

Chapter Two

HILLSDALE TOWNSHIP: TODAY and TOMORROW

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental purpose of this Plan is to establish a basis upon which Hillsdale Township can plan for the land use and public services needs of its future residents. Prior to the preparation of this Plan, Hillsdale Township adopted the position that it wanted to be actively involved in guiding and shaping future growth and development in the community and not allow the community to evolve merely by chance. A key question which the Township must answer in this regard is: *“What should Hillsdale Township be like in the future?”* This important question has to be answered at the onset if this Plan is to present a sound strategy for future land use and public services. Just as an architect has to first identify the desired components of a building before specific construction plans can be prepared, so Hillsdale Township had to identify its desired future character and characteristics. Only then can strategies be developed to reach the Township’s goals.

The purpose of this Chapter is to provide a brief overview of the Township as it exists today and the intended character of the Township in the coming years. A more detailed discussion of existing conditions in the Township can be found in the Appendix. The chapter concludes with a review of important planning issues in light of existing conditions and the desired future character of the Township.

HILLSDALE TOWNSHIP TODAY

Hillsdale Township is a small quiet community of approximately 1965 persons and has been increasing 6% per year. It is located in the far south central region of Michigan, 15 miles north of Indiana in the central region of Hillsdale County. Access to the Hillsdale Township area is facilitated primarily by M-99 and US-12.

The congressional borders of the Township form an 18 square mile rectangle, six miles long by three miles wide; an area half the size of the traditional congressional six mile by six mile square (36 square miles) township in southern Michigan. While the congressional boundaries of the Township cover 18 square miles, the political borders of the township only cover approximately 13.2 square miles due to the presence of the City of Hillsdale in the Township’s central area. The City of Hillsdale is an urbanized community of approximately 8,500 persons located along M-99. It has the traditional urban services including public sewer and water, electric, police and fire protection, and commercial and industrial activities.

Of the approximately 8,400 acres comprising the Township, 43% are devoted to agriculture and are spread throughout except in the far western quarter. An additional 33% of the Township area is characterized by woodlands and wetlands. The majority of the Township’s woodlands are located within a mile of its southern and western boundaries, and some of the larger woodland stands cover 100 to 200 acres. The wetland areas vary in size, from less than two acres to over 200 acres, and are primarily located along the Township’s lakes and drainage corridors and within one

mile of the North, Middle, and South Sand Lake chain. Public services in Hillsdale Township are not extensive; the vast majority of households rely upon private septic systems and wells for their sewage disposal and potable water needs. The Hillsdale Board of Public Utilities provides public sewer and water service to a very limited area of the Township. Police protection is provided by the Hillsdale County Sheriff's Department and the Michigan State Police. Fire protection is provided by the Hillsdale Township Fire Department, and ambulance service is provided by Reading Ambulance Service. Zoning and Ordinance Issues are covered by the Zoning and Ordinance Officer.

The public recreational facility in the Township is 98 acre Lewis Emery Park in the southeastern portion of the Township, and operated by the Hillsdale County Parks Commission.

There is one Public Charter School in Hillsdale Township.

HILLSDALE TOWNSHIP TOMORROW

HILLSDALE TOWNSHIP VISION STATEMENT

We, the Hillsdale Township Planning Commission (HTPC) believe the Township in the coming years will grow at the six to eight percent rate that it has grown in the recent past. The HTPC wishes to maintain the fundamental qualities which have made Hillsdale Township such a desirable place to live. The Township's rural landscape will continue to dominate most areas of the community. The area's wetlands, woodlands, and fields will continue to serve as an open space network with abundant wildlife and clean surface waters that benefit all. All new land uses will be monitored and approved so as to maintain a healthy community with successful agricultural, residential, and commercial activities.

We envision that agriculture within the Township will continue to play an important part of the overall land use pattern and its visual character; the HTPC will work with farmers to enhance their livelihood in balance with the needs of other residents. HTPC further expects that, along with the national trend, urban agriculture will be increasingly prac-

ticed by our residents, and we will seek ways to support this activity.

The HTPC desires responsible economic growth within the Township. We envision that most of the growth will come from small entrepreneurial efforts. However, the Township's natural resources and open spaces will be a vital concern in both small- and large- scale development projects. Open spaces will be preserved for continued agricultural use and wildlife habitats. Higher density residential developments and commercial and industrial land uses will be located where road, sewage disposal, and potable water facilities are adequate to accommodate the new development, and the HTPC will balance the desire for growth with the need to protect the rural character of the Township.

The City of Hillsdale will continue to play a positive role in the daily activity of Township residents as it does today. The City will serve as the principal source of local retail services and industrial activities. As such, Hillsdale Township will strive to be a good partner and will cooperate with the City on issues important to the benefit of both Township and City residents.

Public services will continually improve as the Township grows. The services of internet, cellular phones, and natural gas will be the most likely services that will have opportunities for improvement. Fire and police protection and electricity will be available to meet the needs of the growing community. The Township will continue to rely primarily upon private septic systems and wells. All improvements to public services, including roads, will be largely keyed to the Township's population and activity centers and/or those areas of the Township intended to accommodate heightened levels of growth and development.

Persons and families will continue to thrive in the growing community, nurtured by the high quality of life and the responsiveness of Township officials to local needs. Residential growth in the community will continue to be primarily low density single

family housing. Public participation will continue to play an important role in Township decision-making.

PLANNING ISSUES

Hillsdale Township wants to provide reasonable opportunities for growth and development. Recommendations in this Plan must squarely address the growth and development issues facing the Township and provide a strategy for effectively shaping and guiding future growth and development in a feasible manner, consistent with the aspirations of the Township's citizenry and the opportunities and constraints presented by its natural and cultural characteristics.

The future quality of life and character of the Township will be largely shaped by the Township's strategy in dealing with future land use and public services. The following discussions provide greater insight into important planning issues, and provides the Township with more direction in the development of community goals and objectives (Chapter Three), and identifying the planned future land use pattern (Chapter Four).

Farmland Protection

Farmland has been the dominant land use in Hillsdale Township. Today's use of agricultural land has shifted from 10-20 field plots to larger 20-40 acres all in one field and crops are limited to mostly corn, soybeans, and hay. There is increasing demand for housing units within the township and the Master Plan strives to use land that is not currently being farmed for this development. To this end, the current two-and-a-half acre plots in which housing is allowed is encouraged to be used in clusters on land that is not currently farmed and, where possible, set back from the road using a long single drive to place these houses in lower visibility areas. The use of Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) are encouraged, along with plans to allow for Site Condominiums to be utilized to minimize the amount of land used for housing development. This also allows for increased tax base while retaining the rural pastoral nature of the landscape.

The current agricultural zoning district covers most of the Township; however, less than half of this is being tilled or used for agricultural use. This zoning allows for parcels of as little as two-and-a-half acres to be used for housing with some restrictions such as driveways. Utilizing today's Land Division Act and use of Site Condos or PUDs, the zoning could be modified to only consume one to two acres of farmland for each housing unit.

Through this type of planning, the currently zoned but non-farmed land could provide for housing growth and development for many years to come.

Protection of Rural Character and Natural Resources

Protection of the Township's rural character is extremely important to the residents of Hillsdale Township. "Rural character" is a subjective quality, but is typically associated with an overall perception of limited urban development, and open spaces comprised of farmland and/or natural landscapes, including woodlands, wetlands, and fields. Not only are these elements important in shaping the character of the Township, but also provide vital environmental roles including wildlife habitats, flood control, water purification, groundwater recharge, and air quality. The Township has abundant natural resources and sensitive environmental features.

Effective protection of rural character and natural resources does not require the prohibition of growth and development. Managed growth and development encourages the continuation of the Township's overall rural character. The preservation of rural character and natural resources in the face of growth and development, such as platted subdivisions, PUDs, condominium subdivisions, and non-residential development, is dependent upon site development practices which purposely incorporate the protection of open spaces and natural resources into the development plan.

In addition to the Michigan's Land Division Act, the Township's PUDs will provide opportunities within the current zoning for development that will meet these objectives.

Residential Development

Residential development is expected to be the most predominant change of land use over the next decade. Hillsdale Township is attractive to many new home builders because of its close proximity to shopping, employment, and schools. The open spaces and rural character also add to the demand for this type of building plots.

The primary concern for future housing is that it is in appropriate locations. There are currently 700+ housing units in the township. Current demand for building sites appear to be on plots of one to two acres for median priced homes with larger parcels preferred for the larger new homes. Through proper planning and zoning, these plots can be located in the areas that retain the predom-

inant open spaces and rural character, and minimize the amount of farmland that will be reduced.

Residential Lot Split Patterns

The past practices of five and ten acre parcels have taken some of the open spaces and productive farmland for residential lots. Many of these have created “bowling alley” lots that show the demand for narrow lots.

By utilizing creative planning and zoning for better land utilization, the growth over the next ten years would only take a relative small percent of the available land.

Commercial and Industrial Development

Hillsdale Township does not have existing infrastructure to support larger commercial and industrial development. There are limited roads for heavy truck traffic and lack of sufficient utilities. The close proximity to the cities of Hillsdale and Jonesville, which have these elements, cause little demand for expansion within the Township.

Regionalism

In future planning, the Township should look at other surrounding municipalities and consider what they are providing for the region’s overall needs. This would include not only the industrial and commercial needs of the region, but also of the adjacent areas of Adams, Cambria, Fayette, and Allen Townships and the City of Hillsdale, so that these adjoining areas may have similar zoning and land use where possible.

Limited Tax Base and Public Services

The future land use pattern planned for the Township must recognize its comparatively limited tax base. Tax revenues dictate, in part, the extent and quality of public services. Residents do not readily support increases in taxes. Though new development can be expected to increase the Township's tax base, the new development will place additional demands upon public services. To this end, it is advantageous to maintain a compact form of growth and development.

Current police and fire protection services, and the roadway network, appear to be meeting the current needs of area residents.

Protection of Public Health, Safety, and Welfare

One of Hillsdale Township’s government functions is to provide for the health, safety, and welfare of its residents. The provision of adequate public facilities to serve the new land uses and developments at the time they become functional, and the protection of property values and the Township’s economic stability should be within the Master Plan.