Chapter 4 - Land Use Characteristics

Land Divisions and Ownership

Most of the private ownership is divided into tracts 10 acres or larger. Large hunt clubs, owning several sections of land are common in the northeast part of the county. Small lots and subdivisions can be found within the communities of Mio, Comins, Fairview, Luzerne and McKinley; and around the many lakes within the County. Land divisions over the last two decades have primarily entailed dividing up large tracts into five and ten acre parcels.

The Huron National Forest occupies most of the southern half of Oscoda County, while the northwest corner of the county is in State ownership, see Figure 4.1. The US Forest Service owns 147,885 acres or 231 square miles of Oscoda County. This is all within the Huron National Forest, which occupies the entire southern half of the county and stretches into neighboring counties. State ownership in the county equals 55,000 acres or 86 square miles. Primarily due to these two large holdings, 57 percent of the land is in public ownership and 83 percent of the county is forested.

Figure 4.1
Land Cover/Use

With the economic downturn in 2007, minimal development has occurred in the county. Therefore, no significant changes in development have occurred since the previous plan was completed.

In 1978 a countywide land cover use inventory was completed under the Michigan Resource Information System of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. This is the only countywide land use inventory ever completed. The map of 1978 land cover use, shown as Figure 4.2, illustrates the distribution of land uses throughout the County. Table 4.1 is a listing of the land cover/use categories by acreage. Upland forest, mainly jack pine and oak forest types, was the primary land cover/use in Oscoda County. The top five largest categories included upland forest, upland openings, lowland forests, farmland, and non-forested wetlands. These five categories accounted for 97 percent of the land cover/use. While residential and commercial development has occurred since the 1978 inventory, the amount of undeveloped land is still expected to be around 95 percent of the County.

As would be expected, residential development is found mostly in or near the community of Mio, with lesser amounts of similar development in the communities of Fairview, Luzerne, Comins and McKinley. Commercial-industrial development is minimal and tends to be located in or near the communities of Mio and Fairview.

Residential
As can be seen on the Existing Use Map and table, residential use occupied almost two percent (6,401 acres) of the land in the county. As would be expected, residential development is found mostly in or near the communities of Mio, Fairview, Luzerne, Comins and McKinley. Newer, “up-scale” residential development can be found at the Garland Resort, in Greenwood Township. Seasonal residential development tends to be clustered along lakeshores and streams. As well, residential development is scattered along major roads. General trends in residential development have been construction of primary or secondary homes on lots two acres and larger. Much of the housing around the lakes, and in the county, was originally seasonal and, as is the case with much of northern Michigan, the seasonal housing is transitioning into year round dwellings.

Commercial
The largest concentrations of commercial uses are found in the communities of Mio and Fairview. Strip commercial development is also located along M-33/M-72 between Mio and Fairview. Most of the commercial land uses are service and retail in nature, catering to local residents and tourists. Small pockets of commercial uses can be found in several rural locations around the county. These rural commercial uses are typically convenience retail uses that serve the rural residents and tourists. Lands used for commercial purposes comprised less than one tenth of one percent of the county’s area.

Industrial Extractive/Transportation
Land in this use category included industrial, extractive (sand and gravel pits) and transportation (airports) and accounted for less than one percent of the land area.
Institutional/Recreational
This land use includes such uses as schools, churches, cemeteries and recreational areas. This category accounts for 835 acres or 0.2 percent of the land area in the county. Approximately 57% of Oscoda County is in public ownership, most of which is in the Huron National Forest. While these lands were not mapped as recreational, the considerable amount of public land does offer residents and visitors ample area for a wide range of outdoor recreational activities such as fishing, hunting, cross country skiing and snowmobiling.

Agricultural
According to the 1978 inventory, a majority of the agricultural lands were concentrated in the center of the county, just north of Mio. The townships with the greatest percentage of agricultural lands were Elmer, Comins and Clinton, with smaller amounts found in Big Creek and Mentor. While there has been a downward trend in acreage dedicated to agricultural uses, these lands are falling idle as opposed to being developed for urban built-up uses like other parts of the state and country.

Non-Forested Uplands
The 27,898 acres (7.6 percent) of non-forested upland openings made it the second largest land cover in the county. This category consists of herbaceous open and shrub land. This land cover was scattered throughout the county with larger concentrations in the central part. Much of the non-forested land was once active farmland. Given the downward trend in acreage dedicated to farming, this category has increased over the last 25 years.

Upland Forest
The upland forest lands were the most predominant land cover in the county and accounted for 76.4 percent or 279,371 acres of the county. Of the forested land, the most prevalent forest type was jack pine. Young jack pine forests provide critical nesting habitat for the globally rare Kirtland Warbler. Other forest types include red and white pine; aspen-birch; northern hardwoods, and oak-aspen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>6,401.1</td>
<td>1.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>147.6</td>
<td>0.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial/Extractive/Transportation</td>
<td>868.8</td>
<td>0.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution/Recreation</td>
<td>835.3</td>
<td>0.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>12,092.0</td>
<td>3.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-forest/upland openings</td>
<td>27,898.5</td>
<td>7.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upland forest</td>
<td>279,371.2</td>
<td>76.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowland forest</td>
<td>22,621.3</td>
<td>6.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Forested Wetlands</td>
<td>11,491.5</td>
<td>3.14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surface water</td>
<td>3,937.5</td>
<td>1.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>365,664.8</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Michigan Department of Natural Resources - MIRIS: 1978

Lowland Forests and Wetlands
Wetlands include land that has sufficient water at, or near, the surface to support wetland or aquatic vegetation. These areas are commonly referred to as swamps, marshes and bogs.
The wetland category comprises non forested types such as lowland brush (tag alder and willow) and wet meadows. Non-forested wetlands accounted for 11,491 acres or three percent of the county land area. Lowland forests grow on soils with a seasonally high water table and are often classified as wetlands. Lowland forests include areas that support lowland hardwoods and conifers, such as northern white cedar, black spruce, balsam fir, elm, red maple, ash and aspen species. Approximately 22,621 acres or six percent of the county's total acreage was classified as lowland forest. Lowland forests are usually swampy in nature and often are classified as wetlands.

Two of the most important functions of wetlands are water quality protection and ecological corridors. As can be noted in Figure 4.2, the major wetland areas are adjacent to streams and lakes. The networks of wetlands receive surface water and subsurface water discharge, creating the many streams and creeks which in turn flow into the area lakes. The interconnected resources exemplify how activities distant from major water bodies can still have an impact on the water quality.

Surface Water
Oscoda County is home to 258 natural and artificial bodies of water and 219 miles of rivers and streams. Lakes and impoundments were mapped as open water and accounted for one percent of the area in the county. The county's major waterway is the Au Sable River, which cuts through the mid-point of the county on an east-west course. Mio Pond, an impoundment of the Au Sable River, is the largest water body at 944 acres in size.

Planning and Zoning
Oscoda County Planning Commission completed a master plan in 2005. Oscoda County has no zoning enforced at the county level. Three of the county's six townships have exercised their authority under state statutes to administer their own planning and zoning. They are Comins, Greenwood and Mentor Townships. These three communities have a zoning administrator, planning commission and zoning board of appeals that administer their zoning. The planning commissions are responsible for overseeing the master plan, recreation plan and zoning ordinance. The Township Boards and County Board are the governing bodies responsible for managing finances and making policy decisions. None of the communities have planning and zoning staff and rely on planning commissions to oversee planning and zoning activities. Communities do not have staff, but rely on elected officials to conduct township business.

Planning and Zoning are the principal tools that local communities have to manage growth, preserve community character, protect property values and enhance the economic viability of the area. Planning helps establish and focus the desired future of the community and zoning ordinances are used as one of the primary ways to implement the community master plan and achieve the goals of the community.

A key element of the community master plan is the future land use plan. This is the culmination of the planning process that entails an analysis of existing conditions, public input and goal setting, and finally establishing the community's desired future. The community-wide future land use plan includes a map that depicts where the community envisions types and densities of development. As well, the plan may address important resource areas to protect. Accompanying text describes future land use categories, compatible uses, incompatible uses and development densities. Special issue areas may include utility service areas, roads, open space development and waterfront development.
The future land use plan is a policy document designed to guide land use decisions over a given planning horizon, usually 20 years. By comparison, the zoning ordinance and zoning map is a local law that regulates how property can be developed today.

Land-use planning and zoning are governmental functions critical to public safety. However, because these functions are political as well, they are subject to intense differences of opinion and to public controversy. Therefore, they tend to lag behind development until the problem becomes aggravated. Being political they are also subject, even after enactment into law, to pressures for variances and modifications. With few exceptions, they cannot be made retroactive and, consequently, older developments are not much affected by them. Where land-use planning and zoning have been enforced, however, they have achieved significant degrees of fire safety (Oreg. St. Dep. For. 1978b, San Bernardino County Bd. Sup. 1974).

While building codes provide guidance on how to build in hazardous areas, planning and zoning activities direct development away from these areas, especially floodplains and wetlands. They do this by designating land uses that are compatible to the natural conditions of the land, such as open space or recreation in a flood plain, or by simply allowing developers more flexibility in arranging structures on a parcel of land through the planned development approach.

Capital improvement plans guide major public expenditures for communities for the next 5 to 20 years. Capital expenditures may include creating access roads and fire breaks, hazardous fuels reduction projects including community vegetation management, vegetation removal, and vegetation clearing and/or thinning, and retrofitting existing public structures against wildfire, etc.

Master plans, including the future land use plan, are implemented through zoning, capital improvement programs and recreation planning. Zoning is the primary tool used by most communities to implement their master plan. Zoning regulates the type, intensity and location of development in a community. As such, zoning provides communities a means to implement hazard mitigation strategies for land use development, which may include standards for private/public road construction; driveway standards; requirements for developments (such as subdivisions, condominium, commercial, recreational and industrial) to have two egress ingress roads; and house addresses to be displayed on 911 signs at the driveway end.

Another important zoning tool available to communities is the Planned Unit Development (PUD). Use of PUDs provides flexibility to both the community and developer to incorporate Firewise development standards. In high risk areas, PUD standards should include use of defensible zones, fuel breaks, road and driveway design, signage for street identification, ingress and egress roads, underground utilities and vegetative maintenance for managing dangerous fuel loads in high fire risk areas.