

Chapter 5 TRANSPORTATION AND OTHER INFRASTRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter briefly examines the infrastructure policy necessary to implement the vision described in Chapter 2, and the future land use and zoning recommendations in Chapters 3 and 4. The word “infrastructure” is used broadly to refer to the large-scale public systems, services, and facilities within the county that are necessary for economic activity and improved quality of life, including: roads, airports, harbors, public transportation, non-motorized transportation, public sewer and water, communications, power, schools, medical facilities, police and fire facilities, local government facilities, and parks and recreation facilities. For a description of Mason County Infrastructure see Chapter 6 Transportation, and Chapter 7 Public Facilities and Physical Services in the [Mason County Data Book](#).

TRANSPORTATION

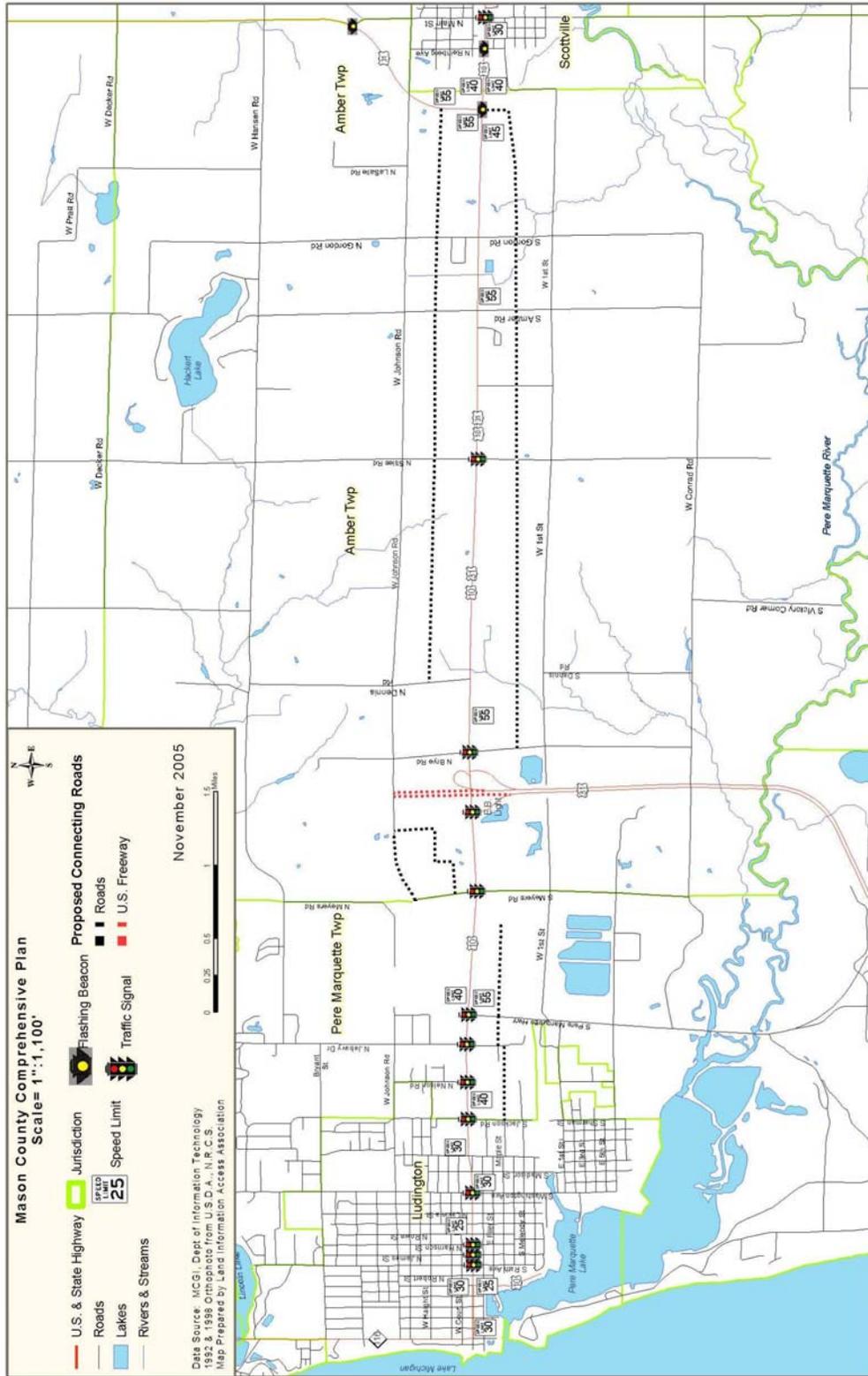
Roads

A quality system of interconnected city streets, county roads and state highways is the most essential component that facilitates economic activity, and for most people, daily life. The road system in Mason County is well established, largely in very good condition and in key places has considerable excess capacity to accommodate traffic growth for many decades. It is very important that this system be properly maintained and incrementally expanded when the need for such expansion is evident. In most cases, road (as well as sewer and water) expansion costs should be borne by the private sector as each new business, subdivision or condominium development is constructed. In a few cases there is a growing need to expand the existing street network to improve traffic safety and flow in congested areas.

The future development proposed in Chapter 3 along US-10/US-31 will create large traffic congestion problems unless a parallel road system is also constructed, and unless at the appropriate time, both Johnson and First Streets are improved for all season traffic between US-31 (freeway) and Scottville. Parallel roads will take local trips off of US-10/US-31 and allow it to continue to serve longer distance travelers well. The public, through MDOT, has made an enormous investment in converting this segment to five lanes with paved shoulders and it would be inappropriate to allow new development to usurp this capacity without building parallel roads to handle the new local traffic. Such a requirement will take changes to the County Zoning Ordinance to properly implement.

Map 5-1 illustrates the location of proposed new roads along this vital corridor. Improvements west of the US-31 interchange with US-10 will likely be paid for with a combination of public and private sources, whereas those east of Dennis Road on the north side of US-10/US-31 and east of Brye Road on the south side are likely to be paid for by private funds as development proceeds. It may be necessary for developers to build longer segments and then enter into payback agreements with abutting property owners, or for the county to bond for some of the segments and be paid back by special assessment of the benefiting properties. These and other financing options should be explored at the appropriate time.

Map 5-1 Proposed New Connecting Roads



The justification for these roads and their integral relationship to access management issues is explained in detail in the Mason County US-10/US-31 Access Management Plan which is adopted by reference as a part of this Plan.

Access Management

Along the non-freeway segments of US-10 and US-31 throughout Mason County are dozens of unnecessary existing driveways, poorly designed driveways, driveways that are too close to intersections and other driveways, unconnected parking lots and few service drives. This leads to unnecessary risks of traffic crashes, congestion and reduced traffic flow. Over time, these problems can all be corrected, or at least improved, and future problems can be prevented through a coordinated system of local access management regulations. That means vehicular crashes can be minimized, damage to vehicles reduced, and personal injuries and deaths can be prevented. Such a benefit cannot be readily calculated, but it is huge, well worth doing and well within the ability of local governments in the county to achieve.

Representatives of the City of Ludington, Pere Marquette Charter Township, Amber Township, City of Scottville, Village of Custer, Grant Township, Mason County Road Commission, Mason County Planning Commission and MDOT worked cooperatively for six months in 2005 to identify problem areas along US-10/US-31 and develop cooperative solutions. These are embodied in the Mason County US-10/US-31 Access Management Plan.

It is very important that each of these jurisdictions with zoning authority adopt a common access management ordinance so that uniform standards are in place to guide future driveway and related access decisions consistent with the recommendations in the Access Management Plan. A sample ordinance is provided in the Appendix of the Access Management Plan to facilitate such action. Periodic meetings to discuss proposed development along the corridor using common site plan review procedures is also essential to consistent implementation of access management regulations. A mechanism for such meetings is described in the Access Management Plan.

Photo 5-1

Access Management Can Improve Traffic Safety



Photo by Mark Wyckoff

Highway Noise

A little considered, but very important future issue will be the impact of noise that comes from high speed highways—and in particular, the freeway portion of US-31. Currently traffic along this freeway segment is very low (for a freeway). Similarly, existing land use adjacent to the freeway is largely limited to farming, very low density residential and the pumped storage facility—so very few people are negatively affected by highway noise. But highway noise will rise as traffic volumes increase. While existing land uses are not proposed to be changed over the life of this Plan, it will be important to understand that if any new subdivisions are approved within 1/6 mile of the freeway portion of US-31, that those developments are not eligible for future noise walls or other noise mitigation measures, should highway noise become a problem. This is because both federal and state policies do not cover highway noise mitigation in this situation where the noise sensitive land use (like a residential subdivision) moves in close to the highway noise source—after the highway was constructed. The cost for any future noise mitigation measures would have to be borne by the landowners in the subdivision.

Of course such a situation is highly preventable by only allowing noise compatible land uses next to highways. These include agricultural, forestry, and open space uses (among others). If noise sensitive land uses like homes, churches and schools are proposed next to the highway, they should be required to be sound proofed and designed to minimize highway noise impacts. MDOT is working on sample zoning regulations and design guidelines to assist local governments with this task. The County Planning Commission should be alert to future opportunities to reduce the negative impacts of highway noise through various noise compatible land use planning and regulatory techniques.

Airport

The Mason County Airport is an important asset for attracting some types of economic development. It is an important asset that should be carefully managed and maintained to meet the demand for air travel and air freight shipment. The airport overlay zone in the County Zoning Ordinance is an important vehicle for ensuring the height of future structures do not exceed maximums established via the ordinance.

Harbor

The Ludington Harbor is a unique asset that is home not only to a Lake Michigan crossing that links both parts of US-10, but it also permits deep draft ships to dock in the harbor. The future potential economic benefits of this asset should never be underestimated, nor should future deep draft vessel opportunities be foreclosed.

Public Transit

Presently the county has a limited “dial-a-ride” service that provides public transportation to a small clientele. However, for many of those served, it is an important lifeline to work, medical care, shopping and education. As more people retire to Mason County and the existing population ages, and as new jobs develop along the US-10/US-31 corridor, the demand for fixed route, short headway, public transit service between Ludington and Scottville will grow. It will be important for the county to stay on top of this rising demand and to take the necessary steps, in cooperation with other benefited parties and jurisdictions, to provide public transit at a level of service necessary to meet the needs of an expanding ridership. Implementation of the proposed future land use arrangement described in Chapter 3 (especially the new residential) along the US-10/US-31 corridor will significantly improve the potential for expanded ridership and may speed the availability of fixed route service.

Non-Motorized Transportation

A well coordinated and integrated system of pedestrian sidewalks, bicycle trails and pathways that link common destinations is critical to a high quality of life and to active healthy living. The most important livability improvement a city or village can usually make is to add an integrated sidewalk system if it does not already have one. Similar livability benefits can occur in townships—even very rural ones—if the pathways are connected and lead to common destinations like schools, recreation facilities and retail areas. Key parts of such a system are already in place in the county, but expansion is necessary in order to reach critical mass where use levels are high. In rural areas, trails should be designed for bicycle and pedestrian use in the summer and snowshoeing, cross country skiing and snowmobile use in the winter.

Railroad Service

Map 3-3, Future Land Use shows a major concentration of new business and industrial development south of US-10/US-31 between Ludington and Scottville. This policy is largely premised on the continued availability of excellent road and rail service, as well as public sewer and water. Quality rail service was provided to Mason County long before the current quality road service. Important employers such as Oxy Chem rely on rail service for both in- and out-bound shipments. Retention of long term rail service to this corridor (and beyond into Lake County and then south to Grand Rapids) should remain an economic development and transportation priority in Mason County. Rail service from Walhalla to Manistee also presents opportunities for new economic development in Fountain and Free Soil and should also be retained.

Photo 5-2
Cartier Park Trails



PUBLIC SEWER AND WATER

For most new commercial, office or industrial development in Michigan, and for all higher density residential development, the presence of both public sewer and water is an essential element for economic viability. In most rural communities, these public services are either in limited supply, or are not associated with a quality road system that has

underutilized capacity. Yet on the US-10/US-31 corridor from Ludington to Scottville, these elements are all in place. Rather than spending significant public and private resources to build new sewer and water infrastructure elsewhere, it is most cost-effective to wisely use the infrastructure that is already in place. The future land use pattern and staging plan presented in Chapter 3 proposes to do this along US-10/US-31. As each new increment of development takes place, the sewer and water would be extended out from US-10/US-31 and linked to create loops with adjacent development. This would occur as the new streets in this area were constructed. It will be necessary to ensure that the site plan review standards in the County Zoning Ordinance adequately require use of public sewer and water by extending existing public sewer and water infrastructure as each new development occurs. It is also important to ensure that new development does not underutilize property. Since property served by both sewer and water is a relatively scarce commodity, it is important that as each new development occurs, it is dense and intensely uses these vital urban services so that there is little pressure to develop on rural land elsewhere in the County where there are limited public services. Another important policy is to not extend public sewer or water into any areas not shown as a community service area on Map 3-1.

Small villages that lack sewer or water service and wish to provide expanded land uses may need assistance from the county in backing bonds for installation of sewer or water service. However, except for Custer, these should be freestanding facilities and not extensions of the existing sewer and water service along US-10/US-31, or else other rural parts of the county will be subject to sprawl and the desired intensity of use along the US-10/US-31 corridor will not occur.

COMMUNICATIONS

The lines between traditional communication competitors such as television, radio, internet and telephone, are rapidly being obscured. The lines will continue to blur for some time. The important concern for Mason County is not to get lost in the transformation. High speed communications are essential to contemporary business models and to a high quality of personal and family life. Any opportunities the county has to assist in upgrading communication options should be seized. A dozen urban communities in Michigan are in the process of offering high speed wireless service to all businesses and citizens. Oakland County is among them. While the resources available to Oakland County far outpace those available to Mason County, the benefits to future job and residential growth in the county cannot be overlooked. While no rural county in Michigan has yet gone down this path, some will. When the opportunity is ripe, Mason County needs to be ready. The early adapters will have a significant leg up on the last ones in, and when it comes to attracting new high tech economic development (every community's dream), high speed communications is essential.

NATURAL GAS & ELECTRIC

The presence of natural gas and all phase electric service is another critical component of new job producing development and higher density residential development. Again, these services are already available in the corridor targeted for future development between Ludington and Scottville. Public resources should not be spent to promote improvements to natural gas or electricity service elsewhere in the county unless there are extenuating benefits.

SCHOOLS

High quality K-12 educational facilities have long been a factor in attracting new businesses to a community, because it is easier to attract employees to an area with a reputation for quality schools. This reason alone (and there are many more) justifies a huge public effort to build and maintain quality schools. It is at least as important to ensure that the West Shore Community College remain a viable institution which produces graduates that employers need. New businesses are attracted to areas that have a well-trained workforce, and the necessary vehicles (like a community college) to quickly train many more workers. Continuing education opportunities are also of growing interest to retired persons and few sources of local circulating income are more stable than the pensions of retired persons. In short, there is never too much importance placed on building and maintaining a quality educational system in a community. While the county has little ability to influence decisions related to improvements to public schools, it should always help facilitate decisions that improve the economic competitiveness of the county and that help to better meet the educational needs of its citizens. When it comes to siting new school facilities, the county should be an active player and attempt to strongly influence siting decisions so that new school facilities are located in already developed or developing areas and strongly discourage, if not prevent the location of new schools in rural locations without adequate public roads, sewer and water facilities.

MEDICAL FACILITIES

Rural communities are often at a significant disadvantage when it comes to attracting new jobs because they have limited medical facilities. However, Mason County has a much broader range of medical facilities, including a hospital, within the county than is typical. Again this is an economic development and quality of life asset that should not be overlooked. As with schools, the county has little direct ability to influence the scope and quality of available medical facilities, but it should always try to facilitate improvements that enhance the ability to attract new jobs and better meet the medical needs of its residents.

POLICE AND FIRE FACILITIES

Presently the police, firefighting and EMS services within Mason County are being adequately met through a series of inter-jurisdictional cooperative agreements and private sector contracts. This is a great way to cost-effectively provide the needed services. However, future physical facilities like fire halls and police stations should be located within established developed areas so that these new public facilities do not contribute to sprawl.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACILITIES

The same can be said about city, village, township and county general government buildings. They should be located within established cities, villages or well developed suburban areas--not in the "middle of nowhere." Where and how the public spends

infrastructure dollars greatly influences private sector spending on new development. The public sector should lead by engaging in new facility siting practices that result in locations that are consistent with the policies of this Plan, and those of the County Zoning Ordinance. Similarly, the public should always build buildings using quality materials that last, and use well designed exteriors so as to set the bar on quality design for the private sector to emulate.

PARKS & RECREATION FACILITIES

Last but not least, the number, size, location and characteristics of public parks and recreation facilities in the county has a lot to do with citizen contentment over quality of life. The state park and federal forests in Mason County are very important resources in this regard, but alone they cannot meet the daily recreation needs of local citizens. Active living leads to healthy people and high satisfaction over living choices. It also leads to fewer and often less serious medical needs. Thus, it is important that local parks and recreation facilities be constructed and maintained in locations that best meet the needs of the people who will use them. The county has and regularly updates a County Park and Recreation Plan that contains an inventory of existing county park and recreation facilities, needs and a strategy for future improvements. That Plan is a prerequisite to eligibility for many state and federal funds targeted at park and recreation facilities. It is very important for the county to continue to prepare and periodically update a County Park and Recreation Plan and then go after state and federal funds to help pay for future parkland acquisition and improvement.