

Case Study: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission (GCMPC) Approach to Transportation and Housing Planning Coordination

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Moving beyond the scope of traditional long-range transportation planning, the Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission (GCMPC) in Michigan not only oversees community development, transportation planning, and environmental programs but also coordinates planning efforts across these programs to leverage resources and enhance livability in local communities.

Recently, GCMPC staff combined planning processes, replacing previous procedures that required each program area to publish an individual planning document every three years. In May 2020, GCMPC published its long-range metropolitan transportation plan, [Genesee: Our County, Our Future](#), resulting from the combined process. The GCMPC developed the plan to empower the public, provide guidance for future development, attract funding opportunities, and ensure an all-inclusive vision for the County. The plan's alignment of housing development efforts with the transportation planning process enhances livability and affordability in Genesee County.

Background and Demographics

The [GCMPC](#) supports transportation and housing development to enhance the quality of life for residents of Genesee County, MI. In the early 20th century, Genesee County experienced rapid growth due to the expanding auto industry: specifically, the presence of General Motors and the United Auto Workers of America. Today, Genesee County is the fifth most populated county in Michigan, containing 33 local units of government. Functioning as a regional hub, the County offers a variety of amenities including three institutions

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- GCMPC's [new long-range plan](#) coordinates housing and transportation planning initiatives.
- GCMPC published the [Barriers to Affordable Living Report](#), along with [Community Housing Profiles](#), to improve the County's housing development efforts.
- The [2020 LRTP](#) identifies areas of need and coordinates planning to maximize limited funding in Genesee County.

IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- The [Genesee County Public Participation Plan](#) guided efforts to ensure all residents had opportunities to contribute to the long-range plan.
- GCMPC developed a [mapping tool](#) to help residents simulate development change.
- The [City of Swartz Creek](#) used funds from a Community Development Block Grant to improve streetscapes, sidewalks, and signage.

of higher education, three state-of-the-art medical facilities, numerous recreational attractions, and diverse employment opportunities.

The new comprehensive long-range plan for GCMPC, “Genesee: Our County, Our Future” took approximately two years to develop, prior to approval. The first year of development focused on technical reporting, while the second was spent presenting findings to the community and receiving feedback. As part of the long-range planning process, GCMPC examined other metropolitan planning organizations’ (MPO) efforts to incorporate housing into their transportation planning processes by conducting a literature review of other plans from across the country. The GCMPC also reviewed Federal performance areas and planning factors to better relate County goals and actions to Federal requirements. During this time, GCMPC formed a steering committee for the long-range transportation plan, which included housing organizations like Habitat for Humanity among its 19 members from numerous agencies in the County.

Community Challenges

According to the County’s 2019 [“Barriers to Affordable Living” report](#), approximately 21 percent of households in Genesee County are considered Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE), a measure developed by the United Way to describe those with income yet still struggling to afford basic needs. Further, over 26 percent of homeowners and 45 percent of renters spend over 30 percent of their income on housing, a common threshold for housing cost-burden. Housing costs in Genesee County directly relate to residents’ ability to access and afford transportation. Because the interrelationship between housing and transportation drives travel decisions and access to essential services, GCMPC incorporates housing considerations into its transportation planning efforts.

Many low-income residents in the County live outside transit service areas or beyond a walkable or bikeable distance to essential services and are less likely to own or have access to a vehicle, resulting in limited access to services and amenities in a car-dependent community. Additionally, when conducting its [Community Housing Profile](#), GCMPC staff found that over 79 percent of neighborhoods in Genesee County did not have sidewalks or had sidewalks in need of repair. Between 2012 and 2016, 103 traffic accidents involving pedestrians in this area were fatal or caused serious injury. Together, these circumstances demonstrate a need for safety and connectivity improvements that will enable travelers across the County to access services and amenities, further linking housing with transportation.

Coordinated Planning for Transportation and Housing

“Genesee: Our County, Our Future” encourages coordination and strategic infrastructure investment in long-range planning for transportation and housing. One of the plan’s action items encourages public facility improvements that enhance the community by utilizing existing infrastructure and housing options. GCMPC provides data that defines the benefits of higher density, mixed-income development to encourage local agencies to build with and improve existing housing, civic, and commercial buildings, as well as transportation elements. Through the plan, GCMPC calls for enhanced integration and connectivity between all transportation modes by working with communities to write grants, encouraging Complete Street design principles in project applications, and continuing to promote transportation and community development projects that preserve critical environmental areas.

GCMPC’s planning efforts produced multiple examples of partnerships demonstrating alignment between transportation and housing. The Swartz Creek Project, located in an area developed between the 1960s and 70s, in need of both housing and transportation infrastructure improvements, leveraged

transportation development to upgrade neighborhood amenities. The City of Swartz Creek focused on transportation resurfacing improvements (e.g., upgraded sidewalks, streetscapes, and signage) and undertook sewer, watermain, and drainage public works projects in low- to moderate-income areas. Through these initiatives, the City invested in the community more holistically to improve quality of life and encourage homeowners to make investments in their properties as well. The coordinated investment for the street sign replacement was supplemented with a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) from the County.

The GCMPC's housing initiatives include providing subsidized units to low-income individuals; rental and utility assistance; a CDBG-supported home improvement program enabling low- and moderate-income homeowners to bring their houses up to code; and the Home Investment Partnership—a Federal program administered by GCMPC—that works with Habitat for Humanity and other affordable housing developers to ensure that housing is accessible, walkable, and bikeable to core services. These initiatives help residents remain in their homes, while incrementally improving neighborhoods and encouraging additional neighborhood investments. The GCMPC tracks the locations of the homes and neighborhoods receiving assistance under these initiatives to better understand the distribution of needs within the County. This allows GCMPC to focus transportation projects on these places, such as the evaluation of micro-transit options in relation to housing locations in the Flint urban area, and the CDBG program for sidewalk and road improvements in low- and moderate-income areas.

Stakeholder Collaboration and Public Engagement

The GCMPC originally created the [Genesee County Public Participation Plan \(2019\)](#) as an internal document to guide its approach to public participation. The GCMPC made efforts to ensure all residents had multiple opportunities to contribute to the development of the “Genesee: Our County, Our Future” plan. Community feedback directly influenced projects identified in the plan. To increase survey participation, GCMPC created contests awarding beautification grants to the neighborhoods with the highest number of responses. Through this incentive, GCMPC received over 1,000 responses. Furthermore, GCMPC staff analyzed potential project impacts on the environment as well as minority and low-income populations to ensure the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens.

For “Genesee: Our County, Our Future”, GCMPC began its public engagement process with a series of open house sessions throughout the County. The agency hosted space at local events and third spaces, community spaces outside of home and work where people spend time and gather, such as, farmers’ markets, parks, community centers, etc., to increase engagement. The GCMPC shared notifications of meetings and open houses to residents using advertisements in the local papers, social media, and on local buses to target transit riders. The GCMPC sent surveys and announcements using its public participation mailing list, which includes core community organizations, to help spread awareness of the plan and projects to hard-to-reach populations. GCMPC staff also conducted one-on-one interviews with residents and stakeholders from 40-50 local transportation and housing agencies. Both the one-on-one interviews and surveys asked residents directly about housing and transportation, further refining the long-range plan’s visions and actions.

To make the long-range plan and related information more accessible, GCMPC worked with a local web developer to create a [website devoted to the plan](#). The website includes a [mapping tool](#) allowing users to simulate changes and interactive public engagement software for users to submit comments on the

plan. In addition to hosting in-person open houses, the County also provided an online meeting option for those unable to attend otherwise.

Next Steps

Through the development of the long-range plan—"Genesee: Our County, Our Future"—GCMPC intends to increase awareness, identify areas of need, and coordinate planning to maximize limited funding. The agency anticipates this plan will inspire local governments, agencies, and citizens by offering multiple pathways for change. The results of the long-range plan are already taking shape, as local units of government incorporate it into their own plans.

Building off the housing profiles created for the ["Barriers to Affordable Living" report](#), GCMPC is now conducting a county-wide study of its housing stock, the results of which will be available to local units of government. With this information, intergovernmental partners in the County can work with developers to determine what type of housing should be built in specific areas. The County is also using Federal funding to conduct a study of US Route 23, one of the area's major transit corridors. As many Genesee County residents commute south for employment, the County is prioritizing local zoning and development to keep pace with residents' safety and mobility needs.

GCMPC looks forward to municipalities coordinating housing and transportation goals for future project proposals to improve the chance of receiving funding. Although it may take a few fiscal cycles, GCMPC anticipates increased investment in its communities through improved housing, sidewalk, and road conditions.

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Resources

["Barriers to Affordable Living" report](#)

[Community Housing Profile](#)

[Genesee: Our County, Our Future](#)

[Genesee: Our County, Our Future GIS map tool](#)

[Genesee County Community Development Projects](#)

[Genesee County Public Participation Plan](#)

[GCMPC Public Participation Plan](#)