

Chapter 2

PRESERVATION OF COUNTY CHARACTER

POLICY GUIDELINE: PRESERVATION OF COUNTY CHARACTER

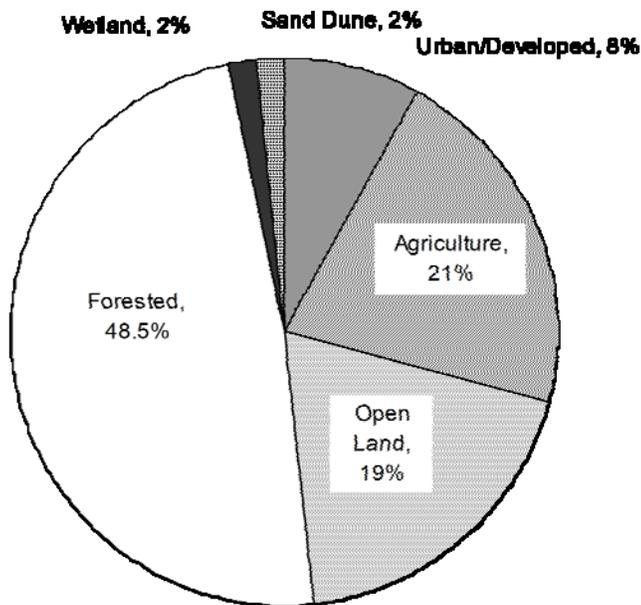
The existing natural and people-made features in the county that make up its rural character are interdependent with the activities that comprise its economic base. It is important therefore, that future land use change in the County enhance, not undermine, the character of the area around it, and in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

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

DESCRIPTION OF COUNTY 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).

Figure 2-1
Leelanau County Land Cover, 2000



Leelanau County has a rural character that is much more than mere numbers can adequately convey. The outstanding quality of Leelanau County is its unusually varied topography. As the photos throughout this plan illustrate, it is a County 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.

When asked in the 2018 Planning Questionnaire ‘What are the most important qualities of Leelanau County’? - a large percentage of all survey respondents identified water quality (86%) and access to Lake Michigan and inland lakes (75%) as very important qualities of Leelanau County. These two characteristics ranked the highest for both student and non-student questionnaire respondents.

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 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 County. 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 County is a checkerboard of woodlots, pastures or meadows, 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 County farms. A broad sweep of crop fields and pastures stretch from the southeast part of the County to the north central part of the County. The south central County 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 and orchards 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 County. There are large open fields, and large conifer plantations. Patches of deciduous forest remain near the water on both sides of the County's tip.

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.

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. A United States national lakeshore located along the northwest coast of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan in Leelanau and Benzie Counties near Empire Michigan.

Water is an important feature of Leelanau County, both because the Great Lakes shape the County, and because of the many lakes, streams, and wetlands within the County. 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 County. Villages, small towns and cross-roads 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 of 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 Leelanau County is treasured by its residents and visitors. The rural character is a driving force of its tourist economy.

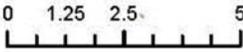
The major challenge to the future quality of life in the County is continuation of the current land use pattern. The current development pattern can be described as low density sprawl. It is characterized by the fragmentation of large parcels into lots of between 1 and 20 acres in size with frontage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

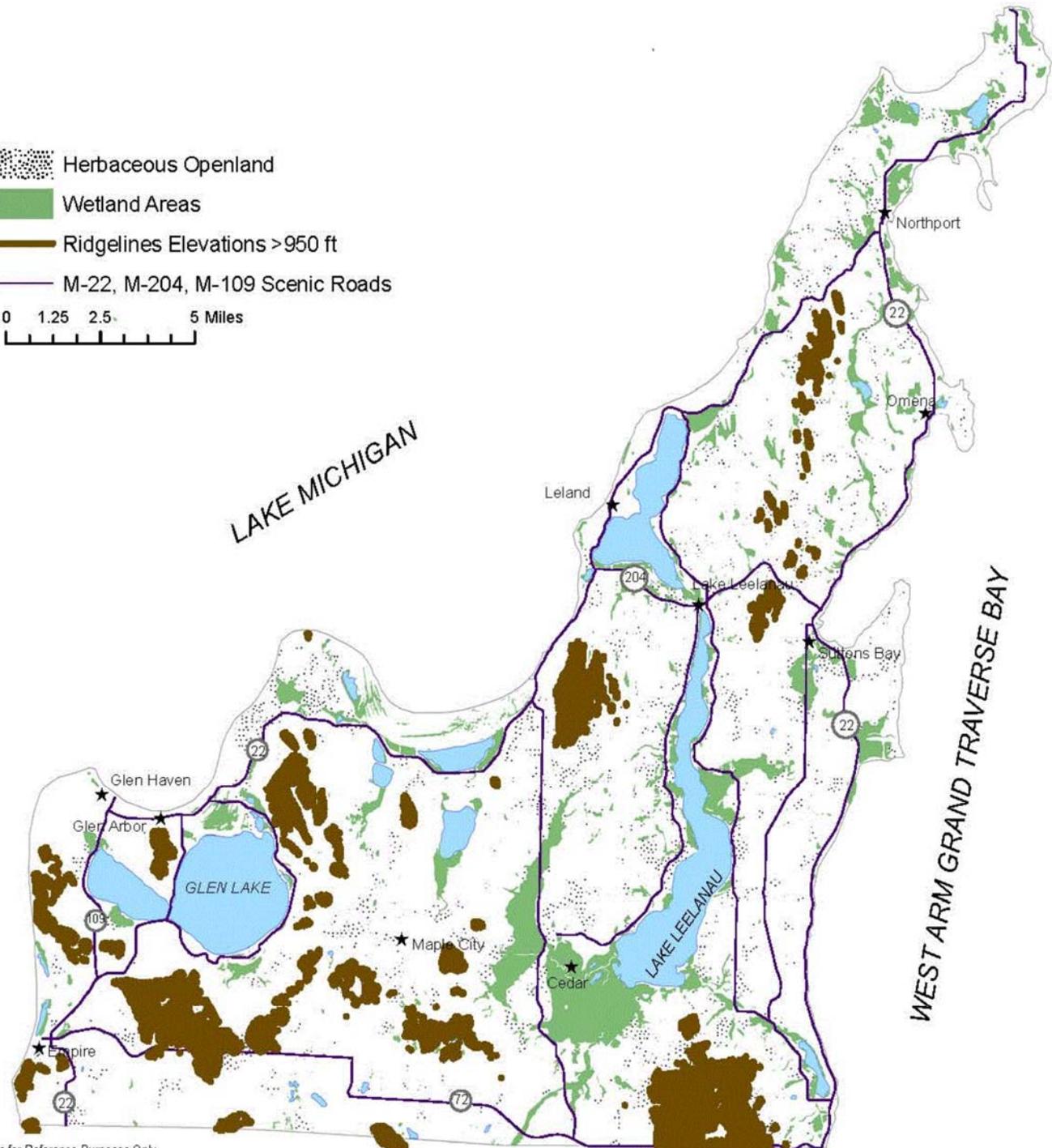
Some of the negative effects of the current land use pattern are listed below:

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

Map 2 - 1 Landforms and Open Space



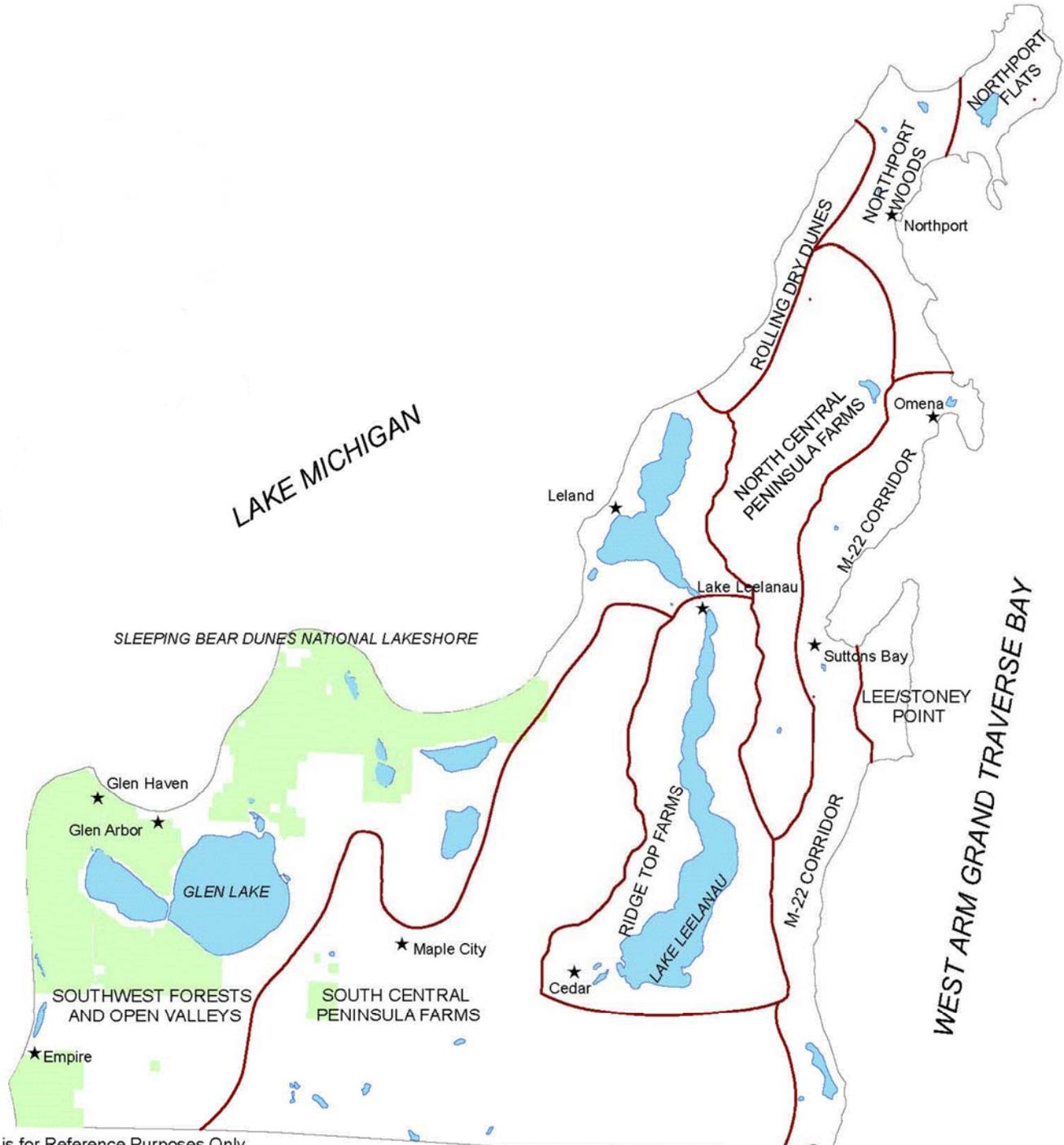
-  Herbaceous Openland
 -  Wetland Areas
 -  Ridgelines Elevations >950 ft
 -  M-22, M-204, M-109 Scenic Roads
- 0 1.25 2.5 5 Miles
- 



Map is for Reference Purposes Only
 Prepared by Leelanau County
 Planning & Community Development May 2019



Map 2 - 2 Landscape Districts



Map is for Reference Purposes Only
Prepared by Leelanau County
Planning & Community Development May 2019

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

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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 County 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.

New dwelling unit activity skyrocketed between 1980 and 2000 with over 4,200 new dwellings constructed. Between 2000 to 2010 1,468 new dwellings were constructed and 964 new dwellings were constructed between 2011 and 2018. Much of this development activity was on large lots scattered throughout the County. Most of it was not in subdivisions with traditionally sized lots.

The number of projected new housing units is estimated to remain high. The long term impacts on the character of the County, on public service costs and on the economic viability of resource based lands, will vary dramatically based on where, and if these 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 County, and much less land would be consumed for 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.

From 1940 to 2000 the population in Leelanau County increased 150% (See Figure 2-2. The increases, however, were much greater in the townships than in the villages. For example, the

population of the Village of Northport increased by only 7%, while Elmwood Township’s population increased by 442%. 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). From 2016 to 2017 the population in Leelanau County decreased 0.9% (See Figure 2-3).

Population increases anticipated for the 2000-2010 decade did not occur 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. The population of Leelanau County grew only by 2.8% from 2000 to 2010 with a 2010 Census 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 2020 population estimate for Leelanau County is 22,200. (Michigan.gov)

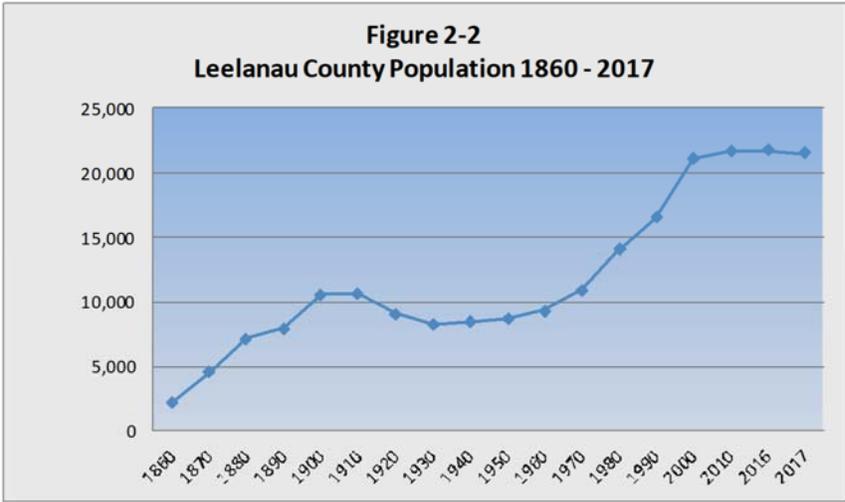
While the population of the County has only increased slightly between 2000 and 2010, there has been several significant population shifts within the County.

The first and most significant is the population reduction in the northern most township in the County 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.

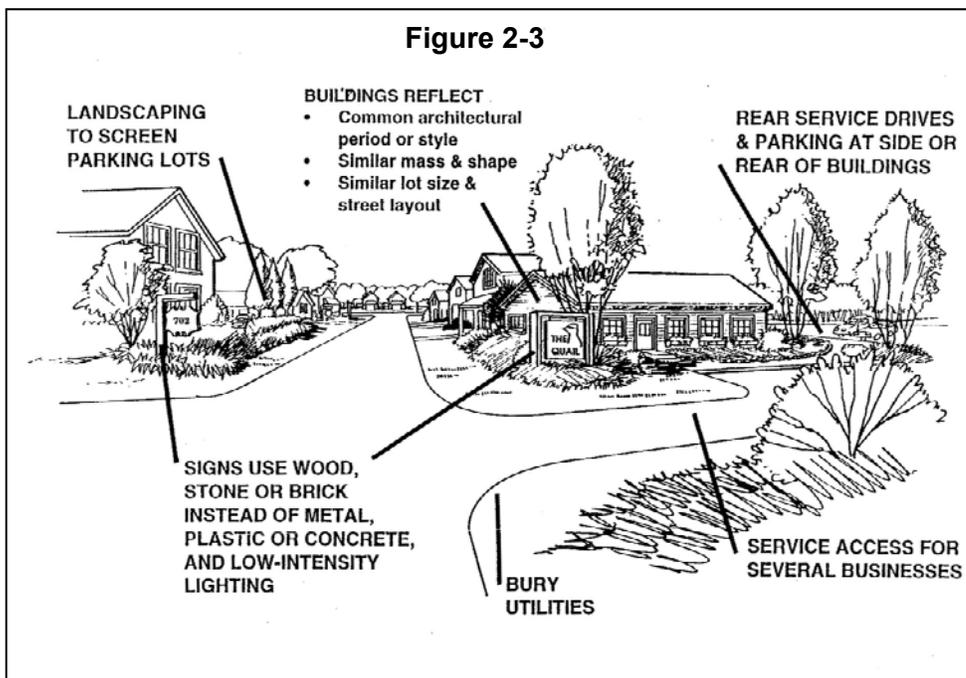
VISUAL CHARACTER ETHIC

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 County and contribute to the sense of identity of its citizens must be protected. Almost everyone feels a right to see, enjoy, and seek to help protect these resources. Protection of the unique rural character of the County needs to become a fundamental part of all future planning and development decisions.

A STRATEGY TO PROTECT VISUAL CHARACTER

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 and elevation
- 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 County will depend to a great extent on the degree to which the particular rural character of the County 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.