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Are Michigan Cities Planning for a Changing Future, or More of the Same?

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In this uncertain context, planners may ask how Michigan cities are planning for their futures. After all, growth requires planning and investment to decide proactively where and how to accommodate new populations and jobs. The Michigan Planning Enabling Act requires that communities adopt a master plan that considers "trends in land and population development" that "may project 20 years or more into the future." What future is it that Michigan planners are considering in these plans, and does this future align with what Michiganders want?

Michigan's demographic future seems highly uncertain. On the one hand, analysts point to declines in population and per capita income growth as concerning trends pointing toward future decline (*see Michigan Planner Sept/Oct 2023*). These troubling trends sparked the creation of the Growing Michigan Together Council last year, which issued a report in December calling for bold action in transit, education, and other areas. On the other hand, population growth is being experienced in many parts of Michigan, especially cities like Ann Arbor, Grand Rapids, and Traverse City. Furthermore, another sweltering summer has suggested the potential for climate migrants to contribute to an economic resurgence. However, climate change is causing new challenges in the state, like heat waves, intense storms, flooding, and worsening coastal erosion, challenges many Michigan cities are not adequately responding to, suggesting that these communities are not planning for a changing climate.

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To answer this question, this article analyzes the adopted city plans for 262 Michigan cities, all of the cities in the state except for 17 small cities for which a plan could not be obtained. The plans were collected from late 2022 to early 2023 as part of an undergraduate thesis, and their average adoption year was 2016. Plans were accessed through the city's website, via an alternative internet search, or by emailing a representative of the city to request its updated plan. Given the importance of cities to the future of the state, these plans provide a snapshot of how these communities are planning for the future.

When preparing a long-range city plan, planners can choose among three basic methods. **Vision-based plans** show a community's desired future without quantifying future population. Although these plans are flexible and appropriate for communities where little change is desired or expected, they lack rigor and detail needed to plan for future infrastructure. That is why many plans follow the method recommended by F. Stuart Chapin in his classic treatise *Urban Land Use Planning* and create **forecast-based plans.** Chapin's book establishes the land use planning process with a forecast future population that is then used to estimate future land use needs. However, this so-called predict-and-plan approach has been thoroughly criticized because the forecast population growth (or decline) rarely shows up as predicted, resulting in irrelevant plans or mismatches between infrastructure and community needs. Finally, **scenario-based plans** avoid pegging the plan on a single future forecast and instead explore multiple alternative futures. Although these plans are still required to contain an identified future land use map per state law, they may also explore alternatives as part of the planning process.

Table 1

Plan Type	Population Trend	Number	Percentage by category	Percentage of all
Vision-based		126		48
	Growth	39	31	15
	Decline	61	48	23
	Stable	9	7	3
	Uncertain	2	2	1
	Not described	15	12	6
Forecast-based		136		52
	Growth	75	55	29

	Decline	61	45	23
Scenario-based		1		<1
Total		**262**		**100**

The analysis found that 48% of plans were **vision-based** and did not contain a quantitative forecast. However, many of these plans contained a qualitative discussion of possible growth trends, with 48% predicting decline, 31% predicting growth, 7% predicting a stable future, 2% describing uncertainty, and the remainder not commenting on the issue (Table 1).

A majority — 52% — were **forecast-based plans**. Among these, 45% forecast flat or declining populations, and 55% forecast growth. Across all of these plans, the average annual change in population was 0.19%. The most optimistic? The fast-growing Orchard Lake Village in Oakland County (7.7% annual growth). The most optimistic cities with populations over 50,000 were Royal Oak (1.5%) and Lansing (1.1%). The most pessimistic? Flint's plan anticipated an annual decline of 2.2%. Looking across both vision-based and forecast-based plans, they describe a pessimistic view of the future, with 122 (or 47% of all plans) anticipating population decline and 114 (44%) anticipating growth.

What about **scenario-based plans**? The analysis found 12 examples of scenario planning, but only one plan (Milan) would be considered a scenario-based plan — less than 1% of all cities. Most plans used scenarios as a method to analyze specific issues. The most noteworthy example of the use of scenarios was contained in Milan's 2010 Master Plan, which described the creation of three alternative scenarios: expanding the city for residential uses, expanding for non-residential, and re-development. These scenarios build on an earlier project, conducted in 2001, called the Milan Organization for Regional Excellence (MORE), which involved the creation of growth scenarios for a five-jurisdiction region including Milan. After community discussion of these scenarios, a preferred pattern was developed. Another plan that contained normative land use scenarios was Hamtramck, which analyzed land use scenarios for the South Hamtramck Subarea but not the city as a whole (Fig 1).



Fig 1. To create this conceptual proposal for the South Hamtramck Subarea Plan, the plan describes analyzing six land-use scenarios: town mixed use, office/industrial, industrial focus, village residential, village commercial, and large lot residential. Source: City of Hamtramck Master Plan Update (2020).

Several plans discussed scenarios related to changes to housing. These included Iron Mountain (Dickinson County in the UP), Madison Heights (Oakland County), and Munising (Alger County in the UP). The most sophisticated housing scenarios were found in Reading (Hillsdale County) and Rochester (Oakland County), both of which made use of the Envision Tomorrow Balanced Housing Model to develop scenarios for alternative housing stock composition (see Additional Resources).

The third area of scenario use was related to climate change. Two coastal communities on the Lake Michigan Shoreline, Bridgman and Grand Haven, incorporated climate futures and management alternatives in their corresponding master plans. Pioneered by Richard Norton's Resilient Great Lakes Coast program at the University of Michigan, the method involved developing land use scenarios to plan for coastal resilience. Other plans discussed climate scenarios created by others. For example, Trenton's plan in Detroit's Downriver area analyzed vulnerability and discussed the possible future use of scenarios for climate resilience, and Ferndale's plan (in Oakland County) discussed climate scenarios for emissions reductions in the context of climate change.

What to make of these findings? Although many elected officials are rhapsodizing about a different future for Michigan revitalized by climate migrants, closer to the ground, city plans describe business as usual. Few communities are using normative scenarios to robustly debate about how they may change in the future, let alone robustly analyze the impacts of climate change. However, the few examples of scenario planning the analysis did find are encouraging. Many communities are talking about housing — and the implementation of the Statewide Housing Plan is sparking a resurgence of planning for housing throughout Michigan. Scenario planning is not only valuable for analyzing housing, it can also be used to align housing with future land-use options and to sharpen focus on the types of zoning reforms needed for implementation. Similarly, the plans the analysis found provide exciting examples of how local communities are baking climate change considerations into their plans. Of course, whether the focus is on coastal resilience, flooding, heat, or emissions reductions varies by city.

Moving forward, there is a need for proactive scenario planning in the state's fastest growing cities. The recently-created Michigan Talent Partnership program, which will support planning for dense, walkable neighborhoods in Detroit, Ann Arbor, Lansing, and Grand Rapids, is a positive development, and fortunately these cities are already pursuing these agendas. State investments in key projects, such as the long-discussed Ann Arbor–Detroit rail or even coast-to-coast rail, would reinforce the urban bright spots. And many other communities can use robust land-use planning to stem undesirable sprawling developments that sap vitality from our historical main streets, reinforce a sense of place, and improve quality of life. Of course, statewide land use policy that would encourage smart growth everywhere is sorely needed, as well as economic development policies squarely focused on innovation, entrepreneurship, and quality of life.

In the context of a rapidly changing environment, the time is right for planners to stand up and lead conversations in communities statewide about how to pursue a brighter future.

RESOURCES:

Growing Michigan Together

U-M Professional Education: Scenario Planning for Urban Futures

Lincoln Institute of Land Policy's Consortium for Scenario Planning

Balanced Housing Model

Resilient Great Lakes Coast

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