



United Growth for Kent County

Making the Urban-Rural Connection

United Growth for Kent County is a project of Michigan State University (MSU) and MSU Extension of Kent County. It was launched in 1999 with funding from the Frey Foundation. United Growth brings people and organizations together to address land use issues from both a rural and an urban perspective. United Growth is directed by a Coalition representing residents, landowners, businesses and organizations within Kent County.

The work of United Growth is accomplished through the efforts of a small professional staff and many volunteers who serve on the following teams:

The mission of the United Growth Coalition is to serve as a sustainable, citizen-based organization that unites people and organizations around the promotion of positive land use in Kent County and West Michigan.



United Growth for Kent County, Inc.
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- **Project Management Team** – The Project Management Team (PMT) is comprised of six representatives elected annually by the Rural and Urban Committees, with three individuals representing each group. The PMT functions as an Executive Committee for the United Growth Coalition.
- **Rural Committee** – The rural component is working to support a healthy and sustainable, regional agricultural system; an interconnected network of open space and wildlife habitat, a strong recreational trail system, and preserved natural areas protecting streams, creeks, rivers and wetlands; and thriving small cities and villages in Kent County.

- **Urban Committee** - The Urban component works to revitalize the central city by assisting community-based organizations in building their capacity to successfully handle complex issues; improve the social and economic vitality of neighborhoods; and identifying and mitigating the effects of urban sprawl.
- **Legislative Committee** - The Legislative Committee is composed of United Growth members interested in learning about the implications of land use policy. Committee members meet with area legislators, research pending legislation, and study possible affects that proposed policies can have locally. The committee is especially interested in issues that relate to both urban and rural interests.

Addressing Urban Sprawl

Disinvestment and abandonment in urban areas and the loss of farmland and natural resources are both caused by inefficient land use (urban sprawl). They are two sides of the same coin. United Growth for Kent County is forging connections between the rural and urban sectors to reverse the negative effects of sprawl and promote positive land usage.

The committees of United Growth undertake several projects each year to strengthen the city while preserving prime and unique farmland and open spaces. Many of these are highlighted here. In addition, United Growth offers a range of educational programming on a variety of topics including:

- Farmland preservation
- Open space conservation design
- Community-based revitalization strategies
- Citizen planner training for elected and appointed officials
- Capacity-building for community-based organizations
- Ways to increase profitability in agriculture
- Youth land use education
- Neighborhood Planning



Successes and Highlights

Received support and recognition from over 85 organizations for working together to achieve sustainable land use patterns in Kent County.

Conducted research on public policy issues including Commerce Centers, Use Value Taxation Agricultural Districts, and the effect of government budget cuts on land-usage decisions.

Authored position paper on the funding of Kent County's Purchase of Development Rights program.



Conducted research to define mixed income neighborhoods in Grand Rapids.

Participated in West Side Neighborhood project leading to Business District Revitalization Plan.

Developed "This Land is Your Land" learning series on land usage for students in grades 3-5.

Conducted Citizen Planner Program engaging over 50 Kent County participants.



Tracked the development status of the City of Grand Rapids revised Zoning Ordinance to support the new Master Plan.

Publisher of the Urban-Rural Connection newsletter reaching over 2,500 individuals four times each year.

Hosted 2005 Land Use Networking Luncheon with Bert Bleke, superintendent of Grand Rapids Public Schools, speaking on how land use decisions influence the social/economic balance and viability of city schools.

Researched the need for and became involved in legislation creating the Michigan Housing and Community Development Fund.



Conducted research on gentrification of two Grand Rapids neighborhoods.

Participated in the Grand Rapids Master Plan update process.

Recognized by several national, state, and local organizations for impacting land use and leadership development.

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