



PLANNING FOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES: CASE VIGNETTE

LINKING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CHILD CARE RESEARCH PROJECT

CORNELL COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

DEPT. OF CITY AND REGIONAL PLANNING

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City of East Lansing, Michigan

The City of East Lansing prides itself on the quality of life it provides to its citizens. According to the city website, "Residents from a variety of backgrounds come to experience all the community has to offer. Many are students or young professionals, while others come to raise a family or seek comfortable retirement." Some of the elements that contribute to making the City of East Lansing a family-friendly place are its safe neighborhoods, lower than national average commute times, quality childcare, and housing affordability. The cost of living is 6% lower than the national average. The City continues to stay at the forefront of better design practices such as mixed-use redevelopments, incorporating open space greenways into community planning, and making transportation and community service improvements.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

East Lansing's Comprehensive Plan adopted in 2006 gives the "Big Picture" for the city, articulating an overall vision for the city's future direction. The plan addresses local redevelopment, historic preservation, family and senior needs, as well as transportation improvement and parks, recreation and open space. Past city plans have guided today's ongoing redevelopment projects.

The City has a very proactive set of boards and commissions with an entrepreneurial edge. They aim to provide services to diverse local residents including families, seniors, young professionals and students in East Lansing's 25 neighborhoods. The City is currently working to streamline energy efficiency initiatives, including LEED certification requirements in its public/private partnerships.

DOWNTOWN

The Downtown Development Authority and Downtown Management Board of East Lansing are active in promoting the city center in various ways including the recent, "It's Your Downtown" marketing campaign. They are currently working on a façade improvement program for downtown businesses and expanding fiber optic access to business and residents there.

Downtown has many public/private partnerships like *City Center II* and *West Village*, mixed-use redevelopment projects with residential and retail components. The City's Downtown *Technology Innovation Center* supports small business development with resource sharing, encouraging local entrepreneurship.

HOUSING

The city boasts a variety of housing from single-family detached and older, historic homes to newer, multi-family developments and single-family attached row houses, condos and student apartments. Many housing options are near transportation and Michigan State University. The median home cost is \$200,000. About 65% of the existing housing stock is rental-occupied and 35% is owner-occupied.

The City has partnered with Michigan State University and other local organizations to create a nonprofit organization called the *Hometown Housing Partnership*. Some of the programs administered through this organization are the *Homeownership Opportunity Assistance Program* and the *Employer Homeownership Opportunity Program*. These programs have been successful in offering down payment assistance and rehabilitation money to income-qualified buyers, as well as to city and

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university employees. The City is also in the process of creating the *Home Purchase and Rehabilitation Program*, which will assist lower-income families rehabilitate newly purchased homes.

Avondale Square is one of the largest city-initiated residential redevelopment projects designed to attract families into the area. Built in partnership with a homebuilder, it is within walking distance from parks, schools and childcare. It features pocket parks and a limited number of rentable “granny flats”. Fifty percent of the housing in this development is affordable, made possible with federal funding from HUD, as well as through state funding from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority.

TRANSPORTATION

The City of East Lansing is currently looking to expand its public transportation systems and exploring bus rapid transit, light rail and streetcar options as more efficient and cleaner forms of transportation. That Capital Area Transportation Authority is one of the highest rated bus systems in the country, ranked #1 in 2007. The City has a local Amtrak station that may be expanded to enhance regional connectivity to Detroit and Ann Arbor. This area is currently undergoing a neighborhood study to better integrate the station and the surrounding neighborhood into the rest of the community.

PARKS, RECREATION, OPEN SPACE AND GREENWAYS

The Parks, Recreation and Arts Committee takes an active approach in reaching out to everyone in the community. As ideas come up, the city looks for funding and facilities, often in collaboration with local



school boards. There are a variety of programs for the elderly including programs geared for active and independent living, as well as for assisted living.

Many of these initiatives came about when the public school closed down some older buildings. These were rehabbed and turned into community, daycare, senior and fitness centers. In this way the city was able to stretch resources. Parks and recreation initiatives

have received funding from the state for park development, and from the Michigan Natural



Resources Trust Fund. Open space and greenways are seen as a part of the larger neighborhood and community framework, not just as isolated parks.

There is an extensive trail system, and a recently developed dog park.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The City faces strong opposition to the expansion of rental housing. The expansion of student enrollment, has led to more and more rental housing in historic and traditional neighborhoods, creating a backlash from owners. Ordinances restricting the amount of rental housing, as well as the conversion of single-family housing to multi-family housing have led to increased rental rates.

The City has also faced issues with the height of new buildings in Downtown. The historic Downtown was only 2-stories high, but in an effort to increase density, the city has permitted buildings up to 10-stories. Some residents prefer a more “suburban” design. Minor issues about land uses have arisen, but have been resolved. There has also been some resident concern over the potential government use of eminent domain but the City has not resorted to this, nor does it plan to do so.

PARTICIPATION

The City conducts public surveys and reaches out to interest groups and community stakeholders that express interest in various initiatives. It aims to educate and involve community members as it creates committees and programming for the city in order to ensure transparency. In doing so, the city aims to prevent miscommunication and delays due to community concerns later on down the line. This has led to more effective and efficient governance.

FURTHER RESOURCES:

City of East Lansing (Images): www.cityofeastlansing.com
Hometown Housing Partnership, Inc.: www.hometownhousing.org
East Lansing Public Transportation: www.cata.org
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