

St. Clair County Master Plan

PUBLIC SERVICES

Technical Report

- Land Use
- Environment
- Economy
- Transportation
- **Public Services**
- Alternatives
Analysis



March 2000

Prepared by the:
St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission

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PUBLIC FACILITIES AND SERVICES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the Public Facilities and Services Technical Report is to evaluate the state of St. Clair County's system of public facilities and services, to make recommendations for changes in that system as part of the Master Plan and to propose policies to accomplish change.

WATER SYSTEMS AND SERVICE

There are 11 public water treatment systems in St. Clair County serving 20 distribution systems. These systems are located primarily in the eastern part of the county and serve the cities and developed portions of neighboring townships.

Several water systems are at or near capacity and need improving. These include Algonac, the Fort Gratiot Township distribution portion of the Port Huron system and the St. Clair Township portion of the Marysville system. China and East China Townships have identified a need for a new water plant to increase the volume of filtered water. (See Appendix A for greater detail.)

SEWER SYSTEMS AND SERVICE

The treatment of sewage is a limiting factor in development in St. Clair County. Most soils in St. Clair County cannot absorb liquids at a fast enough rate to permit septic systems for large projects or small residential and commercial lots.

There are nine municipal wastewater treatment systems in St. Clair County serving 15 collection systems. Most of these are in the more highly developed area along the coast.

Several sewer facilities will soon be in need of expansion to handle increased loads. These include the lagoon systems in Yale, Algonac and Clay Township.

STORMWATER SYSTEM

The stormwater drainage system is pervasive in St. Clair County. There are 373 county drains, 28 inter-county drains comprising 842 miles of county and inter-county drains.

According to the Drain Commissioner, drains were not well maintained in the past. At some point when there is a large storm, flooding is likely in many areas where the drains used to perform adequately. In addition, because development has increased imperviousness in some areas of the county, flooding in those areas is more likely.

There has been an interest in drain improvement projects that are also stream restoration. These projects would both improve flow and create or enhance wildlife habitat.

The City of Port Huron has a largely combined storm and sanitary sewer system. The city began systematically separating the system in the late 1990's. There are an indeterminate number of illegal sanitary sewer hookups from private homes and businesses to stormwater systems. The result is raw sewage being discharged into drains, lakes and streams.

SEPTIC AND WELLS

Homes and small businesses in most of the area of St. Clair County are served by septic systems and drain fields. The St. Clair County Health Department, Environmental Health, receives about 1,000 permit applications each year.

Most of St. Clair County is unsuitable for in-ground drain fields due to soils or high water table. There are many old systems already in place and there is a potential for these to be contaminating surface waters. The alternative approach is to use mound drain fields, which have an average useful life of 15 years.

Lagoon systems require considerable space, but are capable for use by larger facilities. Two new schools and one hospital employ lagoon waste treatment systems, as do several mobile home parks.

PRIVATE WELLS

In most of St. Clair County, homes must rely on private wells. The area of service of municipal water systems is relatively small. This is a problem because it is difficult to obtain good quality water from private wells. There is little contamination of wells from nitrates or bacteria due to the clay layers between the surface and the deep layers to which water wells are drilled. Since 1996, well permit numbers have increased, from 550 in 1996 to 712 in 1998.

LANDFILL AND OTHER SOLID WASTE FACILITIES

Residents, businesses and public agencies generate solid waste that requires disposal. Current capacity to dispose of solid waste within the county is expected to continue to be adequate well into the future.

Only two landfills are currently licensed. These are the Smith's Creek Landfill, the Range Road Detroit Edison property. Howard Solid Waste Transfer and Reclamation Facility is the only other currently licensed solid waste facility.

There are nineteen closed landfills, dumps, processing facilities and Act 307 sites and these are inspected on an annual or semi-annual basis by the St. Clair County Health Department. St. Clair was in the process of updating its solid waste management plan in 1999.

OTHER UTILITIES

Electric power, natural gas and communications links are important to the quality of life of a community and necessary for development. St. Clair County has electricity and telephone service available everywhere in the county.

Natural gas is available via underground pipe in the more developed areas. Propane tank service is also available from eleven private providers. Electricity is generated in St. Clair County by Detroit Edison at both a coal-burning and a natural gas fueled power plant. Detroit Edison provides electric service through both overhead and underground lines to customers in St. Clair County.

HEALTH SERVICES

There are many doctors, clinics and other health facilities located within St. Clair County and the advanced hospital care available in the Detroit metropolitan area is not far away. The three hospitals in St. Clair County participate in joint, or Tri-Hospital services and facilities. The three hospitals offer emergency treatment, wound treatment, cardiac care, sports medicine, physical, occupational, speech and rehabilitation therapy, senior programs and other services. Port Huron Hospital has a branch in Yale.

EDUCATION

Nearly 29,000 persons go to school, grades K-12, in St. Clair County. There are both public and private schools and young people can attend pre-school, kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school and community college in St. Clair County.

There are seven school districts in St. Clair County in which the school buildings are also within the county. Six other school districts extend into St. Clair County from neighboring counties where the school buildings are located. The St. Clair County Intermediate School District provides training services for both students and teachers. It has a campus on Range Road. The most pressing need is for new elementary schools. Private schools provide education for about 1,500 students in St. Clair County. There are thirteen parochial schools in St. Clair County.

St. Clair County Community College provides opportunities for higher education to about 5,700 area residents. The St. Clair Community College campus is located in Port Huron. It also offers classes in Algonac, Yale, Imlay City, Peck and Bad Axe.

The St. Clair County Library System serves the entire County with eleven facilities.

POLICE, FIRE AND EMS SERVICE AND FACILITIES

There is 911 emergency service virtually everywhere in the County. The County has an Emergency Management Coordinator, housed at the Sheriff Department. Problems have been identified with the radio system used in dispatch. The County is upgrading the radio console used in dispatch in 1999 to improve reception by emergency personnel.

Many St. Clair County communities provide their own police and fire protection. Some communities share these services. The County Sheriff also provides services to

communities without their own policing and provides a marine division. There have been discussions about county-wide police services.

This issue has been raised because of the increasing population. Townships are interested in what their costs will be. No conclusion has been reached.

Clay Township and the City of Algonac once cooperated in policing their communities but were not able to maintain the agreements.

While there are many fire departments in the county, many people live some distance from fire stations. This is one factor in a higher fire insurance rating. Most rural townships have few of the features that would help lower insurance rates.

MUNICIPAL OFFICES

There are 32 jurisdictions in St. Clair County. Each has at least a municipal building or hall. Many have additional facilities, such as fire halls, police stations and parks. While the need for expansion of these facilities is the primary interest of the individual community, the County Master Plan examines this issue to find areas where the county can assist or provide guidance in where development should occur so that local jurisdictions can better plan for future expansions.

MUNICIPAL DPW SERVICES

Many communities within the county operate their own public works departments. There have been no reports of perceived needs for additional or updated public works facilities.

OTHER STATE AND FEDERAL FACILITIES

The state and federal governments maintain facilities for providing services to citizens of St. Clair County and to guard the border crossing to Canada. While the Blue Water Bridge was recently upgraded and the Coast Guard will be building a new facility, there are no reported plans for expansion of state and federal facilities. The US Customs has expressed a need for more room at the Blue Water Bridge for inspection of the increasing truck traffic, but there are no plans as of 1999.

RECREATION

St. Clair County has a Recreation Department and an approved Recreation Plan (approved by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, which makes the county eligible for State and Federally funded grant programs).

The County Recreation Plan identifies trail and waterfront site acquisition as high priorities. The 1997-2001 project list includes:

- Bridge to Bay Trail (rail extends along entire county shoreline and beyond - county is piecing together as opportunities permit)
- Algonac State Park to St. Johns Marsh Greenway
- CSX Barge Float Property (downtown Port Huron)

- Power Corridor Demonstration Trail (Leased from Detroit Edison and other utilities)
- Lake Huron Park (lease from Detroit Edison and Detroit Sewer and Water Board)

COUNTY PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES

The new county building on Grand River Avenue houses the County Administrator, the Metropolitan Planning Commission, Parks and Recreation Department, the Personnel office, the Register of Deeds, the Equalization Department, the Family Independence Agency, the County Surveyor and Veterans Affairs. The old county building is the old courthouse which has been proposed for renovation. The county has other facilities for various departments at locations around the county.

FUTURE DEMANDS AND SHORTFALL

With a future demand of another 40,000 persons living in St. Clair County within twenty years, there will be an increased demand for many county services. Where facilities are adequate to serve existing needs, there will be pressure to provide additional services or services to more people in the future. This can mean both the need for new branch facilities and for expanded facilities to house a large county staff or space to handle a larger number of clients for special programs. Where there are shortfalls now, the needs will be compounded. The primary shortfalls that are already identified are limited to the courts and jail.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The most profound finding of this study is that there has been little organized planning for future public facilities and services across the county on a comprehensive basis. There has been some anticipation of sewer and water needs, and new schools are planned for and built within each school district as needs grow. However, there are larger, more important questions that are not being answered. These are:

- How will future public facilities and services be coordinated with an expanding population? Will facilities and services follow wherever people settle? This presumes that wherever people settle is the most appropriate location. An unplanned settlement pattern can lead to inefficiencies in providing public services and artificially high costs to provide those services, as well as other unanticipated consequences such as pollution, loss of open space and farmland, loss of recreational opportunity and lowered quality of life. Or will the provision of public services be used as one tool to help guide growth to the most appropriate locations?
- Do communities want to continue a go-it-alone attitude in the provision of public services or do they want to find opportunities for the shared provision of services where this is practical? There can be efficiencies in the shared approach and tremendous cost savings. When asked about the adequacy of their public facilities, many local communities respond, “We don’t see how the county can help us”. Perhaps the question has never been adequately

addressed, or there has never been an attitude that there was a willingness on the part of the county to help. Also, many communities may not want to “let go” of the control of services, even if this results in great cost to taxpayers.

More specific findings are available in Chapter 8 of the Technical Report.