

## Chapter 6: “Green” Projects & Land Use



In the last few years, United Growth for Kent County has been exploring how climate change, the need for renewable energy sources, building a green infrastructure, and the role of individual responsibility relate to land use. We have found many connections.

The following are brief summaries of some efforts we have undertaken that relate land use activities to the larger issue of climate change. All of these projects can be replicated in other counties. They can serve as a model on how to bring urban, rural and suburban residents together to further develop a local land use coalition.

### **Land Preservation Campaign**

Green infrastructure is our natural life sustaining system, which makes it an important component of land use. Some communities are placing as much (or more) effort on creating and maintaining their green infrastructure system as they do their grey infrastructure (roads, water and sewer lines, etc.) Green infrastructure is a strategic approach to urban revitalization as well as to land conservation in rural areas.

Many families desire to preserve their land as farmland or open space; however, they lack information and understanding of their land preservation options. In addition, now is an attractive time for property owners to preserve their property through whole or partial donations towards conservation easements as generous, federal charitable income tax deductions are in place through the end of 2009.

The land preservation campaign was launched by United Growth for Kent County’s Land Preservation Education (LPE) Committee in 2008 as an organized educational outreach effort. The project was designed as a pilot program that, if successful, could be expanded to other parts of the county or replicated in other parts of the state.

The goal of the project was to individually address fifty (50) property owners in four targeted townships, which would eventually lead to the preservation of 1,000 acres of land in Kent County. Through an intentional program of identifying and evaluating program participants, prospective property owners were chosen based on the location and size (40 acres or more) of their properties and the applicability of their land to the Kent County Purchase of Development Rights program, as PDR requirements are similar to those of other state and federal land preservation programs.

The first step was to develop a concise, comprehensive and understandable *Land Preservation Guide*, which outlined all possible land preservation options in Michigan. Five thousand (5,000) copies of the Guide were printed and distributed. The Guide is available at the end of this chapter. The Guide should be available on United Growth’s web site at [www.unitedgrowth.org](http://www.unitedgrowth.org) by winter 2008/09.

A list of property owners was generated by the townships using their tax assessment database with guidance from township officials, the township’s master plan and township open space committee members. The Guide was mailed to targeted property owners with a letter requesting

a personal meeting or phone call. A pre-stamped return post card was included, which requested their contact information and availability to meet. Property owners who did not return their post card were called by an LPE Committee member. Careful consideration was paid to the timing of the events and mailings as many farmers are too busy during the growing season to seriously discuss land preservation issues.

Two public kick-off events were held to inform property owners of the project. Partner organizations and land use “hot topics” for the target communities were discussed at these events, which included a free meal for participants. Property owners were invited to sign up for a personal call or visit from a LPE Committee member at the event, in addition to the mailing.

Meetings with property owners took place in their home or a place of their choosing. This helped ensure their privacy and comfort - important factors in helping to reduce their reluctance to ask questions and learn more.

The project also included a goal to complete five PDR appraisals in two of the targeted townships. Appraisals are the first step in preserving farmland through the Purchase of Development Rights Program. Without an appraisal, state and federal funding cannot be requested. These critical appraisals cost more than \$2,000 each and determine the value of the development rights for each farm. Most landowners cannot afford and/or unwilling to pay for this cost because funding for the Purchase of Development Rights program for their property is not guaranteed. It was anticipated that after conversations with property owners occurred, applications to the Kent County PDR Program would be submitted from high priority properties and five appraisals would be completed.

### **Funding**

Support for this outreach project was provided by a \$19,500 grant from the Frey Foundation and a \$19,500 grant from the Lowell Area Community Fund from September 2007 – December of 2009. Funding support for Kent/MSU Extension staff (Kendra Wills coordinates this project) and the Land Preservation Guide development was provided by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation through the MSU Land Policy Institute. Printing of the Guide was provided by 15 sponsoring organizations listed on the back of the brochure. Hundreds of hours of work were contributed by Land Preservation Education Committee members. Without them, this project would not be possible.

### **Project Successes**

A huge success occurred very early in the project. Mr. Peter Wege, a local philanthropist who is a dedicated environmentalist, requested assistance from United Growth in preserving his farm, which is located in one of the targeted townships. We worked with the Land Conservancy of West Michigan in placing conservation easements on several of his properties.

A total of 577 acres were preserved through donated conservation easements to the Land Conservancy of West Michigan. Combined with four preserved farms through the Kent County PDR Program, the Parnell Avenue Corridor contains 1,045 acres of permanently preserved land. This is significant green infrastructure!

## **Greening Neighborhoods - Supporting Neighborhood Entrepreneurs**

Many experts agree that the active ‘greening’ of our cities is an essential strategy in revitalizing Michigan’s economy. Educated professionals, the “creative class”, choose to live in communities that are walkable, diverse, and connected to nature.

Commercial districts in the older neighborhoods of Grand Rapids provide the type of living space most preferred by young professionals. Unique shops and eateries located within these walkable areas have been important players in neighborhood revitalization efforts.

Commercial districts that are being revitalized require viable, stable businesses. The lagging Michigan economy has impacted neighborhood business owners. They have to continually look for ways to both generate revenue and keep their expenses to a minimum. Many of these entrepreneurs would like to be more ‘green’ but are limited by small profit margins.

The State Energy Office, a unit of the Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth, offers small grants through their Rebuild Michigan Community Partnerships to reduce energy consumption. The grants provide funding to conduct free energy assessments of commercial buildings. The intent is to reduce utility usage across the state. This would help lessen demand for gas and electricity, save business owners money, and reduce our carbon footprint.

We partnered with the Easttown Business Association and the West Fulton Business Association. The grant allowed us to conduct energy audits on 10 commercial buildings. The audits were done by an experienced professional. Based on the audit, a report containing recommendations on energy conservation measures that could be taken to reduce utility bills was issued to the building owner.

It is then up to the owner to decide what improvements would be completed. We will be tracking how much was saved in utility bills over the next year. Building improvements that are made will not only lower carbon emissions and the business’ utility bills, they will also help in the revitalization and stabilization processes for the district. Green, viable businesses, and neighborhood revitalization are a win-win-win situation!

## **Wind Energy Education Project**

In 2008, wind energy gained a lot of momentum in Michigan. The state is working to attract wind turbine manufacturers to take advantage of our underutilized manufacturing infrastructure and workforce as well as attractive shipping capabilities. Several areas of the state are being targeted by wind energy companies for wind turbine installation. For more information on wind energy see the May 2008 edition of *Planning and Zoning News*.

The Fruit Ridge area northwest of Grand Rapids has been under intense pressure from at least two wind energy companies, one company headquartered in Spain and the other one in northern Michigan, for wind energy lease agreements. Townships are quickly working to adopt MET tower ordinances for companies to test wind energy potential as well as ordinances for commercial and home-based turbines.

United Growth felt it was important to provide education to townships regarding planning and zoning issues and to property owners regarding wind energy lease agreements. MSU Extension has developed a number of resources to provide this education. Our role has been to publicize these resources and build everyone's awareness. Wind energy educational resources include:

- The free downloadable publication, "Michigan Land Use Guidelines for Siting Wind Energy Systems" provides valuable information at <http://www.emdc.msue.msu.edu/Bulletin/PDF/WO1053.pdf>
- A 2.5 hour training program designed for planning and zoning officials based on the Michigan Guidelines publication listed above. This training program can be arranged through the MSU Citizen Planner Program at (517) 432-7600.
- A free downloadable worksheet designed by MSU experts to help property owners evaluate the terms of a wind energy lease agreement. The worksheet is available at: [http://web1.msue.msu.edu/wind/WindLease\\_WorkSheet.pdf](http://web1.msue.msu.edu/wind/WindLease_WorkSheet.pdf) The MSU authors are willing to conduct a presentation for property owners based on this worksheet.
- Ottawa County's Department of Planning and Grants organized a Wind Energy Symposium on June 6, 2008 in Grand Haven, MI. This event qualified for AICP continuing education credits through the American Planning Association. Speakers included MSU and Sea Grant wind energy experts, private wind turbine companies, wind turbine manufacturers and power company representatives. This is something that could be replicated in other areas where wind energy is a "hot topic."
- Charles (Chuck) McKeown with the MSU Land Policy Institute is involved with several national, state and local organizations working on wind energy. He is an excellent resource for communities wanting to conduct wind energy projects. His email address is [mckeownc@msu.edu](mailto:mckeownc@msu.edu)
- The MSU Land Policy Institute has developed an online tool to illustrate a community's wind energy capability based on the National Renewable Energy Laboratory's 50m wind density map for Michigan. This tool is available at <http://www.landpolicy.msu.edu/wpt/> You can log on to see if your community has potential for wind energy.

Wind energy has the potential to be a continuing area of interest to land use organizations like United Growth. With the advancements being made, combined with a better understanding of this renewable energy's potential, both rural and urban residents may be able to incorporate wind energy into their daily lives.

United Growth has used their monthly Coalition meetings as an educational venue for its members to keep abreast of the latest advances in the energy field. We have had speakers on geothermal energy, solar energy, and wind energy. Both rural and urban United Growth members have been interested in these topics since there is applicability everywhere.

### **Green Citizen - Encouraging Individual Responsibility**

A signature project for United Growth is being developed as we write this update. United Growth's Board has approved development of a web-based certification process for citizens who are concerned about the environment and have already taken steps to do their part in reducing carbon emissions.

The web site will ask a series of questions related to actions individuals can take to reduce energy and waste. It includes everything from using CFLs to bringing your own re-usable bags to the grocery store to using public transportation. If you score enough points, you can obtain a "Green Citizen" certificate issued by United Growth and a free, one-year United Growth membership. The intended outcomes of this project are:

- recognition of those who are taking individual responsibility in reducing their carbon footprint
- encouraging citizens to undertake more activities that will positively impact the environment
- helping people make the connections about land use choices, energy consumption, and a high quality environment
- assisting United Growth in building its membership base.

Certificate questions will apply to both urban and rural citizens. We intend to word the questions so that the urban-rural connection in land use will be easily recognized. This project will emphasize the need for every individual to do their part to reduce carbon emissions so that global warming can be reduced.

#### **Supplemental Information**

The rest of the chapter consists of examples for Kent County that can be used as templates for your program. Please note that a lot of the information will be different for your county/region, but the basic framework of the materials should be useful.

## Chapter 7: Public Policy - The Third Prong



The third prong of the United Growth strategy is public policy. Some United Growth participants may have experience in this realm, but many may not feel comfortable talking with legislators and thinking on a policy level. However, it is a natural progression for United Growth to explore ways it can impact policies that affect land use decisions in the county. The following are suggestions on how to move into this public policy stage.

### Meet with Local Public Officials

From the beginning when the Rural and Urban Committees start tackling local land use issues, they should be encouraged to meet with their local officials - both those elected and those appointed. The Rural Committee should develop a relationship with township supervisors, clerks, and planning directors. The Urban Committee should develop a relationship with city commissioners, mayor, city



**Kent County's Urban Committee met with former State Representative Bill Byl at a regular committee meeting in 2001.**

manager, and other city department heads. Both committees will want to know their county commissioners. Let your County Extension Director know when you are meeting with these officials. This will accomplish at least two things: gain more information on the issues and become better acquainted with the officials. The official may be invited to attend a committee meeting to discuss an issue, or a special meeting can be arranged.

Meeting with local officials will also help them become better acquainted with United Growth and your activities. You might want to present each official with a folder that contains materials you have produced (United Growth newsletter, brochure, etc.).

### Meet with Area Legislators

When the Urban and Rural Committees are ready, arrange meetings with their area legislators. This can be done individually or as a group. Here are some possible scenarios:

- Committee members meet with their legislators at a breakfast meeting at a local restaurant to talk about current land use issues of concern. Committee members must feel comfortable talking about their issues and be receptive to hearing what the legislators have to say. (Legislators usually like to meet Mondays or Fridays – the days designated for working in their districts.)
- A specific legislator, who is deemed “friendly”, is invited to a monthly committee meeting to discuss United Growth land use issues, and/or pending legislation that is of interest to the committee.

- Some legislators may hold regular, weekly office hours in the district. A United Growth delegation can go and meet with the legislators for a few minutes.

### **Organize a Legislative Committee**

Once some experience has been gained in meeting with public and elected officials, you will probably want to organize a Legislative Committee. This group will consist of representatives from both the Urban and Rural Committees. It is also an opportunity to involve additional people in United Growth activities by recruiting others. A chair and co-chair should be selected as soon as possible. The issues that are taken up by the committee can be assigned by the Rural and Urban Committees or Coalition, decided on by the committee itself, or a combination of the two. Here are some suggestions on how to get started:

- If there is a particularly hot land use issue happening in the state or county, the Legislative Committee can become informed. They could print the pros and cons of the issue and distribute it. They could take a stand on the issue. (If a stand is taken, this should come as a recommendation from the Legislative Committee to the Coalition. The Coalition will then vote it up or down.)
- The Legislative Committee can review the current, proposed legislation before the House and the Senate. The best reference is [www.michiganlegislature.org](http://www.michiganlegislature.org). You may want to consider having committee members sign up for email notifications for meetings and agendas through this web site.
- Get to know your state legislators. Meet with them annually so that they know the Legislative Committee and committee members know their legislators. Make sure your committee members have a copy of the *Citizen's Guide to State Government* available through legislators' offices.



### **MSU Policies on Lobbying**

Extension Educators should probably never be involved in direct lobbying activities. It makes life easier if this general rule is followed. However, United Growth participants are under no such restrictions. A nonprofit organization has some flexibility in their advocacy work – make sure you are up-to-date on applicable laws. It is important to note that staff, through their professional role, or a nonprofit organization should never support an individual candidate for public office. What one does as a private citizen is up to that individual.

### **Impacting Pending Legislation**

The role of the Extension Educator should always be educational. Staff can assist the Legislative Committee in researching an issue or pending legislation to determine its effect on your county. Publicizing this information is educational – especially if the pros and cons of the issues are explained.

United Growth, or any of its committees, can support or oppose any issue or bills. In meetings with legislators, they can express their support or opposition. They can testify before legislative hearings, write letters to legislators advocating their position and encourage others to contact their legislators. These activities should be done without the involvement of the Extension Educator. Extension letterhead should not be used for communication on behalf of United Growth. They should develop their own stationery and identity.

If the above activities constitute a significant percent of United Growth's activities, the lobbying laws pertaining to non-profits should be followed.

It should also be noted that the Legislative Committee's efforts should be non-partisan. Meet with both Republican and Democratic law makers. Land use issues require the support of both political parties.

### **Examples of Legislative Committee Activities**

The following examples demonstrate the broad range of activities that can be undertaken by a Legislative Committee. Although the focus here is on impacting policy, you will notice that these activities also can have a capacity-building element for both United Growth and the individual Legislative Committee members. There is always an educational component to the activities.

*1. Bill Review.* One of the first major projects undertaken was an extensive review of a controversial bill that was supported by United Growth. The bill encouraged cooperation among governmental jurisdictions. There was much misinformation circulating about the bill, which had stalled legislative action on it.

United Growth for Kent County's Legislative Committee organized a diverse group to review the bill - page by page - to see where agreement and disagreements existed. The review committee had representatives from the following: home builders, neighborhood association, realtor, an environmental group, local college, regional planning organization, etc. When someone disagreed with a section in the bill, the group discussed the point and offered alternatives. The amazing outcome was a document with which everyone in the group agreed. Our suggestions for changes and an outline of our process were communicated to area legislators.

*2. Organizing Support.* The Legislative Committee actively supported the bills that established the Michigan Housing & Community Development Fund. They first distributed information explaining the bills and how they will impact affordable housing in Kent County. An online network of local organizations and individuals supporting the bills was developed. A good working relationship with the Community & Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM), the state organization coordinating much of the effort on these bills, was formed. When the bills started through the committee process, our local network generated over 100 communications to area legislators. Legislative Committee members testified at committee hearings on the bills in Lansing. The bills passed both the House and Senate and became law when the Governor signed them in December 2004.

3. *Issue Research.* One of the recommendations from the MI Land Use Leadership Council was the designation of Commerce Centers. There has not been much action on developing this concept. The Legislative Committee decided that major goal would be to research this concept and offer recommendations. The committee contacted state “experts” to gather their thoughts on Commerce Centers, studied SB 344 which identified Commerce Centers sponsored by Senator Jason Allen, brainstormed what they would like to see in a Commerce Center, and did other related research. They then put their ideas into a position paper that was circulated throughout the state.

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# United Growth for Kent County's Legislative Committee

## Impact on the Affordable Housing Issue

Formation of the United Growth Coalition officially occurred in February 2004 when the Urban and Rural Committees came together. Although still under the MSU Extension umbrella, the Coalition re-structured as a membership-based organization.

The lack of affordable housing surfaced as an issue in both urban and rural areas of Kent County. The Legislative Committee of United Growth for Kent County chose the affordable housing bills that had been introduced into the state legislature as their primary focus for 2004. The bills (H.B. 4787 & 4788) would establish the Michigan Housing & Community Development Fund – a needed tool for funding of affordable housing activities.

United Growth's Legislative Committee developed a several prong educational strategy:

- created informational materials that explained the affordable housing crisis in Michigan and the content of the bills; provided periodic informational e-mails on the status of the bills,
- met with area legislators to learn more about the bills and share above materials (Rep. Kooiman and Senator Birkholz were major sponsors of the bills),
- contacted area organizations and business leaders who are interested in affordable housing to share informational materials and began developing a relationship/network with them so future activities could be coordinated,
- developed a working relationship with the Community Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM) and its executive director Tony Lentych, who coordinated activity on the bills among the Senate, House, and Governor's office,
- authored several articles that explained the affordable housing crisis in Grand Rapids and the purpose of the bills.

Members of the Legislative Committee learned with the rest of the community about affordable housing needs. Over 7,000 families were waiting for subsidized housing in Grand Rapids in 2003. Grand Rapids Public Schools identified 1,115 homeless students attending their schools as of May 2004. Michigan ranks 48<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states in state and local government spending on housing, according to *Governing* magazine. Over 41,000 households in Michigan live in sub-standard housing. The proposed Fund would address these and other consequences of the lack of affordable housing in our city, county, and state.

In addition to the social justice aspects of affordable housing, the committee chose to focus on the economic development impact of the issue. There is a growing mismatch between what employees are earning and the cost of housing. For example, between 1990 and 2000, the median value of owner-occupied housing in Michigan increased by 92.3%, while median household incomes increased by only 44% - so the cost of housing is increasing at twice the rate of wages! Some are calling this a "workforce housing" problem. In order to find suitable housing, employees are being forced to live farther away from their place of employment, thereby

increasing commuting times, traffic congestion, air pollution, and instability both at home and in the workplace.

As a result of the committee's efforts, over 100 letters were generated by the network to legislators. Committee members provided testimony at the House and Senate hearings on the bills. Even though the conventional wisdom was that these bills would not be acted upon by this lame duck session, they were passed by both the House and Senate by wide margins in December 2004. Rep. Kooiman was able to obtain \$2 million in TANF funds to provide the initial funding. Similar bills had been introduced into the Legislature since the 1980's.

# Michigan Housing & Community Development Fund

## What Is It?

- The Fund will provide incentives to housing developers to build units for low income residents and will provide housing-related assistance to low income individuals, such as paying a security deposit.
- The Fund will increase the production of affordable housing in Michigan.
  - the Fund would support the annual development of 1,000+ housing units and assist 1,500 households with special needs
- Identical bills that establish the Fund and operationalize it have been introduced in both the House and the Senate.

## Why Is It Needed?

- Over 41,000 households in Michigan live in sub-standard housing.
- The lack of affordable housing has meant an increase in the number of homeless people. On a typical night in 2003, there were 800 people in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs *in Grand Rapids*. Of those using the shelters on any given night, 36% of them are children.
- In December 2003, there were more than 7,000 families on the Section 8 waiting list in Grand Rapids.
- Michigan ranks 48<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states in state and local government spending on housing, according to Governing magazine.

## Who Will Use It?

- According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), housing is *affordable* if it costs 30 percent of a household's income or less. Almost 750,000 Michigan residents are living in housing that they cannot really afford.
- HUD reports that a family with one full-time worker earning the minimum wage cannot afford a two-bedroom apartment – anywhere in the United States!
- This housing crisis affects households in the suburbs and in the townships throughout Kent County.

## Some Important Facts About Affordable Housing

The proposed Michigan Housing & Community Development Fund would help alleviate the affordable housing crisis that exists in Grand Rapids and throughout the State of Michigan.

### In Grand Rapids

- In 2003, **7,011 families were waiting for subsidized housing**, which is a 31.2% increase over the waiting lists in 2002.
- As of May 2004, **Grand Rapids Public Schools identified 1,115 homeless students** attending their schools. (*GRPS Homeless Students Program*)

### In Michigan

- Elderly households are twice as likely to experience housing need as non-elderly households. (*MI State Housing Development Authority*)
- In Michigan, **40% of renter households pay more than 30% of their income for rent.** (*National Low Income Housing Coalition/LIHIS*)
- Michigan ranks 48<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states in state and local government spending on housing, according to *Governing* magazine.

### In the United States

- According to lender-established ratios, **a minimum wage earner (\$5.15 per hour) can afford monthly rent of no more than \$268.** (*National Low Income Housing Coalition/LIHIS*)
- **One out of every 7 American households has a critical housing need.** These families spend more than 50% of their income for housing and/or live in severely substandard conditions. Most alarmingly, **a growing proportion of these households were low to moderate-income families working full-time jobs.** (*Nation Housing Conference Report, Housing America's Working Families: A Further Exploration*)