

Watershed Resource Paper #4 Preserving Rural Character

The preservation of rural character has been an ongoing theme for Master Plans with increasing amounts of development in the Dowagiac River Watershed. However, as development blooms, the challenges to preserving the unique character of each community increase.

A specific purpose of preserving rural character is to recognize and protect the qualities of rural living enjoyed by the Watershed residents. The abundance of natural features and the high quality of life to which they contribute are worth preserving. Where development of land is requested, the densities and design of such proposals should be of a nature that will continue the rural character of the area or permit use of a portion of the land for preserving open space or natural features.

Preserving the rural character is important since it was for this reason that many people moved to this area. Existing open spaces help maintain the feeling of openness and tranquility prized by area residents. Careful open space planning can also enhance the ability of each of the Townships to limit traffic impacts and environmental problems associated with more intensive development.



What is Rural Character?

Michigan's diverse landscapes, including its shorelines, riparian areas, open fields, forests, and farmlands, draw residents to a variety of rural areas throughout the state. Rural character is many times a perception unique to the individual. One person may interpret rural character as having a low density of development; another may only recognize it where there is a complete absence of man-made features, such as signs and buildings.

But regardless of any individual interpretation of rural character, it remains true that as more people are attracted to rural areas, preserving the unique character of an area becomes more of a challenge.

Can everyone have their piece of the country and still retain a community's rural character?

Ultimately, it is the *community's own definition* of rural character that is the single most important part of its preservation. It is up to each community to decide what its rural character is and subsequently, how it can be preserved. For example, definitions of rural character may include the following elements:

- C tree-lined streets
- C farmlands
- C woodlands
- C clean air and water
- C undeveloped open space
- C natural streambanks
- C natural lake shorelines
- C outdoor recreation opportunities
- C small villages and communities

Relationship to the Watershed

Preserving rural character and preserving the quality of life in the watershed are closely linked. Unlike larger watersheds, which may contain a wide range of urban and rural land uses, the Dowagiac River Watershed is largely rural with relatively small pockets of urbanized land uses. Comments from planning commissioners and residents alike consistently address the desire to maintain the rural character of the area. Indeed, in many cases, it is this character which is sought by new residents.

Solutions for the environmental issues within the Dowagiac River Watershed are closely tied to the same characteristics necessary to preserve the character of the communities within the Watershed. Many of the techniques described in the Watershed Resource Papers, if properly implemented and enforced, will go far toward preserving the rural character sought by each community.

Techniques for Preserving Rural Character

It is likely that rural character will encompass many aspects of many land uses and include natural resources, and thus its preservation will require using a variety of techniques. The following describes regulations that may be implemented through various methods to assist a community in retaining its rural character.



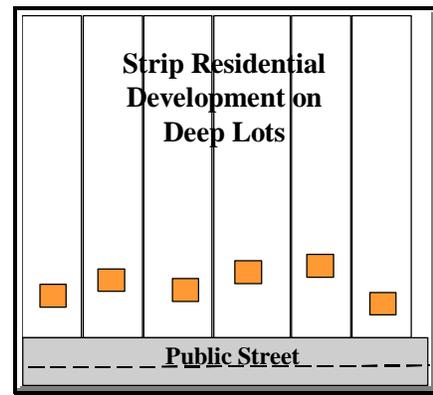
Rural character is as much a perception as reality. That perception is gained from two principal viewpoints. The first viewpoint, and the one that affects the most people on a day to day basis, is from the roadway. The second, and most personal, is the view that someone may have from their own property to their neighbor's property. Preserving rural character in this context involves the design of a development.

The style and method of development of new residential areas will play a pivotal role in preserving the rural character of the Dowagiac River Watershed. Although some existing zoning regulations call for homes with larger lots and generous setbacks, less attention is paid to the careful placement on the lot to preserve natural features.

There are a number of practices which communities may encourage to promote the preservation of the rural environment from both viewpoints. The following describes various techniques that may be implemented.

Roadside Rural Character

Perceptions of rural character may be formed by natural settings along the roadside. Homes spaced out along roadways, particularly when near the street, tend to detract from the rural character of the area when the view is more of buildings than of open space. A byproduct of strip residential development, the inefficient use of land, also occurs when homes are placed near the front property line. A number of properties in the Township are divided into relatively large lots, with the frontage taken up by individual homes. This type of development tends to create relatively deep lots which leaves sizeable portions of properties cut off from road access and essentially unuseable.



While this may not be a problem for the original and some subsequent owners, others may look for opportunities to use the back portions of these lots for further development and seek variances or other approvals from the township to do so. The 1997 amendments to the state Subdivision Control Act (now called the Land Division Act) provides limits to the depth of lots created, but access to interior properties will continue to be an important consideration in reviewing future development proposals.

The number of driveways along these roadways can become a traffic issue, particularly in areas where zoning allows relatively narrow lot widths. In fact, current access management guidelines call for driveway spacing of 550 feet for roadways with an average speed of 55 miles per hour (see table).

Average Speed (MPH)	Minimum Driveway Spacing (in Feet)
25	125
35	185
45	300
55	550

Although individually these driveways do not generate excessive amounts of traffic, over time an increase in their number on a busy roadway can present problems with additional turn movements, especially where vehicle speeds are high.

Access Management Guidelines (MDOT)

Land Development Options

Lot Widths

Increasing lot widths can have the effect of separating the distance between homes to allow for a more "open" feeling. This would require changing the applicable zoning requirements along certain defined roadways (generally county arterial roads). Other applicable provisions for these fronting lots could include such elements as:

- C Increased lot width and/or area.
- C Greater setback requirements.
- C Provisions minimizing urban vegetation (manicured lawns, flower gardens, etc.) and preservation of larger trees in areas visible from the roadway.

However, simply changing the district requirements would mean that the width requirements would apply to all roadways. Therefore, to make this regulation more effective, and to discourage development along the roadway, a companion change to encourage development throughout the site may be needed. This could be accomplished by decreasing the lot frontage required on roads that are part of the development project. Again, this does not imply that the site density needs to be greater, only that the lot widths for interior streets be less than what is required along the arterial roadway.

Implementing these provisions requires adoption of an "overlay" district that would apply to residential zone districts along arterial roadways. Lots fronting on the interior streets would require less widths and setbacks.

Development Setbacks

Another provision that could be implemented would require a minimum development setback for residential projects of more than a single lot. The setback would require that no building that is part of the development could be nearer to the arterial roadway than 200-300 feet. (The weakness of this provision is that it would be more difficult to apply it to individual home sites.)

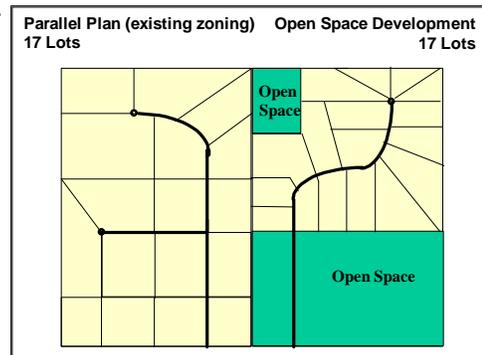
Other provisions applying to this setback area would be that no native or natural vegetation be removed from the setback, nor any grading or changes in topography occur, except that necessary for entrance roads. The Ordinance could allow the Planning Commission to modify this requirement if the developer demonstrated that the clearing of existing vegetation would contribute significantly to the purpose and objectives of the development.

Or, the Planning Commission could reduce the setback if existing landscaping provided a natural screen, or the proposed development provided a landscape screen. There should, however, still be some minimum setback.

This provision would also have to include some allowance for lot variations so that the overall density permitted by the Ordinance could be maintained.

Open Space Development

There could be further incentives for the clustering of residential units, also known as “open space development.” Under this development technique the “base density” is based on a “parallel plan” showing reasonable and permissible development under existing zoning. While Open Space Development may increase the net density for a smaller area of a larger parcel, the overall density would still fall into the requirements of the existing zoning.



It would also allow for the preservation of significant natural features, provide open space for recreation, or allow the continuation of farming on interior land areas. To preserve the roadside character, some or all of the required open space could be placed abutting the roadway.

Development Incentives

Currently, open space development in western Michigan is not particularly prevalent, or indeed, attractive to home buyers. One of the reasons that many buyers are looking in the rural areas is to avoid being too near other homes. Unlike eastern Michigan, where land values are generally higher, open lands are abundant in western Michigan and land prices are very reasonable.

However, there is a segment of the marketplace that can appreciate the value of preserving larger open spaces within a development. Therefore, offering of incentives to developers for using this development technique is appropriate. The basic incentive to which developers will most readily respond is an increase in the number of units which could be permitted over the base density calculated under the parallel plan. This is generally considered a development “bonus.”

The amount of the bonus may vary depending on the nature of the development, and they may be used in combinations of one or more different incentives. As an example, incentives may include an increase in the number of units if:

- C additional open space is provided, beyond that normally gained in the lowering of individual lot sizes;
- C a community wastewater and/or domestic water system is used (avoiding the need for septic systems and individual wells);
- C recreational amenities are provided, such as tennis courts, club house, or other similar facility;
- C walkways, trails, or bike paths are included within the development;

- C significant areas of active agricultural lands are preserved; and
- C where appropriate, commercial uses may be permitted (usually subject to certain restrictions to limit size and effect on the area).

Development Regulations

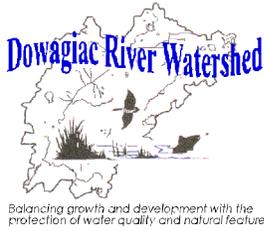
A variety of other development regulations are possible to encourage preservation of open spaces and natural features, and further protect rural character.

Tree Preservation Ordinance

A tree preservation ordinance can be implemented to reduce the number of trees removed from a new development site. Tree ordinances can be general or more specific. A more general tree ordinance can refer simply to the natural features of a site. If a more general ordinance is preferred by a community, then a natural features inventory and a site design that incorporates natural integrity are usual requirements. If a more specific ordinance is desired, regulations can be incorporated that restrict the number and size of trees that are removed from a site or require the planting of additional trees or vegetation to mitigate trees that were removed during site development.

Purchase Of Development Rights (PDR)/Transfer Of Development Rights (TDR)

PDR and TDR programs may also be used to promote rural character. (A detailed discussion of these programs may be found in *Watershed Resource Paper #2, Open Space Protection*.) Generally, these programs have not been highly successful in simply preserving open spaces or rural character since their implementation is usually directed toward the preservation of valuable farmland resources. Of the two, TDR probably has the greatest potential to reduce development density in selected areas, but this also assumes that the community has areas where higher densities would be acceptable.



ACTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Community _____

Preserving Rural Character	Yes	No	Need to Know More
Roadside Rural Character (page 3)			
Lot Widths (page 4)			
Development Setbacks (page 4)			
Open Space Development (page 5)			
Development Incentives (page 5)			
Tree Preservation Ordinance (page 6)			
Transfer of Development Rights (page 6)			