

Master Plan Review: Webster Township

November 23, 2015

Webster Township, Northfield Township's neighbor to the west, is updating its master plan. Pursuant to PA 33 of 2008, the Michigan Planning Enabling Act, adjacent communities are offered an opportunity to comment on the proposed plan before it is adopted. This review focuses on three parts: mentions of Northfield Township in the Webster Township plan; requests directed toward the Webster Township Planning Commission regarding the plan; and areas of the plan that may be of interest as a point of discussion among the Northfield Township Planning Commission (but would not be included in a response to Webster Township). These revolve around the topic of agriculture, not because agriculture is necessarily a top priority of Northfield Township but because it was extensively discussed in the plan and may have useful applications.

MENTIONS OF NORTHFIELD TOWNSHIP

The Future Land Use Map associated with this master plan shows an Agricultural designation all along the shared border with Northfield Township, with the exception of a small stretch of Park / Preserve immediately east of Independence Lake.

Northfield Township is characterized as one of four "growth and development corridors" surrounding Webster Township, specifically "experiencing continuous growth along US-23." Webster Township considers its commercial needs to be fully met by neighboring jurisdictions, including Dexter, Brighton, and Whitmore Lake, with Ann Arbor as the principal urban center.

The plan states that "urban density residential development (a density that exceeds one dwelling unit per 3/4 acre) will be limited to areas adjacent to Loch Alpine, the City of Dexter and the area near the Northfield Township line north of North Territorial Road, provided facilities are available." This goes both ways: "proposed developments that require central water or sanitary sewer services will be required to locate in one of these areas," and that dwellings in this urban residential land "should be required to connect with water and sanitary sewer lines; on-site facilities should not be permitted." Further, the plans states that "the Township will work with Northfield Township and other service providers to coordinate the timing, financing and installation of sewer and water infrastructure to the delineated urban service area." Recommended maximum densities within the urban residential district are:

Single Family Detached: 2.9 dwelling units per acre

Single Family Attached: 4.0 dwelling units per acre

Multiple Family: 4.0 dwelling units per acre

In assessing the community's roads, the Webster Township plan notes that "Barker Road, together with Webster Church, Valentine, and Merrill Roads as connecting roads, has potential (albeit limited since these roads are gravel) to provide the northeast part of the Township with access to the Whitmore Lake community and the US-23 freeway." A particular recommendation pertains to North Territorial Road and may impact Northfield Township: "This road functions as a primary road, in that it carries regional traffic through Webster Township, and connects the Township with the US-23 freeway via the interchange 1.5 miles to the east. The right-of-way should be expanded to 120 feet. Two driving lanes will be sufficient;

however, turning lanes might be needed at the intersections with Jennings, Webster Church, and Mast Roads, and Huron River Drive.”

Though it does not mention Northfield Township by name, one additional citation may have implications for the future: “Fire and police protection within Webster Township will have to increase to meet the needs of an expanding population base. Arrangements for these services at this time are foreseen to be contractual with neighboring units of government and the County.”

REQUESTS

Table 3: The minimum lot size in the Northfield Township agricultural district is 5 acres, rather than 10 as is listed. The minimum lot size in the Low-Density Residential district is 2 acres as listed. Clustering provisions allow for an increased effective density of 1 unit per acre if not served by sanitary sewer, and 1 unit per 33,000 square feet if served by sanitary sewer.

Northfield Township would be interested in the results of the recommended housing study referenced in the passage below, if conducted.

The Planning Commission should conduct a housing analysis for the Township. This should include the following:

- A. Estimate the demand for various types of housing within the Township based upon the projected growth of different demographic populations for the Township and the surrounding region, coupled with the existing housing stock in the Township and the region.*
- B. An analysis of affordable housing needs, including what price range constitutes “affordable” housing for workers in the area*
- C. Recommendations on approximately how many affordable units including multifamily or manufactured housing units should be planned for within the planning horizon*
- D. Appropriate strategies for providing a range of housing options within the Township*

DISCUSSION

Selected Excerpts re: Agricultural Zoning

Township	Agricultural Minimum Lot Size	Low Density Residential Minimum Lot Size
Webster	2 acres	1 acre
Northfield	10 acres (AR district)	2 acres (LR district)
Dexter	5 acres w/out conservation easement, 1 acre with conservation easement (AG district)	2 acres (RR district)
Scio	2.5 acres (A-1 district)	2.5 acres (ER district)

“Agricultural land is land that is in the designated agriculture area and in which low density single-family detached dwelling units are permitted. Each lot in this area must have its own well and septic tank/drain field systems. Residents of the township support the low density aspect of residential development within the agricultural area. The 2014 Master Plan Survey asked specifically about the current 2-acre minimum lot size in three different ways:

- When asked if the lot size should be decreased, 70% said in no areas
- When asked if the lot size should be maintained at 2 acres, 76% agreed

When asked if the lot size should be increased, 41% said in all areas while 36% said in no areas

It is interesting to note that when given a list of five lot sizes and asked to choose the appropriate size for agricultural areas, 54% chose a size greater (5 or 10 acres) than present standards (2 acres), 38% chose the present 2 acre standard, and only 8% chose smaller (3/4 or 1 acre) sizes.”

“Rural residential land is land that is intended for single-family detached dwelling units on one acre or larger lots, which are located outside the agricultural area in the parts of the township where one acre and larger lots is the established lot pattern. Residents of the township support the lower density aspect of residential development within the agricultural area. The 2014 Master Plan Survey asked specifically about the current 2-acre minimum lot size in three different ways:

When asked if the lot size should be decreased, 79% said in no areas

When asked if the lot size should be maintained at 1 acre, 72% agreed

When asked if the lot size should be increased, 40% said in all areas while 38% said in no areas

It is interesting to note that when given a list of five lot sizes and asked to choose the appropriate size for rural residential, 50% chose a size greater (2, 5 or 10 acres) than present standards (1 acre), 41% chose the present 1 acre standard, and only 3% chose the smaller (3/4) size.”

“Any future population increase will not require a large amount of new residential land, particularly if the new housing units are located on smaller lots, such as one or two acre parcels. Even under the most aggressive scenario, if most new residential units are located on 1-2 acre lots, the Township has more than enough land available (in the planning/zoning sense) for additional residential growth. The major issue is locating that growth in the parts of the Township where residential use is the desired long-term use.”

Selected Excerpts re: Agriculture as a Land Use

“Since its organization as a township in the 1800's, Webster Township has been a major agricultural producer in Southeast Michigan. Agriculture remained the major economic activity in the township well after World War II.

Webster Township has seen a couple of major trends in the local economy. Farming and farmland has undergone and continues to undergo major changes. In the approximately 25 years prior to 2005, the trend was toward conversion of agricultural land to residential with subsequent increases in land values, combined with reduced interest by family members in taking over existing family farms. The result was a decline in active farming in the township during this period.”

“Agricultural land use has a long history in Webster Township. How the township has zoned and planned for this land use has gone through a variety of stages over the years. Many of these changes have been shaped by the outlook of the community concerning the viability of future agricultural endeavors along with the amount of residential development pressure facing lands within the township. The zoning ordinance adopted by the township in 1953, kept density very low within the agricultural zoning district. At that time, over 90% of the land in the township was zoned agricultural with a minimum lot size of 10 acres. As development pressures increased, the township drastically increased the permitted residential density in agricultural areas by five-fold to a minimum lot size of 2 acres. Consideration was given to decreasing the density in the agricultural district in the early 2000s, but was not implemented. At that

time, development pressure was high and agricultural viability deemed low. Further, the previously adopted Master Plan had as one of its goals to manage the transition of the land in the Township from agricultural to residential...a foregone conclusion that agriculture had minimal chance for long term sustainability.

Things have changed substantially in recent years.

- Agricultural viability has greatly increased due to commodity price increases and a large demand for locally grown food
- Residents have expressed their desire to preserve viable agricultural areas by three times voting for a township millage for the purchase of development rights
- Ann Arbor has implemented a program to purchase development rights within a greenbelt around the city. About 1/3 of Webster Township is within this greenbelt
- Over 1500 acres (6.5%) within the township have been permanently preserved
- Recent development pressure has been greatly reduced due to economic conditions
- Residents have expressed the importance of agricultural and natural feature preservation through surveys and master plan input. 96% of the respondents in the 2014 Master Plan Survey agree that preserving farmland is important. When asked which areas should be planned for future agricultural use, the top two responses were currently farmed areas and areas with suitable soils."

Selected Excerpts re: Agricultural Preservation

"The Agricultural Preservation overlay district...was developed to highlight the majority of active farmland in the Township and to provide these landowners with the opportunity to participate in agricultural preservation programs.

"The Agricultural Preservation area was chosen based on the existence of working farms in the Township and the Ann Arbor Greenbelt program area. This area is also characterized by the predominance of large parcels (greater than 20 acres) and favorable agricultural soils. This area is also outside of any planned public sewer and water service area. Not all areas of the Agricultural Preservation Overlay District are suitable for farming as they have recognized natural features as indicated by the Natural Features Overlay and are encouraged to be preserved as open space."

"The Township will study and consider innovate options for the preservation and limited development of agricultural areas. A TDR program through the revision of the PUD district to require that each PUD project preserve agricultural and/or natural feature lands by way of allowing increased density on some parcels in exchange for preservation of land within the agricultural preservation overlay is a possible option. Another option to study is changes to zoning density combined with sliding scale zoning and/or lot split incentives for preserving larger tracts of agricultural land. Overall, the goal is to find innovate ways that the market force can have viable incentives to preserve agricultural land."