

Improving Land Use, Stimulating Transit

Ten ways to enhance mobility and accessibility

- **Establish economic incentives for developing compact, walkable commercial centers with a mix of land uses.**

Our planning and zoning policies need to include the option of compact, walkable commercial centers. To take the next step, local units of government can add incentives to make this more attractive to developers. Such incentives could include tax breaks but non-monetary options exist. The latter could include bonuses in square footage allowed on a site or less parking requirements due to inclusion of a mix of uses and adequate pedestrian accessibility throughout the site.

- **Establish planning and zoning policies that require planners, developers, and architects to ensure that development projects include pedestrian access and orientation such as setbacks at the street level to stimulate transit activity and interest.**

Through local master plans and zoning ordinances, communities can ensure that the needed pedestrian access is built and that buildings are constructed in a manner more conducive to persons arriving by transit (e.g. front door closer to the roadway and sidewalk). Such design considerations need to be taken as seriously as minimal parking requirements and lot setback requirements are today.

- **Enact innovative road construction and reconstruction standards that take a holistic planning approach to the transportation corridor, promote safe streetscapes for a range of mobility options, and require all intersections to include crossings that meet or exceed ADA requirements.**

The right of way needs to be seen as more than the road way for cars and trucks to move as quickly as possible from point A to point B. Rather, the right of way needs to be designed to take into consideration the needs of all persons and items which will travel through it. This includes cars and trucks, in addition to bikes, transit vehicles, pedestrians and others, along with utilities above and below ground.

- **Target new, higher density residential development along existing or planned transit routes.**

As communities rework master plans and zoning ordinances, communities can target the growth of higher density residential development along transit lines. Too often, apartment complexes and condominium developments are developed that are (1) outside current transit service areas or away from existing routes, (2) built in such a way that the buildings are spread throughout the site and not readily served by transit or (3) the needed infrastructure, such as sidewalks, are not built into the development. If these types of developments are along existing routes with needed pedestrian access, the accessibility to transit will be increased.

➤ **Locate and grow major job centers along existing and proposed transit lines.**

As communities rework master plans and zoning ordinances, communities can target the growth of job centers along transit lines. Too often, an “office park” is developed that is (1) outside current transit service areas or away from existing routes, (2) built in such a way that the buildings are spread throughout the site and not readily served by transit or (3) the needed infrastructure, such as sidewalks, are not built into the development. If these are along existing routes with needed pedestrian access, the accessibility to transit will be increased.

➤ **Encourage and incentivize major institutions such as universities, hospitals, and government offices to remain in the central city and grow in a mixed-use context.**

As major activity centers and places of employment, our public institutions (government offices and universities) and major non-profits (local hospitals) should be encouraged and incentivized to grow in the central city or in existing commercial centers. As examples, Grand Valley State University, Spectrum Health and St. Mary’s continue to develop their downtown campuses. Whatever changes policy makers can make in order to sustain this trend should be enacted.

➤ **Encourage automotive parking facilities that enhance community appearance, walkability, and integrated public transit. (e.g. place parking behind buildings and front entrances near transit stops in office and industrial parks.)**

When large parking lots are placed in front of a development, it makes it very difficult for pedestrians to move about the site, especially moving from a transit stop at the road way to the front door of a store or office building. As an example, it is very difficult for some one to walk from Rivertown Crossings Mall to the restaurants that are nearer to Wilson Ave. and Rivertown Parkway. If parking were to the side or back of buildings or shared with adjacent lots, pedestrian access would be enhanced.

➤ **Adopt citizen-led context-sensitive design practices that expand non-motorized transportation options, including accessible sidewalks and bike paths.**

“During the 1990s highway design changed rapidly throughout the United States. Highway designers and builders have learned that they must be more sensitive to the impact of highways on the environment and communities. New and better ways of designing highways are evolving following the completion of the Interstate system, based on growing interest in the improvement of highways and their integration into the communities they serve.” (Taken from the Context Sensitive Design Website of the US DOT.) Principles of Context Sensitive Design include (1) The project is in harmony with the community, and it preserves environmental, scenic, aesthetic, historic, and natural resource values of the area, i.e., exhibits context sensitive design and (2) the project is seen as having added lasting value to the community.

- **Link land use planning with transportation planning to develop a comprehensive transportation system and provide a range of safe, convenient, appropriate, and affordable mobility options throughout the metro area.**

Local jurisdictions need to clearly link their land use planning with the transportation planning of the Metropolitan Planning Organization and the Grand Valley Metropolitan Council. Both of these planning processes take each other into account today, but more needs to be done to ensure that our built environment and transportation infrastructure are developed in tandem.

- **Embrace regional planning to enable local governments to plan together for a modern, multi-modal transportation system by coordinating land use and infrastructure decision making and spending.**

Each local unit of government will retain its authority over land use planning. However, as they address this role, they should take into account the neighboring jurisdictions and the metropolitan area as a whole. In this way, growth in the metropolitan area will be consistent and sustainable across jurisdictions and each jurisdiction will take into account possible transit enhancements for the future, such as bus rapid transit or light rail.

Source Documents:

- Down the Road... The Future of Public Transportation in the Greater Grand Rapids Area. Citizens League of Greater Grand Rapids. April 1990.
- The Long Range Public Transportation Plan for the Grand Valley Region. Mobile Metro 2020 Task Force. March 1998.
- The Common Framework: West Michigan. A Region in Transition. West Michigan Strategic Alliance. 2002.
- City of Grand Rapids Master Plan. 2002
- Michigan's Land, Michigan's Future: The Final Report of the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council. August 2003
- FY 2003 to FY 2007 Short Range Public Transportation Plan. Interurban Transit Partnership.
- Today's Winners—Tomorrow's Losers: How Urban, Suburban and Rural Areas of Greater Grand Rapids are Being Threatened by Urban Sprawl. Frey Foundation. April 1997