



## CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

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# Traverse Communities, Michigan

## Grand Traverse County, City of Traverse City & Peninsula Township

### About the Community

Grand Traverse County is located in the northwest portion of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Encompassing 601 square miles, it includes 13 townships and 2 villages and the City of Traverse City, which serves as the county seat. For this project, the County wanted to focus on Traverse City and three townships contiguous to it. Of these, Traverse City and Peninsula Township participated in the audits.

As a whole, Grand Traverse County had a resident population of 77,654 in 2000. By 2005 it was estimated to have grown to 83,971—an annual increase of about 1.63 percent. That rate is forecast to increase to 1.76 percent a year between 2005 and 2020. Over the same periods of time, Peninsula Township's population grew at a rate of 0.7 percent from a 2000 Census population of 5,265 to a 2005 estimate of 5,450. The township is expected to maintain that rate through 2020. In contrast, Traverse City is slowly losing population to the surrounding townships. The population at the time of the Census was 14,532 but 2005 estimates placed it at 14,513 and it is expected to decline to 14,456 by 2020. Essentially the city is in no growth mode and the population is aging.

### State Of Smart Growth Implementation

Because Grand Traverse County is a scenic, agricultural area, the proliferation of low-density suburban development across the landscape was recognized by community members as detracting from the traditional character of the area and posing a threat not only to the agricultural industry but to the tourist industry as well. The Traverse City Area Chamber of Commerce developed the Grand Traverse Bay Development Guidebook as a response to that perceived threat. The Guidebook illustrates the type of development deemed compatible with



the character of the Traverse City area, development that would enhance, or at least not detract from, the beauty of its natural setting.

The first guidebook, which incorporated the values revealed by the countywide 2020 visioning process, has recently been replaced by the updated *New Designs for Growth Development Guidebook* (published in 2005). Use of the guidebook is voluntary; however, the Chamber works cooperatively with the various governmental agencies to strongly encourage developers to incorporate these design guidelines into their plans.

In its own right, the City of Traverse City has won national recognition for embracing smart growth principles and redeveloping its downtown. Though surrounding townships have incorporated some environmental protection components into their plans and codes, they have not adopted compact development standards or other smart growth strategies. The growth occurring outside Traverse City is still mainly in low density suburbs.

Peninsula Township, which abounds with cherry orchards and wine grape vineyards, has instituted a purchase of development rights (PDR) program that aims to preserve agricultural land, scenic viewsheds that promote tourism, and the airsheds critical to maintaining the microclimates conducive to productive orchards and vineyards. Some clustered developments have been built, but most building is still on large lots.

As evidenced by the development of the *New Designs for Growth Development Guidebook*, there is a wide base of civic support for smart growth in Grand Traverse County and in Traverse City. In addition to the political leadership of the County Commissioners and Traverse City Commissioners, there has been active, high-profile support from the non-profit sector, the Chamber of Commerce and developers.

Though all the universal arguments for smart growth were being made—environmental protection, fiscal responsibility and building pleasant and sustainable communities—the most pressing concern for many in Grand Traverse County was the pocketbook issue of preserving the local character that drives the tourist economy. People come to Grand Traverse County as much for the pastoral landscape as for the cherries and wines.

Traverse City breaks the mold when it comes to the communities SGLI has worked with in the technical assistance project. Unlike the others, Traverse City is very well versed in smart growth and has done much to implement it in the downtown. In fact, the city has received recognition and numerous awards for its accomplishments and was included as a model community for its people oriented downtown redevelopment in the recently published "*This is Smart Growth*."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *This is Smart Growth*. (Smart Growth Network, D. Emerine, et. al.) Produced by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the US Environmental Protection Agency. 2006.



Traverse City and Peninsula Township also have the advantage of planners who are committed to smart growth and planners who have logged long tenures in their posts ensuring continuity in vision, strategy and implementation.

The support for smart growth is less evident in the other townships. While there was little evidence of vocal opposition, the lack of participation in the audits and the prevailing development patterns suggest there may be some level of passive resistance to adopting smart growth.

The SGLI Technical Assistance team reviewed the County's Comprehensive Plan, Peninsula Township's Master Plan and the City Plan for Traverse City. The team also audited the relevant code sections from each jurisdiction to see where the fits and disconnects were. Each jurisdiction simultaneously conducted a review of their own documents using the SGLI tools and results were compared.

The team found that in the city and the township, housing affordability imposes a bit of double bind. On one side, the rising property values are pricing out young families and moderate wage earners, forcing them into long commutes. On the other, the lack of life-cycle housing options means that a graying population must age in place or leave the community altogether.

In addition to the housing concerns, with only one way in and out and extremely limited commercial development, Peninsula Township faces serious congestion issues.

The New Designs for Growth Development Guidebook is, it is only advisory. The team recommended that the design guidelines be codified in each jurisdiction and that the smart growth option should offer the easiest course to project approval.

The team also suggested that the city develop incentives to encourage smart growth projects and suggested that the township provide the opportunity for development of a mixed-use, higher density village to serve as a commercial and transportation hub for the community.

One key program, the Traverse City Transportation and Land Use Study (TC-TALUS) is a cross jurisdictional, multi-stakeholder approach that promises to link transportation investments in the area to land use.

## Lessons Learned

### ***Planning without an enforceable plan is a tricky business.***

In Michigan, master or general plan documents carry no legal weight. Codes and ordinances must do the whole job even though they are not particularly good at communicating overarching policies or at articulating how specific requirements support broad policy goals. Even with the best of intentions, the sum of these parts does not necessarily add up to smart growth.



It is essential to have one comprehensive policy document against which consistency of supporting codes and ordinances can be measured. In the absence of such, there is a greater risk that individual decisions made on the basis of narrowly focused rules will incrementally compromise attainment of the policy goals. There is also a greater risk that various codes and ordinances, amended separately over time, may wind up working at cross-purposes.

### ***It takes a village to attain smart growth in rural areas***

Designating a village where daily commercial needs can be met and higher density housing can be provided is essential to smart growth in rural areas. A lack of commercial zoning to accommodate such daily needs as grocery stores and gas stations forces residents to drive to long distances to urban areas. Low-density residential zoning impedes the development of both lifecycle and workforce housing. Older residents are faced with the decision to either age-in-place in large-lot, high-upkeep homes or move. Meanwhile, unless employers can provide on-site housing, most agricultural service workers must commute from urban areas.

The designation of a village allows basic commercial services to be situated within reasonable walking and/or biking distances for many residents.

### ***Quilt, don't patch***

Retrofitting smart growth into existing codes, where planners rely on overlay districts and conditional or special land use permits (CUPs and SLUPs) to do the job, is less effective in the long run and is akin to applying a patch where the art of quilt-making is required.

Patching addresses one place on situational basis without regard to the whole cloth. Quilt-making—even for a patchwork quilt—addresses how the individual piece relates to and completes the whole.

While overlays, CUPs and SLUPs are useful short-term vehicles for implementing smart growth, planners must recognize the need to weave smart growth principals throughout all the codes and ordinances—cross-referencing so their intent and connections are clear, and reducing dependence on negotiations which can be criticized as arbitrary. This is the only way to ensure that smart growth won't be confined to isolated areas but will—over time—blanket the region.

### ***Visionary leaders can get far, but the community must share the vision.***

The role of a visionary leader, be it an elected official or the local planner, undoubtedly has a major impact on the implementation of smart growth, but the longevity of the vision depends on support from the community at large. This is built through an on-going public process. Once defined, the shared vision needs to be revisited periodically to sustain consensus and maintain the momentum for its implementation.



## Local Response to Recommendations

Few changes have occurred since the completion of the audit. The County Planning Director reports that rising gasoline prices have not slowed the demand for development in the region over the last year. The TC-TALUS project is just now gathering momentum. He expects the SGLI audit to be influential in that process as land use and transportation network impacts are tied together.

Peninsula Township is undertaking a study on workforce housing. New Designs for Growth is expected to be the lead agency. The program will have both education and advocacy components. The purchase of development rights program continues.

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Written by: *Susan Weaver*

Tools used: *Smart Growth Policy Audit  
Smart Growth Code and Zoning Audit  
Smart Growth Strategy Builder*

Technical Assistance Team: *Susan Weaver of Weaver Consulting & Research; and Benjamin de la Peña, Associate Director of the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.*

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## About the Case Studies

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*Communities across the country are facing tremendous opportunities to shape their future and provide solutions to the most pressing local, national and global challenges of our time. Community leaders, serving as stewards of the future, have the power to change previous patterns of unsustainable growth and realize the benefits of smarter growth.*

*The Case Studies present the key findings and lessons learned about smart growth implementation from the Smart Growth Leadership Institute's four-year technical assistance program that was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.*

*The Case Studies are meant to help communities that are committed to (or are exploring) smart growth but struggle with its implementation. The cases highlight successful strategies in building support, in identifying the most problematic policies and in other issues that typically accompany a major change in development practice. The case studies also showcase the use of the tools included in the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.*

*Visit [www.sgli.org](http://www.sgli.org) for more information about the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.*

*Visit [www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net](http://www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net) for more information about the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.*