

December 20, 2007

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

SUBJECT: County Code No. MP 07-07, Planning and Economic Development Services' review of an amendment to the Highland Township Comprehensive Land Use Plan 2000-2020

Dear Chairperson Potts and Committee Members:

The Highland Township Planning Commission is proposing to amend its 2000 Master Plan by adding a plan prepared for the Highland Downtown Development Authority. This plan, Historic Highland Station Master Plan Initiative, focuses on the historic center of Highland Township at Milford and Livingston Roads just south of M-59 (Highland Road). The following is a review and analysis of the plan amendment.

Under the recent amendments to the Township Planning Act, which took effect December 20, 2006, Highland Township is required to send a copy of the draft amendment to Oakland County and neighboring communities for comment prior to adoption. Oakland County has 40 days to submit comments on a draft amendment. The January 8, 2008 Oakland County Coordinating Zoning Committee (CZC) meeting falls within our 40-day comment period. Neighboring communities also have 40 days to submit comments directly to Highland 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 amend the plan.

According to the Planning Commission Secretary, Commerce, Milford, Rose, Springfield, White Lake, Brighton, Hartland, and Tyrone Townships, and the Village of Milford were sent a copy of the draft amendment. All of these communities have received notice of the CZC meeting. Comments have been received from Brighton Township and are attached.

### **Background Information**

The Highland Township Planning Commission adopted its 2000-2020 Master Plan in July 2000. Since then, the Planning Commission has amended the plan several times by adopting micro-area analysis plans that address small geographic areas throughout the Township. In 2002, the Planning Commission adopted a small area study for the Historic Highland Station Area. This study looked at future land uses on a block by block basis.

In 2005, Highland Township was accepted into the Main Street Oakland County Program. Since then, the Highland Township Downtown Development Authority (DDA) has spent considerable time focusing on this historic part of the Township. The boundaries of this area are roughly one block either side of Milford Road from M-59 in the north to Colasanti's Market on the south end. The DDA contracted with a consultant team to look at this historic center and prepare a plan with

a design focus. As part of the planning process, several community meetings were held to solicit input on how Highland Station should develop in the future. The resulting study is now being considered by the Planning Commission for inclusion in their community master plan.

### **Plan Contents**

The plan starts with a vision for the Highland Station Area. Using words, photographs, and sketches, the plan tries to capture the essence of Highland Station and what makes it unique. *“Understanding what feels right to a place is at least as important as creating ordinances because it allows all stakeholders to think critically about each independent project while remaining in touch with the larger goals of the community.”* (Page 7)

The scale of Highland Station is of a hamlet, a small center of activity that developed around the train depot on Livingston Road. Because this area is off the M-59 corridor, in some ways it was bypassed and did not become another strip of commercial development. Instead, historic structures remain as individual buildings that are simple in design and reflect the rural past, while natural landscapes provide an open space feel to the hamlet. There is a casual mix of land uses, including residential, commercial, office, institutional, and civic. Residents can walk between uses due to the presence of sidewalks and street connections. In addition, Highland Station is adjacent to the Highland Recreation Area, a large state park. This proximity provides a connection with nature and equestrian activities. Incorporating equestrian uses and attracting recreational users into the hamlet are part of the vision for the historic center.

Change is anticipated for Highland Station because sanitary sewers are coming to this part of Highland Township. While new development and potential increases in density may be by-products of the sewer installation, the community does not want to lose the special charm of this hamlet. The plan identifies the existing character of Highland Station and illustrates how that character can remain even with new development.

### **Framework Plan**

Page 12 of the master plan amendment is attached. This page shows the Framework Plan map for Highland Station. This map functions less as a future land use map and more like a character guide. The following six classifications are shown on the map and are combinations of land use and building style.

1. **Commercial Style, Commercial Use (CSCU)** retail and service uses in buildings originally intended for commercial use
2. **Residential Style, Commercial Use (RSCU)** existing homes reused for service uses and new structures that resemble homes to be used for retail and office uses
3. **Civic** township offices, police and fire station, and similar civic uses
4. **Special Style, Special Use (SSSU)** classification that covers special circumstances like the day care facility now housed in a former church building
5. **Highland Station Commercial (HSC)** commercial uses along M-59
6. **Residential (RES)** single and multi-family homes

The map is centered on the intersection of Milford and Livingston Roads, and shows the area within a five minute walking radius of this intersection. The character of Livingston Road is distinctly different from that of Milford Road, and this is emphasized in the plan. East

Livingston Road from the railroad tracks to Milford Road is envisioned to be the retail core for Highland Station. Several historic buildings exist along this stretch, and it has more of a pedestrian feel as it is off the busier Milford Road. The plan shows how infill buildings could contribute to the existing character of this street.

In contrast to Livingston Road, Milford Road is a main thoroughfare in the western part of Oakland County, as it connects I-96 to M-59. When approaching Highland Station from the south on Milford Road, there is a sense of entry due to the topography. Colasanti's Market provides a visual cue that the driver is entering a special area. Uses along Milford Road to M-59 are mostly planned for RSCU, Residential Style, Commercial Use to capitalize on the existing homes that currently line the road. Since reuse of these residential structures will occur gradually, it is envisioned that existing homes can co-exist with the new commercial uses. Parking should be located behind the commercial/office uses; however a limited amount of parallel parking could be provided in front of the some of the buildings. A recent development done as Residential Style, Commercial Use shows how new construction can be integrated into the existing fabric of Milford Road. The plan identifies ways to slow the traffic on Milford Road through Highland Station, and new sidewalks are suggested to link uses along Milford Road.

As the Framework Plan shows, Civic use would be prominent along John Street. A Civic Green is proposed to highlight town hall and provide a space for festivities. Residential uses are shown behind Milford Road. New residential townhomes are also envisioned due to the sewer capacity that will be available in the future.

An Appendix provides a list of projects that should be undertaken to make the plan a reality.

#### **Coordination with Adjacent Community Boundary:**

Under the new 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 Historic Highland Station Area is completely internal to Highland Township and is not adjacent to any other community. Brighton Township sent a letter supporting the efforts for Highland Station.

#### **Analysis**

This is a very character driven plan. The intent of the plan is to define the character of Highland Station so that as new development is proposed, it can be weighed against the plan to see if it contributes to the desired character or detracts from it. The sketches and photographs included in the plan support this intent and should help property owners and potential developers understand what is desired. Given the small scale of this hamlet, it will be important to monitor new development so it does not overwhelm existing historic buildings. Maintaining the unique charm of this area will be paramount in evaluating development proposals.

One recommendation in the plan is to retain the governmental offices in their current location on John Street and add a second story when expansion is needed. The 2000 master plan does not specifically address the future civic complex except to show Institutional use at both the John Street location and on the north side of M-59, east of Milford Road. The M-59 location is the site of the post office and new library, and there has been discussion of moving the township

offices there as well. The 2002 amendment for Highland Station acknowledged that the township offices would eventually move to this M-59 location. *“However, voters defeated a referendum that would have moved the town hall to that site. That decision was probably a very good one because there are many advantages to keeping the town hall south of M-59, near the heart of downtown Highland Station.”* (Page 28) PEDS staff agrees that keeping the township offices in Highland Station makes sense. Having this civic use close to shops brings in additional pedestrian traffic. The close proximity of the governmental offices to the retail uses along Livingston and Milford Roads will allow residents to conduct township business and shop all in one convenient trip. In addition, retaining the civic uses in this location helps to reinforce the identity of Highland Station as the center of Highland Township.

I asked the Main Street Oakland County (MSOC) staff to review the plan as well from their perspective. Overall, the MSOC staff had positive comments and commends the Township and the DDA for undertaking this plan. In addition to some specific observations about the document, MSOC staff did have two concerns. One concern relates to the appropriateness of the Residential Style, Commercial Use (RSCU) concept listed in the plan. There is a concern that the existing homes are not conducive to reuse as commercial structures, and if they are reused in this fashion, the necessary alterations will erode their residential character. Secondly, the plan seems to suggest that new buildings should have a historic character or style. Staff strongly feels that new structures should not try to mimic the existing older buildings but should have their own architectural integrity. The full text of MSOC staff’s comments is attached and will be shared with Highland Township as well.

### **Conclusion**

Oakland County Planning and Economic Development Services staff compliments Highland Township for taking the time and effort to develop a plan for this special area of the Township.

Based on the lack of impact on any of the adjacent communities’ boundaries, the Historic Highland Station Master Plan Initiative 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 amendment.

Sincerely,

Charlotte P. Burckhardt, AICP, PCP  
Principal Planner

Enclosures

Historic Highland Station Master Plan Initiative Review  
Main Street Oakland County and the Historic Preservation Program  
December 14, 2007

The following is Oakland County Planning & Economic Development Services' review of the Historic Highland Station Master Plan Initiative. This review is from the perspective of the Main Street Oakland County (MSOC) program of which Highland is a Main Street Community; and the Preservation Program of Oakland County, which assists MSOC and the greater Highland community. We commend the Highland DDA and Township in coordinating the development of this plan, for providing insight to the consultant, and for obtaining public input towards the plan recommendations.

### **Plan Contents**

The Plan is divided into the twelve chapters: Acknowledgements; Prologue; A Plan for Highland Station; East Livingston Road; Milford Road; Township Center; Governor Crapo Lane; Neighborhood; Connection to M-59; Green Gateway; Moving Forward; and Appendix A. The plan focuses on the downtown, generally defined by the Highland DDA district boundaries. This is an area that generally is defined as one block either side of the Milford Road corridor from M-59 on the north to Colasanti's Market on the south. The Plan is well organized in its format and content. The use of photos and illustrations establish a historical context, current conditions and future vision. The text is well formatted and easy to read. Overall, the entire document is very effective in content and presentation.

### **Analysis**

Based upon our review of the plan, we offer the following comments for consideration:

#### I. Acknowledgments

- A. An easier way to navigate Main Street Oakland County is via [www.mainstreetoaklandcounty.com](http://www.mainstreetoaklandcounty.com) in lieu of the site listed.

#### II. Prologue

- A. The narrative is very good and the photos serve to reinforce the text, except no people and/or activity are shown.
- B. Specific reference to the Skate Board Shop (which recently closed) and the feed store can date the document very quickly. Perhaps the stage could be set by rewording such as "...the century-old general store continues to serve as a retail outlet and the former hotel remains a place where people gather ..."
- C. The map on page 6 is impossible to read in the download version. PEDS may be able to assist on improving the quality of map(s).
- D. The third paragraph on page 6 introduces the role equestrian activities have had in the community. It may be beneficial to further note here that it is this type of activity that sets Highland Station apart from other communities and makes it unique. It is the niche of equestrian and recreational activities, which we in MSOC feel can establish Highland

Station in a unique position. Accommodating these activities in the Master Plan development, such as hitching posts and suitable riding trails into town, will enhance the character and fulfill an existing need.

- E. The 'character-defining' features are very good and presented in a manner to be easily identified. Reference to adaptively using the residential buildings as offices and retail shops usually ends in the loss of the residential defining features. A September 6, 2007 MSOC tech visit lead by Donovan Rypkema, a nationally recognized specialist in real estate and in the field of downtown development and revitalization, encouraged the preservation of the residential stock for residential use and not adaptive use conversions. It was felt the commercial businesses should be identified within commercial structures as an aid to their success, and residential uses within residential structures as a way to preserve the architecture.

### III. A Plan for Highland Station

- A. The Residential Style, Commercial Use (RSCU) that would allow existing homes to be renovated for commercial business and new commercial buildings built to resemble houses should be reconsidered. At the September Tech Visit, Donovan Rypkema advocated being honest with the buildings in town. It was felt by all of the consultants that these residential structures do not lend themselves for commercial use readily because of too small of windows for displays, many visual alterations needed to meet code when the 'change in use' occurs, desire for parking, and other limitations. Over time commercial adaptive use will erode the character-defining features of the residential architecture. New demands by business owners to 'improve and enhance' their marketability of their place of business will lead to the demise of residential character from this area. Rypkema also stated that care must be taken to not allow the historic home owners along Milford Road to feel that their homes should not be saved.
- B. Consideration for the infrastructure should also include the appropriate use of pervious paving for the walks, drives and parking lots; the use of stone washed aggregate surfaces and/or loose gravel cover (Lincoln's neighborhood Springfield IL, Buckingham Fountain Chicago IL). An infrastructure that is horse/rider friendly should also be considered. This might include trails into town, hitching post, water stations, etc.
- C. Page 14; the 10 feet setback suggested for additions to the RSCU's illustrates earlier comments. Ten foot building separations require fire rate construction that usually result in little or no windows along the facing edges and increase distances for openings on the front and rear elevations. Fifteen or twenty feet of separation is often required as an alternate method of meeting the building code.
- D. Page 14; the statement '...should have a scale and style appropriate to their neighborhood' seems to encourage "new historic" buildings. Consideration should be given that will avoid this current tendency to make things look old as a way to blend in. Good design architects will understand this and accomplish your goal, but many will accept the easy way of duplicating what exists down the street and design/site plan review will come to base their decision on duplication rather than creative design.

#### IV. East Livingston Road

- A. Consider expanding on the historic development of the East Livingston district as the beginning of the commercial center with the railroad and depot.
- B. As previously mentioned, the statement ‘new buildings with a similar style could fill in spaces between existing structures...’ should be tempered to discourage ‘historic’ new buildings.
- C. Commercial buildings should be encouraged to build to the street and maintain a commercial character.
- D. Confusion on the ‘Meek’ building and the Mecklenburg’s building. Consider listing and identifying on accompanying maps the location of the historically significant structures. This could include: Highland Station House; Village Hall; Dance Hall; Feed Store/Hotel; Mecklenburg building; Road Commission Building; Johnson Block; Credit Union; Roscoe’s house and vintage filling station; and Day Care in the former church. PEDS and the MSOC can provide assistance for this if desired.
- E. Page 19 & 20; the text and graphics are difficult to read. The scale of the Hotel/Feed Store in the first line seems disproportionate with the rest of the streetscape.

#### V. Milford Road

- A. On page 23; illustrations appear to show a center boulevard but there is no mention of this in the text. The crosswalks at Milford Road and Livingston Road appear to be more of an urban character, formal in their design. Consideration that would play to Highland Station’s unique character would seem appropriate.
- B. On page 24; the text on the illustrations is very difficult to read. The ‘might appear’ illustration indicates loss of any openness that is noted in the plan as being one of the character defining influences. Both the residential forms and character are lost as the buildings become a row house wall along the street.
- C. On page 25; the ground level plantings seem quite elaborate and more refined than desired. A simple mowed grass side boulevard with deciduous shade trees forming a canopy is recommended in lieu of the shrubs and plant materials suggested in the illustration.

#### VI. Town Center

- A. Page 29; Better labeling (roads and buildings etc.) of the map and greater area coverage within the map would be helpful.

#### VII. Governor Crapo Lane

- A. Consider renaming the proposed streets. Confusion exists over what is being referred to; Crapo Street, Governor Crapo Lane, Governor Crapo Lane North and Governor Crapo Lane South.

## VIII. Neighborhood

- A. On pages 36/37; labeling and references to the Highland House may be referring to the Highland Station House. Labeling of these building on the mapping would be helpful.
- B. Page 37; illustration shows two access points at the service station earlier in the plan; it is recommended that only one access point remain. It is preferred that the original access points be retained to demonstrate the narrow, often confining room that show how early service stations were designed. The likelihood of the two entry points creating a traffic problem is very slim and could be addressed in other ways to preserve the contextual history.

## IX. Connections to M-59

- A. The idea of relocating 'depot building' and creating a viable use for it is terrific and has the support of MSOC.
- B. The development proposed for the SW corner of M-59 and Milford Road is also a great idea and its design well executed.
- C. Consider major deciduous tree plantings in the center boulevard of M-59 and along the property edges of M-59. This would help in creating an enclosure, alerting the motorist that they are entering a special area and would be in lieu of the small plantings illustrated that could go unnoticed. As a MDOT controlled highway, agreements would have to be reached.

## X. Green Gateway

- A. The sketch is nicely done and illustrates the vision very clearly. The proposed sidewalk in the Photoshop version seems extremely close to the road, more of what one would expect in an urban environment rather than the rural, pedestrian-safe and friendly environment that is wished to be conveyed. Consideration of locating the pedestrian walk to the other side of the tree line with a lawn/native plant side boulevard would better work towards the overall vision. If relocation is not possible, the alternative paving materials, as mentioned earlier, may offer a solution.

## XI. Moving Forward

- A. Page 49; we concur with keeping Township offices/buildings within Highland Station. Donovan Rypkema proposed a conservation district as an overlay to the current plan.
- B. On page 50; the Design guidelines need to be supportive of the Master Plan. Under bullet 12 'Architecture' it is suggested that the design ordinance be approached on several different levels with different design criteria. One possible distinction would be to consider three classes of architectural requirements, one for Designated Historic Structures (local, state, or national designation); another for contributing structures; and one for non-contributing and/or new construction. This would provide for the preservation of a field stone foundation on a historic building, while discouraging the use of imitation field stone foundation on a new building. Buildings are important as historic structures because they are a product of their time, reflecting the function for which they

were built, the technology and resources which were available, and the influence of society in regard to the style. Mimicry confuses the public and lessens the value of our true historic resources.

- C. Color should be considered as another and important method of complementary infill.

## XII. Appendix A. Projects

- A. Tree Planting Initiative should consider the impact that later development, such as sewers, will have on the trees.
- B. Center Street (Milford Road) Street Improvements were suggested by the Tech visit to be one of the last issues to undertake.
- C. Consider moving the medium Priority Projects 1, 2, 4, and 5 to High Priority, especially if the sewer project is undertaken within the next five years. These priority Projects are the ones that create the framework by creating and preserving the open space to keep Highland's character.

### **Conclusion**

Oakland County Planning and Economic Development Services staff commends the authors and participants who prepared this comprehensive plan for the downtown. The greater Highland community should be applauded for its efforts to enhance this asset. Applying to the Main Street Oakland County program demonstrated commitment to the downtown. Developing this Downtown Plan further illustrated willingness to enhance and revitalize this unique historic commercial core. You are encouraged to contact the Main Street Oakland County program at our offices, 2100 Pontiac Lake Road or by phone Robert Donohue, Jr. (248) 858-5444, Program Coordinator; Julie Courtney (248) 858-2033, Assistant Coordinator; or Ron Campbell, AIA (248) 858-5436, preservation architect.

We look forward to working with you to build a stronger, more economically viable and desirable place to work, live and play.

Sincerely,

Julie Courtney  
Assistant Main Street Oakland County Coordinator

Ronald R. Campbell, AIA  
Principal Planner/Preservation Architect

F. The use of 'Introduction' at the bottom of pages 5, 7 and 9, as a chapter indicator, is confusing with the table of contents title and the page 3 title 'Prologue'.

D. Page 22; the photos do match the text discussion of that page. Page references do not match.

A. Page 28; at '*that*' in the second paragraph.

Labeling M-59 on the map would be helpful