Chapter 1: Introduction

Featuring:

- MPC Mission
- Master Plan Background
- Future of Planning in St. Clair County
- Five Master Plan Guiding Values
- St. Clair County’s Regional Context
- Population Overview
The vision, goals, and objectives offered in this master plan are the combined result of input from citizens and government officials—elected and appointed—from throughout St. Clair County. The historical information, statistics, and current trends presented in the master plan are the result of observation, research, and analysis performed by the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC), which is also responsible for the overall compilation and content of the plan.

The St. Clair County Master Plan establishes planning goals that, if strived for, will help shape and direct the future of St. Clair County for the next 30 years. The plan does not advocate for growth or no growth. Rather, the plan advocates managed growth and change in order to preserve the rural character, unique features, and natural, cultural, and historic resources that make St. Clair County an attractive place to live, work, and play.

The content of the plan is based on:
- The Metropolitan Planning Commission’s analysis of planning activities and development trends within St. Clair County;
- Input and direction from citizens, community groups, and government officials in St. Clair County;
- Targeted input from the St. Clair County Board of Commissioners;
- Information from planners and government officials within the Southeast Michigan region, through active participation in the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG);
- Information found in planning documents created by other counties and communities within Michigan; and
- State and federal planning guidelines and laws.

The MPC will review and update the master plan every five years, as required by Public Act 33 of 2008 (the Michigan Planning Enabling Act). The plan will be updated as necessary, based on new information, statistics, land use patterns, growth requirements, and emerging trends. The last master plan was adopted by the MPC and endorsed by the St. Clair County Board of Commissioners in the summer of 2009.

Intergovernmental collaboration is more important to the success of our communities now more than ever. In order for the county and local units of government to accomplish our goals and achieve prosperity, it is imperative that we work together to find innovative solutions to problems. Communities must pool resources together to ensure economies of scale and efficiencies, especially in light of ever-changing budgetary constraints. Public-private partnerships are also increasingly important. Getting buy-in from the private sector...
on planning and economic development initiatives is an important step in “making things happen.” At present, the private and nonprofit sectors’ awareness of the importance of placemaking has never been greater.

Additionally, state and federal agencies that offer grant funding opportunities are now recommending – and in many cases, requiring – that applications for funding be regional in scope. In late 2013, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder’s office unveiled the “Regional Prosperity Initiative (RPI),” which was an effort to realign the state’s service delivery regions and create new, regional partnerships among counties. Under the RPI, St. Clair County was moved from the SEMCOG region into the new Region 6, which includes Genesee, Huron, Lapeer, Sanilac, Tuscola, and Shiawassee counties. St. Clair County is in the unique position of being deeply tied to two regions – the SEMCOG region that comprises the counties in Southeast Michigan and the I-94 corridor; and Region 6, which also encompasses the I-69 International Trade Corridor (a state-designated Next Michigan Development Corporation formed in 2012). Based on employment and commuting patterns, shared environmental resources, transportation funding systems, and longstanding programmatic relationships, county officials feel strongly that it will be important for St. Clair County to maintain active membership in SEMCOG, while at the same time exploring new opportunities for collaboration with our new Region 6 partners.

Lastly, local units of government in St. Clair County will need to continue identifying new ways of partnering together to carry out planning and economic development projects. The Metropolitan Planning Commission can serve in a capacity to bring communities together to explore new collaborative opportunities, joint authorities,

<table>
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<tr>
<th>5 MASTER PLAN GUIDING VALUES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 QUALITY OF LIFE</strong> Ensuring that a person can live his or her entire life in St. Clair County – total quality of life. Quality of life refers to the subjective pleasure and convenience that citizens receive from recreational facilities, public services, private and nonprofit organizations, cultural opportunities, environmental resources, historic features, good jobs, and affordable housing.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2 GREAT PLACES</strong> Bringing people and places together. Creating greater access to complete, walkable neighborhoods and healthy communities. Connecting people to healthy food, parks, shops, transportation options and other amenities.</td>
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<td><strong>3 PROSPERITY</strong> Diversifying the tax base so our communities are fiscally sound and educating/training our people to prepare them for 21st century job opportunities. Revitalizing the county’s economy refers to the overall strategies necessary to promote, increase, and support sustainable economic development. This includes fostering entrepreneurial growth, facilitating industrial development, revitalizing our downtowns, and creating high-skill, high-wage jobs.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4 SUSTAINABILITY</strong> Protecting and preserving our valuable natural resources and sensitive environments for future generations. Ensuring that public bodies are planning for and implementing development that promotes fiscal sustainability.</td>
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<td><strong>5 INNOVATION</strong> Effective and efficient delivery of public services through smart decision making, lean operations, intergovernmental collaboration, and innovation.</td>
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and joint planning. In order for land use decision-making to be more proactive, coordinated, and inclusive, local planning commissions will have to collaborate. This updated county master plan acknowledges this need for collaboration and will serve as a catalyst for making it happen.

**WHAT DOES THE METROPOLITAN PLANNING COMMISSION DO?**

In order to carry out its mission, the MPC serves local units of government and the public in the following ways:

**We PLAN**

In order to proactively plan for the future of the county and its various communities, the MPC firmly believes in the power of visioning processes to get stakeholder input on all projects. It is imperative that county planning is based on best practices and new innovations that cultivate strong assessments, accurate analysis, and reasonable forecasting into the future.

**We FACILITATE**

The Metropolitan Planning Commission strives to bring groups together to seek mutual public benefit. Toward that end, county planners must be champions of collaboration and must work to cultivate relationships between local communities, nonprofit organizations, the private sector, ad hoc interest groups, and residents. The importance of collaboration now and into the future cannot be overstated. Our community’s success hinges on how well all of its stakeholders work together to accomplish great things. The MPC will work to promote the coordination of government services, identify opportunities for cooperation, and help partners explore new relationships. As this happens, the overall capacity for managing change in St. Clair County will continue to increase.

**We EDUCATE**

The MPC strives to provide local elected and appointed officials with a myriad of resources to bolster effective decision making and support smart planning. As such, county planners will continue to offer training programs for local planning commissioners and zoning boards of appeals members, as well as other stakeholder groups as appropriate. The MPC works to keep its community partners informed, so that they can be quick to adapt to changing conditions around them. Additionally, we will stay abreast of public policy changes that can impact local governance through the interpretation and explanation of such policies. In short, the MPC works to keep its constituents informed. When communities or organizations are properly equipped, they become nimble in adapting to change, innovative in their thinking, efficient in their execution, and intelligent in their decision making.

**We IMPLEMENT**

Planning is only effective when real action is taken to implement projects and programs that serve to accomplish the plan’s goals and objectives. If a plan sits on a shelf upon completion, it is a failed plan. An overarching goal of the Metropolitan Planning Commission is to make things happen. We strive to be a collection of “doers.” That said, planning and the implementation of plans does not occur in a vacuum. We need partners. Sometimes, the MPC will carry out a project or task. Other times, we may simply provide support to another county department, local unit of government or local organization so that they may “get things done.” St. Clair County is fortunate to have so many groups working for the common good. In many cases, goals and objectives of varying organizations overlap with one another. These shared visions and goals create opportunities for powerful collaboration to foster positive change in our community.
In the past, the county master plan was a collection of lengthy, detailed technical reports that were pulled together by a summary document. This plan takes a different approach, instead focusing on the values of the community and the strategic actions that the county, its partner local units of government, and other community-focused stakeholders can implement to make smarter, more effective decisions when it comes to land use planning, economic development, and the delivery of public services. In other words, there is LESS focus on goals and objectives in this plan and MORE focus on values and strategic actions that can lead to implementation. This shift in focus coincides with an evaluation of the role and mission of the Metropolitan Planning Commission when it comes to countywide planning.

**A SPECIAL PLACE THEN AND NOW**

The first inhabitants of the area in and around what is now St. Clair County were Native Americans. People of many nations held ceremonies and buried their dead along the banks of the great Huron waters and the river into which it flows. They hunted game from expansive woodlands, fished from rivers and streams, and honored the land and water from which their sustenance came.

The area’s recorded history began in 1679 when an expedition led by French explorers Robert Cavelier de La Salle and Père Louis Hennepin navigated what later became known as the St. Clair River. As a result of their exploits, the French claimed ownership of vast lands surrounding the Great Lakes and soon established missions and trading posts in the region. In 1686, the French explorer Sieur Daniel Greysolon Duluth built forts, including the oldest in Michigan – Fort St. Joseph – at the mouth of Lake Huron, near the present site of Port Huron.

The first settlers in the area of old Fort St. Joseph came about 1790 and named the settlement Desmond. In 1814, this became the site of Fort Gratiot, which garrisoned troops. By 1830, the community had only 377 people. In 1837, the same year that Michigan became a state, the community changed its name to Port Huron. By 1840, the community grew to 1,113 people. It was organized as a village in 1849, and L. M. Mason was its first village president. Port Huron became a city in 1857. By 1870, it was the largest community in the county. Its industries included seven sawmills, four shipyards, three breweries, two dry docks, and a soap factory. Port Huron became the County seat in 1871, after a legal battle with the city of St. Clair. The city-county building was erected in 1873. Between 1850 and 1900, over 70 small communities in St. Clair County, most of them inland, became officially recognized settlements. Many had a post office and a school, and all sported some kind of commercial trade and at least one church. Many people around these settlements worked a family farm.

This trend toward settlement living was in keeping with Michigan’s and the Midwest’s economy, which was heavily based on agriculture and extraction of natural resources, such as lumber and minerals. Laborers not
directly involved with harvesting crops, cutting trees, or mining were employed in related transport or processing industries. Proximity to a railroad was a dominant factor in determining quality of life and economic development. In contrast, since the start of the twentieth century, most of St. Clair County’s growth has occurred in five waterfront communities and four rural cities and villages. Many rural communities away from the waterfront were abandoned. St. Clair County hamlets and villages such as Tara’s Halls, Brockway, Fargo, Blaine, Abbotsford, and Lamb became either much smaller entities or disappeared completely.

This growth away from agricultural areas was spurred by dwindling lumber and mineral resources in the late 1800s, and the advancement of manufacturing technologies and facilities within city centers that offered a glut of high-paying jobs. Even though many families continued to farm their fields, St. Clair County’s economy throughout the first half of the 1900s shifted from being resource-based to manufacturing-based.

After World War II, the population shift changed direction as people began to move from declining central cities to more attractive suburbs. In St. Clair County, development spread a few miles inland and had a large impact on how land was used, where and how people lived, and provision of public services. People measured quality of life on availability of schools, streets, waste removal systems, safe drinking water, hospitals, and police and fire protection.

In the 1980s and 1990s, people began moving back to the rural areas, the result of another shift in the economy and lifestyle. Manufacturing processes became less centralized. Computer technologies and transportation/automotive improvements facilitated mobility so people could live farther away from their jobs. Technology, globalization and the outsourcing of jobs changed the industrial world. As a result, many industrial firms were able to increase production while decreasing manpower. This trend changed the economy of Southeast Michigan – an economy that for years had been dependent on the automotive industry. While the region has slowly transitioned from a manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge-based, service economy, innovations in technology and engineering are creating new opportunities for advanced manufacturing and other highly-technical jobs.

In the present day, there is a renewed interest among both young professionals and baby boomers alike in moving back into central cities - people are craving a sense of place. They are choosing to live in communities that offer a variety of transportation, entertainment, recreation, and living options. Cities, villages, and townships in St. Clair County have embraced this desire for quality places and have begun working collaboratively to create those places to attract and retain residents and visitors. Like other communities across Michigan, St. Clair County's population is aging - a trend that will impact government service delivery for years to come.

**REGIONAL CONTEXT**

Located at the base of the thumb area of the lower peninsula of Michigan, St. Clair County is the easternmost of Michigan’s 83 counties. It’s known as the Blue Water Area because its eastern and southern boundaries are formed by the waters of Lake Huron, the St. Clair River, and Lake St. Clair. The St. Clair River forms a natural boundary separating Michigan from Ontario, Canada. The river flows along the southern part of the City of Port Huron until it reaches the twin Blue Water Bridges under which is the mouth of Lake Huron. It is also one of the heaviest traveled rivers in the world and is part of the world’s longest shipping canal, the 2,347 mile St. Lawrence Seaway.
St. Clair County is home to the award-winning Blueways of St. Clair, a system of 16 water trails spanning nine different water bodies. The Blue Water Area is truly a paddler’s dream...
St. Clair County Land Use

Land Use 2008
- Agricultural
- Airport
- Commercial
- Governmental / Institutional
- Industrial
- Multiple-family residential
- Parks, Recreation, and Open Space
- Single-family residential
- TCU
- Water

Source: Land Use 2008 was created by SEMCOG. The 2005 Aerial Imagery was used to interpret Land Use by analyzing the digital footprint of the raster dataset.
Greatly influenced by Lake Huron, St. Clair County offers a temperate climate which has cold winters, hot summers, and moderate springs and falls. There is 140 miles of shoreline in the county. Within the County are a wide-range of land types and uses, from rural agriculture to urban development to expansive and beautiful coastline; there is even an international border. Wetlands are scattered throughout the County, covering approximately 62 square miles, or 8.6% of the County’s land area, but are most prevalent along the eastern and southern coastline and along inland rivers. Local governments are comprised of eight cities, including Port Huron which is the county seat, twenty-three townships and two villages: Capac and Emmett. Each municipality maintains its own master plan and zoning ordinance. The various jurisdictions within the county along with many other organizations have proven themselves to be willing to cooperate with one another for the overall benefit of the region.

St. Clair County is a major international trade gateway between the United States and Canada for the movement of people and goods across the St. Clair River via the Blue Water Bridge and the international train tunnel. St. Clair County’s stunning waterways as well as its diverse annual events makes it a tourist destination all year long. Residents and visitors alike, are attracted to its vast water resources, its stunning scenic landscapes, beautifully maintained parks, miles of trails, neighborly communities, and its mix of traditional downtowns, and unique rural character.

The total area of the county is approximately 836.63 square miles, of which 724.37 square miles is land and 112.26 square miles is water. An agricultural/village pattern of land use exists in the western portion of the County, supporting a rural lifestyle that residents would like to preserve. The predominant land use is agricultural, which covers almost 47% of the land area. This is followed by a substantial amount of single-family residential land at 38.6%, then park, recreation, and open space is the next largest use with only 4.9%. This part of St. Clair County offers diversity, a change of view and a change of pace from populated commercial communities that have proliferated along the County’s eastern and southern waterfront.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>218,808</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-Family Residential</td>
<td>179,825</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple-Family Residential</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>7,273</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>5,790</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government/Institutional</td>
<td>9,647</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park, Recreation, and Open Space</td>
<td>22,731</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airport</td>
<td>1,069</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation, Communication, and Utility</td>
<td>17,840</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>2,578</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Acres</strong></td>
<td>466,140</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SEMCOG 2008 Land Use Data.
More intense land uses such as commercial, industrial, institutional and transportation are primarily found in the Port Huron area and to a lesser extent in village areas and in small parcels on major corridors throughout the county. Commercial land is the largest intensive use category in the county with 7,273 acres. Residential uses are found scattered throughout the entire county.