

# Cover Story



## Sustainability, placemaking and citizen engagement **The new face of economic development**

**W**hat makes a sustainable community?

*In 2009, researchers (including the author of this article) asked township and other local officials in a number of Michigan communities to define “sustainable” communities. The responses received were varied—and researchers concluded that the definition of sustainable depends on who’s doing the defining.*

*The exercise was repeated again in 2010. Again, the explanations of “sustainability” were numerous, with no clear consensus by local officials on a definition. What was most clear from the study, however, was what was really on local officials’ minds: their struggle to do what they could to prevent economic decline in their communities. Researchers concluded that although these officials couldn’t define sustainability, they knew it when they saw it—and they knew what threatened it.*

### **A SLOW RECOVERY**

After three years of decline, in 2012, it appears that Michigan’s private sector economy is picking up somewhat, judging by tax collections, motor vehicle production and the average price for residential housing. The Citizens Research Council (CRC) of Michigan recently said the state is in the early to middle stages of a “profound local government recession,” predicting that property tax bases will continue to decline for several years and will only recover slowly when real estate markets recover.

While no one can predict what’s in store for Michigan’s townships, and its other municipalities, what does seem clear is that local governments will need to find new and innovative ways to offer programs and services if they want to avoid eliminating them altogether. The decisions that a growing number of community leaders face today have less to do with stretching limited resources than with keeping their communities intact.

Ultimately, a community’s residents vote for its future with their feet. In Michigan, the only state to lose population in the 2010 U.S. Census, one can see dramatic evidence of that in the form of urban areas abandoned by large shares of former residents. But flight from dying cities isn’t a city-only phenomenon. It can happen on both sides of the city-township boundary.

It’s no secret that the underlying issue is lack of employment. This suggests a bedrock definition of sustainability: the ability

of a community to maintain economic opportunity—the means of making a living—for its residents. Based on this definition, many Michigan communities are failing this simple test of sustainability. And when residents leave, so do revenues.

### THE CHALLENGE OF COOPERATION

One approach to this problem that interests many local officials is to seek greater efficiency through a variety of intergovernmental agreements that can lead to shared and consolidated services and joint purchasing.

In Michigan, CRC has championed service sharing under the rubric of consolidated services. Additional research has confirmed what many local officials know from personal experience—that there are widespread objections to the consolidation of local governments. However, the CRC points out, a weak economy creates strong incentives for local governments to consider shared services, because this approach “allows local government officials to avoid duplication, benefit from economies of scale and economies of skill, and increase the level of services above that which is possible if the services are provided independently.”

CRC has catalogued the service delivery methods of local governments and found that local governments often cooperate on fire protection, libraries, water, sewer and transit services. Conversely, they seldom cooperate on police protection, janitorial services, code enforcement and several other areas, which represent considerable untapped potential.

The Snyder administration recognizes the value of shared services and has incorporated this as an aspect of state policy. The Competitive Grant Assistance Program (formerly the Economic Vitality Incentive Grant Program) provides incentive-based grants to municipalities that elect to combine government operations. The fact that these grants have not attracted much attention from Michigan townships points to an issue that the researchers observed in their evaluation work: getting started in cooperation has its own price tag. Some community leaders have noted that without grant support, they could not have persuaded their jurisdictions to pay for the transaction costs of cooperation.

In addition to support in meeting the costs of getting started, the following are needed to bring such cooperation about:

- Identifying services that can be shared or delivered through consolidation
- Identifying potential partners for collaboration
- Creating working relationships and an atmosphere of trust
- Creating public understanding and buy-in through citizen engagement
- Closing the deal by getting all parties to “yes”

In other words, it takes considerable skill, professionalism and good will to bring about cooperation.



**A bedrock definition of sustainability: the ability of a community to maintain economic opportunity—the means of making a living—for its residents.**

### TWO APPROACHES TO MOVING FORWARD

Some forward-thinking leaders have begun to recognize the need for two distinctly different approaches to the problems faced by Michigan’s communities. In one approach, change is driven by what might be called tactical efforts to stave off decline and decay. Solutions like budget cuts, privatization of government services, shared service agreements, joint planning agreements and the like make up a kit of tools at the disposal of officials in townships and other local governments.

In addition, some local officials have begun to try to drive change through organic processes that arise out of civic engagement. Such officials think government needs to stop being a funnel of complaints and start being a convener of problem-solving efforts—and the way to do it may be to engage ordinary citizens in devising creative solutions to local problems. Such efforts have the potential to surface new, emergent solutions that are not embodied in the existing toolkit.

Studies of citizen engagement efforts across the country show that certain factors in a community predispose it for successfully approaching its problems in this way:

- A political authority that supports public deliberation and is willing to consider its results and share decision-making power
- Resources and expertise to mobilize people and convene structured deliberations
- A constituency that demands citizen engagement, even when it proves uncomfortable or inconvenient for the powers that be
- A deliberative entrepreneur who catalyzes engagement by introducing the community to the ideas and techniques of public dialogue

Public engagement can represent a departure from a business-as-usual approach to conducting local government business. ►



Photo of sculpture park in downtown Meridian Charter Township, an entry in the "It's About Place" contest by Let's Save Michigan.

## Township officials weigh in: Getting started in placemaking

### 'It goes back to involvement'

"There are always resources. In our area, there is the Olsson Family Foundation, Rotary Charities and others that can make a difference with financing. There are always community leaders who can add their insights. It goes back to involvement. The more people you have engaged at the front end, the more likely it is that somebody knows how you can get started."

—Chuck Korn, Supervisor  
Garfield Charter Township (Grand Traverse Co.)

### 'We've all got resources out there'

"Cost scares people away. But if you get people together and figure out what you want, you can then figure out how to do it. Sometimes you've got resources in the community that you don't even know about. We had a resident who basically wrote our recreation plan for us, free of charge. He's just community-oriented. We've all got resources out there that we don't recognize."

—Dave Ballard, Supervisor  
Hamlin Township (Eaton Co.)

### 'You have to start by building trust'

"You have to have trust to work together across jurisdictional lines on the community level. Elections really cut into that because of turnover, so it does take time. But you have to start by building trust if you're going to do anything with placemaking."

—Susan McGillicuddy, Supervisor  
Meridian Charter Township (Ingham Co.)

And yes, it can entail risk. The flip side is that it distributes that risk across the entire community, rather than allowing it to remain squarely on the shoulders of local officials.

Our observation has been that Michigan's municipalities have scarcely begun to explore the possibilities inherent in citizen engagement, though certain communities have come close. In these communities, we've seen local leaders who support public deliberation, within the scope of a well-defined project; resources and expertise to mobilize people; and a deliberative entrepreneur, in the form of an outside contractor. If you're counting, that's three of the four bullet points listed above.

The element we haven't seen is the first one on the list, a popular constituency that demands this form of democracy. To work, citizen engagement needs cheerleaders, pioneers and early-adopter types—and they must come from the community.

They are out there, even in the least populated townships, but they're not necessarily easy to identify or engage. **Garfield Charter Township** (Grand Traverse Co.) Supervisor **Chuck Korn** knows the problem first-hand. "It's frustrating that people don't get involved until they disagree with something," Korn said. "I understand that. Everybody's busy, they've all got things going on. I was like that myself up until a few years ago." From that point of view, a high-profile public "disagreement" can be a useful tool for recruiting engaged citizens.

Even if citizens who are willing to be engaged *can* be found, citizen engagement can look like a risky venture to many local officials. It can be hard to persuade citizens that they have more to gain than lose from opening up the decision-making process. But public involvement is key, says Korn. "The more people you have involved, the more they add their vision, and the more genuine the solution becomes," he said. "Making decisions in the back room is a thing of the past."

Supervisor **Dave Ballard** of **Hamlin Township** (Eaton Co.) is another township official who sees an upside to citizen engagement. He offers this advice: "Any time you get people involved, it creates new ideas. You get the diversity of the whole community's opinions. It also creates opportunities for people to do something, and they need that, because so often they think they can't do anything."

Ballard says the benefits of engagement multiply from there. "It makes people realize we're here to help, so then they start to volunteer for things just because they've got that contact with us, that relationship. It creates so many opportunities for good things to happen," he said. "There are very few times bad things that can happen as a result of citizen engagement."

Not all townships suffer from the problem of small, mostly disengaged populations. Some, like **Meridian Charter Township** (Ingham Co.), boast a population in the tens of thousands and have strong activist contingents. Such townships wrestle with their own outreach issues.



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Meridian Charter Township Supervisor **Susan McGillicuddy** is familiar with that side of the engagement problem, and what she worries most about are balance and representation. “It’s important to have all your citizens educated about what’s going on if they’re going to be engaged,” she said. “It means you have to reach out to all quadrants of the community for membership on boards and commissions.”

Fine, but how? “Publicize everything,” she said. “Bring it full circle for the board and the community. Unfortunately you can’t rely on the media to inform people about what you’re doing. They’ll do segments of it, but not a thorough job. It’s hard—we’re a community of more than 30,000. But use technology to your advantage. We use public access television, a website, our own newspaper. I think our most important function in government is to engage our citizens.”

### THE SHORT TERM—AND THE LONG TERM

In the short term, communities need to find new ways to offer services if they want to avoid eliminating them altogether. Explore that kit of tools. Citizen engagement can also lead to novel, location-specific solutions that may garner community-wide buy-in.

Longer term, two relatively untested approaches offer promise: an economic development strategy known as place-making, and a municipal survival strategy referred to as resiliency.

These strategies both come out of the perception that healthy, livable and desirable communities of the future will be characterized by an emphasis on local resources and their efficient use, compact development as opposed to sprawl, planning that considers a wide range of uses and preserves natural and cultural assets, and access to amenities and services for all.

In Michigan, one of the most articulate proponents of placemaking has been Soji Adelaja, former director of the Michigan Land Policy Institute at Michigan State University. Adelaja defines placemaking as “the use of strategic assets,

talent attractors, and sustainable growth levers to create attractive and sustainable high-impact, high-energy, high-amenity and high-income communities that can succeed in today’s economy.”

Placemaking, then, can be seen as an approach to economic development, in which the conscious improvement and exploitation of unique local assets is key. This can be done through leadership, analysis and citizen engagement. When properly executed, proponents say, it actually improves the quality of place and, in turn, the ability of that locality to attract and retain talent.

Placemaking can be pursued at virtually any scale, but it may make sense to think in terms either of a specific locality or a little more broadly defined, but still compact region. The scale to choose is up to local officials. As a generalization, though, the larger the geographic locale chosen, the more likely it is to have assets that can make it a talent- and capital-attractor in its own right. A regional approach may be the better choice in many cases. This principle dovetails with the reality that resources that matter economically typically do not begin and end at township, or even county, boundaries. Communities with a strong appreciation of the regional scope of their assets can make “common cause” with other communities in the region. Adelaja is a proponent of leveraging the assets of Michigan’s regions, which he sees as “vast social, environmental, natural and recreational assets which are largely untapped.”



## Property rights or sustainability?

In **Meridian Charter Township** (Ingham Co.), Supervisor **Susan McGillicuddy** struggles to balance the rights of property owners with what she sees as the long-term demands of community survival.

“Everyone wants to have the right to develop their property as they see fit,” she said. “Yet I think what people value most is being able to gather together, to mingle—old and young alike. That’s what makes society interesting, and [commercial developments like] malls don’t offer that.”

Meridian Charter Township is a relatively affluent residential community on the eastern edge of the greater Lansing community and Michigan State University campus. It has undergone extensive commercial development in the last 30 years, including a 125-store, 970,000-square-foot indoor shopping mall, the Meridian Mall, which opened in 1969.

“I realize a lot of townships think a mall would be great,” McGillicuddy said. “But the reality is, there are a lot of empty parking spaces in a mall. And you have to think about what comes with it, like higher taxes to support the police force that’s needed, and so on.”

So what does McGillicuddy think offers the best solution to this dilemma? Improved, cooperative planning.

“I’ve seen us in Meridian Charter Township lose beautiful agricultural property for strip development because developers would rather start with empty space than redevelop an existing property,” she said. “Yet we need to preserve our agricultural land if we’re going to continue to be strong in agriculture, the state’s second-largest industry, and tourism.

“We have a pocked landscape,” McGillicuddy continued. “We have to do better.”

How might regional placemaking work in practice? “When we did our joint community master plan, we realized the City of Eaton Rapids is the shopping district for the community, so in the townships, we don’t want to steal from that,” said Ballard. “At the same time, we know people in the city, when they drive out to the township, they appreciate the open spaces and the trees. That’s the thinking behind the joint master plan.”

Ballard’s comment illustrates how flexible a concept placemaking can be. It need not imply the carefully crafted, strategic elegance of Adelaja’s vision—it’s enough if it works to make a community stronger. “Is that placemaking?” Ballard asked, rhetorically. “I don’t know. I just know we started by identifying our natural features and resources and it led to this plan.”

By contrast, resiliency is a conservative strategy that aims to manage change by “husbanding” resources. Like placemaking, the resilient-community approach focuses on what a community can do for itself with the assets at hand, and recognizes that nothing guarantees success in the new economy. Some places with superior assets are more likely to prosper than others with inferior ones. That does not doom certain communities to failure, however. Rather, it puts a premium on a realistic assessment by local officials of what is possible—and likely. Resiliency implies a commitment to “take care of our own,” in preference to committing resources in a risky attempt to market ourselves to the world.

Resiliency may be the best many communities that aren't "natural" attractors plan for in the face of uncertainty. As Land Information Access Association (LIAA) Executive Director Joe VanderMeulen said recently, "We live in a time when adaptive change is required. ... [W]e may find that the real work is less about place as attractor, than place as resilient community."

The processes we've been discussing pose many challenges. Most public officials simply can't pursue them without assistance. Local governments typically need the services of a outside resources if they're going to find optimal strategies for sustainability and survival.

As was mentioned at the outset of this article, local officials candidly told researchers that they did not fully understand what an emphasis on sustainable communities implied. They were pleased with their progress toward goals and very enthusiastic about their townships' successes and prospects for the future. But the theme of sustainability meant different things to different people.

That's healthy for Michigan's communities. Township officials are uniquely positioned to understand their communities' strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and challenges. Which specific approach they choose as they work to sustain the quality of life of their residents will depend on the unique local combination

of these forces. It's good that there is no "by the book" approach to sustainability; township officials wouldn't buy it.

It's also good that this ambiguity around the concept of sustainability has spurred numerous resource organizations to redouble their efforts to understand the concept, and to offer relevant services to local governments that come out of an appreciation for its complexities. Working together, Michigan's local officials can tackle the economic challenges facing the townships of the early 21st century. ■

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*Author's note: The subjects for this study were participants of a program called Partnerships for Change, a grant-supported effort to bring local units of government together for joint planning. MTA co-sponsored the program together with the Land Information Access Association (LIAA), which administered the grants and provided resources to the project communities, and other local government organizations. Beginning in 2004, the program concluded this year after enrolling more than 180 local governments in Michigan, of which more than 100 are townships.*