

Southern Lakes Planning Initiative



Prepared for:

The Southern Lakes Planning Initiative

Prepared by:

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The Political Science Department and the
Public Administration Program
at the University of Michigan – Flint



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and
The Saginaw Watershed Initiative Network

The Southern Lakes Planning Initiative

Introduction

The Southern Lakes Planning Initiative (SLPI) began as a group of planning commissioners and trustees/council members from local jurisdictions in southern Genesee and northern Livingston counties who were concerned about increasing land development. The SLPI began meeting in February 2005 to discuss the effects of rapid population growth and land consumption in the region. This growth is documented by 2005 Census figures, building permits issued for new residential and commercial units, and increases in school enrollment. Figure 1, below, shows where the Southern Lakes region is located.

Figure 1: Southern Lakes Region



Steering Committee
of the SLPI

Mr. Thomas Murphy
Silver Lake Homeowners Association

Mr. David Lossing
City of Linden

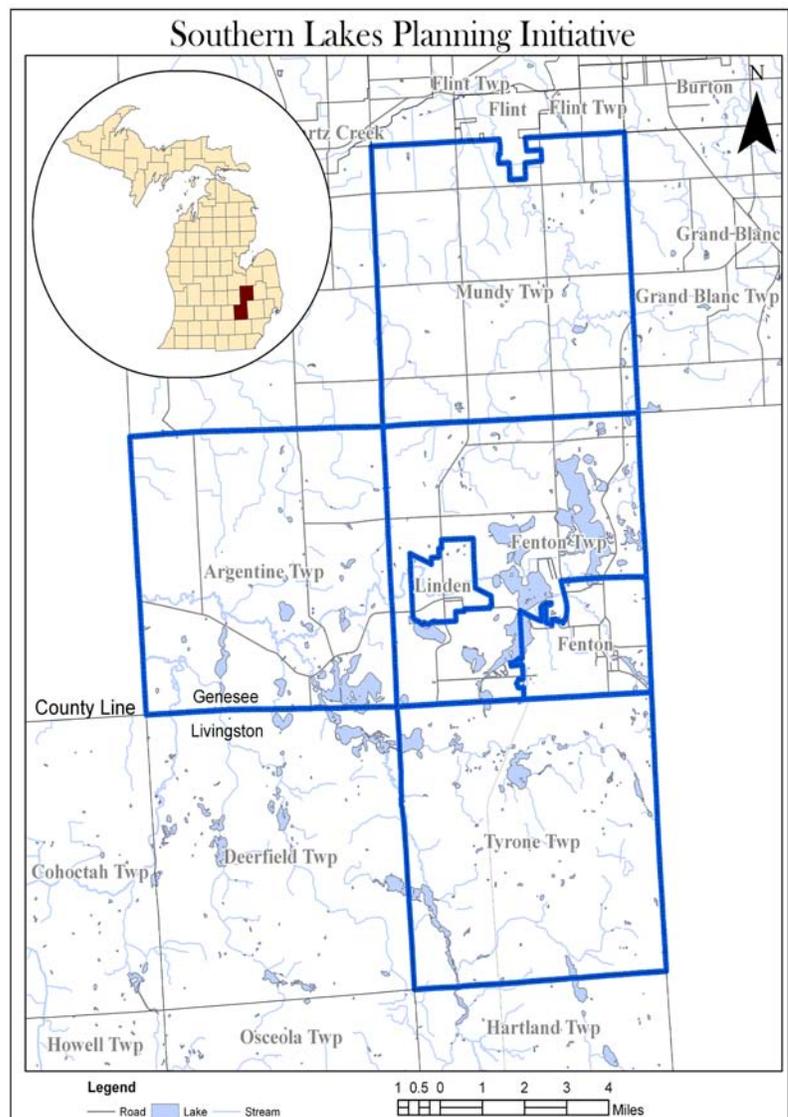
Mr. Thomas Rathsack
Mundy Township

Ms. Karen Gawron
Mundy Township

Mr. William Laverty
UM-Flint

Ms. Sara McDonnell
UM-Flint

Vacant
Argentine Township



Accomplishments and Activities



- The SLPI steering committee meets regularly on the 3rd Wednesday of the month. Locations vary and meetings are open to any interested individual.
- The group has secured two grants: \$46,000 from the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network and \$25,000 from the Land Policy Institute at Michigan State University.
- SLPI, in conjunction with CAER, produced a video film about residents' views of community in the region. Results from this project are reported, below.
- Presentations were made to numerous groups and individuals from Gaines, Swartz Creek, Fenton, and Linden.
- SLPI continues to communicate with other organizations and interest groups in the region to encourage participation.

SLPI Timeline

March 2005 - SLPI partnered with the Center for Applied Environmental Research (CAER) at the University of Michigan – Flint and the Genesee County Land Bank to provide resources on working collaboratively.



July 2005 - Erin Perdu from ENP & Associates spoke with the SLPI attendees about multi-jurisdictional, cooperative planning initiatives in Michigan. After her presentation, the group reached consensus regarding several issues that face the region. The Genesee County Land Bank constructed a survey instrument for elected and appointed officials to rank various issues according to their perceived importance. Overall, "growth management" was cited most frequently as the primary issue in the Southern Lakes Region.

October 2005 – SLPI worked with CAER to develop a range of options to guide growth in the region. One option was an Area Plan Overlay, focused on directing growth to areas that made economic sense and preserved the environment. Other important issues the survey identified included water quality and increasing connectivity between the region with parks, trails, and natural areas. The proposed Area Plan was structured to function as an overlay to existing local master plans. It was not intended to usurp local authority, but rather supplement local planning efforts.

January 2006 - SLPI invited all elected officials from local governments in the SLPI area to attend a special meeting to present the results of the group's activities. One major objective of the meeting was to encourage every jurisdiction's continued participation in the process. A second objective was to request that elected officials consider adopting two resolutions signifying their continued interest and participation in the SLPI.

May 2006 – CAER received a grant on behalf of the SLPI from the Saginaw Watershed Initiative Network to support regional cooperation activities in the Southern Lakes Region.

September 2006 – Four of six participating jurisdictions passed a resolution to support the SLPI and development of an Area Plan Overlay. Two jurisdictions decided to withdraw from continued participation in the Area Plan process. Pursuant to these withdrawals, the SLPI changed its focus to public outreach and participation prior to pursuing another resolution.

February 2007 to Present – CAER received a grant on behalf of the SLPI from the Land Policy Institute at Michigan State University to conduct interviews and survey community residents regarding their perceptions of the region's needs. A film was produced and ongoing community presentations and conversations were held with this grant.



Membership

Membership in the SLPI is voluntary and informal. To date, regular membership has consisted of representatives from the following local governments and groups: City of Linden, Tyrone Township, Mundy Township, Argentine Township, Silver and Marl Lakes Homeowners Association, Genesee County Land Bank Authority, ENP & Associates, and CAER.

SLPI interacts with, and has delivered presentations, information, and study results to, the Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, Fenton Area Chamber of Commerce, Genesee Regional Area Chamber of Commerce, local school districts, Lake Fenton, Fenton, Linden, and Hartland, the City of Fenton, Fenton Township, Clayton Township, City of Swartz Creek, Genesee County Drain Commission, Flint River Watershed Coalition, Friends of the Shiawassee River, Southern Lakes Parks and Recreation, Fenton Township Lakes Association, local civic groups, Livingston County Land Conservancy, Charter Cable Channel 19, The Flint Journal, ABC 12, and the Tri-County Times.



Future

Pursuant to the Saginaw WIN grant, CAER will continue to provide support to the SLPI through November 2008 on projects, research, and planning support. SLPI will identify specific projects to focus on through 2008. Moving forward, the SLPI will operate under the following guiding principles.



Guiding Principles

SLPI will Work Together to:

1. Build community connections: working together helps everyone
2. Achieve the most efficient allocation of resources and to reduce duplication
3. Preserve the unique character of the region and each community within it
4. Recognize that each community has a role and assets to contribute; the identity of each community is important
5. Plan for change so that the small town atmosphere of the community is preserved
6. Create a safe, fun and attractive community for all ages.

Recent Project:

Defining Community in the Southern Lakes Region

Project Description & Design:

In March 2007, the Southern Lakes Planning initiative was awarded a grant from the Land Policy Institute to ask residents what they thought was important for the Southern Lakes communities to be successful.

The Center for Applied Environmental Research coordinated the project that involved student photographs, video interviews, a documentary film, and community conversations.

Student Photographs

As part of the community input process, disposable cameras were purchased and distributed to residents in southern Genesee County. Special effort was made to reach people aged 12-17 as they are often not in attendance of community meetings.

CAER made personal contact with the following school districts in the county:

- Fenton
- Lake Fenton
- Linden
- Carman-Ainsworth
- Grand Blanc
- Swartz Creek

These school districts each cover portions of the “Southern Lakes” including the cities of Linden and Fenton, and the townships of Mundy, Fenton, Argentine, and Gaines. School administrators used different methods for getting students involved with the only successful methods being: making it a class assignment and asking student directly to be involved in the project. Resultantly, only two school districts were successful in recruiting students for the project. CAER recruited additional students through a local church youth group, Resource Center, and through the Community Foundation of Greater Flint.

Students were asked to take pictures of their ‘community’, this includes where they live, go to school, hang out, and shop. Students were given a photo journal to document where the photo was taken and what they liked or disliked about the photo. The final photographs and journals were compiled into a database to conduct analysis.

Of the 100 cameras distributed, 41 were returned, with a total of 570 pictures being taken. Students that returned cameras attended Carman-Ainsworth, Swartz Creek, Grand Blanc, and Fenton schools. It isn’t known what school districts three individuals attended that were recruited through the church youth group. Table 1 summarizes the communities students came from.

Students were asked to take pictures of their ‘community’, this includes where they live, go to school, hang out, and shop.

Table 1: Student participation by school district or organization

Community Group	Number of Students
Carman-Ainsworth High School	20
Resource Center / Grand Blanc High School	4
Swartz Creek Middle School	12
Church – Argentine Twp	3
Fenton Middle School	2
Total Number of Students	41

Factors that contributed to low or no involvement from some school districts included the project start date being near the end of the school year, and school staff not being accessible.



Pictures taken by students covered 18 communities in Genesee, Livingston, Shiawassee, Oakland and Saginaw counties. One picture was taken out of state, and 63 were taken at unknown locations; students did not specify the location of the picture. Table 2 summarizes what communities students took pictures of.

Table 2: Pictures by Community

Community	Number of Pictures Taken	Percent Total
Flint, City	222	39%
Swartz Creek	83	15%
Unknown	62	11%
Flint Twp	50	9%
Linden	34	6%
Fenton, City	33	6%
Mundy Twp	28	5%
Flushing Twp	18	3%
Clayton Twp	9	2%
Grand Blanc, City	9	2%
Lennon	6	1%
Gaines Twp	5	1%
Argentine Twp	2	0%
Fenton Twp	2	0%
Tyrone Twp	2	0%
Burton	1	0%
Chesaning	1	0%
Holly Twp	1	0%
Indiana	1	0%
Mt. Morris	1	0%
<i>Total</i>	<i>570</i>	<i>100%</i>

Each student was asked to state in their photo-journal whether they liked or disliked the photograph and why. Photographs were categorized by the students as a community like or dislike, with 344 (60%) pictures taken of places students liked, 217 (38%) of places disliked, and 9 (2%) with no answer. Photographs of community likes and dislikes were similar across different communities, with the exception of some unique features in each community.



Pictures were organized into broad categories identified in Table 3, Pictures by Category. Descriptions of the categories are included in the results section, below.

Table 3: Pictures by Category

Category	Number of Photographs	Percent Total
Local Businesses	69	12
Community Atmosphere	247	44
Entertainment and Recreation	108	19
Public Services	76	14
Education	43	8
Unhealthy Food	6	1
Miscellaneous	9	2
Total	558*	100

*Twelve pictures were not included in the analysis due to missing information in the photo-journal.



Local Businesses

Businesses were described as “safe” places to hang out with friends and socialize, and their importance were well-recognized for local economies and the City of Flint. The top two types of businesses photographed were restaurants and hang out spots. Favorite hang out spots included the Genesee Valley Mall, mini-golf, bowling alleys, and movie theaters. Restaurants were favored because they were “local,” had “good service,” and “good food.” Students also liked businesses that were nearby to school or home because they were convenient. Other types of businesses photographed included ice cream stores, movie theatres, music stores, car dealerships, malls and strip malls, local downtown businesses, and grocery stores. Students disliked some businesses because of their appearance, the products they sold, poor customer service, or because they moved jobs overseas. Businesses were photographed in Flint and Flint Township, Clayton Township, Fenton, Swartz Creek, Linden, Flushing, Mundy Township, and Grand Blanc.

Community Atmosphere

A large number of photographs centered on community atmosphere. This category highlights aspects of community that help define what community is. Student photographs covered individual aspects of community as likes or dislikes.

Positive community atmosphere included nice homes and neighborhoods, nature, patriotism, beautification, religious institutions, rural life, and local events. Problem areas identified by the students included neglected and vacant properties, religious institutions, pollution, community growth, and crime.



Student photographs highlighted where they lived. Homes and neighborhoods photographs focused on nice homes that were cared for, homes that students lived in, and places that were nice to play in. Many photographs were taken of new homes in Flint because, “they make the area look good.” Photographs were also taken of historic homes because they were cared for. Students liked neighborhoods and subdivisions because, “things could be done outside without parents worrying.” Neighborhoods with big trees were said to be “nice and relaxing.” Photographs were taken in Flushing, Flint Township, Grand Blanc, Swartz Creek, Fenton, Linden and Flint.

Nature photograph subjects included water, woods and trees, open space, flowers, bird houses, and gardens. Students stated that it was “good to have nice places that are scenic, beautiful, and clean.” Benefits of these places included providing habitat for fish and frogs, relaxing, peaceful and calm, fun and full of adventure, and good for the environment. Pictures of water included Lake Fenton, the Flint River, the Shiawassee River, Swartz Creek and private ponds.



Patriotism includes photographs of U.S. flags and veterans memorials. Pictures were taken of U.S. Flags across the region and described as “showing patriotism” and “respect to veterans.” The Swartz Creek Veterans Memorial and McFarland Park in Flint were the memorials photographed.



Church-related photographs were taken throughout Flint, Flint Township, Argentine Township, Fenton, Grand Blanc, and Linden. Churches “provide places for people to get together and share beliefs, host safe events for families, and are open to everyone.” Churches also make communities look good and offer outreach and positive influence. Church bells and historic architecture were also viewed positively.

Rural life and agriculture pictures focused on farms, fields, and horses. Comments stated that farms “create income and things like the Farmer’s Market” and that “it’s good to have farms and people who still garden.” Students also wrote about the simplicity of rural life; they enjoy walking through fields and that is was “nice to have fresh air instead of homes, businesses, and cars.”



F

lowers Make the Community Beautiful

Beautification pictures included flowers, landscaping, and lawns. Most comments stated they “liked looking at flowers” and “that they made the community beautiful.” Photographs were taken in Flint Township, Linden, Mundy Township, Swartz Creek, and Fenton.



Local Events photographs and comments highlighted the Enjoy Flint sign and Swartz Creek Hometown Days. Students liked seeing what was happening in Flint and think Swartz Creek Hometown Days is “fun for all ages.” Other local activities highlighted “family bonding” and a sorority club.

Problem areas identified by students included areas where neglected or vacant property was located. “Neglect” was used to describe people’s behavior or lack of action. “Vacant” literally described vacant or abandoned land and buildings. A majority of the comments in the neglect category refer to trash or litter. This includes garbage, papers, tires, and cans. Litter was not limited to any one community and a few comments were made that “no garbage cans are present in some public places.” A large number of photographs focused on vacant properties, abandoned buildings and homes, businesses that recently closed, abandoned pets, and cars.



A handful of pictures and comments also addressed what people should do: “take care of lawn and house”, “clean up their mess”, and “make it (their lawn) look decent.” A couple of comments talked about re-opening a business or transforming a vacant lot into a playground or park. Some comments also referred to lack of action where development was started and then left unfinished or where vacant property is for sale and should be developed. Two comments were also made about being “disappointed with the loss of historic buildings.”

Development pictures focus on “losing open space and farmland,” and the “overdevelopment of the community.” Some comments focus on how new development looks such as houses “too close together.” These pictures were taken in Swartz Creek, Fenton and Fenton Township, Clayton, Grand Blanc, and Mundy Township.



Crime pictures were taken of places where crime occurs, and signs of increased crime. Signs of increased crime included wired fences, and a growing county jail.



“Neglect” and “vacant” also refer to the negative image a community acquires from being neglected and not “kept up well enough.” These comments were directed primarily at individual properties that had overgrown weeds, rundown buildings, and poorly maintained facilities, including golf courses, playgrounds, etc. Likewise, several comments were made about how abandoned properties “look bad,” “make an area look worse,” and are “bad for the community.”



Places and things perceived as harming the environment included farms, smokestacks, landfills, and cars. Students took pictures of dirty water and crowded lakes which were also described as “pollution.”



“For Sale” was the category assigned to pictures that focused on businesses, homes, and vehicles for sale. Comments included “no business can survive”, and “you cannot travel down one road without seeing a for sale sign.”



Entertainment Recreation and

Recreation activities are those that students report they like to do during free time and/or for enjoyment. Subcategories of recreation-related pictures include: parks and trails, history and culture, and sports.

Recreation facility photographs included bike paths and walking trails, beaches, parks, gazebos, playgrounds, and picnic areas. The most frequent reason stated for liking these areas is that they are “relaxing” and “fun.” Other reasons included “hanging out with family, exercise, free concerts, swimming, carpooling, sledding and ice skating.” Recreation photographs were taken in Flint, Swartz Creek, Fenton, Flint Township, Linden, Flushing, and Clayton Township. Problem areas identified with park facilities included playground equipment that was in disrepair or unsafe. A comment was also made that “there are hardly any parks that children can go and play in.”

History and Culture includes various landmarks and institutions including libraries, theaters, museums, historic markers, public art, and cultural institutions. Historic features highlighted structures primarily in downtown Flint including the Capitol Building and Theater, Arches across Saginaw Street, and the Weather Ball. Historic homes were photographed in Fenton and Linden. Mural art was photographed across the city of Flint on historic buildings. Libraries were applauded for providing a place to learn more and for having programming. Likewise museums were liked for providing entertainment and teaching local history. Local theaters were cited as helping people gain appreciation for the arts and for keeping people entertained. Several photographs were taken at Flint’s Cultural Center including the Flint Institute of Arts, Flint Institute of Music, Flint Youth Theatre, Whiting Theatre, and the Planetarium.

Students enjoy public facilities because they are clean, open to the public, and provide something for families to do.

Sports-related photographs included the facilities themselves and the benefits of sports facilities. Baseball, softball, basketball, soccer, tennis, and Whirlyball were all included as sports activities. Students identified four private facilities that they liked including the Soccer Zone Complex, Whirlyball, Flint Swim Racket Club, and the Cage Fieldhouse. Students enjoy public facilities because they were clean, open to the public, and provide something for families to do.

Public Services

Services included transportation choices and roads, police and fire departments, emergency medical services, community centers, water supply, and hospitals. Transportation subject matter includes road signs, public transit, road construction, expressways, railroads, and main streets. Students made comments on such transportation-related subject matter as “big road signs improve navigation,” “main street character” in Flint and Flushing, and “railroad tracks” that were used to transport goods and were relaxing to look at. Expressways were viewed as “safe and convenient.” Positive benefits of road construction were recognized and it was “nice to see road construction making the area look better and improving roads.” Low traffic roads were used for biking and training for soccer.

Problem areas identified in transportation include road construction, potholes and broken roads, traffic jams, road kill, and road design. Most of the negative comments addressed potholes and broken roads. Students took pictures of bad roads and construction areas and disliked strongly these problem areas. Many students did not like gas prices. Many thought that they were “unreasonable” and impacted how far they could drive. A comment was also made to “move bus stops onto residential streets to keep people safer.”

Other services include the YMCA, the Humane Society, hospitals, water tower, fire department, police department, courthouse, and the county jail. Students liked hospitals because “they take care of people and are nearby.” Students liked the YMCA because of “services they offer, can workout there, and because it’s fun.” Many students felt safe and protected knowing that there was a fire or police station nearby.

Education

The majority of pictures taken of middle and high schools were in the Swartz Creek and Carman Ainsworth districts. Photograph subjects and comments were directed at new renovations at Carman-Ainsworth and the need for renovations at Swartz Creek. Comments were also made about specific rooms in the schools including the music room, computer lab, courtyard, cafeteria, chorus room, and weight lifting room. Students recognized their schools as “great learning environments” when renovations had been made. Sports-related comments supported sports facilities and recognized athlete performance (trophy displays).

Students took pictures of sports-related facilities needing improvements. These improvements are “needed at sport fields so athletes can train properly.” Classroom size and appearance and locker size were also criticized. Buses were described as crowded and noisy. Two comments were made that a new high school is needed in the Swartz Creek district.

Unhealthy Food

Students identified unhealthy food as a community problem. Pictures were targeted at fast food restaurant chains, pop machines and a liquor store. Comments were made on the obesity problem and how fast food is “fattening and unhealthy.” One student remarked that fast food restaurants “takes business from family-owned restaurants.”





Over the spring and summer of 2007, videographers attended several local events and gathering places to ask residents questions about their community. People were interviewed at local events in the area including Fenton Farmers Market, Swartz Creek Hometown Days, and Movies by the Mill. Interviews were also solicited at local chamber of commerce events, parks, and libraries.

These questions included, generally:

*1. Where are you (your family) from? (Twp / city / village)
How long have you lived here? Why did you move here?*

*2. When you hear the word “community,” what comes to mind?
What does it make you think of?*

*3. What do you think of as your “community?” What makes your
community special? What activities / organizations do you
participate in? Where do you spend free time / hang out?
Where do you go for entertainment (spend money)? Where do
you shop (for necessities and for fun)? How far do you travel
to do these things?*

*4. If you could make one change / improvement in your community,
what would it be? If there was one thing that you would never
want to see changed in your community, what would it be?*

5. In what ways can communities work together?

In what ways
can communities
work together?

These interviews were not scripted interviews, where the videographer moved from one question to another in a prescribed order. Rather, they were conducted more as “guided discussions,” where the questions that were asked, and the responses that were given, flowed naturally from the videographer and interviewee interaction and discussion. A total of 26 interviews were conducted. Four of the interviews had multiple respondents, which produced 33 individual sets of responses for analysis. Figure 2 and Table 4 illustrates the general areas where video interviewees live and the number of interviews conducted in each community.

Figure 2: Interview Respondent Hometowns illustrates the general areas where video interviewees live.

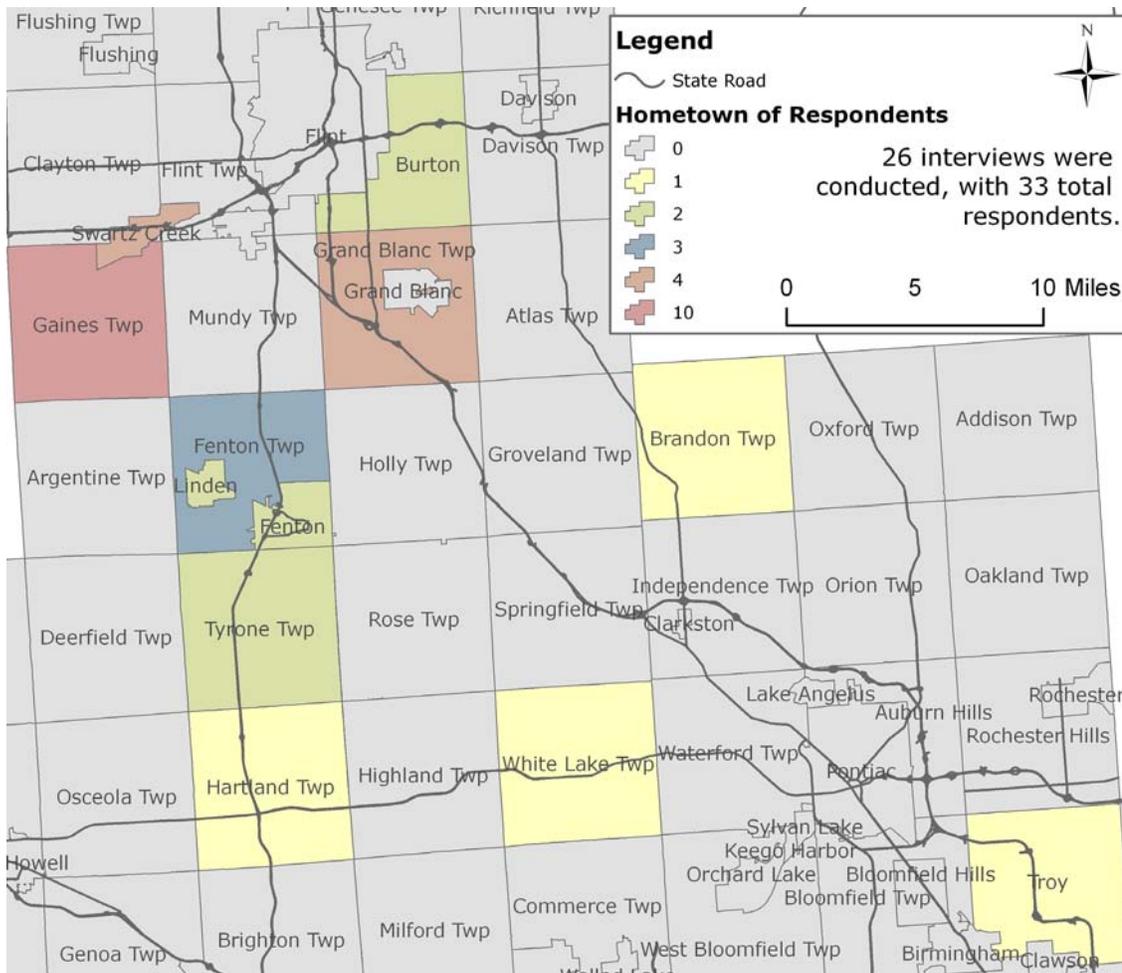


Table 4: Video Interviewee Communities

reports the specific communities where interviewees live and the number of interviews conducted in each community.

Interviewees' responses to the questions identified were quite varied. Interviewee responses were coded using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 7) and several broad conclusions can be gleaned from the initial coding process.

Community	Number of Interviews	Number of Respondents
Burton	2	2
Fenton, city	2	2
Fenton Twp.	3	3
Gaines, village	2	3
Gaines Twp.	2	7
Grand Blanc	3	4
Hartland	1	1
Linden	2	2
Ortonville	1	1
Swartz Creek	4	4
Troy	1	1
Tyrone Township	2	2
White Lake	1	1
Total Persons Interviewed	26	33



Table 5, Interviewee Response Summary reports the number of coded responses to the interview questions identified above and the number of response subcategories that were developed as the interviews were analyzed.

It is important to interpret the results reported in Table 5 with care. The number of responses does not necessarily indicate a single, independent statement by an interviewee. A response may be a distinguishable part of a statement or sentence that contains a separate idea. For example, an interviewee may have discussed roads and road maintenance in the same sentence; however, each of these infrastructure issues are coded and treated separately for analysis purposes. Table 5, below, reports that interviewees had substantially more to say when it came to answering Question 3 and Question 4a.

Table 5: Interviewee Response Summary

Question Number	Question Topic	Number of Responses	Number of Response Subcategories
2	What Community Means	96	1
3	What Makes Community	473	25
4a	What You Would Change	195	24
4b	What You Would Never Change	109	10
5	Areas in which Communities Work Together	140	7
Total Responses		1013	67



If there was one thing that you would never want to see changed in your community, what would it be?



Communities are places where “everybody would work together” or “where everybody is the same and working together for one common cause, for the better community.”

Eighteen (18) individuals responded to the question regarding how long they have lived in their community. One couple reported having lived in their community for 48 years, which was the longest period of residency reported. The least amount of time reported was three (3) years. The average length of time that interviewees had lived in their community was 14.9 years, while the median was 12.5 years.

Individuals described several reasons for having moved to the community in which they now reside. These included moving to be close to family and/or friends, moving for employment, retirement, some other major life-changing event, or because they enjoyed the amenities that the area offered.

Interviewees had a variety of responses to Question 2, what came to mind when they hear the word “community.” These responses centered primarily on four topics: family, friends, church, and neighbors. One person noted that “[c]ommunity is a group of people that live similar to each other. Not where they live; no, how they live.” Communities are places where “everybody would work together” or “where everybody is the same and working together for one common cause, for the better community.” They are where people are “sharing resources” and “meeting each other’s needs.” They include “[a]ctivities, things that go on,” including school activities and church activities.” Or community can include “[a]nything that takes place in a town that brings people together” or which “creates an atmosphere where you can get to know your neighbors.”



Table 6, entitled What Makes Community reports that there was some general agreement on what interviewees believe are the important components that comprise their community. This wide range of responses is due, in part, to the specific questions that the videographers asked, or did not ask, each interviewee. If we observe the Question 3 wording, page 13, it is clear that there was a broad array of questions that the videographer might have asked. The specific questions asked in each interview often varied because there was not a strict format for the interview questions and the videographers questions flowed naturally from their interaction with interviewees.

Interviewee responses fit into five major response categories. The first category, Business related comments, were directed primarily at community growth, development, and redevelopment activities. People were closely divided over the need to keep dollars in local businesses versus the variety and price of goods available from large, national chains and “box stores.” One interviewee noted that it is “very difficult for a small town to keep businesses,” while another individual stated that it is important for their community to “try a little harder to develop more” and “get more big box stores in and around Fenton.”

Family, friends, neighbors, and church are the basic core of community...

Comments on community atmosphere were concentrated on preferences for the “small town” feel, though several interviewees complained that there were too few social opportunities that one might find in larger suburban or urban areas, particularly an establishment that caters to clientele that one might run into at a “college type community bar.” People spoke at length about the recreation activities that they engage in (57 comments), but there was considerable comment on the restricted types of activities available in the region (40 comments).

Overall, people would much rather spend their money in the community in which they reside, but they feel that they have to travel to other communities to have access to all of the activities that they want to enjoy. Movies, theaters, plays, museums, and restaurants provide the main incentives for residents to travel to other communities and spend their dollars. When it comes to outdoor recreation opportunities, park and lake proximity and availability dominate comments, but several interviewees noted that there are insufficient facilities and programs to serve high school age and younger residents. One person commented that there “was never enough places for the kids to play sports, organized sports, so that would be nice if they could pass millages and things to expand the organized sports fields.”

Family, friends, neighbors, and church are the basic core of community for interviewees (69 comments). Schools and libraries are the dominant public services that interviewees mention that shape their community; however, about half of the comments were critical of jurisdictional disputes and accountability issues in schools. The most frequently mentioned Question 3 sub-categories that individuals used to describe their communities include: Recreation Activities (57), Out of Area Entertainment Destinations (40), Family, (39), Growth and Development (38), Schools (28), and Play (28).

Table 6: What Makes Community?

Response Category	Number of Response Subcategories	Number of Responses
Business Related	4	89
Community Atmosphere	3	30
Entertainment and Recreation	9	223
Family and Friends	4	81
Public Services	5	50
Total	25	473

What Aspects of Their Community Do People Want to Change?

Table 7, below, identifies four (4) basic categories that interviewees would change if they were able. As one can tell from the number of response sources reported in Table 7, interviewees did not limit their comments to only one change in their community that they would like to see.

Their individual responses often spanned several category subjects. These categories include: Commerce and Business, Community Atmosphere, Out of Area Activities, Public Services, and Recreation Activities.

Table 7: Question 4a Responses – What One Change Needs to Be Made?

Response Category	Number of Response Sources	Number of Responses
Commerce and Business	11	39
Community Atmosphere	15	57
Public Services	15	73
Recreation Activities	8	19
Total	51	188



With regard to Commerce and Business, interviewees enjoyed having more shopping opportunities available to them close to where they reside. Some expressed preferences for additional large box stores, while some local business persons recognized the need to support smaller local businesses. Some respondents expressed a desire to maintain a lid on some forms of residential growth and development, especially those that consume large swaths of farm land and/or open space or those that were viewed as “undesirable,” such as modular home developments.

Community Atmosphere could be improved and maintained by expanding the number and type of community events that draw people to public places. Improved access to a range of individual and family recreational activities would keep individuals (and their dollars) in their community. Many individuals felt that the range of options available to them in their communities forced them to travel to surrounding communities to access and participate in the activities they enjoy.



Individuals had very strong feelings and attitudes about the quality of public services that were provided by various government units. Road maintenance issues and transportation issues generally outweighed all other comments in terms of number and intensity. There were forty-one (41) instances where roads and transportation were criticized as needing some improvement in the quality and level of service. Parks and recreation

activities were mentioned nineteen (19) times, while improved municipal potable water systems was mentioned twelve (12) times. Even though there was broad support for more and improved public services, there was not broad recognition that these improved and new services are likely to require a revenue stream to build, operate, and maintain a service over time. There was clear opposition to taxes only when a public expenditure was viewed as “not needed” or extravagant. In this case, one respondent was addressing the new police station in Grand Blanc.

Respondents also had a lot to say when it came to communities finding additional ways to cooperate across jurisdictional boundaries (Question 5, Table 5). Interviewees recognized that the small towns that they had moved to are growing in small steps and that this incremental growth was likely to sneak up on them more rapidly in the future. Individuals living in more rural areas do not believe that their fellow citizens and their public officials see the “big picture” and the slow and steady extension of residential growth into predominantly small town and agricultural areas. They did, however, express satisfaction that communities were able to work across jurisdictional lines when emergencies occur including fire (11), police emergencies (8), or emergency medical services (5). The one public service area that needed more attention paid by local elected officials to achieve cost-savings opportunities was local school districts (12). Group purchasing was suggested as an area that local government units had yet to pay much attention.



Access to a range of individual and family recreational activities would keep individuals (and their dollars) in their community.

Interviewees were far less expansive on aspects of their community that they would never want to see change. Table 8, below, reports that interviewees had strong preferences with regard to maintaining the small town and rural nature of their communities.

People stated that the area was “getting too built up” and that the way to stop this was “to quit selling off small property” in order to “[k]eep it a rural setting.”

One of the primary attractions of living in the area is “the general friendliness of its people” and the fact “that people know each other, it’s nice.” Even when it comes to the general attitudes of people in this “conservative minded area,” some interviewees enjoyed the “[s]mall town politics; you can’t beat it.” One of the largest disadvantages to living in the area is related to transportation costs and the price of gas; however, when it comes to school services, several individuals were satisfied with the quality of education provided by the area schools and noted that “their school system is really good so I wouldn’t change that.”



Table 8: Question 4b Responses – What One Aspect Should Never Be Changed?

Response Category	Number of Response Sources	Number of Responses
No Growth	4	13
Open Space / Rural Atmosphere	5	14
People	3	5
Politics	2	6
Public Services	7	14
Total	21	52

The fifth question in the interview process asked respondents to identify specific areas in which communities could work more closely together. Question 5 results are reported in Table 9, below.

Table 9 reports that this question produced the smallest number of responses and comments, perhaps because it was not asked consistently, or when it was asked, interviewees had a more difficult time responding. This question required additional thought and perhaps additional knowledge or expertise.

Table 9: In What Ways Can Communities Work Together?

Response Category	Number of Response Sources	Number of Responses
Community Proximity	1	3
Emergency Medical Services	3	5
Fire Services	4	11
Police Services	3	8
Road Issues	2	8
School Districts	2	12
Taxes	1	3
Total	16	



Overall, interviewees were very satisfied with Fire Department services noting that “we have an excellent volunteer fire department” and they “. . . don’t have any complaints with the fire department.” The one public service that people spoke at length about was school districts. Comments addressed school district boundaries and the need to “consolidate their schools more or at least their buying power.”

Community Conversations

Six community conversations were held across southern Genesee County. The film was shown at the beginning of each session followed by discussion about what makes each community a great place to live, and what changes should be made to protect or improve each place. Nine presentations were made to existing groups (civic clubs and local governments) in November and December. Presentations to existing groups will continue through November 2008 with support from the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network. Questions asked at each conversation were:



*What do you think of as your “community”?
What makes your community special?*

*If you could make 1 change / improvement in
your community, what would it be?*

*If there was one thing that you would never
want to see changed in your community, what
would it be?*

*What are some issues / topics that
are important enough for communities
of Southern Genesee County
to work together on?*

Several people at each event filled out the questionnaires. A majority of the participants came from the Fenton and Swartz Creek areas.

What makes a community special? What do you think of as your “community”?

What Makes Community?



Community conversations defined community by events in the area, “the people, the places that make us different than everywhere else”, Genesee County, and where people shop and live. Mention was also given to school districts, small town feel, rural areas in parts of southern Genesee county, and being close with neighbors.

Community Qualities



The two most important qualities worth preserving were open space (6) and the small town rural atmosphere (6). Other community qualities that were important for preserving were the belief in the community (3), local events like hometown days and concerts (2), large events such as the Buick Open and the CRIM (1), as well as historic buildings (1). Qualities that made each community unique are beautification efforts in Linden and Fenton, safety in the region, entertainment via local events, churches, and family involvement.

Recreation Activities



Comments made on the topic of recreation were for improving a park for kids to play in Mundy Township, cultural opportunities around Fenton and an urban bike path on public roads. Several comments were also made about the abundance of recreation opportunities making the Southern Lakes communities unique.

Public Services



Attendees were concerned with public services such as transportation choices and roads, police and fire departments, emergency medical services, community centers, water supply, and hospitals. Responses included how services could be combined across communities, and how they could be improved or expanded.

Services were very important to those who participated in the conversations. Services needing improvement included government function at the local and county level, roads and sidewalks, and overhead power lines in downtown Swartz Creek. Participants also wanted 2-lane roads and access to community leaders preserved. A lot of services were suggested for communities to work together on including planning, parks and recreation, economic development, emergency services, and transportation.

Commerce and Business



This category encompasses any businesses that were described as favorable or unfavorable, and what types of economic development is needed or unwanted. Economic development was a focus for community improvements. Revitalizing downtowns was important for all the small cities and the city of Flint. Other needs mentioned were more unique businesses, downtowns that you can hang out in, and improved recruitment and retention efforts. A few comments were also made about limiting development of strip malls and big box retailers that would harm the downtowns. Economic development was also a reason to work together to create a business-friendly environment and ensure that “all communities need to support and welcome small business.”

Education



Education includes different types of education facilities along with how buildings look and classes they offer. The community conversations focused on improvements to school buildings and administration.

Schools were mentioned as areas that needed improving or areas that communities need to work together on. New investment and more funding are needed for the areas school districts. Participants from the Swartz Creek area noted that a new school bond proposal has failed twice despite the need for a new school and improvements.

Out of Area Activities



It was alluded to in the conversations that there is a lack of things to do in the area for teenagers and young adults. There were several suggestions to bring in facilities and events that cater to these audiences such as a community center or complex, a dance hall, and more sports.

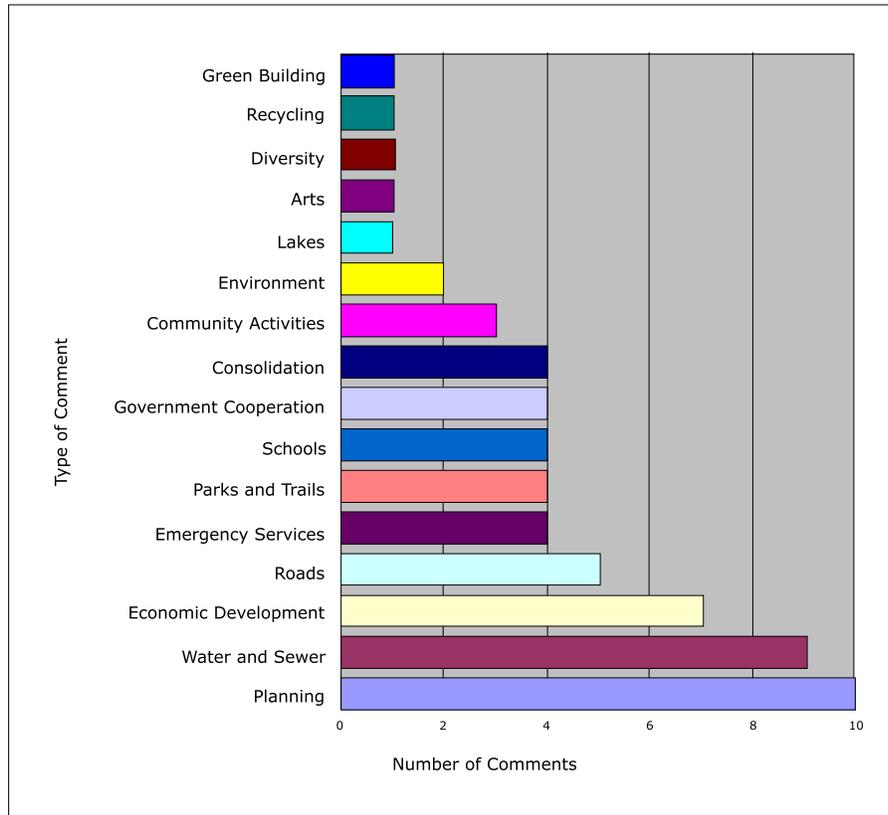
Working Together



A final question was asked in both the video interviews and community conversations on how communities can work together. The answers vary but many fit into one of the above categories.

The range of topics for communities to work together on includes: shared services, economic development, funding for schools, community activities, planned development and future growth, emergency services, and parks and recreation. The most frequent response for communities to work together was planning future development. Figure 3, Community Conversation Responses to “How can communities work together?” reports responses broken down by category.

Figure 3: Community Conversation Responses to “How can communities work together?”



Project Summary and Conclusions

Information gathering has been carried out continually since SLPI was established. The purpose of this phase was to determine if issues important to local officials and the SLPI were similar to the issues that people who live in, work in, and visit the area felt were important. The input gathered from this project varied in methods and results. Through this process, a broad range of community assets and issues have been identified. Several broad categories were created to group pictures, interviews, and conversations together based on aspects of daily life and community vitality. The range of categories is:

1. *What Makes Community*
2. *Community Qualities*
 - Church, Family
 - Local events, Beautification
 - Patriotism
 - Nature
 - Rural and Small Towns
3. *Recreation Activities*
 - Trails and parks
 - Cultural and historic,
 - Sports
4. *Services*
 - Public
 - Social / Community
5. *Commerce / Business*
6. *Education*
7. *Unhealthy Food*
8. *Out of Area Activities*
9. *Working Together*

These categories are broken down further according to what participants thought desirable (what wouldn't you change) and undesirable (what would you change) in a community. Answers varied slightly by community; however, comments generally fell into one of the eight categories.

Over the course of the various community participation and input processes described above, several conclusions were drawn regarding residents' satisfaction levels in the Southern Lakes Region. Community strengths, opportunities, challenges and problem areas were identified, and a guide for the future direction of the SLPI has been suggested.



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Project Conclusions

Differences Between Age Groups

A few key differences across age groups became evident when participants identified, described, or defined community assets or problem areas. Youth focused largely on recreation activities and businesses as community assets; vacant and neglected properties were the primary areas that need improvement. Nature was important to youth; pollution and increasing crime were observed as important problems. Adults focused on the small town character and ambience of the area; roads and transportation were areas that needed improvement.

Community Strengths and Opportunities

People are satisfied with emergency services in the area and there were only a few comments to coordinate or consolidate these services. Preserving the small town and rural atmosphere is very important. The atmosphere defines the region and is what draws people to live in and visit the area. The small town / rural atmosphere was defined as nice neighborhoods, small downtowns, open space, and parks. There is strong support for local events that bring people together to have fun and enjoy each other. Events that celebrated patriotism, community, local businesses, and farmers' markets are important aspects of the Southern Lakes atmosphere. Beautification efforts are strongly supported and appreciated, though there was some frustration with lack of volunteers for such activities and support from local businesses.

Preserving the small town and rural atmosphere is very important.



Challenges and Problem Areas

Community change and improved coordination are needed for transportation related issues such as road maintenance, preservation of two-lane roads, public transportation, more sidewalks, bike lanes, and trails. Greater equality and sustained funding is needed for school districts. Lack of activities for youth and young-adults to participate in the area was mentioned across all audiences. Suggestions were made to build a community center targeted towards school-aged children and to offer a broader range of year-round activities for families. Suggestions were also made to support the redevelopment of downtown Flint as a social scene and walkable downtown, particularly for young adults and young families. Revitalizing the downtown areas in Linden, Swartz Creek, and Fenton were also mentioned. Citizens and participants would like to have more diverse businesses in close proximity, though they do not necessarily want to see small downtown areas increase their size.

There were several mentions of keeping a small town and rural atmosphere while maintaining low taxes and city services, particularly when there are preferences for expanded shopping opportunities. This presents a difficulty when planning communities. Tax revenue is needed by the local governments to function and maintain services; however, these activities can harm the local charm and character of an area if not carried out properly.

Planning communities better was mentioned by many people. There appears to be support for cross-jurisdictional planning activities that improve coordination of government spending, service delivery and economic development. There was also dissatisfaction with the duplication of businesses in the area including big box retailers and cultural opportunities; however, there were a few comments stating that additional big box stores are preferred in the area. The SLPI needs to pay special attention to where these amenities are being planned and sited so that they do not diminish community atmosphere and character. Community atmosphere and character can be achieved and protected through design standards and proper siting and scale of commercial centers.



Future of Southern Lakes Planning

Moving forward, the SLPI may choose to focus on any of these key areas. Local support appears to favor coordination of services, recreation opportunities and planning for future development. SLPI should strive to maintain community involvement and prioritize one area to focus on over the next few months. Goals, objectives, and tasks can be created for that focus area by establishing work groups; facilitators at CAER and ENP & Associates stand ready to help.



W

e serve as an umbrella to connect local activities across the region. We are committed to keeping Southern Lakes a Great Place . We do not desire to create a new organization but serve as a clearinghouse for local initiatives throughout the region. We believe working together benefits everyone, by linking groups together with similar interests, projects will leverage more funding and garner greater recognition.



Focus Areas

We Promote:

Southern Lakes, a Great Place

Based on past research, the SLPI will continue to identify local assets that help identify the region. Outcomes of this include a short documentary, and student photographs. Future endeavors will promote unique features of each community to aide in economic development, historic preservation, and tourism.

Shiawassee River Trail

cooperating with Headwaters Trails in Oakland County, the SLPI will identify key locations for signage along the Shiawassee River .

Non-motorized Trails

cooperating with Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, the SLPI will work with local municipalities to incorporate trails into local parks and recreation plans, and champion the development of trails in the region.

Beautification

cooperating with Keep Genesee County Beautiful, the SLPI will encourage master gardeners, and local beautification committees and commissions to attend trainings and promote a county-wide beautification effort.

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