

November 27, 2007

Commissioner David Potts, Chairperson
Oakland County Coordinating Zoning Committee
1200 North Telegraph Road
Pontiac, MI 48341

SUBJECT: County Code No. MP 07-05, Planning & Economic Development Services' review of the Independence Township Vision 2020 Update Master Plan

Dear Chairperson Potts and Committee Members:

The Independence Township Planning Commission has developed an update to its 1999 Vision 2020 Master Plan. The following is a review and analysis of the proposed plan.

Under the recent amendments to the Township Planning Act, which took effect December 20, 2006, Independence Township is required to send a copy of the draft plan to Oakland County and neighboring communities for comment prior to adoption. Oakland County has 63 days to submit comments on a draft plan. The December 4, 2007 Oakland County Coordinating Zoning Committee (CZC) meeting falls within our 63-day comment period. Neighboring communities also have 63 days to submit comments directly to Independence Township and are asked to send a copy of any comments to the County as well. Once the comment period has expired, the Planning Commission can hold a public hearing and take final action to adopt the plan.

According to the Independence Township Clerk, Brandon, Groveland, Orion, Oxford, Springfield, Waterford, and White Lake Townships; the Cities of Auburn Hills, Clarkston, Lake Angelus, and Pontiac; and the Villages of Lake Orion, Ortonville, and Oxford were sent a copy of the draft plan. All of these communities have received notice of the CZC meeting. In addition, Oakland County Planning and Economic Development Services staff sent a notice to Oakland County Parks and Recreation because Independence Oaks County Park is located within Independence Township. Oakland County Parks and Recreation acknowledged receipt of the notice sent by County staff but had no comments. No comments were received from any of the surrounding communities.

Plan Contents

A three-volume document set was prepared in 1999 as part of Independence Township's last planning effort. The three volumes consisted of Background Studies, Strategic Plan, and the Master Plan. This Vision 2020 Update combines the Strategic Plan and the Master Plan into one document and provides a summary of updated background information.

The Plan consists of the following sections: Introduction; Background Studies Summary; Goals & Objectives; Master Land Use Plan; Target Plans; Transportation Plan; Greenways Plan; and Implementation. A glossary of planning terms is included as an appendix. The Introduction states that the full text of the Background Studies is included in the appendix but the draft copy provided for the County's review is missing this section.

Independence is a large township centrally located in Oakland County. Population and land use information was updated and shows that Independence Township is still growing. *"By August 2006, the Township's population is estimated to have grown to 34,745, an increase of more than*

45% over the 1990 population of 23,717 and 6% over the 2000 population of 32,581.” (Page 9) Population projections prepared by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) forecast another 17% increase by 2020 from the year 2000.

In terms of land use, almost 64% of Independence Township is in a single family residential use. Interstate 75 bisects the Township in an east-west fashion, and the character of the community changes depending on which side of I-75 you are located. Low density residential is mainly found north of I-75. In this part of the Township, most residential lots are 1.5 to 3 acres or more in size, and the community is more rural in nature. South of I-75, smaller suburban style lots predominate. Also, this is where most of the commercial uses are found, mainly along the key corridors of Dixie Highway, M-15, and Sashabaw Road.

Public, Semi-Public, Recreation, and Utilities are the next highest land uses with over 22% of total land area. Included in this category is the 1,089 acre Independence Oaks County Park that is located in the north central part of the Township and surrounds Crooked Lake. Other major recreational uses are the DTE Music Theater and Pine Knob Golf Course and Ski Resort, centrally located at the I-75 and Sashabaw Road interchange.

Almost 1,700 acres of vacant land still exist in Independence Township, according to the 2005 Land Use Inventory. However, vacant land has been shrinking at a rapid rate due to the development that has occurred in the recent past. *“There has been nearly a 69% decline in the amount of vacant and agricultural land from 1990 to 1999, and a 47% decline since 1999.” (Page 22)*

Goals from the previous planning effort remain essentially unchanged although some changes have been made to the objectives. Goals address residential land use; commercial, office, and industrial land use; historic and rural preservation; open space and natural resource preservation; transportation; community facilities; and utilities and services. Maintaining the residential nature of the community and preserving the rural character of the northeast and northwest portions of Independence Township are themes present in many of the objectives.

The master plan contains target plans for six locations within the Township. The locations are the Northwest Area, the M-15/I-75 Interchange Area, Sashabaw Corridor, White Lake Road Corridor, Northwest Dixie Highway, and Pine Knob Area. Each target plan provides detail on the recommended land uses appropriate for that area. Information on circulation, landscaping, parking, and design provides additional guidance on how development should function within the target areas.

A transportation plan and a greenways plan are also included. These separate elements were included in the 1999 plan but have been expanded in this update. New aspects of the Transportation Plan are sections on access management, traffic calming, and corridor improvement authorities. The Greenways Plan identifies ways to tie existing public and private open space into a linked network for recreational use and natural resource protection. A new section in this plan is on maintaining the rural character of local roads and how these tree-canopied roads can be part of this open space network.

The master plan concludes with a chapter on implementation. Implementation tools include zoning adjustments, capital improvement programming, public education, and future plan updates.

Future Land Use Map and Target Plans

The visual representation of the Township's policies is shown on the Future Land Use map (attached). The largest planned land use is single family residential. The following are the six density classifications of single-family residential shown on the map.

1. Rural Residential (3 acres or more per dwelling unit)
2. Estate Residential (1.5 acres per dwelling unit)
3. Suburban Residential (1 acre per dwelling unit)
4. Single Family Residential (15,000 square foot lot minimum)
5. Traditional Lakefront Residential (pre-existing 30 to 40 foot lots around Walters Lake, Round Lake, and Whipple Lake)
6. Single Family Attached/Detached (density not to exceed 4 dwelling units per acre)

Broadly speaking, the northwest corner of the Township is planned for the lowest density of Rural Residential, while the northeast corner is planned for Estate Residential. The higher density single family classifications are found primarily south of I-75. The **Northwest Area Target Plan** reinforces the desire to maintain the northwest part of Independence Township as rural with an emphasis on historic preservation and natural resource protection. Wetlands and woodlands should be preserved. Cluster residential development is encouraged to provide open space and natural resource protection. Even the major roadway in this part of the Township should reflect rural character. The vision for M-15, north of the City of the Village of Clarkston, is that of a parkway with a landscaped median; right of way width should be limited to 120 to 150 feet with existing vegetation maintained along the corridor.

Commercial, office, or industrial uses are confined to a handful of road corridors that support higher traffic volumes. Dixie Highway, M-15, White Lake Road, and Sashabaw are planned for a mixture of these more intensive uses. Target plans have been prepared for each of these corridors. These plans supplement the Future Land Use map by providing in more detail a description of the variety and arrangement of land uses envisioned in each corridor. The following highlights the uses planned in each area.

M-15/I-75 Interchange Area: The Future Land Use map has the M-15 corridor both north and south of the I-75 interchange planned for office. The northwest corner of the interchange shows Planned Research Office with the remainder planned for Office Service. The Office Service classification allows medical, professional, general, and service related office uses. Planned Research Office allows for similar uses, including research but on a larger scale, preferably in a campus setting. Compatible architectural elements and landscaping should provide a unified design on the campus.

Sashabaw Corridor: The area of Sashabaw Road from Maybee Road north to the I-75 interchange is being planned as an important destination within Independence Township. *"The Sashabaw corridor area was identified as the core for new economic development and community identity within the Township."* (Page 57) A Town Center concept is envisioned for the Sashabaw Road corridor. This vision has started to be implemented with the roadway improvements completed within the last few years that transformed Sashabaw from a two lane road into a four lane boulevard with a landscaped median. New commercial and residential development has occurred concurrently with the road improvements. The Target Plan indicates the addition of a civic use to the corridor would further enhance its "Town Center" image, and pedestrian connections between uses are encouraged. The plan promotes a mixture of uses, including residential to bring vitality to the

corridor. Planned Mixed Use is shown for the west side of Sashabaw. The Target Plan illustrates how this mixture can function by showing an arrangement of office-service, commercial/office, and commercial areas along the Sashabaw frontage with Single Family Attached and Multiple Family located behind these uses. On the east side of Sashabaw, Industrial Office Park is planned close to the interchange with Office Service along the frontage and Planned Research Office behind it. A medical campus is proposed by McLaren Health Corporation for the site identified as Planned Research Office. Groundbreaking has taken place for the first phase, which is a medical office building. At the south end of the corridor at Maybee Road, General Commercial is planned.

Pine Knob Area: North of I-75 to Clarkston Road, the Sashabaw Road corridor has a more natural character compared to the southern portion of the corridor, and is planned for Recreational-Conservation and office uses. The Pine Knob Golf Course and Ski Resort showcase the natural elements of wetlands and open space present in this area. In addition, the presence of the DTE Music Theater brings a strong entertainment focus to this part of the corridor. Office Service and Planned Research Office are planned to complement these Recreational-Conservation uses. The Target Plan identifies the possibility of a hotel/conference center for the northeast corner of the interchange.

White Lake Road Corridor The focus of this Target Plan is White Lake Road from Dixie Highway south to Andersonville Road in the extreme southwest corner of Independence Township. A variety of uses are planned within this southern gateway into the community. At Dixie Highway and White Lake Road, the Future Land Use map shows Planned Mixed Use. This classification is further defined in the Target Plan for Medical Technology, allowing for medical uses complementary to the existing medical office building, 24 hour emergency care, and assisted living facility. South of this, Single Family Residential is planned. Then adjacent to the railroad track, General Industrial is allowed. *“A key component of this plan is to upgrade and improve the appearance of the more unattractive existing uses in the area. Warehousing and contractor’s facilities are the new uses that are encouraged and should be promoted for the Corridor.”* (Page 73)

Northwest Dixie Highway The emphasis of this Target Plan is developing an attractive western entryway into the Township. The Office Service uses proposed at the border are intended to be compatible with the current and planned uses in Springfield Township. The amount of Single Family Attached/Detached planned for the north side of Dixie Highway has been expanded from the 1999 plan to enhance the residential character of this gateway area. In addition, importance is given to managing access drives along Dixie Highway to facilitate traffic safety and efficiency.

Comparison of the draft 2007 Future Land Use map to the 1999 map

The 2007 Future Land Use map uses the same land use classifications as the 1999 map so a direct comparison between the maps is possible. While there have been no large scale changes in the map, several important changes have been made in key areas of the Township.

In the Dixie Highway corridor from the Springfield Township border to Maybee Road, several changes were made. First, at the Springfield Township border on the southwest side of Dixie Highway, a 15 acre tract has been changed from Multiple Family Residential to Office Service. On the north side of Dixie Highway, the border has been changed from Office Service to Single Family Attached/Detached. These changes make this border area more compatible with Springfield Township’s planned uses. At Dixie and White Lake Road, an eight acre portion of the existing

shopping area was changed from Multiple Family and Single Family Residential to Local Commercial to reflect the extent of the commercial parcel. Finally, two parcels at intersection of Dixie Highway and Maybee Road on the north side of the road have been changed from General Commercial to Office Service. Banks currently occupy these parcels.

Several changes also have been made in the Sashabaw Road corridor north and south of the I-75 interchange. To the north, 30 acres at the southeast corner of Clarkston Road and Sashabaw have been changed from Planned Research Office to Planned Mixed Use. In the Pine Knob development, a 52 acre portion of the golf course has been changed from Multiple Family Residential to Recreational-Conservation, and a 67 unit condominium development on Waldon Road has been changed from Suburban and Single Family Residential to Multiple Family Residential. South of I-75, a 10 acre tract on the north side of Waldon, west of Sashabaw has been changed from Single Family Residential to Planned Mixed Use. To the south, on the east side of Sashabaw at the site of the developing McLaren Medical Complex, 10 acres fronting on Sashabaw have been changed from Industrial Office Park to Office Service, and a large 72 acre tract extending to the expressway was changed from Industrial Office Park to Planned Research Office.

Changes to land planned for Recreational-Conservation involved the loss of approximately 50 acres that were changed to residential classifications. These were primarily made up of wetlands that were located in residential developments. Approximately 20 acres were added to Recreational-Conservation at various smaller sites in the Township.

Some shifts between the boundaries of different residential classifications were also noted. Three sites in the southern portion of the Township comprising over 90 acres were changed from Single Family and Suburban Residential to Single Family Attached/Detached. One of these sites is at the southwestern border with Springfield Township, while another site is on Mann Road, next to the Mobile Home Park and adjacent to Waterford Township. Also, two large 40 acre tracts in the northwest portion of the Township that were planned for Rural Residential are now planned for Estate Residential and Suburban Residential.

Coordination with Surrounding Community Boundaries

Under state law, the county's review is required to include a statement indicating whether the proposed plan is "inconsistent with the plan of any city, village, or township" that received notice of the draft plan. The following provides detail on how the draft plan coordinates with each of Independence Township's neighboring communities.

North Boundary –Brandon Township: The Brandon Township Future Land Use Plan was adopted in March 2000 and amended in 2004. Independence Township shares its entire northern boundary with Brandon Township. Along this border, Independence Township has planned for lower density residential uses; Rural Residential (3 acres/dwelling unit) is planned west of Sashabaw Road and Estate Residential (1.5 acres/dwelling unit) is planned east of Sashabaw. Three areas of Recreational-Conservation are planned by Independence Township within this residential border. Similarly, Brandon Township has planned most of its southern border for low density residential use, classified as Rural Residential-Agricultural (2.5 acres/dwelling unit).

However, there are two notable exceptions to this consistent residential border. In Brandon Township, at both M-15 and Sashabaw Road, more intensive uses are planned. At M-15, Brandon Township has planned for Commercial (Office-Retail) on both sides of M-15 and then Multiple

Family Residential surrounding the Commercial on the west side of M-15. In Independence Township, there is an existing office use at the border and M-15 that is compatible with the commercial in Brandon Township. However, the land planned for multiple family is either vacant or currently in a residential use. If this land does get developed for multiple family, Brandon Township needs to give particular attention to site design, buffering, landscaping, and access during the site plan review stage to ensure that potential negative impacts are minimized for surrounding homes in both Independence and Brandon Townships.

At Sashabaw Road, Brandon Township has planned Commercial (Office-Retail) and Mobile-Home Residential on the east side of the road at the boundary between the two communities. These future land use classifications represent existing conditions with both the small store and mobile home park being in existence for 20+ years. These uses have co-existed with the residential subdivisions to the south in Independence Township; therefore this area is compatible.

East Boundary –Orion Township: The Charter Township of Orion Master Plan was adopted in May 2003 and amended in 2006. Independence Township shares its entire eastern border with Orion Township. Both communities have planned exclusively for single family residential along the border. Independence Township has planned for Estate Residential (1.5 acres/dwelling unit) for the north half of the border and Suburban Residential (1 acre/dwelling unit) for the southern half. Orion Township has planned this border mostly for Single Family Low Density (2.5 acres/dwelling unit) with two exceptions. Single Family Medium Low Density (1.5 acres/dwelling unit) is planned around Heather Lake, while a concentrated area of Single Family Medium High Density (2.5 to 3.9 dwelling units/acre) is planned for an area about ½ mile south from Maybee Road. The border between these two Townships is extremely compatible.

South Boundary – Waterford Township: The Charter Township of Waterford Master Plan 2003-2023 was adopted in January 2003. Independence Township shares its entire southern border with Waterford Township, although four large lakes lie along the border separating land uses in several locations. Along Independence’s southern boundary, Waterford Township has planned (from west to east) Local Business, Multiple Family, Quasi-Public (Cemetery), Single Family, Community Business at Dixie Highway and then Single Family to the eastern boundary. For most of its southern border, Independence Township has planned for Single Family Residential (15,000 square foot lots). At Dixie Highway, Independence Township has planned for Multiple Family Residential and Local Commercial on the west side of Dixie and General Commercial on the east side. The uses are compatible along the border.

It should be noted that there are two existing uses in Independence Township along this border that have some impacts on the surrounding uses. The first use is the Waterford Hills Race Track, which is east of Dixie Highway and planned for Recreational-Conservation. The other use is the mobile home park off Mann Road in the far southeastern corner of Independence Township. The noise from the racetrack and the added traffic from the mobile home park are impacts from these established uses.

West Boundary – Springfield Township: The Springfield Township Master Plan was adopted in March 2002. Independence Township shares its entire western boundary with Springfield Township. From Oak Hill Road south to the I-75/Dixie Highway interchange, Independence Township has planned for Rural Residential (3 acres/dwelling unit) to Holcomb Road, and then Estate Residential (1.5 acres/dwelling unit) from Holcomb to I-75. In Springfield Township, this

same area is planned for Low Density Residential (2.5 acres/dwelling unit) and Medium Density Residential (1-2 acres/dwelling unit) with an area of Recreation-Conservation just north of the interchange. This border area from the Townships' northern boundary to I-75 is fairly consistent in terms of single family residential densities.

South of I-75, along Dixie Highway, Springfield has High Density Residential planned for the north side of Dixie Highway and a small area of Office-Service on the south side. At this location, Independence Township has planned for Single Family Attached/Detached on the north side of Dixie Highway and Office Service on the south side. The Single Family Attached/Detached was expanded in this area in this master plan update and replaces a former classification of Office Service for the area adjacent to Springfield Township. The Office Service on the south side in Independence Township is a change from the previous 1999 Master Plan that showed this area for Multiple Family Residential. These changes make this area more consistent, with Office Service now planned in both communities and residential adjacent to residential.

From this point south to the railroad tracks, residential is planned in both communities: Medium Density Residential in Springfield Township and Suburban Residential (1 acre/dwelling unit), Single Family Residential (15,000 square foot lots), and Single Family Attached/Detached in Independence Township.

Finally, from the railroad tracks to the southern boundary, Springfield Township has planned for Limited Industrial. This is compatible with the General Industrial that Independence Township has planned at its southwestern corner. The Independence/Springfield border is compatible.

Internal to the Township – City of the Village of Clarkston: The Master Plan City of the Village of Clarkston was adopted in July 1997. Independence Township completely surrounds the Village of the City of Clarkston. Clarkston has planned for Single Family-Suburban Density Residential (1 to 3 dwelling units/acre) for all areas adjacent to Independence Township except for an area of Civic at Waldon Road in the southeast corner, Multiple Family at the west central edge, and Park at White Lake Road. Similarly, Independence Township has planned for Suburban Residential (1 dwelling unit/acre) and Single Family Residential (15,000 square foot minimum lots) for all areas around Clarkston except for the M-15 and White Lake Road corridors. North of Clarkston along M-15, Independence Township has planned for Office Service, while Office Service and General Commercial are planned on M-15 south of Clarkston. Independence Township has General Commercial and Public, Semi-Public (cemetery) planned at White Lake Road. These non-residential classifications represent existing uses; therefore, the border is compatible.

Coordination with County Property

Independence Oaks County Park is located in the north central part of Independence Township, adjacent to the Northwest Target Area. Its presence contributes to the rural, natural character envisioned for this part of the Township. The park is surrounded by land planned for single family residential use of varying densities. Most of this residential land has already been developed and is compatible with the county park. Oakland County Parks and Recreation acknowledged the receipt of the Future Land Use map that County staff had sent but had no comments.

Analysis

As part of the master planning update process, Independence Township revised its Future Land Use map. This map shows where different land uses are planned in the future. The emphasis of a Future Land Use map is on the arrangement of land use, with attention given to compatibility between adjacent uses. However, by the nature of the graphics, Future Land Use maps do not convey the character of the planned land use. For example, the classifications of General Industrial or Office Service can be developed in different ways depending on the design of buildings, setback from the road, landscaping, and other elements. This is information you cannot glean from just looking at the map. That is why the Target Plans found in this update are so important. Each plan expands upon what is shown on the Future Land Use map by giving additional information on how the land uses should function. The desired “look and feel” of each area is explained so the reader gets a better understanding of the character envisioned for that area. The Target Plans add an important dimension to the master plan, and Independence Township should be commended for including them as part of their Vision 2020 planning process.

Since the Target Plans further define what is envisioned for each area, it is a little surprising that the Sashabaw Corridor target plan does not address the proposed McLaren Medical Complex project. In the last few months, groundbreaking has taken place for the first phase, which is a medical office building. A new hospital is planned in the future. The Independence Township Planning Commission was reviewing site plans for this project while this master plan update was being developed. Newspaper reports indicate that upwards of 3,000 new jobs may be generated with the completion of this complex and ancillary services. Yet the new medical complex is not mentioned; there is only a statement to indicate medical uses are allowed in the Planned Research Office classification. It would seem that the medical complex would have some significant impacts on this part of the Township and acknowledging potential impacts if all phases of the medical complex come to fruition would help Independence Township plan for them.

The Transportation and Greenways Plans are two other notable elements of this master plan update. In Oakland County, the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) has jurisdiction over township roads. Many townships therefore do not address transportation issues to any great extent in their master plans. Independence Township however realizes the need to address the land use/transportation connection and does so through its Transportation Plan. *“The lack of jurisdictional responsibility over the roadway system does not mean the Township is unable to have influence over the function and character of its roadways. The Township is in the position to influence road agency policy and furthermore has authority over land use decisions, which are often inseparable from transportation.”* (Page 97) The Transportation Plan provides a list of needed road improvements, emphasizes the need for access management and traffic calming, and contains a Safety Path Master Plan. The Transportation Plan also includes the Master Right-of-Way Plan prepared by the RCOC that shows planned future right-of-way widths for the main roads in the Township. This is an important component of the Transportation Plan because it communicates to residents and developers what are these potential future widths. And if the Township requires building setback from these potential future widths, it will make acquiring right-of-way in the future more feasible and affordable when roadway expansion is needed.

The Greenways Plan is another special feature of this master plan update and helps to ensure that open space is part of the Township’s future character. Independence Township still has a significant amount of vacant land. It is important for the Township to be proactive in trying to preserve open space through cluster development and other land management techniques. By

encouraging the creation of open space in residential developments and then linking this open space into a greenways network, the rural character of the Township can be preserved. In addition, the creation of nature/walking trails will provide recreational opportunities that will enhance the quality of life for current and future residents.

Conclusion

Oakland County Planning and Economic Development Services staff commends Independence Township for preparing this new update to its Vision 2020 Master Plan.

Based on the review of the surrounding communities' master plans, the Independence Township Vision 2020 Update Master Plan is **not** inconsistent with the plan of any city, village, or township that received notice of the draft plan.

Oakland County has not prepared a countywide development plan, so there is no countywide plan to which to compare the plan.

Sincerely,

Charlotte P. Burckhardt, AICP, PCP
Principal Planner

Enclosure