younger talent, townships need to reprioritize and reconsider what services are provided—and how. Beyond determining funding for such basic services as public safety and roads—which can be a challenge unto themselves—townships must also consider what services are central to their communities' mission and, then, how to deliver the same.

Does your township want to be a community where folks come to retire and, thus, invest in senior housing, linking that housing to service centers by bus transit? Does your township want to be a community that attracts research & development jobs and, thus, invest in business corridor improvements and provide such infrastructure as high-speed fiber? Does your township want to be a community that uses the mortgage foreclosure crisis to redevelop a housing stock that attracts a multi-generational population? Does your township want to capitalize on its rural character and promote agri-tourism or become the center for local farmers markets?

These questions must be posed within the context of who your township is *today*. What are your community's strengths, and how do your residents want to see the township change as officials and other stakeholders vision for the future?

Albeit fundamentally simple questions, they form the very basis for an entire community plan that will determine resource allocations and project implementation. The most deliberative, inclusive and sustainable way to answer these questions is to pose them at the beginning of your township's master planning process—making the answers an integral part of the entire planning and implementation processes.

### Inside Pittsfield

With a population of about 35,000 and an area of 28 square miles to the south of Ann Arbor, Pittsfield Charter Township has a diversity of land uses, with a significant portion designated as green space. Three thoroughfares—U.S. 12, U.S. 23 and I-94—traverse through the heart of the community, making it very accessible. Pittsfield Charter Township has a vibrant research & development business corridor supported by talent from the University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University and Washtenaw Community College, and serves as the retail destination in the region. A majority—about 52 percent—of the township's population has a bachelor's degree or higher, and Pittsfield has one of the most racially diverse populations in the region.

In fall 2008, during the depths of the economic downturn, township officials decided that rather than be discouraged by the economic climate, it was a good time to undertake a deliberative process to outline a future vision for their community. In particular, they saw a need to systemize the priorities that officials had heard folks in the community express

a desire for, such as reducing the lack of non-motorized transit, enhancing accessibility to green/recreational spaces, and a reduction of sprawl.

The township's 2009 Future Land Use map, which had been updated periodically over an extended period of time, reflected not just the diversity of land uses in Pittsfield but a randomness that lacked cohesion. To position the township to take advantage of its human capital and geographic location, officials felt it was important to present a vision for their community that was reflective of resident desires in a cohesive manner. Public feedback and engagement were critical to the master planning process and its outcome (*see sidebar below*).



## Ideas for outreach

To be the most effective, an inclusive planning process must reach out to as many township shareholders as possible, including residents, area businesses and regional stakeholders. Take a look at the variety of ways that Pittsfield Charter Township sought to garner feedback and share information during its master plan update:

- Hosted public forums
- Used a master plan Web page to solicit community stakeholder input and feedback
- Organized design charrettes
- Set up Facebook and Twitter accounts to reach out via social media
- Conducted both an online and paper-and-pencil survey (that garnered a close to 40 percent response rate)
- Engaged master plan subcommittee members in a bus tour and walking tour, and participated in township-facilitated forums to allow for cross-committee discussions and dialogue where they were informed of each others' goals and objectives

## QUESTION #2: HOW DO WE CHANGE?

This question is especially pertinent in the case of those townships looking to make drastic shifts in their vision for their future as they grapple with such scenarios as a devastated manufacturing-based economic base or sharp declines in property values of predominantly agricultural farmsteads. *What kind of place does your township want to be?* Undertaking a revision of a township master plan is a natural forum to determine not just what change needs to occur, but also how it must be incorporated into the township's existing and future vision for the community.

### Inside Pittsfield

Having prioritized a thorough revision of the Pittsfield Charter Township master plan, the first step was developing—using internal staff—a branded look for the plan and using this 2010 Pittsfield Master Plan (PMP) design theme consistently for all public forums, outreach and social media outlets. An official kick-off event included residents, local businesses, and regional stakeholders. Representatives from each of these and other groups were recruited to serve on one of the eight subcommittees, based on their areas of expertise. The subcommittees—which included transportation & land use; economic development; housing; and arts & culture, among others—were established to delve into specific topical areas that would each, in the final plan document, manifest as a unique but related chapter.

Through this process, the priorities articulated by the community and other stakeholders emerged. Stakeholders wanted the township to direct development where it already existed and to preserve green spaces and integrate them into the economic fabric, while increasing non-motorized accessibility to and usability of recreational spaces. With the inclusion of arts and culture into the master planning dialogue for the first time, residents and others supported the promotion of local arts and a celebration of local culture through, among other things, the creation of public gathering spaces.

This gave the township the grounding needed to begin promoting a different model of development, based on a cohesive vision, in a suburban township wherein dense nodes of development are created, based on existing land use patterns, which are inter-connected to residential, recreational and business areas via a robust multi-modal (roads, sidewalks, pathways, greenways, transit) transportation network.

The next step, then, was to determine where future development—when it came—would be directed, to allow for preservation of green spaces that would be integrated into the community's fabric by providing for the economic vitality of agriculture. In other words, now that the township knew what change the community wanted and supported, how could it plan for this change?



## PLANNING FOR THE CHANGE

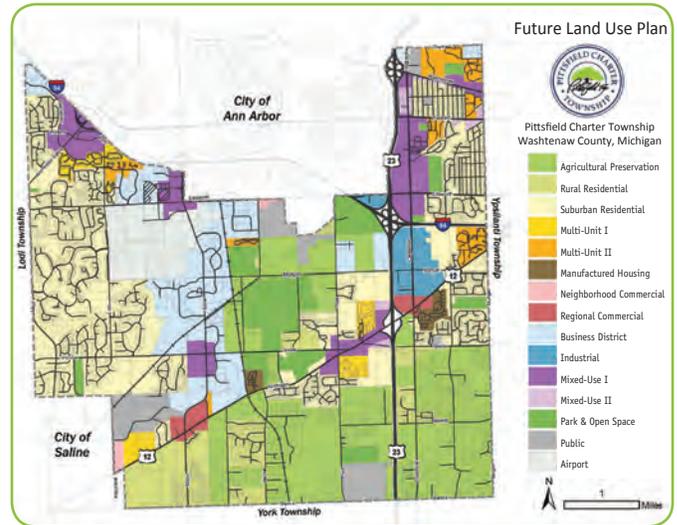
Having determined what kind of place your township wants to be in the future, the next steps are critical in ensuring a translation of this vision into reality. Most importantly, it requires townships to identify what goals, projects and/or initiatives will be prioritized to create a place consistent with the vision outlined in the public engagement portion of the planning process.

### Inside Pittsfield

The approach Pittsfield Charter Township took was one that would build upon the intrinsic link between placemaking, quality of life, attraction/retention of talent, aging in place, and attractiveness to businesses. But, how could this be accomplished? How could the township incorporate a clear community-based, cohesive vision into the master plan document?

The first step was to begin with the township's existing land use and develop a high-intensity map to show where development had occurred in greater density. This mapping allowed the township to:

- 1) identify areas that already had significant development and denote them as focus development areas that would absorb future development by providing density and co-location of mixed uses; and
- 2) identify existing green and recreational spaces to be preserved and made more accessible.



Having mapped out the development nodes and excluding the township's predominant residential developments on the western and eastern edges, it became very clear where the majority of the community's agricultural, open and recreational spaces were concentrated.

The aim, then, would be to connect the different land uses—residential, commercial, retail, cultural, recreational, jobs, and green spaces—through a robust multi-modal transportation network. The township was faced with two distinct demographics—an aging population and the need to attract/retain younger talent. Both age groups are looking to reduce their dependence on the automobile either by necessity or choice. Communities must provide for not just safe motorized roadways but also sidewalks, bus transit, bike lanes and 10-foot greenways that support the need or choice to reduce automobile dependence. After identifying the mixed-use, dense development areas and those to retain for preservation and recreation, the township developed a multi-modal transportation map supported by a hierarchy of cross-sections for different roadways.

Using these maps as guides for change helped the township translate the community's priorities into tangible implementation goals, and also assisted in communicating a cohesive vision for the township's future. The PMP Future Land Use map (*above*) made clear that development would be concentrated within mixed-used nodes to allow for dense co-location of a variety of uses, such as retail, housing, commercial, entertainment and cultural venues.

In the end, the township's 2010 master plan project is a commitment to create a cohesive and comprehensive development and preservation pattern that will result in practical, productive and sustainable growth and conservation in Pittsfield Charter Township.

## PUTTING PLANNING INTO PRACTICE

Once a township has prioritized its goals, projects and initiatives, the final step is to establish a systemic framework to ensure implementation of the same. What this systemic

framework is will be determined by such factors as the size of your community. The smaller your township, the more likely you are to rely on volunteers and residents for implementation.

**Inside Pittsfield**

Pittsfield Charter Township’s process prioritized multi-modal transportation and concentration of development within mixed-use areas, along with policy goals such as promoting arts and creation of public spaces. But how could the township ensure the realization of these projects and goals, as outlined in the 2010 PMP?

The first step was taking the subcommittees from the 2010 PMP planning process and either incorporating or transforming them into standing township committees/commissions (see at chart above right). This gave ownership to the authors of the master plan content for implementation, and ensured a high level of

2010 PMP Chapter	Township Committee/Commission
Transportation & Land Use	Planning Commission/Road Committee
Neighborhoods	Planning Commission
Economic Success	Economic Success Strategies Committee
Arts & Culture	Arts & Cultural Excellence in Pittsfield Committee
Open Space, Agricultural & Natural Features	Stormwater Management Committee/Park Commission
Green	Stormwater Management Committee

continuity and consistency in the work of the committees/commissions with the master plan itself.

The success of this approach is made apparent by the fact that in a matter of three to four years, the township has made considerable progress in each of the areas identified as priorities by the 2010 PMP. The chart below demonstrates how areas of focus can be put into action:

Transportation	Neighborhoods	Economic Success	Arts & Culture	Open Space, Agricultural & Natural Features
<b>Topic/Area of Focus</b>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multimodal improvements</li> <li>Business corridor improvements</li> <li>Implementation of 'Complete Streets'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce sprawl</li> <li>Infill development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retaining &amp; growing local businesses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promoting public gathering spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Native gardens/habitats</li> <li>Stormwater management</li> <li>Agricultural productivity</li> </ul>
<b>Project/Initiative Completed</b>				
<p>Sidewalk gap filling provides for continuity and better access to bus transit in northeast and northwest areas of the township</p> <p>Multiple bike lanes installed, including east-west connector that provides non-motorized access to residents in east Pittsfield to green/recreational spaces in the township center</p> <p>Two, two-mile, 10-foot-wide greenways installed that interconnect residential, retail, entertainment, recreational spaces</p> <p>Completion of environmental assessment for State Street corridor</p> <p>Road 'diets' and installation of multiple mid-block crossings to facilitate pedestrian mobility</p>	<p>Working with developers to provide denser residential located in close proximity to commercial service centers</p> <p>Promoting infill development by making existing neighborhoods more appealing by connecting them to recreational spaces</p>	<p>Of the tax incentives on the rolls, nearly 70 percent were granted in the last four years to small, local businesses growing in the township. This has added nearly 200 jobs to the local economy since 2009.</p> <p>Host an annual business-to-business mixer that allows local businesses to learn and work with each other</p> <p>Successfully attracted retail giants Costco and Dick's Sporting Goods, and incentivized building within already developed nodes</p>	<p>In 2012, the first township historic district was established at the Sutherland-Wilson farmstead, which is also the venue for, since 2009, the annual Harvest Festival, which attracts hundreds of residents to enjoy music, hay rides, petting farm, pumpkin-picking, homemade treats, and tours of the historic home</p> <p>Hosted a township Farmers Forum March 2013 that will result in the first Pittsfield farmers market, beginning June 2013, at the administration building's east parking lot</p> <p>The first public art project, a mosaic sculpture by local artists, will be installed at the township administration building in summer 2013</p>	<p>A rain garden was installed as a demonstration project, using community donations, at the township administration building to promote best practices and the use of native plantings by residents</p> <p>Two large native planting projects have been completed in two township parks since 2009</p> <p>Stormwater management forums are conducted annually for residents to enhance water quality</p>

Lastly, Pittsfield Charter Township undertook a comprehensive revision of its zoning ordinance—slated to be adopted in May—to support the following goals that were articulated, for the first time, in the 2010 PMP:

**1. Promotion of public gathering spaces and public art**

The proposed zoning ordinance calls for infill and new developments to provide public spaces.

**2. Economic viability of agriculture**

The proposed zoning ordinance calls for a new set of specific use standards that allow for Community Supported Agriculture, farm stands, farmers markets, agri-tourism, and outdoor displays and sales.

**3. Mixed-use, dense development nodes**

The proposed zoning ordinance provides for form-based design (see table at right) within the six nodes identified for mixed-use development. The design is more permissive in terms of the use of the land, but more prescriptive in terms of the way a site is developed. For instance, the requirements in one certain district allow for a much greater development density, and a wide variety of land uses. However, standards provide specific requirements about building and parking lot locations, building facade treatments, landscaping, lighting, height, usable pedestrian space, and accessibility. Many aspects of the development requirements enhance and promote walkability and transit use.

Table Building Form E	
Building Form E: This category provides an opportunity for large-format retail or entertainment uses within the district. They directly abut the right-of-way providing parking in the side-yards, and contribute to the street atmosphere by providing a consistent street front with other, more pedestrian-oriented projects. They may be set back from the right-of-way, but only when they provide cut-lots within the same project for category A, B, C, or D building forms on the same or on separate lots.	
Building Height	Rear Building: Minimum 14 feet, 1 story; no maximum Front Buildings: Minimum: 20 feet, 2 stories (14 feet minimum ground floor); no maximum
Building Footprint	Front Yard: 10-foot required building line Side Yard: No minimum side setbacks; if provided, minimum 5 feet Rear Yard: Minimum 10-foot rear setback
Lot	Lot coverage: Minimum 50% Access and circulation: Driveways may access the site from any side, pedestrian pathways must be provided from the right-of-way, and cross access shall be provided in instances where a development is within an out lot of a higher classified building form Parking location: Parking shall be located in a side or rear yard; when located in a side yard and abutting the required building line adjacent to the primary building, parking shall be screened with a minimum 20 inch masonry wall on the required building line, or within 5 feet of the required building line, provided that a landscape treatment is added between the wall and the required building line
The Planning Commission may alternate the required building line for projects incorporating a permanent series of additional lots or smaller buildings in the A, B, C, or D building form categories, provided that those additional lots and/or buildings make up the entire frontage of the overall development along the required building line, with the exception of access drives. The required building line frontage minimum for the additional lots and/or other buildings forms along the required building line shall apply for each individual additional lot and/or building.	

**ONE LAST QUESTION: WHAT NEXT?**

Planning—and sustaining the goals, projects and initiatives prioritized therein—is most successful when it is continually evaluated and updated. For example, if your township prioritized workforce development as an initiative, an evaluation of this strategy after one to two years may find that the retraining is not aligned to the market demands.

For Pittsfield Charter Township, their continual evaluation methodology is centered around a township recognition event, held the week before Thanksgiving, which invites members that serve on each of the township’s boards, committees and commissions. The dual purpose of this event is to give thanks for the time and effort these individuals put into serving the community, while also convening roundtable discussions, by master plan chapter topic, so folks can reflect on the achievements of the previous year and prioritize initiatives and programs for the upcoming year. This allows the township to provide cross-topical consistency, eliminate redundancies and ensure continual implementation.

Such proactive approaches, undertaken in partnership with township residents and other regional stakeholders, can allow townships to prioritize and implement placemaking initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life for all. ■

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See more details about the Pittsfield Charter Township master plan at  
[www.pittsfieldtwp.org/masterplan.html/](http://www.pittsfieldtwp.org/masterplan.html/)