

Good Morning. My name is Paul Haan, and I am the current President of United Growth for Kent County. The mission of United Growth is to mobilize citizens and organizations around the promotion of positive land use in Kent County.

United Growth began its work in the early 1990's as urban and rural leaders began working with the Michigan State University Center for Urban Affairs and Kent/MSU Extension to explore ways to combat the growing problem of suburban sprawl and to improve the quality of life for all citizens in Kent County by advancing smart growth principles.

Earlier this year, United Growth strengthened its resolve to fight for a better future and incorporated as an independent Michigan non-profit.

United Growth is a true coalition--a partnership--of rural and urban citizens. Members represent residents, landowners, businesses and organizations throughout Kent County. We are farmers and we are neighborhood business owners. We are township clerks and we are city mayors. We are a diverse cross-section of communities throughout Kent County.

Members of United Growth are working together to fight the issues that threaten the quality of life in Kent County. We are working to fight issues like traffic congestion and we are working to fight community planning that is driven by the needs of automobiles instead of people.

The report issued today tells us that, since 1980, the number of miles Americans drive has grown **three times faster** than the population. The report also tells us

that currently land is being consumed for development at a rate almost **three times faster** than population growth.

We're driving three times as much as we did 27 years ago, and using three times as much land as the previous generation. Somewhere along the line our driving habits and our development patterns have convinced us that we need and are dependent upon our cars. With this dependence we created federal, state and local policy that favors the needs of cars over the needs of people... roads instead of sidewalks, parking instead of green space, carbon dioxide instead of fresh air.

But among these sobering statistics there is hope.

Today's report also cites real estate projections showing that **two-thirds** of development expected to be on the ground in 2050 is not yet built, meaning that the potential for change is profound.

In Kent County, we need to plan our future development, our future communities and our future neighborhoods so that they sustain the health and well being of the children, adults and elderly who live there, **NOT** just so that they are convenient places to drive our cars. That means that we need to plan for a world where global warming and the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions are **a reality**. Where peak oil has come to pass. **Where we recognize that our quality of life is inextricably linked to the health of the environment around us...** whether that be the built environment or the natural environment.

We need to plan for tomorrow knowing that **environmental health and human health are NOT two separate concepts** (repeat). No longer can we ignore the

fact that human health is a subset of the health of the larger ecosystem in which we live. Our health is directly effected by the health of our communities and the health of our environment.

To that end, United Growth of Kent County has two main goals.

Our first goal is “to revitalize existing neighborhoods and communities by revitalizing commercial corridors, creating walkable and self-sustaining neighborhoods, using existing vacant land, encouraging development in existing cities, and designing cities and their streets for people instead of automobiles.”

Our second goal is “to provide public education on the benefits of a Purchase of Development Rights program and other tools to protect farm land and open space.”

The contents of today’s report by the Urban Land Institute are fully compatible with these two United Growth goals.

As the report states, we know that demand for walkable, green neighborhoods is growing. Whether in the central city or in small towns, the fact that these convenient locations often fetch high prices reflects the fact that demand far exceeds supply.

The research clearly shows that we must stop digging a hole of carbon dependence for ourselves by building communities that guarantee accelerating levels of driving. The test for any new development should be: *“How are people going to be able to meet their daily needs if they have to reduce the amount they drive, or not drive at all?”*

Today's report provides strategies and policy changes that can be enacted at the federal, state and local level so that local communities are able to make smart choices to reduce dependence upon auto travel and improve the quality of life for their citizens.

I'd like to talk very briefly about the three recommendations for local policies.

The first recommendation for local government calls for "rewriting the rules and procedures to encourage compact development." United Growth has been a vocal and active partner in the development of Grand Rapids' proposed new zoning ordinance. This draft ordinance is a complete re-write of a relic that has been around since 1969 and takes Grand Rapids decades into the future. The proposed ordinance will be in front of the Mayor and City Commission for adoption in the coming weeks. Mr. Mayor, we're hoping that you and your colleagues on the Commission will adopt this new ordinance without delay!

The second local recommendation calls for the "creation of safe and welcoming environments for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users." In my estimation, as a central city resident active in my local neighborhood association's efforts to reclaim Plainfield Avenue for high-quality commerce, that we have a long way to go here. Too many of our streets, like Plainfield Avenue, are not "complete." They are designed simply for cars. They need to be redesigned to also include the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, and mass transit users. We need to move beyond the model of "Traffic Safety Departments" to a multi-modal mindset that honors all uses and respects the surrounding commerce and residential areas. Streets need to support neighborhood activity, not just the need to pass through. The City of Grand Rapids

is beginning to experiment with some of this in some areas of Grand Rapids as streets are rebuilt, and that is good. But we need to get far more aggressive in our efforts if we truly want to have high-quality, walkable communities that support compact development.

The third and last local recommendation is to “invest in citizen engagement to help residents choose their community’s future.” Grand Rapids is a community steeped in citizen engagement and activism. That is one of our true strengths. We need to continue to build on that strength, listening to residents each step of the way. No one knows better how to make their own community more live-able, more vital than those who live there.

To close, I’ll share a phrase coined by noted author and conservationist Bill McKibben. In his 2007 release *Green Economy*, Mr. McKibben talks about the need for what he calls “durable communities.” We need durable communities-- communities that will live beyond peak oil, durable communities that reduce rather than contribute to global warming, and durable communities that people will care for and enjoy for the long haul.

United Growth stands with those here today in calling for a sharp reduction in the number of vehicle miles traveled through the creation of durable cities, towns and neighborhoods.

Thank you.