CHAPTER 3: PLANNING FOR DESIRABLE COMMUNITIES

FEATURING:
- Livability
- Placemaking in St. Clair County
- Eliminating Blight & Poverty
- Healthy Communities
- Complete Streets
- Parks and Recreation
- Barriers to Desirable Communities
LIVABILITY

OVERVIEW

According to the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), “affordable housing, quality schools, nearby employment opportunities, community resources, and shopping in close proximity all contribute to the livability of a community, as do safe, affordable, and healthy options for getting around.”

The county’s quality of life, and attractiveness to residents and businesses, is directly connected to the degree of investment in public facilities and services, parks, infrastructure, urban design, and the preservation of natural, cultural, and historical resources. Creating high quality places with good supporting infrastructure helps create a community identity, compliments ongoing economic development efforts, and results in a community in which people want to live, work and play.

EDUCATION

Primary and Secondary Education
Education is an important factor in life because it can provide for more opportunities. St. Clair County is home to many different educational opportunities, from primary to higher education including college. St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) is the intermediate school district of St. Clair County. RESA provides a variety of services to the county’s public school districts, a Technical Education Center, and academies throughout the county offering a range of specialized educational opportunities.

2014-2015 Enrollment by School District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algonac Community School District</td>
<td>1,719</td>
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<td>Capac Community Schools</td>
<td>1,180</td>
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<td>East China School District</td>
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<td>Marysville Public Schools</td>
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<td>Memphis Community Schools</td>
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<td>Port Huron Area School District</td>
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<td>Yale Public Schools</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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2014-2015 Graduation Rate by School District

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</thead>
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<td>East China School District</td>
<td>92.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marysville Public Schools</td>
<td>96.8%</td>
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<td>Memphis Community Schools</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Port Huron Area School District</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale Public Schools</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
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</table>
Seven public school districts are located within St. Clair County; being that they have at least one facility located within the County. Six additional school district’s boundaries extend into the county but do not have any facilities within the county. Enrollment is the County’s seven public school districts totals more than 22,000 students. Over the past eight years, enrollment has dropped by almost 21% at the public school districts in St. Clair County.

Higher Education
St. Clair County Community College and Baker College provide residents of the County opportunities of higher education. Each of these institutions offers a wide variety of programs for students to choose from. Combined enrollment at these two schools totals more than 7,000 students.

The main campus of St. Clair County Community College is located in Port Huron. In addition to the main campus, the college has four extended learning centers in Algonac, Croswell, Yale, and Peck (Sanilac County). The school offers certification, associate, and bachelor degree programs in five different disciplines. The school’s University Center partners with four colleges and universities in Michigan that allow students to complete a bachelor program locally.

Baker College is located on Lapeer Road in Port Huron Township. The Culinary Institute of Michigan, located in Port Huron, is also part of Baker College. Between these two sites, the school offers programs from certification to graduate degrees in 15 different areas of interest.

Public Safety
Public safety is important to residents because it can make a place desirable to live. Police, fire, and emergency medical services are provided to the residents of St. Clair County by many different organizations from public to private.

Police
The St. Clair County Sherriff’s Department provides law enforcement services county-wide, but primarily areas where no local law enforcement has been established. The department includes eight (8) divisions that include a Detention Center, Marine Patrol, and Road Patrol.

The St. Clair County Marine Patrol headquarters are located in Algonac. The Marine Patrol provides services to the counties waterways in addition to assisting the marine patrols of adjoining Macomb and Sanilac Counties, the United States Coast Guard and other law enforcement and rescue agencies of the United States and our neighbors in Canada. The duties of the group extend beyond typical law enforcement to include search and rescue operations, recovery operations, emergency medical assistance, and firefighting.

The department has a fleet of eleven vessels to patrol the waters of St. Clair County. Patrol boats are stationed at three locations throughout the county to patrol the counties 110 miles of navigable waterways. The St. Clair River handles a very high volume of commercial shipping traffic. This region of Michigan is known as the busiest marine thoroughfare for pleasure crafts in the world. Any pleasure craft or commercial freighter traversing between the lower and upper Great Lakes must pass through St. Clair County.

Fire/EMS
Twenty one municipalities offer fire service throughout the county. While there are many fire departments in the county, the fact that a large segment of the population lives some distance from the nearest fire station coupled with a lack of fire hydrants in those rural areas result in higher fire insurance ratings. Emergency medical systems (EMS) are provided by local fire departments, local hospitals and/or private companies.
HOSPITALS

St. Clair County is served by three hospitals; McLaren Port Huron, St. Joseph Mercy Hospital, and St. Johns River District Hospital. The hospitals are located along the eastern edge of the county with two hospitals in Port Huron and one in East China Township. There are urgent care locations throughout the county in addition to the three hospitals.

COMMUNITY CHARACTER/URBAN DESIGN

Community Character
A frequent goal of the master plans in St. Clair County communities is to preserve community character or rural character. Often it is the first goal. Obviously, residents value the visual character (and the associated functions and social values) and believe it to be threatened.

Community character is the image of a community or area as defined by such factors as its built environment, natural features and open space elements, type of housing, architectural style, infrastructure, and the type and quality of public facilities and services. A desirable community character is important to citizen satisfaction and to business success. The county and local master plan and related regulations are created in part to protect and improve community character.

The view of St. Clair County from the interstate highways is very rural. There are farms, trees, and open fields. The view from local roads is different. From local roads, there are the following three general scenes in different places in the county:
- Rows of single-family houses lining the roads with open fields and farms behind them. This may be the predominant scene in the county.
- In more urbanized areas, small scale cities with businesses and houses that are seldom more than a few stories in height.
- In the more rural areas, farmlands, open fields and wooded areas with scattered non-farm home sites.

St. Clair County is generally flat in the western half of the county and only slightly more rolling in the eastern part. The coastline has powerful visual interest simply because the water is there. As a result, there is a great deal of shoreline development of all types, primarily residential, resort, and industrial. The industrial is there because of Great Lakes shipping. The southern most part of the county, bordering Lake St. Clair, includes some very low islands and extensive wetlands. These islands and marshes make up the largest freshwater delta in North America.

There are a number of historic sites identified in St. Clair County. These include homes, churches, schools, lighthouses, and museums. Nearly all of them are in the coastal area. History is important to citizens because it fosters a sense of belonging and enhanced commitment to the community. History is not just in the buildings on the state or national historic registry. It is also in the preservation of settlement centers, patterns, and economic way of life. A sense of history can also be fostered through architectural design of new structures that reflect the styles of important, past periods. In addition, preserving a community’s history is critical to creating a sense of place and giving a community an identity.

Urban Design and Community Appearance
The visual appearance of a community has a big impact on the perceived quality of the community as well as long-term economic value. Local units of government can influence the appearance of the built environment by regulating private development and designing attractive, functional public facilities. Often times, these regulations include zoning, subdivision controls, façade improvement grants, public art programs, signage programs, design guidelines, and streetscape enhancements. Together, the regulation of land use and development combined with the implementation of enhancement programs helps create a community identity, eliminates blight, and contributes to the overall quality of life in a community.
Since 2000, the St. Clair County Master Plan has advocated for communities to enact various tenets of “Smart Growth.” The characteristics that distinguish smart growth in a community differ from community to community. On the whole, smart growth devotes time, awareness, and resources in bringing back community and vigor to downtowns and older suburbs. Smart growth is town-centered, transit and pedestrian oriented, and has a greater mix of housing, commercial, and retail uses. It also preserves open space and many other environmental amenities. Smart growth is also commonly called “sustainable development,” “sustainable growth,” and “New Urbanism.” Whatever one calls it, the concepts are generally the same.

Smart Growth concepts include:

- Communities cooperating to provide the most efficient, fair, and cost-effective delivery of public services.
- Creating strategies for sustainable economic development.
- Ensuring an adequate long-term land resource base for agriculture, forestry, mining, and recreation.
- Preserving and providing an adequate supply of affordable housing throughout the county for all age groups, income levels, and for those with special needs.
- Providing opportunities to end the concentration of poverty, especially in central cities.
- Establishing a coordinated land use planning process among all levels of government.
- The use of incentives to encourage specific private sector investment decisions.
- Making urban areas more livable through better design in both new development and redevelopment.
- Preserving small towns and a community’s sense of place.
- Supporting research and public education on the capacity of land and communities for growth.
- Conserving, protecting, or restoring public lands and water, including protecting and maintaining water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation and scenery.
- Encouraging infill of areas already served by infrastructure by directing public investments to existing communities and away from greenfield sites.
- Linking land use and infrastructure planning more closely.
- Providing a range of adequate, safe, and efficient transportation facilities for all St. Clair County citizens.
- Encouraging alternative forms of transportation to the automobile.

**Placemaking Overview**

The term “placemaking” can mean many different things. When it comes to community planning, it often means simply creating better community spaces in our cities, villages, and townships. As Al Zelinka and Susan Jackson Harden note in Placemaking on a Budget (American Planning Association, PAS Report Number 536), placemaking can be defined as “the process of adding value and meaning to the public realm through community-based revitalization projects rooted in local values, history, culture, and natural environment.”

Creative placemaking is an evolving field of practice that intentionally leverages the power of the arts, culture and creativity to serve a community’s interest while driving a broader agenda for change, growth and transformation in a way that also builds character and quality of place. It describes a certain type of community development based upon an examination and accounting of the types of places where talented people, entrepreneurs, and businesses want to locate, invest, and expand. Placemaking capitalizes on local assets, inspirations and potential, and seeks to create public spaces that promote health, happiness and well-being.

Stressing the belief that cities flourish on well-managed community places, placemaking involves walkable streets, welcoming public spaces, and lively neighborhoods. For most people, specific places can invoke a whole host of emotions, including nostalgia, belonging, and exhilaration. In order to strengthen St. Clair County communities, they must transform into more attractive and interesting places to be. The county and its local Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has developed the Place Diagram (above), where the inner ring represents key attributes, the middle ring intangible qualities, and the outer ring measurable data. The Place Diagram is intended to help communities evaluate places. Source: Project for Public Spaces, www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/
units must work to create places that will draw people in – places that make residents and visitors alike feel as though that particular town is the place to be. By creating more functional, interesting places, shops, and businesses in our downtown, areas can thrive, jobs can be created and sustained, and the already high quality of life in the county will increase.

Many of the cities, villages, and hamlets in St. Clair County possess a rich history and unique character. The task for the county and for local officials is to create new connections to that history and uniqueness. Effective placemaking calls for creating a framework that responds to the scale of the immediate environment; consideration of the emotional impact it will have on its users; and a comprehension and love of the history of the built world. The condition of a community’s sidewalks, plazas, parks, streets, and storefronts serve as a barometer of its vitality, social cohesion, public health, sense of place, and identity. Ultimately, communities in St. Clair County will flourish when they become destination places with streets and public spaces full of life and activity.

In order for communities to create more vibrant, livable places, county and local officials must understand the values of community and place. The best way to gain that understanding is to let people articulate what is most important to them about their community. According to the APA book *Placemaking on a Budget*, there are three primary mechanisms for gaining an understanding of the values of a community: community involvement, observation, and research.

A primary jewel in St. Clair County’s fine setting is the waterfront. Together, the urban and rural landscapes produce a distinctive place, offering a sense of identity to visitors and residents. It is beneficial to plan for, protect, and strengthen this character as the county grows and matures. Within St. Clair County, Port Huron and Marine City have been leading communities for waterfront revitalization.

As you can see in the word cloud on page 48, successful placemaking is community-driven, visionary, ever changing, context led, flexible, focused on creating destinations, and collaborative. Placemaking is never imposed from above, it is not reactive and is never one-size-fits-all. Placemaking efforts are usually not a quick fix or one dimensional.

Following the major economic changes from 2009-2011, the County should employ the key components of both placemaking and smart growth for future land use decisions and economic development decisions. This strategy should help our communities more quickly return to prosperity by effective use of placemaking processes. The goal is to help communities re-examine the importance of everyday settings and experiences that shape our lives – downtowns, parks, plazas, main streets, neighborhoods and markets that influence where we live, work, play, and how we interact with each other.

### 11 Principles of Placemaking

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has developed 11 principles that can be used to evolve public spaces into “community places.” PPS differentiates between “spaces” and “places” - they are two wholly different things. A space is a physical description of a piece of land, whereas a “place” connotes an emotional attachment to the piece of land. Following is a summary of the 11 principles of placemaking:

1. **The Community is the Expert:** People who use a public space regularly provide the most valuable perspective and insights into how the area functions or should function.

2. **You are creating a place, not a design:** Providing access and creating active uses, economic opportunities, and programming are often more important than design.

3. **You can’t do it alone:** Creating great public spaces requires collaboration and ideas from many stakeholders.
4. **They'll always say “it can't be done.”:** Every project has people who do not like it or think it cannot happen. Saying “it can’t be done” is often code for “it’s never been done that way.” This attitude can be overcome by collaboratively creating a vision and building support to make something happen.

5. **You can see a lot just by observing:** Observing a space allows you to learn how the space is used. People will adapt to a space and find creative ways to utilize it to accommodate their needs.

6. **Develop a vision:** A vision for a public space must be defined by the people who live or work in or near the space. The vision needs to address a public space’s character, activities, uses, and meaning to stakeholders.

7. **Form supports function:** Understanding how a space will be actively used during design can prevent unnecessary design elements and keep costs down.

8. **Triangulate:** Locate elements of a space near each other in a manner that fosters activity.

9. **Start with the petunias:** Simple, short-term actions like planting flowers can encourage further ideas and provide flexibility to expand the space by experimentation and incrementally building into a longer-range plan.

10. **Money is not the issue:** Funding for public space improvements is always going to be scarce. Often times, that alone can be cause to do nothing. The space needs to be valued enough by stakeholders in order to pick up partners who can help come up with creative solutions for funding or other action.

11. **You are never finished:** As PPS notes, “about 80% of the success of any public space can be attributed to its management.” Good places have a fluid quality to them in that their uses may change weekly or seasonally. Good management will ensure positive response to that change, allowing for adaptability and flexibility.

‘The Power of 10’
The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a nonprofit planning, design and educational organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities. The “Power of 10” is a concept PPS typically uses to start off a Placemaking process. The concept is grounded in the notion that it is not enough to have just one great place in a neighborhood - a community needs a number of them to create a truly lively city or town. PPS defines the “Power of 10” as follows:

“At the core of the Power of 10 is the idea that any great place itself needs to offer at least 10 things to do or 10 reasons to be there. These could include a place to sit, playgrounds to enjoy, art to touch, music to hear, food to eat, history to experience, and people to meet. Ideally, some of these activities are unique to that particular spot and are interesting enough to keep people coming back.

Local people or visitors who use these spaces most often are the best source of ideas for what those 10 places, 10 things to do, or 10 reasons to be there are. That is where the mechanisms listed above come into play. As St. Clair County communities work to achieve their vision, goals and objectives outlined in their own master plans, they also need to focus on how land use policies, transportation improvements, recreational amenities and other governing decisions will impact placemaking efforts within their communities.

Over time, decision makers and other stakeholders need to hone in on the inventory of great places, great things to do, or other reasons to live, work, and play in our communities.
**PLACEMAKING IN SCC: CREATING GREAT PLACES AND THINGS TO DO**

**Black River Walk - Public Art**

The Blue Water Young Professionals (BWYPs) have been working with community partners to create a vision and sustainable plan for the Black River Walk in Downtown Port Huron. Phase I of this creative placemaking project has transformed a rather barren strip of river walk with usable public art pieces and new gathering places. It features six bike racks, six benches and 32 painted picnic tables. They are all maritime-themed, featuring ships, bridges, sailboats, lighthouses and anchors.

The BWYPs focus is on developing quality-of-life amenities for the Blue Water Area. The group has raised funds to finish twelve maritime-themed bike racks and benches, which are usable pieces of public art. The Black River Walk project is the development of a ten block stretch of land along the Black River that will connect people to the Great Lakes Maritime Center, Downtown Port Huron, SC4, and the Port Huron-to-Mackinac Boat Races. The goal is for the walk to complement local restaurants and businesses, giving visitors a reason to stay downtown for more than getting a bite to eat, or an item to buy.

The Community Foundation, which was the driving force behind the Blue Water River Walk, also funded a life-size chess board and two fire pits along the Black River Walk. The two river walks complement each other. The Blue Water River Walk is a more natural walkway, and the Black River Walk has a more urban path as it traverses downtown.

**Blue Water Convention Center**

In 2015, St. Clair County opened the 42,000 square foot conference and convention facility located along one of the most breathtaking points of the St. Clair River. The convention facility offers unprecedented views of Lake Huron, the Blue Water Bridges and the St. Clair River. This facility and its location offers visitors an experience that will draw them back to the community again and again. The convention center was built next to the newly renovated Hilton DoubleTree Hotel, Freighters Restaurant, and Baker College’s new Culinary Institute as a major draw for new visitors and additional private investment. Combined, these various projects represented about $27 million in public and private investment.

**Blue Water River Walk**

The Blue Water River Walk is almost one-mile of St. Clair River shoreline immediately south of the mouth of the Black River in Port Huron. It is less than a mile downriver from the Blue Water Bridge to Sarnia and the southern end of Lake Huron. Owned by the Community Foundation of St. Clair County, the Blue Water River Walk is open to the public year-round. The shoreline used to create this beautiful River Walk was donated to the Community Foundation of St. Clair County by local philanthropist James C. Acheson and his wife Suzanne at Christmas of 2011. This initial gift, valued at approximately $1.5 million, has now been leveraged to create a total public and private partnership investing more than $6,000,000. In 2012 the Community Foundation used a $250,000 grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to begin habitat restoration and restored approximately 450 linear feet of shoreline as a Pilot Phase. Later that year the Foundation received a $2,000,000 grant through NOAA and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) to fully complete the shoreline and habitat restoration. The River Walk features many exciting elements: the old railroad ferry dock, which dates back to the early 1900’s, has been fully restored and re-opened to the public. Using partial funding from the Michigan Department of Transportation, the Community Foundation raised matching private donations that led to the construction of a 10’ wide asphalt pedestrian trail along the entire length of the shoreline. This trail is a key component of the Bridge to Bay Trail system. At the north end of the River Walk, just north of the Ferry Dock, is an Outdoor Classroom. Intended as a true interactive learning environment, the Outdoor Classroom is meant to teach the public about the St. Clair River ecosystem and the plant and wildlife habitat found along the River Walk.
**Placemaking in SCC: Discover the Blue**

The Blue Water Area Convention and Visitors Bureau (BWACVB) is the organization that promotes tourism for the Thumb area of Michigan, including communities in St. Clair, Sanilac, and Huron counties. “Discover the Blue” is a marketing campaign that was established in 2009 to highlight the Blue Water Area as a tourism destination - one of Michigan’s great PLACES to visit.

Nine communities participate in the Discover the Blue campaign: Clay/Algonac, Marine City, St. Clair, Marysville, Port Huron, Lexington, Port Sanilac, Harbor Beach, and Port Austin. BWACVB maintains a website (www.bluewater.org) that highlights each of these communities and informs visitors about things they can do and see while visiting. The marketing campaign continues to be a huge success and is now directly connected to the state’s “Pure Michigan” tourism campaign that is considered to be the best state-run tourism marketing campaign in the nation.

The Discover the Blue website includes short videos highlighting the best of what each community has to offer. Additionally, it includes a photo gallery that allows potential visitors to “virtually visit” a community before actually going there.

The Discover the Blue program is one tool that participating communities have to help market the community and bolster placemaking efforts. As long as it is financially feasible, communities should continue to participate in the campaign.

**Source:** Blue Water Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. Residents and tourists gather for the Algonac Rotary Art Fair.
One of the most important drivers of economic development in the Blue Water Area is tourism. Many communities throughout the Thumb are working to increase their share of visitation by enhancing local attractions and amenities, or placemaking. Central to these efforts is an emphasis on the region’s extensive blueways and greenways trail systems. According to the American Trails organization, “a trail can bring at least one million dollars annually to a community, depending on how well the town embraces the trail.”

In 2013, the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC), along with regional partners in the Thumb and the Land Information Access Association (LIAA), kicked off a project to help local communities build on existing bike trail and water trail assets by developing a comprehensive “Blue Water Trail Towns Master Plan.” The Trail Towns approach identifies trails as the focal point of a tourism-based strategy for economic development and revitalization. The Blue Water Trail Towns Master Plan provides community leaders and business owners with detailed guidance on ways to capitalize on greenways and blueway connections for a more vibrant tourist trade.
Placemaking is...

**HEALTHY COMMUNITIES**

**CURRENT TRENDS AND ANALYSIS**

There are a number of things that contribute to a healthy community. First and foremost is a measurement of how people feel. Good health is a product of genetics as well as personal behaviors such as exercising, eating nutritiously, and avoidance of risky behaviors. The level of good health in a community is an indicator of many things: Opportunities for recreation, appropriate nutrition, exercise, access to preventative health care and a clean environment.

County Health Rankings data from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation shows that St. Clair County ranked 63rd out of 83 counties in Michigan for health outcomes in 2015. Additionally, St. Clair County ranked 53rd in Health Behaviors, 50th in Clinical Care, 46th in Social and Economic Factors, and 66th in Physical environment. Child welfare outcome data for St. Clair County is also a huge concern. A report by Wayne State University released in May 2015 suggests that the rate of confirmed child abuse and neglect in St. Clair County was the highest in the seven-county Metropolitan Detroit region over a five-year period from 2009 to 2013. The rate of child abuse and neglect in St. Clair County for kids 0 to 17 years of age was 15.8 per 1,000 in 2013.

**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Many of the county’s neighborhoods, shopping centers, and employment areas were built in a time where they were designed around the automobile at the expense of pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. The county’s
road network took decades to construct and retrofitting it to accommodate a range of users (pedestrians, bicyclists, young, old, and disabled) will require long-term commitment and dedicated resources.

Another issue confronting St. Clair County is the number of individuals that are uninsured. Residents without health insurance are more likely to avoid seeking health care services early when experiencing illness, this delay leads many residents to seek care only once a condition is worsened to the point where it is more difficult and expensive to treat. 19% of adults ages 18-64 reported not having health care insurance, this is higher than the state (16.2%) and national (16.9%).

There are a number of steps communities can take to create and promote healthier places:

- Promoting more walkable and bike-friendly communities. A place that is more pedestrian-friendly and not as reliant on cars promotes physical activity. By having each local community perform walkability audits we can determine how walkable and safe an area is and what can and should be done to improve the community. Improving the quality of the sidewalks and bike paths can increase the number of users because they can get from Point A to Point B and feel safe while doing so.

- More/Better access to Healthy Food, we have too many Food Deserts in this County. Below are some ideas where we can improve food accessibility:
  - More community gardens
  - Promoting existing farm markets throughout St. Clair County
  - More Grocery Stores
  - Better/Healthier Restaurant Choices (Etc. Farm to Table)

- Improvement in mental health.

- Improved air quality
  - Transportation-related pollutants are one of the largest contributors to unhealthy air quality. Exposure to traffic emissions has been linked to many adverse health effects including: Exacerbation of asthma symptoms, diminished lung function, adverse birth outcomes, and childhood cancer.
  - Motor vehicles contribute to more than 50% of air pollution in urban areas. The design of communities and transportation systems impacts how often automobiles are used, how many automobile trips are taken, and how long those trips are. Reducing automobile trips by increasing mass transit use, carpooling, walking, and bicycling can help reduce air pollution, especially in urban areas.

- Shorter Commutes to Work. This can be done by improving the economic climate here in St. Clair County by providing more higher paying jobs. Thus, eliminating the need to drive a long distance for a good job.

**COMPLETE STREETS**

**OVERVIEW**

In recent years, transportation planners have made a significant shift in their approach to the design and intended function of streets. This paradigm shift encourages transportation planners and engineers to coordinate road improvements with land use planners and urban designers. This shift represents a new, holistic approach to transportation planning. “Complete streets” are designed to prioritize pedestrian or non-motorized
traffic over cars. Streets and roadways often represent the largest component of public space in a community. Complete streets attempts to make us reconsider the intended function and/or use of that public space.

It is recommended that local units of government adopt land use and development policies that encourage compact development patterns, a mix of uses, connected streets and transit supportive development densities to reduce automobile dependence and vehicle miles traveled. Some suggestions include:

- Adding sidewalk and bike lane improvements wherever possible.
- Provide streetscape improvements to create a walkable environment.
- Coordinate improvements with Safe Routes to Schools, including street crossing improvements (crosswalks, refuge islands, audible signals and tactile warnings on curb ramps).

**Benefits of Complete Streets**

There are a number of benefits to communities when they implement complete streets elements, including:

- By providing designated space for each activity, complete streets improve overall safety for pedestrians, non-motorized and vehicular traffic.
- Complete streets are context-sensitive, meaning they do not disrupt the physical fabric of neighborhoods or individual properties.
- Complete streets demonstrate that a community is committed to maintaining a mix of transportation alternatives.
- Complete streets will make communities more walkable for pedestrians of all ages and abilities and create safer pedestrian crossings.
- A balanced transportation system that includes complete streets can help facilitate economic growth and stability by providing efficient connections between residences, schools, parks, and businesses.
- Complete streets encourage more walking and bicycling which helps to make a community healthier. Nationally and statewide, there is an obesity epidemic affecting people of all ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. In St. Clair County, 31% of adults are obese and 25% of adults aged 20 or older reported no leisure time physical activity.
- Complete streets are good for children. Streets that allow for kids to walk or ride their bike help them to get physical activity and gain independence. According to Smart Growth America, kids who have safe walking and bicycle routes have a more positive view of their neighborhood.

Now more than ever, planners and citizens nationwide are focusing on making their communities more walkable. Walkable communities are widely viewed as thriving, livable, sustainable places that offer their residents safe transportation options and an enhanced quality of life. Current trends show that people prefer walkable communities are choosing such places over less walkable, automobile-centric communities.

**Parks and Recreation**

**Overview**

Parks and recreational facilities foster positive activities ranging from physical activities to community events that are very important to the health and welfare of the county’s residents. They often accentuate and support distinct environmental features of a place while providing important recreational opportunities for the public. Environmental features provide opportunities to enhance a community’s character and sustain ecological principles.

**St. Clair County Parks and Recreation**

The St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) currently owns five properties devoted to parks and recreation activities that total 961 acres. Brief descriptions of PARC facilities are provided below.
Goodells County Park
Goodells County Park is a 327-acre park that features two playgrounds, river and fishing access, a seasonal ice skating rink, trails, four picnic shelters, a community center, a visitors center, historic buildings, a BMX track, a radio-controlled model airplane airfield and truck track, a butterfly garden, special events buildings, the “Splashpad,” equestrian facilities, and areas for outdoor events. Goodells Park also houses the County Farm Museum.

The "Splashpad" has 11 spray features that include two water cannons, five dumping buckets, ground geysers, and a rainbow water tunnel. The “Splashpad” is open daily from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. and admission is free.

Fort Gratiot County Park
In Fall 2005, the St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) purchased 16 acres of property from Citizens First Bank for $3.1 million using a $2.2 million grant from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, administered by the Department of Natural Resources. PARC also purchased a beach easement needed to move forward with the development of Fort Gratiot Park.

PARC formally approved an updated Fort Gratiot County Park Master Plan that incorporated the use of the adjacent Detroit Water Board property (an additional 14 acres) and the new location for the 1971 Tunnel Explosion Memorial. Phase 1 of the park’s development began in 2006 and included the installation of water and sewer lines, underground electrical lines, roads, paved trails, and parking areas.

Columbus County Park
In 2007, the County purchased 291 acres of the Bauman Road Farms property in Columbus Township from the Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national non-profit organization, using a $1.4 million Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant. Phase 1 construction at Columbus County Park was completed in early 2010. Phase 1 included constructing the main entrance on Bauman Road, a park roadway, a 100-car parking lot, erosion control and drainage improvements, electrical work, a water well and development of a lighted sledding hill. In 2012, the energy efficient Park Lodge was constructed with modern restroom facilities, a picnic pavilion, offices and storage rooms.

Woodsong County Park
St. Clair County purchased the 44.5-acre Camp Woodsong site from the Michigan Waterways Council of the Girl Scouts of America in December 2008. The property is located off of Abbottsford Road at the east end of Rynn Road in Clyde Township. The western half of the property features existing buildings that include a garage, small activity building, two vault toilets and group camping areas. The eastern half of the property has scenic, steep slopes that travel down to 2,800 feet of Black River shoreline. The park is the ideal place to nature watch. The site also has a rustic parking lot, and an ADA trail and kayak launch is planned for the future.

Fort Gratiot Light Station
PARC’s newest county park is home to the oldest lighthouse in Michigan. The five-acre retired Coast Guard Station property was officially transferred to St. Clair County Parks from the United States Coast Guard in 2010. The Fort Gratiot Light Station is located next to the new Coast Guard Station in Port Huron and includes the Fort Gratiot Lighthouse (1829), which is the oldest lighthouse in Michigan.

The Light Station also includes the Light Keeper’s Duplex (1874), Fog Signal Building (1900), Single Keeper’s Dwelling (1932), former Coast Guard Station (1932), Equipment Building (1939), and a three bay garage (1990’s).

The agreement with the Federal Government requires St. Clair County Parks to oversee the restoration of the site, following the Historic Structures Report. The report is a guideline for how the site should be restored, beginning with the light tower. Following the report, restoration of the tower began in the fall of 2011 and was completed in the spring of 2012. The Port Huron Museum is responsible for tours of the lighthouse, which are available May through December. All improvements to the site are being completed with various grants.
The Park is open daily from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Admission to the park grounds is free. Admission tickets are sold in the gift shop for tours of the station and tower. The park is located at 2800 Omar Street, in Port Huron.

**STATE-OWNED RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES**

There are several state-owned and maintained parks and recreation areas in St. Clair County, three of which are near the City of Algonac.

**Algonac State Park** occupies approximately 1,450 acres of land located along M-29, north of the Algonac city limits. The park fronts along the St. Clair River for a distance of approximately 3,200 feet. The park offers a number of campsites, both modern and rustic style, along with many other facilities. Algonac State Park is popular for watching freighters pass through the St. Clair River.

**Lakeport State Park** is located on Lake Huron in northern St. Clair County. Situated along Lake Huron, Lakeport State Park provides Southeast Michigan residents access to the Great Lakes. The park has two distinct units separated by the Village of Lakeport. A total of 250 sites are divided between the two campgrounds. All sites have a picnic table, fire circle, electricity, modern toilet/shower buildings along with several pull-through sites and camp pads for ease of leveling campers.

There is a state-managed boat launch in Lexington ten miles north of the park for boating and fishing access. The Port Huron State Game Area is within a 15-minute drive and provides opportunities for hiking year round and hunting in season.

**St. John’s Marsh** is located west of the City of Algonac and occupies approximately 2,477 acres. It was established in 1974 to preserve a valuable wetland area and it provides the public with opportunities for additional wildlife recreation opportunities, including fishing, hunting, and bird watching.

The **St. Clair Flats State Wildlife Area** is located on Harsens Island and occupies approximately 10,300 acres of land, located at the mouth of the St. Clair River as it enters Lake St. Clair. Large portions of the numerous islands that comprise this area are included within this State game area. The State of Michigan declared it a State Game Area and Sanctuary in 1949. It is a natural habitat for fish and waterfowl.

The **Port Huron State Game Area** encompasses over 6,000 acres and is located along the Black River north of M-21 in Clyde and Grant townships. The site offers opportunities for small game hunting, fishing, hiking, and nature study.

**GREENWAYS AND TRAILS**

Greenways are corridors of land recognized for their ability to connect people and places together. According to the EPA, greenways promote outdoor recreation, catalyze economic development, increase adjacent property values, celebrate historical and cultural assets, promote conservation and environmental education and improve quality of life.

Greenways have multiple purposes, but from a recreation perspective they have two major functions:

1. To link and facilitate hiking and biking access between residential areas and parks.
2. To provide opportunities for the linear forms of outdoor recreation (i.e. hiking, jogging, bicycling, equestrian riding, and walking) in which many St. Clair County residents engage today. These recreation activities require the development of trails along the greenways.

There are two primary trail systems within St. Clair County: the Wadhams to Avoca Trail and the Bridge to Bay Trail.
Wadhams to Avoca Trail
In 1999, PARC purchased the surface rights to 9.82 miles (100 acres) of right-of-way from CSX Railroad and began developing it as the Wadhams to Avoca Trail. In 2001 and 2004, PARC purchased two additional properties totaling 17.65 acres adjacent to the trail north of Imlay City Road for a trailhead and parking. In 2003, PARC purchased the surface rights to an additional 2.6 miles of CSX Railroad right-of-way totaling 17.66 acres from Wadhams Road to Griswold Road. As of the beginning of 2012, the trail is over 12.4 miles long and contains 163 acres.

To date, the 640-foot long Mill Creek Trestle has been decked and railed for pedestrians and bike riders. Three acres of land was recently purchased southeast of the Trestle to create a horse crossing at Mill Creek. At the south end of the trail in Kimball Township, over 5 miles of trail have been paved starting at McLain Road running southeast to Griswold Road. The paved section of the trail passes through a developing residential area and is heavily used by residents.

In a joint effort with the St. Clair County Road Commission, a Hybrid Pedestrian Signal was installed in 2010 where the trail crosses Wadhams Road. It was the first time this type of signal has been used for a trail crossing in Michigan. The signal prompts flashing lights to stop traffic when a pedestrian wishes to cross the road.

Designated parking areas are located at the Wadhams Road, Imlay City Road, Lapeer Road and Avoca Road trailheads. The non-motorized trail is open to walkers, bicyclists and equestrians.

Bridge to Bay Trail
The St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) is working in conjunction with 13 local units of government to develop a 54-mile paved trail from Lakeport State Park to New Baltimore. St. Clair County helps to plan and promote the trail while each local unit of government is responsible for constructing their section of the trail. Even though PARC plays an instrumental coordinating role in the development of the Bridge to Bay Trail, the property that makes up that trail is owned by various municipalities and townships. Most trail construction projects are funded by grants. PARC usually helps to fund the local match required for trail construction grants.

The Bridge to Bay Trail extends from St. Clair County’s northern border; under the Blue Water Bridge; through Port Huron, Marysville, St. Clair, Marine City, and Algonac; and past state and municipal parks, museums, gazebos, and lighthouses. Sometimes the trail is within reach of the water’s edge and sometimes a few miles inland. It connects communities together for walkers, joggers, strollers, and bicyclists of all ages. The trail varies from a 10-foot wide separated paved pathway in the right of way along a road, or a 5 foot wide dedicated bike lane.

The trail can potentially link to the Wadhams to Avoca Trail within St. Clair County, the Discover Michigan Trail, the Macomb Orchard Trail, and – via ferry – the St. Clair Parkway Trail in Lambton, Ontario, Canada. As of 2012, roughly 25 miles of the 54 mile Bridge to Bay trail is complete.

Funding for the Bridge to Bay Trail comes from St. Clair County Parks and Recreation millage, local government funds, and grants. Grant money for the trail has been provided by the United States government through federal transportation funds and by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), and the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF).

THE BLUEWAYS OF ST. CLAIR

One of the goals included in the 2007-2011 Master Recreation Plan was to explore developing a system of water trails in St. Clair County. The St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission, in partnership with PARC, applied for and was granted a Michigan Coastal Management Grant to create a Blueways Vision website
for the shoreline of St. Clair County. Research began in 2009 to find all the public access points along waterways in the County. Next, public input was gathered for popular paddling routes and put-ins. The “Blueways of St. Clair” website was built up with paddling routes, access pictures, information on restaurants, motels, museums and other points of interest. One will find information on the major rivers in the County, including the Black River, Belle River, Pine River, Lake Huron, St. Clair River, and the St. Clair River delta.

The Blueways website lists 16 different paddling routes, totaling 138 miles, in nine unique bodies of water and lots of valuable information related to paddling and shoreline recreation. The website is dynamic, with driving directions between favorite points, aerial imagery maps, weather report links, and a section to post personal paddling trip stories and pictures.

In 2014, the Island Loop Route became Michigan’s first designated National Water Trail by the U.S. Department of the Interior. At the time of its designation, the Island Loop National Water Trail became the 14th national water trail in the nation.

In 2017, it is expected that a new Blueway route along the Krispin Drain on Harsens Island will be added to the Blueways of St. Clair.

Check out St. Clair County’s Blueways website at www.BluewaysOfStClair.org.

**BARRIERS TO DESIRABLE COMMUNITIES**

**BLIGHT AND VACANT PROPERTIES**

There are blighted or abandoned buildings spread across St. Clair County communities, both urban and rural, conveying images of old, worn out neighborhoods. These should be seen as untapped assets that provide land for redevelopment. The National Vacant Properties Campaign (NVPC) notes that vacant properties can include abandoned, boarded-up buildings; unused lots that attract trash and debris; vacant or under-performing commercial properties known as greyfields; and neglected industrial properties with environmental contamination (or brownfields). State laws and uniform building codes further refine what constitutes an abandoned building, but these vary from community to community. As noted by the Center for Community Progress, “Public interest and private investment can come together to create a future for these buildings, bringing new residents, retail, and other positive forces to revive neighborhoods previously in trouble.”

In the 2005 report, “Vacant Properties: The True Costs to Communities,” the NVPC states that communities “must address the increasing number of vacant properties, not only because of the negative impact they have on the surrounding community, but because of the numerous costs they impose. They strain the resources of local police, fire, building, and health departments, depreciate property values, reduce property tax revenue, attract crime, and degrade the quality of life of remaining residents.”

**STATE/FEDERAL HOUSING PROGRAM FUNDING CUTS**

Federal funds and programs play an important role in the housing market, providing essential capital, subsidies and incentives that enable providers and developers to offer more affordable homes – helping the market supply better meet the demand. Many of the local and state programs upon which our communities rely are funded in large part by federal dollars.

State investment in the housing market has a double bottom line: it provides homes and economic growth. Many good state-funded housing programs help provide stable homes and communities for the most vulnerable
citizens.

For over two decades, the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission has offered a Homeowner Assistance Program through Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds that come from the federal government (US Department of Housing and Urban Development) and are allocated by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA). The county’s Homeowner Assistance Program provides very low interest loans for low and moderate income homeowners to make needed home repairs that help to improve their quality of life and stabilize neighborhoods.

LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION

The affordability gap between the cost of a home and what people actually make is present virtually everywhere, from the most urban to the most rural communities in St. Clair County. High housing costs force many workers to overburden themselves, paying more than they can truly afford just to give their family a place to live.

Living in poverty, or avoiding it, poses a range of challenges aside from just housing: health, employment, safety, education, and much more. While these aspects of life often parallel an individual or family’s housing situation, they are also an important piece of their experience and their well-being.

Foreclosure has long been a problem for homeowners, and it has only been complicated by high unemployment and the slow economic recovery in recent years. When individuals lose their homes to foreclosure, it is a blow to families, communities, and the health of the housing market.

Developers, advocates and politicians can all agree that affordable housing and housing for individuals with particular needs is a necessity in our communities, but frequently the best plans still face opposition from those in the communities themselves. NIMBY-ism (“Not in My Backyard”) poses a challenge for making these homes into realities. Rural areas face many of the same challenges as cities and suburbs - blight, foreclosure, homelessness, a lack of available affordable housing - with even fewer resources to address these critical issues.

Due to the affordability gap between housing costs and the actual wages, even having a full-time job does not always mean someone can afford a stable place to live. St Clair County communities need to ensure that affordable housing is available to workers around the county. Local ordinances often shape how public and private groups can create housing opportunities. Inclusionary zoning ordinances in particular are a powerful tool

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF VACANT PROPERTIES ON COMMUNITIES & HOMEOWNERS

- Crime
- Arson & Accidental Fires
- Public Nuisances & Health
- Lost Tax Revenue
- Lower Property Values
- Higher Insurance Premiums
- Poor Quality of Life
- Continuing Spiral of Blight

to encourage or require real estate developers to set aside a certain piece of market rate residential development projects for low- and moderate-income households.

Additionally, the cost of transportation - whether it is owning a car or paying for public transit - is an often overlooked factor when considering housing affordability. The cost of housing and transportation really go hand-in-hand. Historically, people moved further away from urban job centers because the cost of housing was higher in those areas. The thinking was that it was less expensive to live out in the suburbs and commute into job centers. However, recent research into this old way of thinking shedding new light on what affordable housing really is.

The Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT) has created a new tool to gauge the true affordability of housing by considering not only the price of a home or an apartment, but also the transportation cost associated with living there. Using the "Housing and Transportation Affordability Index," CNT has discovered a potential financial challenge lurking behind suburban living: the increased cost of transportation for commuting to job centers typically eradicates any savings expected by choosing a home on the urban fringe.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Limited transportation options mean reduced access to jobs, public spaces, and key goods and services. Decentralized employment, higher gas prices, and the continued relocation of low-income households to suburban areas further isolate these communities. The average cost of owning a car ranges from about $6,000 to $12,000 a year, an expense that is particularly acute for low-income households.