

## Chapter 2

### PRESERVATION OF PENINSULA CHARACTER

#### POLICY GUIDELINE: PRESERVATION OF PENINSULA CHARACTER

*The existing natural and people-made features on the peninsula that make up its rural character are interdependent with the activities that comprise its economic base. It is important therefore, that future land use change on the peninsula enhance, not undermine, the character of the area around it, and in so doing contribute to protection of the unique rural character of the entire Leelanau Peninsula.*

#### DESCRIPTION OF PENINSULA CHARACTER

Leelanau County can be described in many ways. In purely numerical terms, it is nearly 21% agricultural land, 48% wooded land, 19% open land, 2% wetlands, 2% sand dune/barren land, and 8% urban land. The pie chart below illustrates the land use/cover relationship in

2000. (See Figure 2-1).

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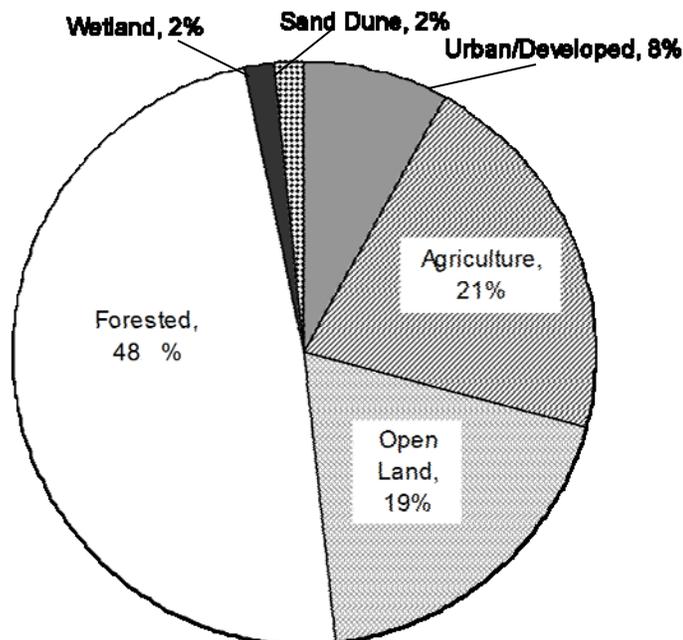
**The character of the Leelanau Peninsula is a mixture of farms, orchards, forests, sand dunes, wetlands, rivers, lakes, bays, hills, valleys, resorts and villages.**

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But Leelanau County has a rural character that is much more than mere numbers can adequately convey. The outstanding quality of the Leelanau Peninsula is its unusually varied topography. As the photos throughout this plan illustrate, it is a peninsula of significant natural beauty. It is the home of a major national park and of a state park. It is a place of special scenic quality and opportunity for pleasure in the out-of-doors.

Visual character is the image one retains from looking at a landscape. This image is made up of many parts. It is the architecture of homes

**Figure 2-1  
Leelanau County Land Cover, 2000**



and businesses in an area. It is also the shape of hills, valleys, and shorelines. It is how much the forests close in on the roads or how the fields are open. It includes the species of trees in the forests and the type of crops in the fields. Roads, too, are an important component: are they straight or curved, wide or narrow, and are there curbs **and sidewalks** on the residential streets?

The visual character of a community is important. It is more than just what buildings or landscapes look like. Visual character "sticks" in people's minds. It is a very important part of what attracts people to an area to live, invest, or vacation.

Familiar landscapes are important image guideposts people use in finding their way in daily activities. Change in the landscape can become a big issue because it affects a person's daily life by changing surroundings that were once familiar into suddenly unfamiliar settings.

High dune and glacial ridges form the major land features of Leelanau County (see Map 2-1). These ridges generally run north to south. There are small pocket valleys between the ridges, as well as broad slightly rolling plateaus in the center of the peninsula. Rolling plains are farms along the shoreline in the area of Northport. High points on the ridges are landmarks because of the striking views they provide to the inland lakes, Lake Michigan or Grand Traverse Bay. For example, the view to the north and west from the hill crest of Town Line Road is a panoramic view of Lake Michigan and the Manitou Islands that serves as both a beautiful view and as an orientation landmark. Because the ridges are highly visible, they need to be considered as sensitive visual environments. Development can easily change them.

Most of the peninsula is a checkerboard of woodlots, pastures or meadows, vineyards, active crop fields, orchards and water. There are few routes where forest borders the roads for more than a half mile, nor where open fields stretch for more than a mile without encountering another woodlot. There is more wooded landscape than open field.

## **Landscape Districts**

The visually similar areas in Leelanau County are: (see Map 2-2).

**West-Bay Shore Drive (M-22) from Greilickville to Omena.** This is a narrow band of waterfront houses on the east side of the road and largely abandoned agricultural fields on the west that are being converted to large-lot residential use. There are occasional wooded areas and strip residential lots. The West Grand Traverse Bay is intermittently visible almost the entire length of this area.

**The central peninsula farms.** A broad sweep of crop fields and pastures stretch from the southeast part of the **peninsula** to the north central part of the peninsula. The south central peninsula farms are characterized by more traditional farms, fewer orchards. Extensive sand and gravel extraction activities also exist in the southwest portion of this area.

**Ridge-top farms.** These are farms, orchards and vineyards along both sides of the south arm of Lake Leelanau that are perched high on the ridges, and command long views.

**Southwest forest and open valleys.** In the southwest part of the county the hills are wooded and there are fewer farms and open fields. There are a few valleys that have been farmed, and are now largely meadows. This area extends from Bohemian Road (CR 669) to Empire north along Lake Michigan to beyond Leland.

**Rolling dry dunes.** In this area north of Leland to about Johnson Road there are open grassy fields on the hills and pockets of cedar and aspen in the wetter hollows. Between Manitou Trail (M-22) and Lake Michigan deciduous forest cover is fairly complete.

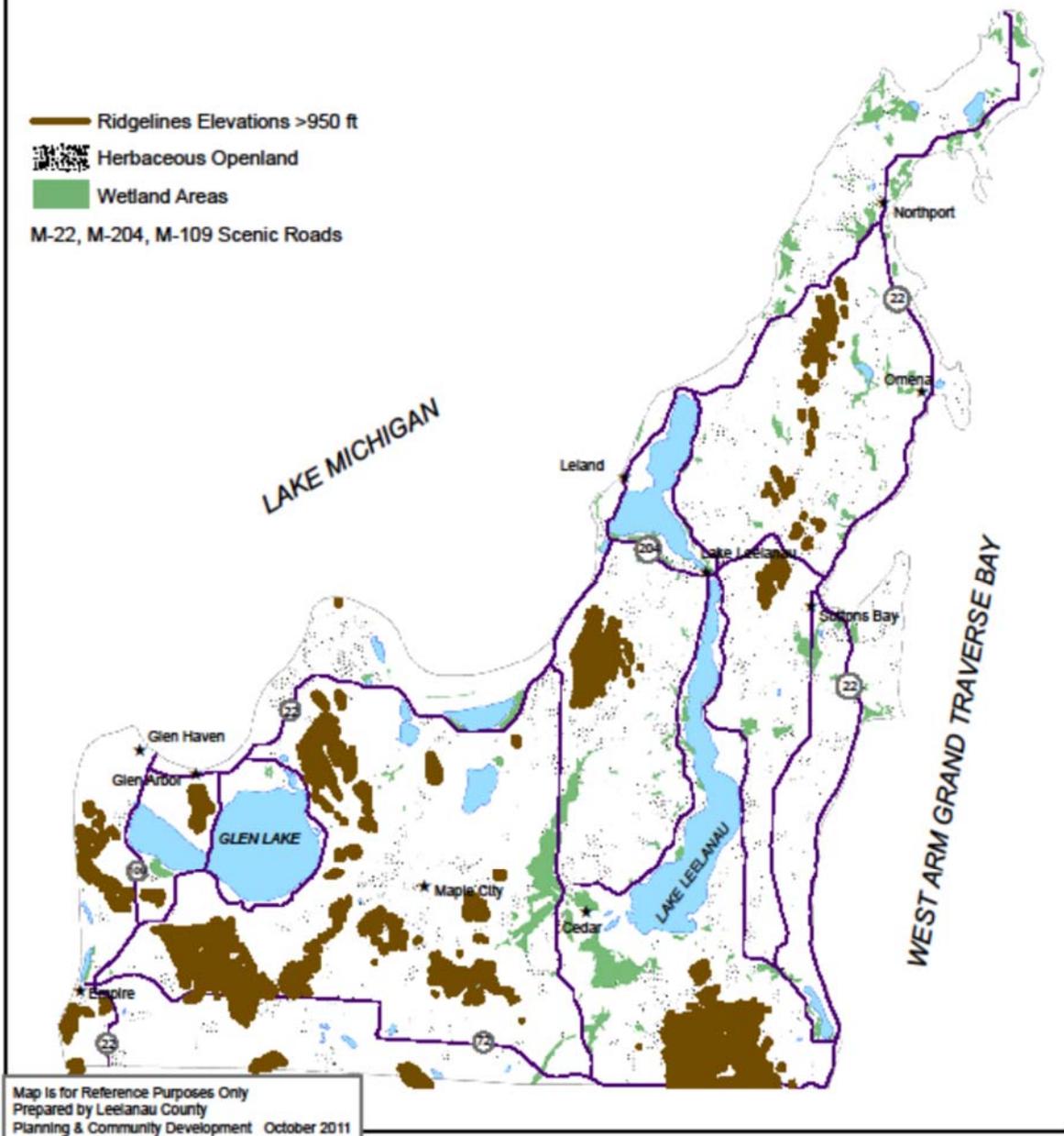
**Northport woods.** In this area to the south and west of Northport the deciduous forest is still largely intact, so that there are few open views.

**Northport flats.** The area north of Northport is flat compared to the rest of the Peninsula. There are large open fields, and large conifer plantations. Patches of deciduous forest remain near the water on both sides of the peninsula tip.

# Map 2 - 1 Landforms and Open Space

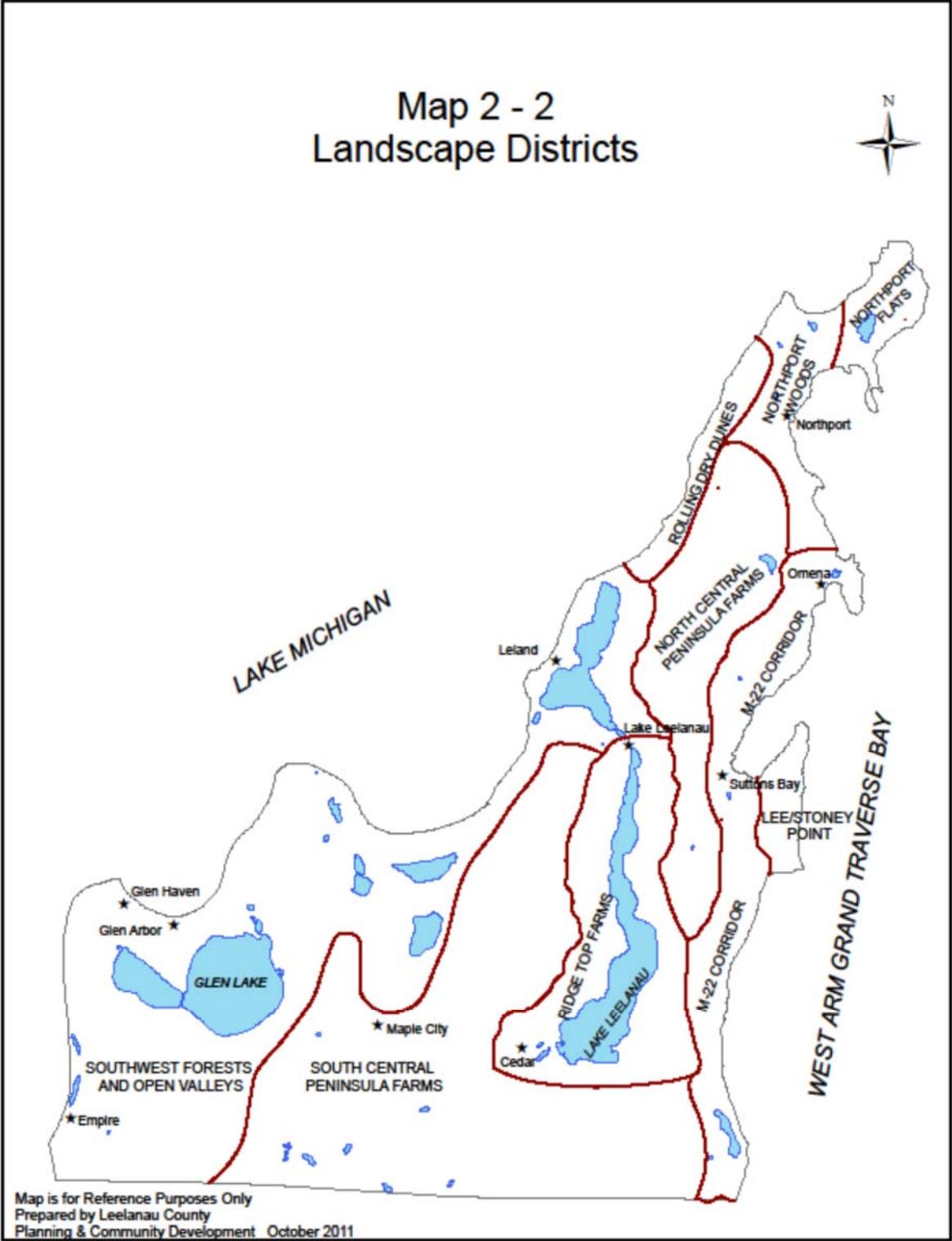


-  Ridgelines Elevations >950 ft
-  Herbaceous Openland
-  Wetland Areas
- M-22, M-204, M-109 Scenic Roads



Map is for Reference Purposes Only  
Prepared by Leelanau County  
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# Map 2 - 2 Landscape Districts



**Lee Point to Stony Point.** This area of rolling farms, orchards and woods jut out into Grand Traverse Bay. However, because of the dense bay-side vegetation and high bluffs along much of the water's edge this area is more isolated from views of the water.

Water is an important feature of Leelanau County, both because the Great Lakes shape the peninsula, and because of the many lakes, streams, and wetlands within the peninsula. Places where roads are adjacent to the water or cross rivers and streams, make nodes, or focus points. Big and Little Glen Lakes and Lake Leelanau are the largest lakes in the county. Numerous smaller lakes, usually associated with wetlands, are scattered throughout the peninsula.

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Villages, small towns and crossroads get their character from the style of architecture, the nature of businesses, and the layout of streets. All the towns and villages in Leelanau County are small. Each has a small grid street pattern, making the location of businesses and homes easy. Suttons Bay has alleys behind the houses on many streets, reducing conflicts between pedestrians and cars, and between cars on the streets and those backing out of driveways.

Buildings throughout are generally small scaled. Few buildings are of large mass or over three stories in height.

Architectural styles are most often of five basic types. One is the agricultural, which includes farmhouses, barns and other outbuildings, and pole barn-type sheds and small processing facilities. A second is an old resort type. These are generally painted one or two-story clapboard Cape Cod, Victorian, salt box, vertical or horizontal log, or mixed small lakefront cottages. A third is the contemporary natural finish wood structure. Large and small lakefront homes as well as commercial buildings are

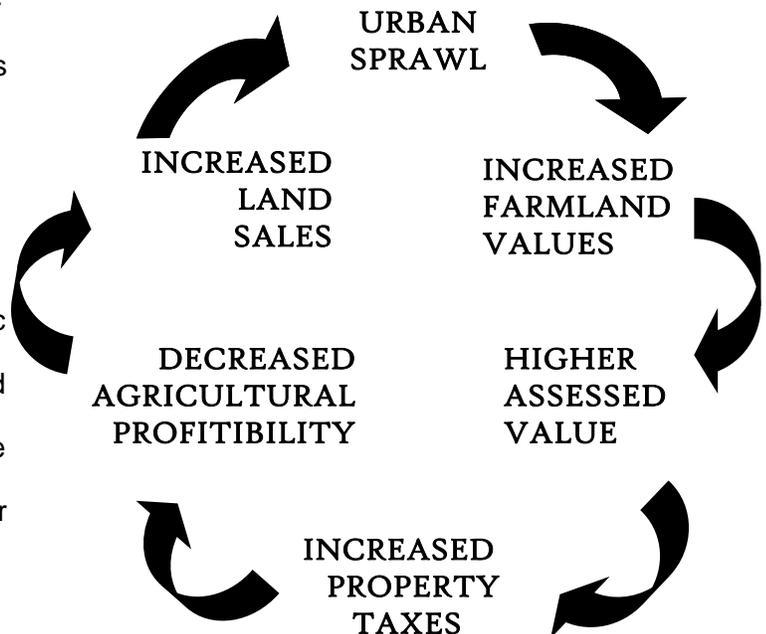
now being built in this angular style. A fourth is the suburban ranch home that is built on lakefronts, subdivisions, and in strip residential areas along county and state roads. These are often brick, wood or vinyl clapboard siding or a combination. The fifth is the eclectic contemporary, or the contemporary from some other region. These are structures such as concrete-block and painted metal grocery stores and mansard-roofed banks.

**MAJOR CHALLENGES**

The rural character of the Leelanau Peninsula is treasured by its residents and visitors. The rural character is a driving force of its tourist economy.

The major challenge to the future quality of life on the peninsula is continuation of the current land use pattern. The current development pattern can be described as low density sprawl. It is characterized by the fragmentation of large parcels into lots of between 1 and 20 acres in size with frontage on a county road primarily for use as the site for a single dwell-

**Figure 2-2  
Diagram of the Urban Sprawl Cycle**



ing. These changes are occurring largely because local plans and zoning regulations not only permit them, but encourage them through so-called "large lot zoning" practices. These changes seem to be slow but are insidiously changing the rural character of the peninsula in ways that have serious cumulative effects. It is, in the sage words of ancient eastern leaders, "the death of a thousand cuts." These changes are documented in Working Papers #5 and #10. Some of the negative effects of the current land use pattern are listed below:

- renewable resource lands (such as prime farm and forest lands) are being destroyed probably forever.
- the agricultural economy of the peninsula is being seriously diminished.
- a future public service quandary is being created.
- open space and scenic vistas are being destroyed.

In short, these changes are cumulatively undermining the very unique character that makes the peninsula so attractive to permanent and seasonal residents, as well as to tourists, (and hence is undermining the tourist economy.)

The pressure to fragment rural lands and convert them from agricultural or forested cover to residential use stems largely from regional population and employment growth. The beautiful and varied landscape of the peninsula and the reasonable commuting time to other employment centers outside the county contribute to the market pressure. Unfortunately, each new dwelling on prime orchard or forest land not only permanently converts that land out of renewable resource use, but also creates a new public service burden and contributes to rising taxes on the farmer—making it more difficult for the farmer to stay in business (see Figure 2-2).

From 1940 to 2000 the population in Leelanau County increased 150% (See Figure 2-3). The increases, however, have been much greater in the townships than in the villages. For example, the population of the Village of North-

port increased by only 7%, while Elmwood Township's population increased by 442%.

New dwelling unit activity skyrocketed between 1980 and 2000 with over 4,200 new dwellings constructed. Much of this development activity was on large lots scattered throughout the county. Most of it was not in

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subdivisions with traditionally sized lots. From 1980 to 1992, over 1,500 acres were rezoned to residential (largely from agricultural districts).

Between 1980 and 1992 the percentage that agricultural lands represented of total state equalized valuation fell from 17% to 9% while residentially classed parcels rose from 70% to 81%. Agricultural land value during that same period rose from \$37.4 million to \$58.3 million while residential land value skyrocketed from \$158.1 million to \$508.8 million.

Employment, on the other hand, has been concentrated in jobs that are generally low paying.

The 2000 population was 21,119. The county's population grew by about 3% per year since 1990. The base population was expected to grow by another 28%, to 27,032 persons by the year 2010. (See Figure 2-3).

The number of projected new housing units was estimated to remain very high. An addition 2400 were projected by 2010 and 2750 more by 2020.

#### **2010 Census Data:**

The population of Leelanau County grew only by 2.8% from 2000 to 2010 with a 2010 Cen-

sus population of 21,708. The highest percentage increase was the area in Elmwood Township which is a part of the City of Traverse City. This area saw a 28.9% increase in population with Centerville Township next at 16.4% increase. The biggest loss in population was the Village of Northport with 18.8% decrease in population. Empire Village also decreased by .8% while Suttons Bay Village saw an increase of 4.9% in population during this period.

The County has experienced a decrease in taxable values, subsequently leading to lower tax dollars available for services. Total Taxable value for real and personal property declined by almost \$1.8 million dollars from 2009 to 2010, and represents a declining tax base for the county. Residential property values plummeted nearly 8% overall in Leelanau County from 2008 to 2009, with the largest loss in Solon Township at -19.36%. The '8%' represents a drop of some \$548 million in the 'true cash value' of all residential property in the county over one year. The figure is based on sales studies and other analyses undertaken annually by the County Equalization Department.

The long term impacts on the character of the peninsula, on public service costs and on the

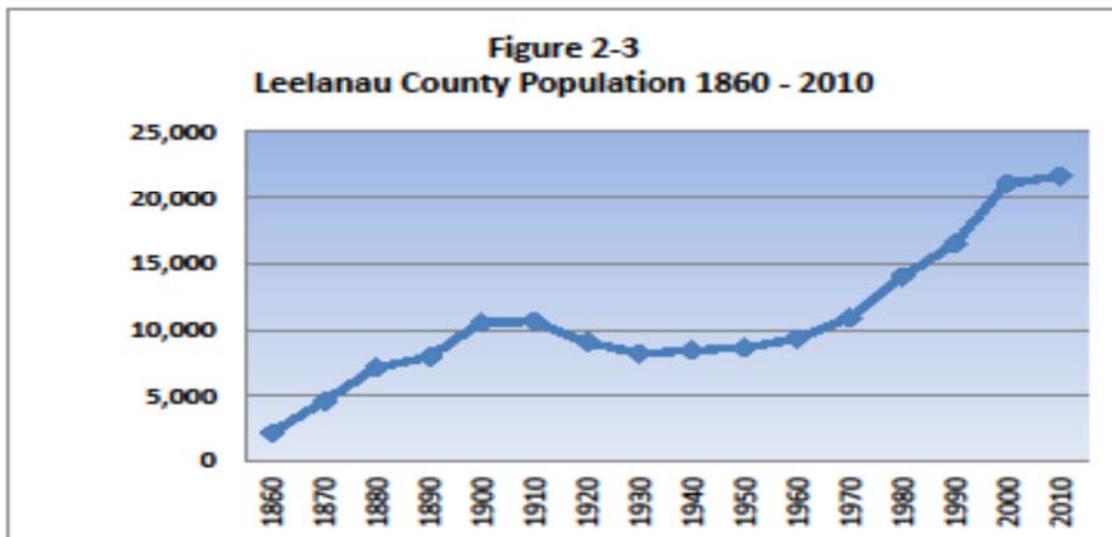
economic viability of resource based lands, will vary dramatically based on where, and if these

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**Each new dwelling on prime orchard or forest land not only removes that land from renewable resource use, but also creates a new public service burden and contributes to rising taxes on the farmer - making it more difficult for the farmer to stay in business.**

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new dwelling units are constructed. For example, if all the homes were on lots in twenty new 150 unit subdivisions within or contiguous to existing villages, the community character impacts would be far, far less than if they were spread on large lots across the peninsula. In the former case 3,000 new dwellings on quarter acre lots would take up only 750 acres of land, whereas if those new dwellings are built at current average minimum lot sizes and spread across the county, about 3,185 acres of land will be needed to accommodate them. This is nearly 5 square miles of land. If, as is more likely given current trends, these residences are on lots larger than current average minimums, then as many as 30,000 acres (47 square miles) could be consumed just to provide lots for 3,000 new dwellings.



In contrast, employment – in terms of both the labor force and the number of new jobs – does not grow as quickly as the population, due to the large number of retirees and residents that commute outside the County. Thus, far fewer acres of land are needed to accommodate new commercial and industrial development.

Unless coordinated and integrated land use planning occurs at both the county and local levels of government very soon, the landscape features of the peninsula that make it so attractive to year round and seasonal current residents and tourists will be lost or badly

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damaged.

Population increases anticipated for the 2000-2010 decade have not occurred primarily because of the economic downturn experienced in the later part of the decade and slower than anticipated overall growth in the Grand Traverse Region. While the population of the county/peninsula has only increased by 2.8% over the decade, there has been several significant population shifts within the county/peninsula. (See table 10-1).

The first and most significant is the population reduction in the northern most township in the county/peninsula that includes the Village of Northport. Additionally, there was essentially no change in population in the two townships that immediately abut Leelanau Township. Major development that would have appreciably increased the population, that were planned for this part of the County, have been cancelled, stalled or deferred. As the economy rebounds and economic activity in the Grand Traverse region increases it is expected that these population decreases will ultimately be reversed.

The second significant population shift in the county, and one that was anticipated, is in the

area immediately abutting Traverse City. Significant increases have been seen in Elmwood Township and to a lesser extent in Bingham Township continuing the pattern of suburbanization of these areas.

The third significant population shift, and one that is potentially resulting in additional significant “large lot” fragmentation, is the increased population in Centerville Township.

The last significant population demographic shift is the “Graying” of the county’s population. The average age of the county’s population increased by almost 8 years during the decade. This demographic shift may result in the required delivery of increased senior citizen services, increased transportation, public and special, and a potential shift to more multi-unit housing options from predominantly single family housing.

## **VISUAL CHARACTER ETHIC**

It is most desirable for the rural visual character of the landscape to remain after growth accommodates increases in population and development. County citizens have indicated they do not want the landscape to take on a suburban or urban ornamental character, or the natural and rural character will be lost. The bays, lakes, rivers, streams, ridges, and rolling terrain along with woods and farms that drive the economy of the peninsula and contribute to the sense of identity of its citizens must be



*Omena*

protected. Almost everyone feels a right to see, enjoy, and seek to help protect these resources. Protection of the unique rural character of the peninsula needs to become a fundamental part of all future planning and development decisions.

## **A STRATEGY TO PROTECT VISUAL CHARACTER**

The proactive participation of the county in development of the **Grand Traverse Bay Region Development Guidebook** illustrates the ways in which new development could occur in order to protect the visual character of the peninsula. Recommendations from the **Guidebook** which are incorporated into this **General Plan** follow.

The protection of scenic values can be accomplished through a variety of choices including (see also Figure 2-4):

- Building most new dwellings in villages and subdivisions rather than on large rural lots.
- Setting aside open land, or placing development where it has the minimum visual impact.
- Clustering residential, commercial, and industrial development to retain open space.
- Using plantings with predominantly naturally occurring species on areas visible from roads.
- Retaining naturally occurring vegetation to the maximum extent possible.
- In building, sign and other construction, lean toward using materials such as wood, stone, or brick rather than metal, plastic, or concrete. Muted, rather than bright colors seem to suit the north country lakes, woods, and traditional farms and villages.
- Using Form Based zoning.

Pleasing, rather than chaotic views, along roads can be accomplished by:

- Reducing the size and number of signs.
- Burying utilities or routing them away from the street.
- Enhancing parking lots with landscaping.
- Using service drives and alleys to limit curb cuts.
- Placing parking behind or beside buildings, but not in the front yard.

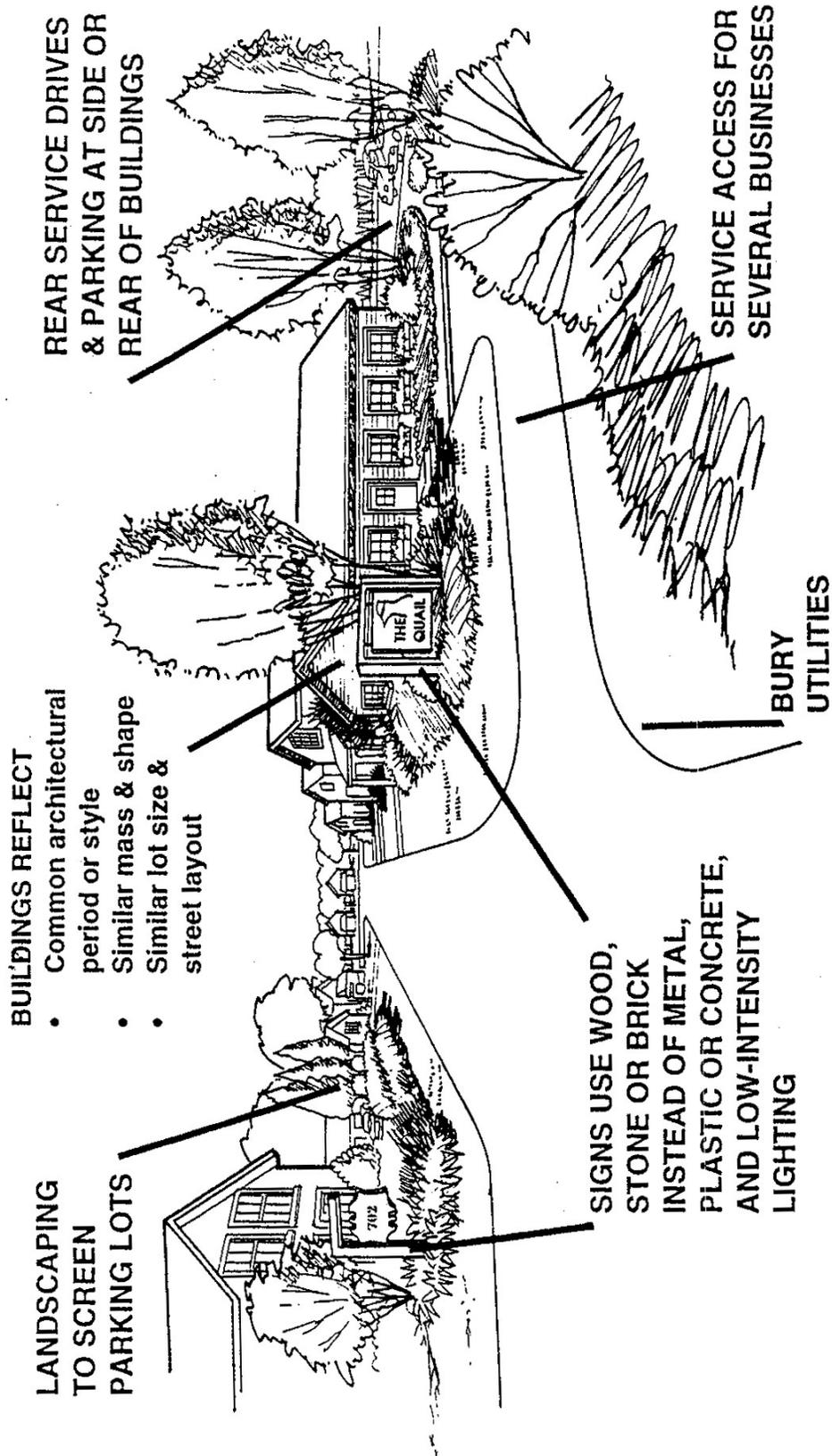
The character of villages should be kept intact. Key aspects of village character include:

- architectural period and style
- mass and shape
- material and color
- lot size and street layout.
- Form Based zoning.

At night, the stars should be visible in the sky - not obstructed by diffuse light from the built-up environment.

Future quality of life on the peninsula will depend to a great extent on the degree to which the particular rural character of the peninsula has been protected. Much of the local economy will depend on it. The sense of satisfaction residents have with their community will depend on it. Protective measures are not incompatible with additional growth because the issue is not whether or not to grow, it is where and how. It is most important to focus efforts on encouraging new development in and adjacent to existing villages, protection of existing village character, while protecting agricultural lands and other open spaces. Protection of the visual character of these areas will provide both long term economic benefits and quality of life benefits to both residents and visitors now and for many years to come.

**Figure 2-4  
Protect Visual Character**



**PROTECT VISUAL CHARACTER**