

Chapter 7 – Future Land Use

According to the US. Census Bureau, over the last decade South Branch Township experienced a 33.5 percent growth rate, adding 462 persons to its year round population. In percent growth rate, the Township was the second fastest growing community in the county. Additionally, the Township had the second largest numeric increase in population between 1990 and 2000. South Branch Township accounted for 23 percent of the County's population increase from 1990 to 2000. While residential growth is occurring in South Branch Township, according to the current land use inventory, 94 percent of the land area was classified as forest, farmland, non-forest open space, and wetlands. Six percent of the Township's land was used for urban related purposes, including extractive, commercial, industrial, utilities, institutional/recreational and residential development.

The next step in developing a Master Plan is to determine the types, location and intensities of development that will occur over the next twenty years. With the establishment of a Future Land Use Plan, South Branch Township intends to ensure that existing land uses such as residential, commercial and industrial can continue; that irreplaceable resources such as water, wetlands and forestlands and farmlands will be protected; and that reasonable growth can be accommodated with minimal land use conflicts or negative environmental impacts.

The Township Planning Commission with public input and assistance from NEMCOG developed future land use recommendations for South Branch Township. Recommendations are based on an analysis of several factors including: social and economic characteristics, environmental conditions, existing land uses, available community services and facilities, existing patterns of land divisions, current zoning and community goals and objectives.

Future Land Use Planning Areas

The community has identified seven categories of land use needed to serve future development needs. These categories are listed below. **Figure 7.1** is the Future Land Use Map of the South Branch Township, which depicts the locations of land use planning areas. This section will provide explanations of each land use planning area, including purpose, recommended development density and compatible uses. This future land use plan recognizes that existing parcels within future land use planning areas may be less than the recommended minimum lot size. The plan does not intend to restrict the construction of new residences or continued residential use of these existing parcels.

Future Land Use Planning Areas

- Resource Conservation
- Stream Corridors
- Forest Recreation
- Rural Residential
- General Residential
- Commercial
- Light Industrial

Resource Conservation

Location and Purpose: South Branch Township recognizes extensive areas of forests and wetlands contribute significantly to the quality of life and the rural character, which are valued by Township residents and visitors. The Resource Conservation category includes all of the U.S Forest Service and Michigan Department of Natural Resources lands, and privately owned lands (larger tracts, isolated parcels, and large wetland complexes). This category covers 65 percent of the township. Extensive jack pine forests provide critical Kirtland's Warbler nesting habitat. The Mason Tract, some 4,700 acres of land adjacent to the South Branch of the Au Sable River, provides high quality recreation and fishing opportunities. Large areas of the Resource Conservation planning areas are only accessible by seasonally maintained county roads. Locations recommended for this category are shown on the future land use map, **Figure 7.1**.

Uses: This plan encourages the retention of large tracts of lands, contiguous resource areas, river greenbelts, wetlands, scenic areas and wildlife habitat. The Resource Conservation category is designed to provide protection to environmentally sensitive areas, while allowing for very limited and low intensity residential development to occur. Primary uses to be encouraged in this category include hunting, fishing, skiing, hiking, camping, wildlife management and forestry management

Development Density: The Conservation category is designed to provide protection to environmentally sensitive areas, while allowing for very limited and low intensity development to occur. This development would be consistent with recreational and conservation uses. A development density of one dwelling per 20 acres is recommended for the category.

Other Development Considerations: To protect sensitive areas and maintain larger tracts available for other uses, clustering based on density equivalents (one house per twenty acres) should be encouraged. Additionally, gravel pits with site reclamation plans would be allowed, provided the activity is compatible with surrounding neighborhoods.

Stream Corridors

Location and Purpose: During the community input session, many participants spoke of the importance of the Au Sable River system to the health and well being of the community. The waterways played a pivotal role in the history of the community. Today, the river system is still the economic foundation and a key community asset. The stream corridor planning area borders all rivers and creeks in the township. The purpose of the stream corridor is to preserve, protect and enhance the river environment in a natural state for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. The Natural Rivers Act regulates activities including zoning and development along the Main Branch, North Branch and South Branch of the Au Sable Rivers; Beaver Creek, Douglas Creek; and Thayer Creek. It is the intention of the Township to support and administer Natural Rivers Act zoning for designated waterways.

Uses: The Natural Rivers Act regulates uses along designated rivers and tributaries. In addition, the stream corridor planning area includes all non-designated streams in the Township. Residential uses are considered compatible with the stream corridor planning area. This category supports the continuation of recreational based commercial operations such as canoe liveries, campgrounds and rental cabins. Industrial facilities and oil & gas extraction should not be located within the stream corridor areas.

Development Density: The Natural Rivers Act regulates development densities (minimum lot sizes) along designated rivers and tributaries. This plan recommends the same development density standards for non-designated tributaries as the Natural Rivers designated tributaries.

Other Development Considerations: The Natural Rivers Act regulates development standards such as waterfront setbacks, greenbelts, and lot widths along designated rivers and tributaries. This plan recommends the same development standards for non-designated tributaries as the Natural Rivers designated tributaries.

Forest Recreation

Location and Purpose: The Forest Recreation category is the second most extensive future land use category, covering 14 percent of the township. The land cover is a mix of upland forests, lowland forests and old farm fields. Both seasonal and year round homes are located in this area. Locations recommended for this category are shown on the future land use map, **Figure 7.1**. This category encourages the continuation of resource management and wildlands recreation activities. South Branch Township recognizes the presence of farmland as well as old farm fields contribute to the scenic and rural character valued by the Township residents. This land use designation is intended to encourage the continued existence of limited farming in the Township.

Uses: Along with low density residential uses, farming, forestry activities associated with timber and wildlife management would be considered compatible in this area. Other compatible uses include vacation homes, public and private conservation areas, hunting camps, parks, and playgrounds. **If designed to be compatible with surrounding neighborhoods, special uses such as recreational camps and clubs, home occupations, cottage industries/home based businesses, golf courses and resorts (recommended on twenty acres or more) would be allowed.**

Development Density: The plan recommends this category accommodates single family dwellings at an average density of one unit per five to ten acres. Larger residential lots provide privacy and tend to maintain ecological integrity of the natural resources. To protect sensitive areas and maintain larger tracts available for other uses, clustering based on density equivalents (one house per five acres) should be encouraged.

Other Development Considerations: Gravel pits with site reclamation plans would be allowed, provided the activity is compatible with surrounding neighborhoods. No municipal water or sewer service is planned for these areas. Buffers or physical separation from incompatible uses (commercial and industrial) are necessary when Forest Recreation areas are located next to more intensive development. The plan further recommends incorporating open space development options, native vegetation greenbelts, and landscaping requirements into the Zoning Ordinance.

Rural Residential

Location and Setting: The Rural Residential future land use area is located near the southern border of the township and functions as a transition from medium density residential to undeveloped natural resource areas. Current land cover is forest, old farm fields and active farmland, along with low density residential development. The large residential lots provide privacy from neighbors and/or other development.

Uses: The Rural Residential development category is designed to accommodate single family dwellings. Existing farming and forestry activities are considered compatible. Special uses may be allowed if they are designed to be compatible with the residential setting. Special uses to be considered include home occupations contained within the dwelling; cottage industries/home based businesses, bed and breakfast facility; churches and associated structures; parks and playgrounds; schools, child care facilities, libraries; community buildings and publicly owned buildings; public utility buildings; publicly owned and operated parks; and farms.

Development Density: This category is designed to accommodate single family dwellings at an average density of one unit per two acres. Non-residential uses require larger minimum lot areas and should be established according to the type and intensity of use.

Other Development Considerations: Additional provisions are recommended to be incorporated into the Zoning Ordinance to allow for a cluster development pattern to avoid or minimize development impacts on environmentally sensitive areas, forests or farmland. No municipal water or sewer service will be available

General Residential

Location and Setting: The General Residential category is intended to preserve existing residential development where land has already been subdivided into smaller lots and to expand specific areas for future residential growth. These areas are concentrated in the southwest corner of the township. Forest Dunes residential/golf course development is also included in the category.

Uses: Principal uses include single family dwellings and two-family dwellings. Where compatible with residential uses, other uses to be considered include multi-family dwellings, home occupations contained within the dwelling, neighborhood services, churches, schools and libraries, group homes per state law, utilities, bed and breakfast facilities, parks and playgrounds, community buildings and publicly owned buildings, public utility buildings, golf courses and publicly owned and operated parks. The Townships should require site plan review and special approval for all uses other than individual single and two family homes.

Development Density: The General Residential development category is primarily designed to accommodate single-family dwellings on lots with a typical size of 15,000 sq. feet to two acres. Older platted subdivision areas contain lots created prior to implementation of the zoning ordinance. These lots-of-record are smaller than minimal lot sizes in current residential zoning requirements. Future development regulations should recognize these conditions and provide for the reasonable continuance of their use and character.

Other Development Considerations: Due to a lack of public water and sewer service available, higher density residential uses, such as apartments, townhouses, condominiums, mobile home parks, convalescent or nursing homes and manufactured home developments should be restricted. If adequately engineered wastewater disposal systems are included as part of the design, higher density development can be considered. It is also important to note that under state law, manufactured homes are allowed in any residential area if the structure meets all requirements set for site-built homes. Additionally, a manufactured home development would be compatible with the multiple-family portion of the residential area. However, given the soil limitations for septic system drain field operation, compact mobile home parks could not be accommodated unless adequately engineered wastewater disposal systems are included as part of the design.

Commercial

Location and Setting: At the present time commercial development is very limited in the Township. Existing business areas are located along M-18. The community has identified two areas to direct future commercial development. The commercial node located at the intersection of M-18 and M-72 includes publicly owned lands. This plan supports transfer of ownership of public lands adjacent to the intersection.

Development Density: Commercial lots along major roads with higher traffic volumes and higher speed limits should have widths that can accommodate recommended driveway spacing in MDOT's access management guidebook for local communities. For example, at speed limits of 55 mph, driveways should be spaced at least 455 feet apart. As an alternative, narrower lots would be acceptable if frontage roads or shared driveways are incorporated in development plans. Access management will preserve the safety and efficiency of travel; preserve community character; advance economic development goals; and protect the substantial public investment in roads and highways.

Uses and Development Considerations: Commercial developments in rural, recreational based tourism townships tend to serve local residents and visitors. Compatible uses include retail sales, gas stations/convenience stores, restaurants, personal services, and office uses. Businesses should have adequate buffers separating operations from residential and resource uses. Access management, shared driveways and parking lots, stormwater management, groundwater protection, pedestrian access, landscaping, buffering, signage, billboards, traffic and pedestrian safety, and outdoor lighting should be considered in development plans. Roadside landscaping to maintain traffic safety and minimize any negative visual impacts of development should be required along the main roads. Larger scale commercial development often needs municipal water and sewer or may need a satellite water or sewer system.

Other Considerations: State law grants the authority to regulate billboards along state and federal highways to townships, cities and villages, but not to counties. Therefore it is recommended the Township adopt a billboard ordinance to regulate billboards along M-18 and M-72.

Light Industrial

Location and Setting: The communities have identified the need to improve employment opportunities and expand the local tax base. Industrial future land use areas are located at nodes along M-18. Much of the identified areas are publicly owned lands and it is the intention

to pursue land exchange or purchase to accommodate future development. The Township acknowledges there are industrial sites and industrial parks in adjacent neighboring communities such as Roscommon and Grayling. In the short term and for some types of industrial uses, development should be guided into those existing facilities.

Uses: The light industrial future land use category is designed to provide sites for wholesale activities, warehouses, major repair operations, retail operations that require large outside storage areas, and light manufacturing. These more intense uses require site plans and in some cases a special use permit. Operations are subject to performance standards relative to impacts on the community. This district is compatible with a business district, but not compatible with residential districts without a required buffer.

Development Density: Recommended minimum lots sizes would be two acres.

Other Development Considerations: Developments should consider access management, buffering, signs, stormwater management, groundwater protection and landscaping to maintain traffic safety and minimize any negative visual impacts of development along the main roads. Larger scale development often needs municipal water and sewer or may need a satellite water or sewer system. Manufacturing and warehousing development should be located on all-season roads. State law grants the authority to regulate billboards along state and federal highways to townships, cities and villages, but not to counties. Therefore it is recommended the Township adopt a billboard ordinance to regulate billboards along M-18 and M-72.

Special Issue Areas

Roads

Money for maintaining county roads comes from state and local sources. The Township pays part of the cost of upgrading roads to a paved surface. The Township intends to work cooperatively with the Crawford County Road Commission to implement a coordinated asset management program to maintain and improve the road network. However, there are no intentions on upgrading the entire gravel road network to a paved road network. To address safety, maintenance and possible conversion to public ownership, it is recommended the Townships develop and adopt private road standards.

Open Space Development

Concentrations of subdivisions tend to destroy rural character by converting natural and agricultural open spaces to suburban characteristics of homes with manicured lawns. Through the use of clustering homes and limiting the size of improved lawns to smaller *development pads*, developers can preserve substantial areas of space in each subdivision. Where possible, these preserved open space areas should be made visible from adjacent roads and properties.

Methods communities have employed to help protect and preserve privately held forest and farm lands while protecting a landowner's economic investment include the Purchase of Development Rights (PDR), conservation open space development standards, clustering requirements for residential uses, and tax breaks or incentives for continuing forestry and farming use. The conservation open space residential and commercial development design standards are effective means to preserve scenic views, rural character, farmland, meadows, woodlands, steep slopes and wetlands with a target of preserving at least 50 percent of the land within a development. It is recommended that these alternatives be investigated for possible

application in South Branch Township as a way to balance economic rights with wildlands preservation goals. Incorporating open space requirements into Planned Unit Development zoning is a means of achieving this goal. The Township should consider incorporating Planned Unit Development options as special uses in residential, commercial and industrial zoning districts.

Community Facilities

Surface and groundwater protection is a primary goal of South Branch Township's long range planning effort. This plan recognizes compact development such as existing development along waterways and older small lot subdivision development may someday require public or common water and sewer facilities. While specific sites have not been identified, the Township wishes to recognize potential future needs and the necessity to pursue grant funding to implement common or community water and sewer facilities.

Resource Protection and Management

This plan supports the retention of managed public and private forest lands in the township. Jack pine and oak forests are the predominate forest types, and are prone to wildfires. Timber management and regeneration of mature stands are key to reducing fuel build-up and threats to wildfires. The rural forested landscape is valued in the township. A technique for maintaining a forested atmosphere is to hide development from adjacent roads and properties. Arranging lots and internal subdivision roads to use hills and ridges on the site is an effective way to hide homes, outbuildings, and lawns. Use of woodlands and existing native vegetation may also make very effective screens for all types of development.

Wetlands are a limited resource in the Township. The protection and preservation of these plant communities is encouraged. Wetlands can be preserved through use of conservation cluster residential development, conservation easements or fee simple purchase by local and state government. A minimum 50 feet natural vegetation buffer should be maintained around all wetlands. Foot trails used for recreation would be acceptable in this buffer area. Other types of development such as roads, parking lots, buildings, septic systems, stormwater detention facilities and lawns are not considered acceptable uses within the wetlands or associated buffer areas.

Hazard Mitigation

The Crawford County Hazard Mitigation Plan identified wildfires as the number one natural hazard. Given the predominance of jack pine forests, South Branch Township is a community at risk. Timber management to reduce fuel buildup at the urban-wildlands interface should be encouraged. The plan supports implementation of a community wide Firewise program. This includes use of supplemental development standards and site plan review through zoning regulations and a landowner education program.

