

Washtenaw County Regional Quality of Life Initiative

October 16, 2003



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Summary

In September and October, 2003 a group of elected officials and staff convened to develop the organizational design of an initiative to maintain and enhance the quality of life in the Washtenaw area. This group identified key issues on which to begin working, identified the elements of quality of life that their constituents most value, and developed a charter describing the group's purpose, background, core principles, structure, process elements, duration, and dissolution.

The group considered a number of regional models from Washtenaw County and other parts of the country, and selected key attributes of these efforts to help shape its charter.

This group will use its leadership position to address issues before they become problems, proactively identify and seize opportunities to enhance quality of life, and strive to maintain the sense of place of the Washtenaw area.

This document forms the framework for the group's continuing efforts.

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Situation Analysis

The Washtenaw region is widely known as a wonderful place to live. The Washtenaw region enjoys cultural and shopping amenities, scenic resources, recreational opportunities and a healthy economy. This reputation helps encourage people to move here, and this continuing growth brings a variety of benefits and challenges.

In the foreseeable future, these forces are most likely to have the biggest impact on the Washtenaw region's quality of life:

- Increasing vehicle traffic, impaired road capacity and increased difficulty in finding convenient parking
- Challenges to the mix of nearby urban and rural communities
- Development pressure on existing agricultural, scenic and recreational open space
- Increasing cost of public safety, including police and firefighting services
- Historic and continuing relationships between jurisdictions at the adjacent neighbor and regional levels
- An increasing number of lawsuits regarding zoning decisions
- The structure of state laws, including land use and policies affecting land use (e.g. transportation funding)
- The actions of the University of Michigan as a regional economic engine, and Eastern Michigan University as a large landholder.

Balancing Forces

These driving forces contain some intriguing paradoxes that need a balanced, insightful and creative treatment:

- Home rule *and* the impacts of regional issues
- The desire to attract to the area talented people *and* their desires around suburban living
- Continued economic vitality *and* non-damaging growth
- Land use decisions *and* property rights
- Regional desires for continued high quality of life *and* case law and policy

Desired Vision for the Future of the Washtenaw Region

If this regional initiative is successful, the participants of the group agree that these elements of quality of life will be preserved and enhanced into the future:

- An individual sense of place for each of the communities
- The mix of rural and urban character of the region
- Economic security
- Ability to attract talented people
- A way to manage growth to achieve these aims

Criteria for Selecting Initial Issues

- Promises early success
- Something we can all agree to support
- Doesn't cost very much and is cost effective
- Visible to the public
- Visible demonstration of cooperation
- Something that would really help: public acknowledgement of value
- Looks out for the best interests of the citizens of the entire county

Initial Issues on Which to Start Working

1. Ensure that the regions comprehensive plans work to maintain and enhance quality of life.

Approach

Make it easy to look at what each unit of government is doing and identify opportunities and potential problem areas. Give the ability to compare and contrast county plan with local plans.

Action

Compile a consolidated document pertaining to land use and existing plans for the eastern county. Develop a common terminology to allow for comparison of plans.

Person Responsible

Tony VanDerworp

2. Create a vision for a coordinated, connected parks and open space system.

Approach

Include parks at all levels of government, trails, privately protected land, and open space. Identify opportunities to connect park resources for recreation, scenic and wildlife values. Use as a guide for land acquisition.

Action

Create an inventory and map of all the parks and open space and provide information about access, develop product for public. Connect to promotion efforts. Cooperate with road commission and other units of government.

Publicize the work product, make it accessible, and proactively deliver it to key audiences.

Person Responsible

Tony VanDerworp

Top Issues on Which to Begin Working

The group identified these top issues for potential initial action. From this list they selected actions from the first two.

1. Parks and open space
2. Begin process of coordinating master plan for future land use and zoning
3. Promote concepts that would benefit all the areas (e.g. cleanup day event)
4. Insurance pooling agreement
5. Promote image of area
6. Fire and police cooperation
7. County-wide survey to find out what we are doing well and what the residents would like to see

Potential Action Items for Top Issues

The group discussed these top issues, before deciding on 1) parks and open space, and 2) coordinating the master plan process.

Parks and open space

- Propose a resolution of support for the greenbelt initiatives
- PDR and/or TDR ordinances and millage
- Coordinate parks among all units; consider having the county facilitate to create a vision for parks overall
- Inventory parks and needs for parks, including schools

Begin process of coordinating master plan for future land use and zoning

- Countywide comprehensive plan
- Get a commitment to share planning updates with all units within this group, beyond just neighbors
- A consolidated document pertaining to land use for the eastern county, compilation of plans
- Compare to master plan for parks and open space
- Discuss how people on the boundary are served
- Method to track what happens to land that is annexed

Promote concepts that would benefit all the areas

- Cleanup day event, coordinate/align dates of individual events, coordinate publicity
- Coordinated approach to dumping

- Regional Pride Day, t-shirts
- Region-wide Parks Appreciation Day

Insurance pooling agreement

- Cooperation in defense of land-use lawsuits
- Have attorneys come together to share information on how to make it easier to defend plans and actions
- Create repository of litigation and results
- Consider legislative remedies (e.g. landowner standing, injury)

Promote image of the area (visitors, potential new businesses, residents)

- A lot of work being done already, e.g. branding the AA-Ypsi area
- VCB convention roll off
- Promote quality of life to affect how people here feel about themselves, brand loyalty
- Provide “did you know?” information to residents re quality of life
- Visual reminders of high quality of life
- Connect to event days
- Develop identity, pride in being from here

Fire and police cooperation

- Collect all mutual assistance agreements
- Inventory resources and utilization, boundary issues
- Conduct a “start-from-scratch” study
- Explore setting up a district
- Begin by exploring cooperation among contiguous communities
- Emergency management as a way to start

County-wide survey to find out what we are doing well and what the residents would like to see

- Consult Detroit Area study (attitudes, not services, no participation from townships)
- 1997 county-wide survey marginally helpful
- Robert Marans might be able to help
- Statistically significant, representative survey
- Publish report on what you are already doing
- Leverage the universities
- Include a feedback portion to all services and events, reach out to marginally less involved
- Local governments could/are doing this, compile this information

Full list of Potential Issues on Which to Begin Working

In order of nomination, with tallies (in parentheses)

1. Parks and open space (17)
2. Insurance pooling agreement (10)
3. Regional transportation and transit (9)
4. Promote image of area (11)
5. Promote concepts that would benefit all the areas (e.g. cleanup day event) (11)
6. Fair share housing agreement (1)
7. Marketing tool/resource for the county (re all services) (2)
8. Huron River water quality and recreation connectivity (7)
9. River, streams and stormwater management (1)
10. Cooperative purchasing agreement (6)
11. Attracting and retaining young professionals (0)
12. Begin process of coordinating master plan for future land use and zoning (15)
13. Celebrate success by publicly acknowledging housing initiatives for affordable living (4)
14. Use tools such as infrastructure improvements and creative zoning to promote economic diversity and preserve our tax base (4)
15. Childcare needs assessment for future planning (0)
16. Regional transportation signage (8)
17. Water and sewer capacity (3)
18. Defend land use and development-related lawsuits (9)
19. Emergency management and preparedness (0)
20. Fire and police cooperation (10)
21. Show how local government is working together (4)
22. Shared vision of development of the future (8)
23. County-wide survey to find out what we are doing well and what the residents would like to see (10)

Washtenaw Metro Alliance

Group Charter

Purpose

To protect our quality of life by anticipating issues before they become problems and to enhance our quality of life by identifying opportunities to maintain our sense of place through commitment to leadership and action.

Background

The continuing growth in the Washtenaw region provides benefits and also presents challenges to regional quality of life. Transportation, housing, land use and public safety are parts of a system that require a regional approach. Many of these issues can be better managed with regional cooperation and as part of a system. An escalating number of lawsuits challenge land use decisions, and local governments are finding it increasingly difficult to deal with these lawsuits. Many regional quality of life initiatives are springing up, signaling a felt need and requiring leadership. These issues have a gravity and urgency that demands attention now.

Core Principles

This initiative will be most successful if the participants subscribe to and abide by a set of core principles.

- This will be a safe place for discussions and will use a process that can withstand disagreements.
- It will be a forum for full inclusion of all the issues that are directly appropriate to regional action.
- It will endeavor to understand each entity's goals and find commonality, and to help each community to be successful.
- It will communicate its decisions to the public such that key points are easily understood.
- It will provide the ability for interests to come together in a regional process while maintaining local identity and control.
- Its decisions will respect the interests and individual needs of the entities.

Structure and Participation

- Participation is voluntary and by consensus of the group.
- Participants are elected or government decision-makers and staff and other support groups.
- Decision-making members are elected officials.
- Other elected officials may join upon request or invitation, especially as we prove our ability to create successes.
- Each entity will invite two representatives to serve.
- Entities may withdraw upon notice to the group.

- Communication and coordination for the initiative is provided by the county and participants’ staffs. Costs and resources for special projects will be apportioned among the membership.
- Current co-chairs are Leah Gunn and John Hieftje. Future chairs will be chosen by the group.

Process Elements

- The process should start with the big picture—what deserves to be here 100 years from now-- and develop a plan that everybody can buy into.
- Develop a process to select issues on which we agree to work.
- Create successes to encourage participation of other entities.
- Decision-making on recommendations from this group are by consensus of the elected officials. Consensus means “I can live with the decision and I agree that I will support it.”
- Recommendations requiring actions need approval from governing bodies of the participants. The group will design a process for taking each of our recommendations to their respective governing bodies for endorsement or acceptance.
- Minority opinions need to be acknowledged and need to be handled with flexibility on a case-by-case basis.
- It is important to maintain positive personal relationships with all participants. Maintaining the ability to disagree while being respectful is key.
- Discuss the next meeting’s agenda at the prior meeting.
- Co-chairs set the agenda with suggestions from any member.
- Schedule meetings at time that meets the most members’ ability to participate.

Duration and Dissolution

This is a standing organization. By consensus of the group, this initiative may be dissolved.

Approved and Executed by:

City of Ann Arbor

City of Ypsilanti

Washtenaw County

Ypsilanti Township

Pittsfield Township

Ann Arbor Township

Scio Township

Superior Township

Case Study Summaries

The group considered some models of regional initiatives from around the country to identify elements of the models that would help develop the design of the Washtenaw initiative. These brief summaries characterize salient points of the different kinds of cases.

Mile High Compact

The Mile High Compact is a legally binding agreement for the growth of the communities in the Denver, Colorado metropolitan area. It has its roots in the Metro Mayors' Caucus, a group that formed to identify and discuss regional issues of importance. The Mile High Compact establishes an enforceable commitment among the participating jurisdictions to establish and implement urban growth boundaries, to develop comprehensive plans in each jurisdiction, and to ensure that those plans are consistent with the regional development plan — Metro Vision 2020, consistent among adjacent jurisdictions particularly at the jurisdictional boundary and consistent within each jurisdiction with zoning and development regulations.

Lower Arkansas Conservancy District

Five counties in southeastern Colorado formed a taxation district to provide a local market for sale and purchase of water. This district was authorized by ballot initiative, and won in the November 2002 election by a wide majority in each county. At the time, Colorado was in an unprecedented drought, so water was on the voter's mind. The taxation district formed an organization to fund and purchase water rights in the local area. Previous to the formation of the district, the only market for water rights was suburban Denver communities, which are not in the same watershed. Sale of water to these communities removed water from the local areas forever, and threatened to diminish the economic base of the local communities.

Greenways Initiative

The communities in suburban Detroit have banded together to create a greenway surrounding Detroit. This organization is a program of the Community Foundation, and has no staff or volunteers of its own. It is rather an informal collaboration of a large number of groups and individuals, with strong leadership from community leaders, elected and volunteer. The original idea came from a Rails to Trails Conservancy report identifying the potential for more than 200 miles of trails in the area, against an actual 20 miles. The staffing is provided by a lone individual employee of the Community Foundation, who provides the convening power, political strategy and fundraising capacity.

Mesa County, Colorado

Three communities in rural western Colorado foresaw the possibility that they might some time in the future grow together and lose their individual identities and character. To forestall this undesirable situation, elected officials and their staffs decided to develop a community separators project to conserve land between the communities. They formed an interagency agreement to cooperate and to provide a stream of funding to purchase

conservation easements. The three municipalities have contracted most of their work to a local land conservation organization for implementation.

Participants in the meeting also described some additional models. The Northern Front Range, Colorado is an initiative to deal with explosive growth in that area. The Allegheny Conference, established in the 1940s, is based on regional economic development. The City of Portland, Oregon has developed a model waterfront development approach along the Willamette River.

Elements of Success in Regional Initiatives

It seems that each of the models, though different in inception, purpose and organizational structure, have some things in common.

Compelling, shared need. They responded to a very compelling, shared need to address issues that can only be addressed at a regional level

Ripeness. The issues were widely known and felt by a critical mass of constituencies, and a call for action was imminent or voiced.

Leadership. Elected officials led or responded to the situation with a demonstrated effort to organize for action.

Efficient shared processes. The organizations within the collaborative figured out specific protocols and processes to make the work proceed efficiently, developed a common vocabulary to ensure accurate communication, and developed a useful decision-making framework. They also worked diligently at maintaining good relationships among all participants to ensure that key issues could be discussed openly and candidly, that minority opinions were heard and honored and that dissent could be productively engaged.

Money. Money was not the principle driver in any of the successful cases, but instead was more likely a result of the initiative and its successes. It was important in each case that participants decided how funding would be handled so that misunderstandings would be minimized later when the money appeared.

