

Whitewater Township Planning Principles, Goals, and Implementation

Ultimately, a community master plan must chart a course for the future. While a community's vision for itself in the future can be expressed in multiple ways, the essential elements of community planning come down to defining where a community "wants to go" and implementation steps describing "how it intends to get there."

The steps to define "where Whitewater Township intends to go" began by revisiting the goals described in the 2015 Master Plan. This review revealed the fact that the four master plan goals (and bullets thereunder) are not goals in a strict sense but rather are general statements about what Whitewater Township values and hopes to encourage. These overarching principles are pertinent to many local planning issues but do not articulate a clear policy or provide actionable steps forward. They can, however, be used as a framework for more specific, actionable goals and implementation steps.

In considering and developing more specific community goals, two major considerations were to view them through the lens of current community attitudes (survey and workshops) and use a framework called "SMART goals" as much as possible. SMART goals help to define clear, realistic, and measurable targets. SMART is an acronym that stands for:

Specific: The goal should be well-defined and clear.

Measurable: The goal should have criteria for measuring progress and success.

Achievable: The goal should be attainable and not impossible.

Realistic: The goal should be within reach and relevant.

Time-bound: The goal should have a clear start and end date.

Given the development of SMART goals, implementation steps in a community master plan often fall into two general categories. First, policies are developed to help the community respond to future requests for action or provide guidance for future actions as opportunities present themselves. This might include information on how to respond to future rezoning requests. Second, initiatives are developed to define action items that must be completed to achieve something. This might include developing new zoning standards, procedures, or special planning studies to address a key issue. Defined initiatives should be associated with a sense of priority and timeframe.

Planning Principle: Respect the Rights of the Township Residents and Property Owners.

Context: The rights of residents and property owners can be infringed upon in several ways. These include:

1. No one is served by poorly drafted or ambiguous zoning requirements that create confusion, permitting delays, and legal challenges.
2. A lack of consistent zoning enforcement can leave property owners unprotected from nuisances and diminish property values.
3. Blighted areas in Whitewater Township reduce property values and discourage investment.
4. Existing permitted and special uses in various zoning districts may create land use conflicts (i.e., residential uses are currently allowed in the industrial zone).
5. Effective and reasonable landscaping requirements in the zoning ordinance can mitigate visual and noise impacts between dissimilar land uses.

Potential Goals	Initiative	Policy
1. Have a clear, well-organized, and effective Zoning Ordinance. This includes current and future steps to improve the clarity of the existing zoning ordinance so that requirements and standards are unambiguous. This also includes preparing, updating, and adopting a Zoning Map linked to the Zoning Ordinance that plainly defines the boundaries of all zoning districts.	X	
2. Effectively address blight in Whitewater Township. Specific steps include updating the Township Junk Ordinance (38) (and any other related ordinance) as necessary and providing for an effective enforcement mechanism as required to ensure compliance.	X	
3. Reduce future land use conflicts in Whitewater Township. Presently, the Whitewater Township Zoning Ordinance is cumulative (for example, all uses are permitted in the Industrial Zoning District). Specific steps include a review of all permitted and special uses in <u>all</u> zoning districts to ensure that they are generally harmonious and compatible. This is also an ongoing process as new land uses and development trends emerge.	X	X
4. Provide effective landscaping and buffering requirements in the Zoning Ordinance. Specific steps include reviewing and updating existing landscaping requirements, particularly regarding buffering, lighting, and noise for land uses that may have off-site impacts.	X	
5. Have and maintain effective regulations regarding higher-density residential development. Specific steps include a review of permitted density, required open space, parking area locations, lighting, etc. This is also an ongoing process as development trends emerge.	X	X
6. Have and maintain practical regulations concerning alternative energy facilities in Whitewater Township. Specific steps include creating basic regulations to allow for the development of local alternative energy production (solar panels, wind). Such regulations provide safeguards to mitigate off-site impacts. This is also an ongoing process as technology evolves.	X	X

Planning Principle: Preserve Whitewater Township's Rural Character

Context: Residents value the rural character of Whitewater Township and want to preserve it. Additionally:

1. To residents, the area's rural character is the presence of orchards, farm stands, other agricultural land, woodlots and forests, and extended views of undeveloped land across the landscape.
2. Preserving rural character also includes protecting the environmental integrity of the Township floodplains, wetlands, watersheds, and water bodies.
3. Land east of Cook Road on M-72 is largely zoned A-1.
4. There is strong support for agricultural tourism as a broad category of activities that can include roadside stands, u-pick operations, and other activities incidental to the operation of a farm that brings members of the public to the farm for educational, recreational, or retail purposes.

Potential Goals	Initiative	Policy
1. Have regulatory tools necessary to help maintain rural character. Specific steps include a focused effort to identify and evaluate potential new tools to minimize impacts on rural character. Primary options include 1) a focus on permitted density (units per acre to keep housing units more spread out) and/or 2) more stringent requirements on landscape design (home placements, retaining natural vegetation, native plantings, visual blocks, etc.).	X	
2. Maintain the rural qualities of M-72 east of Cook Road. Land next to M-72 and east of Cook Road is now zoned Agricultural (A-1). The policy of Whitewater Township should be to discourage rezoning of Agriculturally-zoned land on M-72 east of Cook Road to Commercial (C-1) or other more intensive development zoning districts.		X
3. Create an improved PUD Zoning District that developers are inclined to use. Specific steps include updating the existing PUD Zoning District to include regulatory incentives. A PUD should be an attractive option, allowing for residential density to be clustered with the preservation of unique environmental and landscape features that contribute to rural character.	X	
4. Review and update zoning requirements to further support agricultural tourism. Specific steps include reviewing existing zoning requirements for roadside stands, farm markets, u-pick operations, and other related activities incidental to farm operations. A zoning amendment would be necessary to align requirements with desirable development activity.	X	
5. Develop consensus about the desirability of voluntary or mandatory architectural design guidelines. Local preferences point toward favoring architectural styles that reflect rural qualities. Voluntary or mandatory architectural design guidelines could be based on survey and open house findings and additional study to articulate desirable features to be included in new construction.	X	
6. Eliminate the R-1 Zoning District along the creeks and tributaries. Presently, land along streams and tributaries in Whitewater Township is zoned R-1 (a higher density and more intensive zoning district than A-1). This encourages more development in areas generally regarded as environmentally sensitive (wetlands/floodplains). Specific steps include rezoning such property to A-1 (like adjacent property).	X	
7. Update the existing "Road Plan" for Whitewater Township. Specific steps include reviewing the current Road Plan in the context of seeking the designation of local roads as Natural Beauty Roads per the Natural Beauty Road Act (Act 451 of the Public Acts of 1994). Such designation provides some protections concerning mowing, use of herbicides, tree removal, etc.	X	
8. Re-evaluate the repeal of Article 27. Article 27 contained regulations for Environmentally sensitive areas (wetlands, steep slopes, shorelines, etc.). This Article was eliminated in 2019. While this article may have shortcomings, some useful requirements should be considered for reinstated in a new zoning amendment. A review of Article 27 is warranted, and a replacement should be considered as necessary to address important issues.	X	

Planning Principle: Build a Sense of Community

Context: Like many small rural communities, Whitewater Township lacks a defined downtown and sense of place common in cities and villages. However, Williamsburg was once a commercial center, but many buildings are now gone. Additionally:

1. Three out of four survey respondents want to encourage redevelopment of Williamsburg, north of M-72, into a downtown-type setting with small-scale retail, commercial services, restaurants, and upper-floor housing.
2. Most, if not all, of the land uses in Williamsburg (south of M-72) are now residential (except for the Township Hall and the Methodist Church).
3. Places for social and cultural activities and interaction (farmers market, car shows, concerts, senior programs, etc.) are limited (except for the township park).
4. The area west of Elk Lake Road and North of M-72 is zoned "V."
5. Residents point to the need to develop more convenient bike trails and walking paths in Whitewater Township. More non-motorized transportation options in Whitewater Township would help build a sense of community.

Potential Goals	Initiative	Policy
1. Evaluate permitted uses and development standards in the "V" Village Zoning District (North of M-72 and east of Elk Lake Road) to ensure they align with the development concept of a downtown-type setting with small-scale retail, commercial services, restaurants, and upper-floor housing. Steps toward this goal may include preparing and refining land use sketches showing building mass, placement, and parking area locations. This is followed by a zoning amendment(s) to eliminate regulatory barriers to a desirable development pattern.	X	
2. Pursue opportunities to develop a corridor plan for M-72 with the newly created Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and associated potential funding. Such a plan would identify ways to manage access to adjacent property as it develops to lessen congestion and increase traffic safety. This potentially includes topics such as future signals, roundabouts, access roads, combined access drives, turn lanes, deceleration lanes, etc., and allows for coordinated land use and transportation planning.	X	X
3. Encourage investigations into discovering feasible central water and sewer options to support more intensive development in Williamsburg. Continue to study and support investigations into possible central water and sewer options to reduce concerns over pollution and water supply and to support more intensive development in Williamsburg proper.		X
4. Develop a general non-motorized plan for Whitewater Township. Such a plan defines opportunities for bike and walking trails and creates a list of long and near-term projects that would connect to a regional non-motorized network and community facilities such as parks and schools. It may include paved road shoulders and standalone trails. Emerging partnerships include TART, the Grand Traverse County Road Commission, and the newly formed MPO.	X	
5. Create a local community development foundation (CDF) or establish partnerships with existing CDF's. Encourage and support the creation of a local community development foundation to assist with community projects related to education, environmental projects, or economic development efforts. Such an entity could be a local non-profit corporation, or partnerships with entities such as the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation could be formed or strengthened.	X	
6. Maintain and Develop Partnerships with the Elk Rapids School District. A focus on the Mill Creek School is warranted, given current enrollment and facility issues. At the same time, a growing community raises issues about needs such as libraries, senior centers, and related public space needs. Coordinated planning (especially regarding facilities and public buildings) is desirable and warranted.		X
7. Attract and encourage redevelopment in the "V" Village Zoning District (North of M-72 and east of Elk Lake Road). This might include partnerships with the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and other local or regional economic development entities.		X

Planning Principle: Encourage Economic Opportunities

Context: Whitewater Township is pro-business and seeks to provide an environment wherein people can succeed economically. Additionally:

1. Whitewater Township has an industrial area (generally south of MN-72, West of Williamsburg Rd and east of Moore Road). It is home to several light industrial uses that provide jobs and a local tax base.
2. The M-72 corridor (west of Cook Road) presents opportunities for new commercial development. Residents generally desire smaller building footprints (75,000 square feet or less), mixed uses (potentially retail, services, office, residential, etc.), controlled signage, limited driveways, limited site lighting, and extensive landscaping.

Potential Goals	Initiative	Policy
1. Pursue designation as a “Redevelopment Ready Community” through the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC). This certification process signals that a community has clear development policies and procedures, a community-supported vision, a predictable review process, and compelling sites for developers to locate their latest projects.		X
2. Update the C-1 (Commercial) Zoning District. Specific steps include reviewing permitted uses, special uses, and development standards (lot sizes, setbacks, and maximum building size limitations align with desired development scenarios). Potential updates in a future zoning amendment align with the community survey results and feedback from the open house.	X	
3. Update the N-1 (Industrial) Zoning District. Specific steps include reviewing permitted uses, special uses, and development standards (lot sizes, setbacks, and maximum building size limitations) to align with desired development scenarios. Particular attention should be focused on uses currently allowed that are not industrial.	X	
4. Develop consensus about the desirability of voluntary or mandatory architectural design guidelines in C-1 (Commercial). Determine if architectural design guidelines (voluntary or mandatory) are appropriate to further rural character in new non-residential buildings in the C-1 Zone. Local preferences point toward favoring architectural styles that reflect rural qualities. Voluntary or mandatory architectural design guidelines could be based on survey and open house findings and additional study to articulate desirable features to be included in new construction.	X	
5. Address the issue of Short-Term-Rentals (STR) in Whitewater Township. Zoning regulations should be clarified, and new / updated regulations should reflect recent survey results and other feedback obtained through the Master Plan process. Any steps forward in terms of new or revised regulations should take into account any legislative changes at the state level.	X	
6. Define and capitalize on the potential to use existing rail networks. The existing rail line west of the post office may present development/redevelopment opportunities for Whitewater Township. This might include new recreation attractions such as utilizing abandoned railways for rail bikes or other forms of transportation. Whitewater Township should encourage and support efforts to use this existing rail bed and right-of-way for purposes that help stimulate redevelopment of this area.		X
7. Invest in township facilities as development catalysts. Township and public facilities (such as EMS, fire protection, township hall, etc.) are necessary to support quality public services. From a planning perspective, there are opportunities to co-locate facilities in ways that help support development and redevelopment. The Township Board, Planning Commission, and School Board should maintain close communication and collaboration to ensure related decisions create synergy, efficiency, and development catalysts where possible.		X