

Chapter 1: Introduction

Almena is a growing rural township on the eastern edge of Van Buren County in southwest Michigan. Only six miles outside the City of Kalamazoo, it is experiencing growth pressure from the urban area as people move into the country for a quieter way of life. State Highway M-40 forms the Township's western border and M-43 traverses Almena, making the Township accessible for commuters (see Base map, pg. 8).

The primary challenge facing Almena is to balance the reality of a growing community with the desire to preserve the very things that draw people to the Township: natural features and a quiet lifestyle.

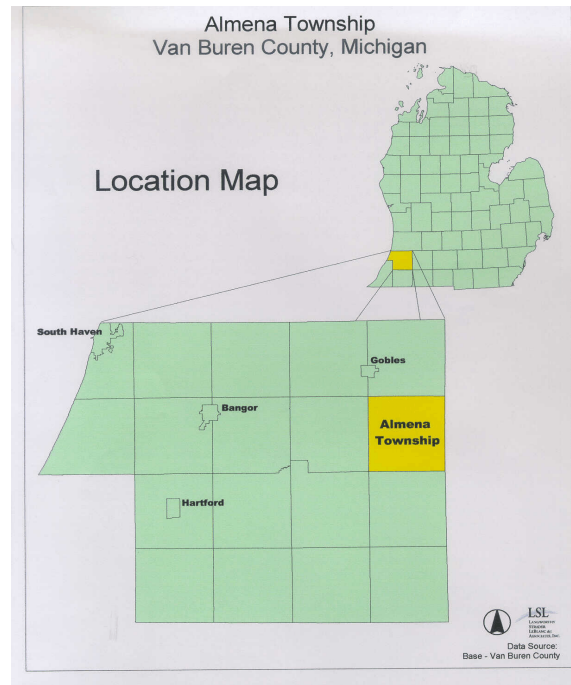
This Master Plan for Almena Township is a vision for how the Township will grow and develop over the next twenty years. It is a document developed through investigation of demographic and land use trends and the vision local citizens have for the Township. The basic purpose of the Plan is to manage the intensity and configuration of land use in a manner that supports economically viable, environmentally sound, and visually pleasing growth.

The Master Plan will help ensure that Almena Township remains a highly desirable community by enabling residents, business owners and developers to make investments with a reasonable expectation of the future. In essence, the Plan balances the sometimes competing interests of environmental protection and individual land ownership to achieve overall community interests.

Plan Elements

This Master Plan consists of several components, including:

- Public input, which is an essential part of the Master Plan process. It is critical to have an understanding of what Township residents and landowners think of the issues.
- Background research regarding housing, population and other current conditions within the Township.
- A survey of existing land use which summarizes the current land use trends within the Township.
- Development of goals, objectives and strategies that define how the Township will address identified concerns and trends.



- The Land Use section that describes which types of development would be most appropriate within the community and suitable locations for that development.
- The Future Land Use map that is an illustration of the long-range land use pattern proposed for the Township.
- Implementation strategies that should be evaluated on an annual basis.

When the above components are combined, a picture is created that will serve as a guide for the Township as it faces important decisions now and years from now. These decisions may include policy changes, budget allocations and the more day-to-day issues such as site plan reviews, special land use approvals, and rezoning requests.

Planning Framework

Overall, the Master Plan is based upon a number of Township characteristics, each of which must be considered by the Planning Commission and Township Board as the Plan is implemented and updated. These characteristics include:

Community Character: The community character desired by residents and landowners determines the Plan's goals. A strong emphasis placed on maintaining rural character, for example, would be reflected in the Future Land Use goals and any subsequent design standards enacted in the zoning ordinance.

Capability of Land: Environmental constraints must also be considered. Is the land itself able to accommodate planned uses? Where public utilities are not available are the soils capable of accommodating the density of planned development?

Community Needs: What types of land use are needed in the community? If a shortage of affordable housing were determined to be a community concern, the provision of suitable land uses in desirable locations would be an appropriate response. If a small shopping area seems appropriate for the community, a location should be selected and planned based on the ability of that location to accommodate such a use.

Available Services: Through issue and goal identification, as well as data collection, information is obtained about the status of community services. Are existing services capable of handling planned development? What kind of strain will new residential development place on the ability to provide adequate fire protection? What road improvements may be required?

Existing Development: How will the planned land uses affect existing uses? Are there some areas that are currently residential that the Township would like to see become commercial in the future? How will planned uses affect nearby existing uses?

Regional Planning: The Township does not exist in a vacuum. There are other regional issues such as transportation, environmental protection, and utility plans that must be considered as well. Sharing copies of the Plan and communicating about it with

neighboring township, county and regional planners as well as other appropriate entities will facilitate regional planning and coordination efforts.

Implementation

The Planning Commission and Township Board should continuously strive to ensure effective use of this document. Although the tie between decision-making and land use policy is not always abundantly clear, most land use and design decisions can be guided by the goals, objectives and strategies provided in this Plan. In the most general terms, if the Township's vision drives all decisions, community leaders will be implementing the Plan. What follows are additional practices that will ensure Plan implementation:

Refer To the Master Plan in All Zoning Decisions

One of the principal benefits of having an adopted Master Plan is the foundation it provides for sound zoning decisions. Just as the Plan is the policy guide for land use, zoning is the principal legal enforcement tool. The two should work together to provide adequate justification for land use decisions.

Encourage Other Decision Making Bodies to Use the Master Plan

The Master Plan should help guide everyday decisions, from the capacity of improved roads to new schools. Working together with the Van Buren County Road Commission, school districts, and adjacent communities as well as other parties that can impact land use patterns within the Township, can help Alma Township in the implementation of the Master Plan.

Keep the Plan Current

The vision outlined in the Plan will not occur overnight. The Master Plan is an outline for the future that guides day-to-day decisions. However, even with this in mind, the Plan should not be applied or used rigidly since changing conditions that can affect the original intentions of the Master Plan should be acknowledged and the Plan amended, if necessary.

Township decisions can be weakened by an outdated Plan or one that is not in constant use as a reference. The Planning Commission should conduct an annual review of the Plan to ensure that the Plan is kept current. The Township Planning Act requires that the Master Plan be reviewed every five years. While this does not mandate that the Plan be changed, it at least encourages a thorough review to determine if the directions set forward are still valid. Any amendments to the Plan can be done at that time to keep it up to date and consistent with Township philosophies.

On the other hand, while the Plan needs to be a flexible instrument, its recommendations should not be taken lightly. Adjustments should be made only as necessary, and justified based upon changing conditions or shifts in community philosophy.

The Master Plan & Zoning Ordinance

The relationship of the Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance is often misunderstood. Stated concisely, the Master Plan is a *guide* for land use for the future; the Zoning Ordinance regulates the use of land in the present. The Master Plan is not a binding legal document; the Zoning Ordinance is a law that must be followed by the Township and its residents. However, the Master Plan is the foundation upon which the regulations are built.

Adopting or changing a Master Plan does not directly affect the zoning for any property. However, future changes to the zoning map are intended to be reflective of the planned uses shown by the Master Plan.

Evaluation of Land Use Changes

Changing the land use or zoning designation for any property can have far-reaching consequences, physically, environmentally, financially, and legally. Therefore, a careful evaluation of proposed rezonings is essential. As with any land use decision, the use of standards is essential to reaching fair and consistent decisions. The following evaluation measures are included in the Plan to permit their use by the Township when rezonings or Future Land Use changes are contemplated. The zoning district intents and rezoning criteria provided in the zoning ordinance must also be considered during the evaluation process.

Standard 1 - Consistency with the Community Vision and Plan Strategies

If conditions (such as economic factors, demographic shifts, new utility lines, changing traffic conditions) upon which the Master Plan was developed have changed significantly since the Plan was adopted, the Planning Commission and Township Board should incorporate these factors into their deliberations to ensure that the Plan is current. Particular attention should be paid to the vision and goals to ensure that they remain valid, and that the proposed rezoning or land use change does not impair their intent.

Standard 2 - Compatibility with adjacent uses and districts.

All of the uses allowed in a proposed district should be compatible with the conditions present on the site and in the immediate vicinity of the site especially in terms of density, character, traffic, aesthetics, and property values. The Plan provides several guidelines, as noted above, which should be considered when determining whether the proposed district is compatible with the neighborhood and the Township as a whole.

Standard 3 - Capability of being used as already zoned.

It is the right of every property owner to receive a reasonable return on the investment placed on property. This does not mean that zoning is a slave to the "highest and best use," (which is not a zoning, but rather a real estate term). It does mean that there should be a reasonable use available within the zone district. But if the property is capable of

being used as zoned, there should be a compelling reason to change the zoning. Such reasons may be related to the first two standards of consistency and compatibility.

Site plans will not be considered as part of a rezoning request. The Planning Commission and/or Township Board will not be swayed by what is proposed by the petitioner. Instead, the Township will make a specific finding that ALL of the uses permitted in the proposed district are appropriate for the site and area, not just the one shown on a proposed site plan.

Standard 4 - It is critical that the Master Plan be read in its entirety.

Rather than attempting to isolate individual statements that may appear to support one position or another regarding the Future Land Use for the Township, the Planning Commission must consider the intent of the Plan as a whole. This requires a careful reading of the Plan to ensure that all of the Plan's considerations are included in the evaluation of any change.