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What is Happening in Your Community?

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

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# WHAT IS HAPPENING IN YOUR COMMUNITY?



MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

EAST LANSING

# What Is Happening In Your Community?

By Louis A. Wolfanger

Departments of Resource Development and Soil Science Cooperating

In what kind of a community do you live?

- A farm community?
- A suburban community near a town or city?
- A lake or riverside community?
- An unincorporated village?
- A northern Michigan rural community (in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula or the Upper Peninsula)?

Look about you.

- What is happening in your community?
- Is it getting better each year?
- Is it going down hill gradually?
- What will it be like 10 years from now?

\* \* \* \*

Your community will be different because change is a law of life. Every community in rural and suburban Michigan is changing—some slowly, many rapidly. Your community is not like it was even 5 years ago.

Most of the changes are good. But some create problems when uses of land that clash come into conflict. Moreover, poor uses of land are costly to both owner and community, and are costly to change or improve. Every progressive community deplors its abandoned homes and churches, its idle run-down farms, the ill-fated ventures which unwise use leaves behind.

Good uses of land and resources on the other hand are a credit to a community. They pay permanent dividends to both individual citizen and community in health and happiness as well as in purse.

Read the thumb-nail sketch of each community that follows. Note the changes taking place. Perhaps you had not noticed some of these changes, or thought much about them.

Read especially the sketch of the type of community in which you live. Maybe changes other than those described are taking place in your com-

munity. Whatever they are, think about them. Do you like them, or would you like to do something about them?

Even if you live in a city, take time to read this leaflet too. Your city is wrestling with much the same changes and problems. Many are even bigger and tougher.

## FARM COMMUNITIES

Nearly everyone likes open country. There is no landscape more satisfying to the eye than the broad sweep of fields, meadows, and woodlands of the open countryside. The scene delights the spirit of both city and rural inhabitant.

Many of these scenes in Michigan are changing, however, especially near larger towns and cities or within commuting distance of them. Even the area around many small towns and villages is changing. Many one-time farm communities are no longer open country. Farm after farm has been sold off piecemeal. A number of farms have been bought outright and subdivided.

One of the remarkable features of this century is the number of city people who are daily moving to the country. They are not interested in farming, however. They have a job in town. But they want a home in the more open, less congested countryside near their town. Some want only a lot, some an acre or two, others a miniature farm.

### "Overnight" changes

Each spring the urge is especially strong. During a season or two of active building, a farm community can be strikingly altered. The changes are often breathtaking.

First a few houses go up. Then a dozen. Before long they pop up everywhere. They string out along the main highways. They branch out along the side roads. They are built on an acre or two purchased from the farm across the road or next door, or they are scattered over the new subdivisions.

Shops, stores and various business undertakings appear—grocery stores, garages, trailer parks, gas stations, motels, junkyards, eating places. They bunch up at road corners. They spread out along the highway between the homes.



Recreational enterprises of many kinds spring up—dance halls, night clubs, taverns, and others. A drive-in theater is erected on one of the old-time farms with the exit drive on a hill where there are sure to be accidents.

Numerous industries are flocking into the country. The country provides more space for low-storied modern plants, for parking, and for yard space. Often homes, stores, farms, and manufacturing plants get all mixed up in one neighborhood.

### **New landscapes**

As land changes hands, many old families leave the community. Many farms, or portions of farms, become part-time farms. New land uses of a non-farm nature are undertaken. Part of the land may still remain as “country” but only part of it is in crops. Many acres become idle. As farms disappear, the community loses one of its chief attractions—its open character, the magic expanse of cultivated fields, and green meadows dotted with livestock.

Because many of the city workers who move to the country to live are young, there are many children. The existing school house must then either be enlarged or new ones built. School taxes skyrocket with frequently the greater burden falling upon the farm owners, lowering their standard of living or forcing them out of the community.

As the number of homes and other nonfarm land uses increase, new fire-fighting equipment and buildings to house it must be purchased.

In short, many country areas that yesterday were open, quiet farm communities in which land was handed down from father to son or daughter are gradually breaking up. They are becoming unsettled, changing, mixed-up farm and city-workers’-home communities, interspersed with business and industrial enterprises. Good farm land that should be reserved for future generations, and land essential for water conservation, recreation and other community needs is being constantly diverted to housing developments, industry, shopping centers, school grounds and other urban uses.

Are these changes necessary—good—desirable—for your community?

## **SUBURBAN COMMUNITIES**

If you live in a subdivision or suburban community within a mile or two of a city, you have probably noticed that it has been growing more like a city each year. If there were no highway markers, you could hardly tell where the parent town ends and your suburban community begins.

Construction goes on all spring, summer and fall, and runs into the winter. The picturesque farms and open country are rapidly giving way to abandoned fields and weed-choked lots. As old subdivisions begin to fill up, new ones are laid out, one, two or more, nearly every year. Some of them have big lots and curving streets. Some have the common gridiron streets with narrow lots. Others tie in poorly with existing developments, or with what future growth should be.

Some home owners build on wet land where they must constantly fight damp basements, risky water supplies, poor sewage disposal conditions, and storm waters that flood everything. In spring their driveways and yards are mixtures of mud and pools. Automobiles are then frequently left on highway shoulders where they create traffic hazards.

Others build on deep, dry sands where garden and lawn are perpetually thirsty, sick-looking, and subject to blowing.

### **Hazards arise**

Many standards of health, safety, quality, and soundness of construction are represented in the location and erection of homes and buildings. Frequently sewage is discharged into drainage or roadside ditches where it becomes play puddles for children. Lack of any adequate sanitation brings on dysentery or other diseases. In time, as numbers increase, private wells and sewer systems have to be abandoned, forcing the property owner to pay for two expensive installations—first his own and then a public system. There is acute need for rubbish and garbage disposal facilities.

Homes erected under poor standards are constantly clashing with good-standard homes. Most people take pride in the homes they build and the grounds that surround them. But some show an “I don’t care” attitude and piece together anything regardless of how it affects their neighbors.



Some people build too close to their side lot lines. Crowding not only increases the risk of spreading fires, but it is also a constant source of irritation between neighbors and pulls down the quality of a neighborhood.

Suburban lanes are quickly turned into busy streets filled with dust and pot holes. A cry goes up for graded streets, black-top surfacing, sidewalks, and street lamps. Driveways are located at blind spots. Troubles arise over goats, chickens, pigs, cows, rabbits or pigeons which some families maintain.

### **Traffic increases**

The highway leading into and through the community becomes a mixture of homes, retail stores, garages, beauty parlors, drive-ins, night clubs, taverns, amusements, gas stations, dog kennels, restaurants, supermarkets, cleaning establishments, junkyards, used car lots, and outdoor advertising signs. Accidents become frequent to both people and property. Then traffic controls are imposed, reducing the highway to a city-like street with 25 or 35 mile speed limits. Every improvement in the highway system brings in more people and a greater burst of new subdivisions or sale of unplatted lots.

Schools overflow with children. Existing buildings must constantly be expanded, or new ones erected. School taxes become nightmares.

Many kinds of industries are moving into the suburbs. Industry has generally been unwelcome because of the smoke, dust, noise, odor, or traffic that people usually associate with it. Today, however, many industries control these nuisances and erect landscaped buildings as attractive as homes. These industries are now welcomed, even solicited, because of the added jobs and tax moneys they bring. But however strong an invitation may be, they will shun the jumbled-up, unplanned, unzoned community and any threat of an unfair share of taxes.

### **Some disenchantment**

Unless a suburban community exercises some controls, everyone may do as he pleases regardless of the effect it may have upon others. You can never be reasonably certain how secure your investment is, nor what may occur across the street, next door, or in the neighborhood that may affect your property.

Feelings are mixed as to the attractiveness of living in these half-town, half-country communities. Some love their zip, their newness, their frontier-like atmosphere. Other former city-dwellers do not find them as glamorous as they expected. In the less built-up areas, there may be no nearby back-fence neighbor with whom the housewife can chat or share a pot of coffee, and her young children get lonesome for playmates. Weeds are a never-ending problem. The big lawn requires hours to cut. Youngsters must be constantly taxed to doctor, dentist, music lesson.

## **LAKE AND RIVERSIDE COMMUNITIES**

There is no resource like water. It exercises a magnetic power. Lakes and rivers draw people to their borders to live, play, and often to work, as no other resource does. First there are a few scattered summer homes on the well-drained shores at the edge of the woods. Only roughly-hewn out and winding trails lead in from the public roads. But this simple type of development soon changes to a complex one.

Cottages increase until the number is like a small village. Trailers come in and occupy individually owned lots. Someone stocks a few groceries with gasoline service. Another opens a boat livery and has bait for sale. Resorts spring up. Others erect rental cottages or cabins, public garages, restaurants, or hot dog stands. Dance halls, movies, skating rinks, taverns, and night clubs offer indoor entertainment. The commercial enterprises are sometimes grouped together, but are more often mixed in with the dwellings.

### **Carelessness slips in**

Fire standards are generally ignored. Cottages and business structures are sometimes built of flimsy, easily-kindled materials. Chimneys are erected on insecure foundations. Metal stove pipes may be run through inflammable roofs or walls without adequate insulation.

Buildings are often crowded together on the same or adjacent lots, too close for fire or health safety. Anyone careless with cigarettes, stoves or inflammable fuel can wipe out an entire waterfront in even a modest breeze.



The narrow, shallow lots and the lots located on low ground or on skimpily built-up wet lands are critically dangerous to health. They do not provide adequate conditions, area, or space for wells and sewage disposal. Sewage then either runs into an already saturated subsoil or directly into the lake or river, or seeps down into the groundwater. Wells and privies or septic tank disposal fields are often crowded side by side, if not on the same lot, then on adjacent lots. Well water, especially if from shallow ground water sources, is easily polluted by seep-in sewage.

### **Standards lowered**

Health authorities are often amazed at the crowded conditions and the low standards of waste and sewage disposal under which many people live while on vacation or living in a cottage on a lake or stream. These people frequently try to justify the low standards with the explanation that occupancy is temporary—for only a week or two, or for a summer. Or they say that land is too high priced for adequate spacing.

Too high priced for what? Fire and disease take no holiday. They don't stop at small lots. They respect no man, child, or calendar. They honor no single season, month, week, day, night or hour. Health or life once lost can never be recovered at any price.

Because many of Michigan's waters lie within easy driving distance of towns and cities, many people prefer to occupy their water-front cottage as a permanent home throughout the year. This adds further complications. Roads must be kept open in winter. Schools must be expanded. All-year fire protection, policing, sewage and waste disposal must be provided.

Year by year, many of the state's lake and river edge communities are becoming more town-like. Many are losing their peaceful, restful, attractive, and healthful qualities as more people crowd into them—as safe standards of sewage and waste disposal are ignored—as they continue to be a jumble of anything and everything—of jerry-rigged shacks, pleasing cottages and homes, resorts, trailers, disreputable amusements, and all sorts of commercial enterprises.

Much of Michigan's "water wonderland" is gradually becoming jumbleland.

## **UNINCORPORATED VILLAGES**

An unincorporated village is a miniature town. It is made up chiefly of generously spaced homes that fade

out gradually into the surrounding country. It has a few stores, garages and eating places, a school, one or two churches, perhaps an elevator, or stockyard, or town hall, and a few small industries. There is a sprinkling of in-the-home businesses that offer radio, television, refrigeration, electrical, auto-repair, carpenter, plumbing or sewing services.

### **Signs of new life**

Many people think of villages as sleepy, stand-still communities. "Nothing important ever happens there," is a common verdict.

Perhaps not very important in some. But have you noticed how many are getting a new store or a new industry or two? Have you noticed the new modern homes that are being erected and the older ones being remodelled? The new neon signs? The new school? You don't see these in every village, but you can see first one and then another from village to village.

The changes depend in part upon the location of your village. If you are near a large town or city that offers employment, many of your neighbors are probably going to work there. In turn, the village is attracting city workers who prefer living under its simple conditions. Friends visit them and decide to live there too.

Many industries are seeking village locations. Unincorporated villages have few, usually no, labor problems. They have low cost land, low taxes, and land aplenty. Some of the industries will bring smoke, some dust, some an unpleasant odor, some increased traffic. Yet they will be welcomed. They bring jobs and add stability if they succeed.

### **How does it fit in?**

But where are they best located so as to fit in with the life and comfort of the community? Windows are open in summer. Will the prevailing winds carry the smoke, odor, or dust into or away from the residential areas of the village? A growing village would do well to avoid some of the "messes" that cities are in.

Another problem confronting many villages is the growth of "home occupations" or businesses in the residence areas. One neighbor starts dismantling old motor vehicles in his back yard and selling the parts. Another saws and hammers at late hours, making



furniture. Another runs a welding shop in his garage. Another raises rabbits, or pigeons, or quality dogs.

Reactions to such home occupations are varied. Some residents approve them. Some don't. Approval seems to depend largely upon whether it is the man with the shop or livestock that is talking or his annoyed next-door neighbor. It is generally admitted, however, that such occupations will in time break down the residential quality of a neighborhood if continued and expanded. Should they therefore be limited in any way? If so, how?

## NORTH MICHIGAN RURAL COMMUNITIES

The same changes that have been described for southern Michigan's communities are taking place in similar communities in northern Michigan, (in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula). But in general, they are not occurring to the same degree, nor at the same fast tempo.

Suburbs are gradually growing up around many of the towns. Homes are being erected on lots or acreage sold off from some farm within easy driving distance from town. Villages are changing too, but not as rapidly.

Rivers, lake shores and highways, however, are booming with summer cottages, resorts, shops, service businesses and recreational enterprises. These are the prize lands of our north country.

### New values

For many years most of northern Michigan was widely regarded as merely "cut-over land," and a region of low agricultural value. Now, however, it is recognized as one of the important resource regions of the state. Land in its native condition, mantled with trees—even with only second growth—and uncluttered by the creations and complexities of modern civilization, exerts tremendous attraction. City people spend vast sums to visit such lands, then return and boast about the beautiful, restful scenery, and awe-inspiring country they have seen.

Coupled with the large areas of "wilderness" is a rich endowment of lakes and rivers. Waters combined with trees (forest and woodland) are irresistible.

From time immemorial, they have attracted men. Their value is eternal, unreckonable in dollars or any other measure.

### Shorter distances

Interspersed with the forest and recreational land are a number of good agricultural communities.

As the state's highway system is improved — by limited access highways, by four lanes to the Straits and through other extensions — the distance into northern Michigan will be tallied, not in miles, but in hours and minutes. Ambitious development plans are already in motion to more fully utilize the assets of the region. For the Upper Peninsula, the Mackinac Bridge now shortens the crossing of the Straits from a slow water passage to a quick dash.

Unlike southern Michigan, most of North Michigan rural communities are as yet unbroken by a wholesale invasion of rural-resident homes, commercial enterprises, and other 20th century developments. They would do well to profit by the painful experiences of many southern Michigan communities.

They should act to protect their assets in advance. They should act to conserve their good qualities before overwhelming changes engulf their communities. There is still time for it. While they are not without problems, they are not as yet facing the number of critical problems with which southern Michigan communities are grappling. They are like a clean sheet of paper with only a few blemishes on which a good future can still be written.

## YOU MERELY HOPE?

So look about you. What do you think of your community?

What changes are taking place? Are they good or bad?

What can happen in your township, in your county, in your part of the state?

Is your community continuing to be the kind you had thought it would be? For your home? For your business? For your recreation? To hand on to your children?

You hope it will be!!

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

**Remember:** Changes cannot be stopped. You cannot build a wall against them. Whether or not you like it, your community will be different tomorrow from what it is today. Unless your community is a "dead" community, it will have more people, more homes, more businesses, more industry, more summer cottages, more good or bad occurrences.

You can help guide the changes, however. You can help to see that they conform to good and decent standards of health and safety. You can help to see that the developments occur in a planned and orderly manner, and not merely in a hit-and-miss fashion which is almost always costly. You can help to see that they fit properly into your community so as to benefit both the community and the individual who is bringing them to pass.

Study Michigan's *rural planning* and *zoning laws*. Learn how *your* community can work out a good blueprint for its development, like the sketch or blueprint you prepared for your home, farm, school, church, place of business or summer cottage.

Then get your county or township to consider a *planning program* and a *zoning ordinance* and other actions based upon the blueprint. The zoning acts are one of the tools which the legislature has provided for putting plans into effect—for guiding future changes. With a *good ordinance* your county or township can set a number of standards for future changes. It can encourage the best use of the resources and opportunities your community has. It can help reduce hazards to life, health and property. It can help stabilize your community.

But don't think of zoning as a cure-all. You will also have to use other laws and tools. You may have to think up new tools. On the other hand, a simple ordinance may satisfy all your community needs at present.

Extension Bulletin No. F-272, "Rural Zoning in a Nutshell", will give you a brief outline of what rural zoning is and how it works.

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Laws related to planning  
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