

2. Master Planning for Industrial

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A master plan considers **how land is used** for a variety of development types, including industrial. Communities seek a **responsible balance** of land uses to create a stable tax base and opportunities for sustainable growth and redevelopment.

Industrial is typically a land use category unto itself. Unlike residential and commercial uses, which are often mixed, industrial uses are rarely absorbed into other categories without creating conflict, although certain types of emerging industrial uses may change this approach. When planned intentionally, industrial development can contribute to the tax base and support good-paying jobs while meeting fair performance standards that address common impacts.

A master plan is also the policy backbone for zoning. In Michigan, a community with a zoning ordinance is legally required to have a plan on which zoning is based.

Holland Energy Park: Photo by Progressive Companies.

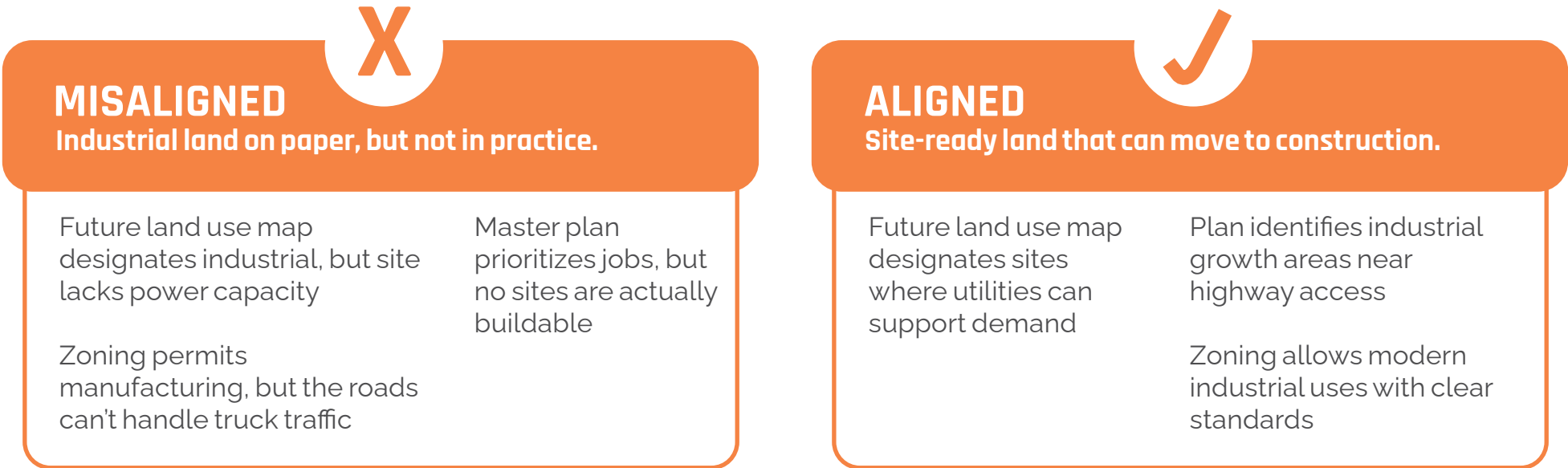
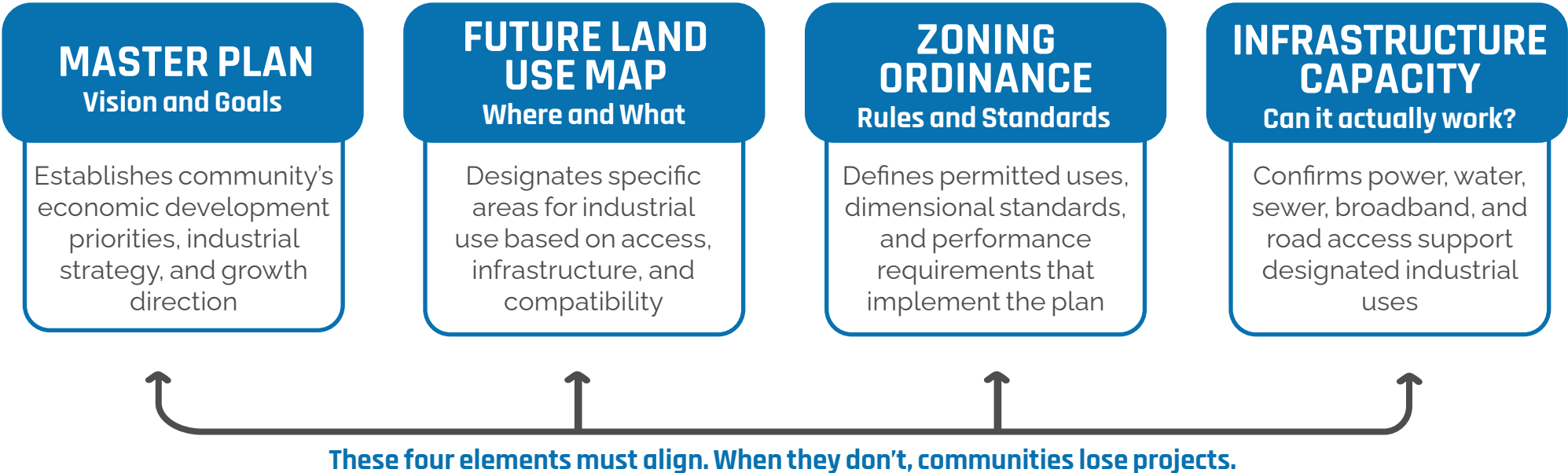
Seeing Industrial in the Future of a Community

Why plan for industrial?

The master planning process allows municipalities to take stock of their current resources and decide what they want to be as a community moving forward into the future. Although sometimes an afterthought in the master planning process, industrial development should be top of mind for any local leader. Industrial uses can create jobs, tax revenue, and positive impacts across the community, from resources that support quality of life to infrastructure upgrades and more.

Michigan Exclusionary Zoning

Michigan law prohibits zoning that has the effect of totally prohibiting a land use when there is a demonstrated need, unless there is no appropriate location in the community or the use is unlawful. Courts have reinforced a practical reality—not every land use fits every community, but most land uses are subject to the standard, and communities should avoid prohibiting industrial as a land use category.



The Evolving Nature of Industrial Uses

Industrial land uses today often look different from the heavy operations that shaped 20th-century zoning.

Many modern businesses operate in controlled environments, prioritize efficiency, recycle their waste, and seek to recapture water and energy. These uses do not match the public's mental image of industry. There has also been an emergence of scaled-down industrial uses that generate few, if any, outside impacts. New markets for locally produced goods are being created alongside the adaptive reuse of historic industrial buildings.

Some uses previously treated as industrial are now encouraged in commercial districts, especially where large, underutilized buildings exist. At the same time, non-industrial uses are sometimes attracted to industrial districts because of large floorplates and lower rents. Communities differ on whether that mix is appropriate or whether it risks pricing out true industrial users and jeopardizing incubator opportunities.

Master planning is where a community defines what "industrial" should mean locally, rather than relying on outdated "light" versus "heavy" industrial labels that no longer align cleanly to impacts.



Photo by Progressive Companies.



How to Master Plan for Industrial

1. Start with the why and the outcomes.

Before mapping land use, define what success looks like. Industrial planning is strongest when it is framed as an outcomes conversation, not just a zoning designation.

Set target outcomes such as:

- Stable or growing tax base
- Quality jobs and workforce alignment
- Reuse of underutilized industrial property and brownfields
- Infrastructure investments that support multiple community priorities
- Clear expectations for compatibility and environmental performance

Then name the community's non-negotiables in policy terms as part of the master plan, so they can later be translated into zoning and site plan review.

2. Educate the public before asking for preferences.

Industrial conversations get stuck when residents only picture the worst-case version of industry. Before asking for input, planners should ground the discussion in real examples and clear constraints.

Use the master plan process to:

- Provide examples of current industrial land uses in the region, showing a range of building types and scales
- Remind residents that Michigan jurisdictions are obligated to offer some land for industrial development
- Ask residents what opportunities and obstacles they anticipate, then document them in the plan

To keep the plan actionable, pair public concerns with strategies that mitigate common impacts, such as performance zoning and site design standards.

3. Build an existing conditions and infrastructure picture that is specific to industrial.

A master plan should offer a clear picture of the community's capacity for industrial and where different types of industrial uses are realistic. This is where many plans stay too generic. Industrial planning benefits from being concrete.

Include an industrial-focused conditions assessment that covers:

- Utilities and capacity, including transmission and gas, and the location of water and wastewater infrastructure
- Transportation and freight linkages, including rail, truck routes, and water shipping routes where relevant
- Roadway limitations, including truck tolerance and weight capacity

- Certain environmental and hydrologic constraints that could shape site feasibility
- Workforce and job base context, including whether local educational attainment aligns with likely industrial employers

Use this section to be honest about what the community can and cannot accommodate. A built-out city may not have contiguous acreage for a very large facility, but it may be well positioned for smaller parcels, adaptive reuse, land assembly, or industrial incubator activity.

4. Identify where industrial is suitable, including greenfield and redevelopment opportunities.

Industrial land planning should not simply default to a greenfield. A good plan distinguishes where new industrial expansion is appropriate and where reinvestment and reuse are the priority.

Address suitability for:

- New industrial development on greenfields, with attention to proximity to residential areas, protection of wetlands and natural features, and nearby infrastructure
- Redevelopment and adaptive reuse of existing structures and districts

Then connect suitability to infrastructure readiness and a realistic pipeline. A plan that identifies industrial locations without a credible path to utility and access solutions creates false expectations. Similarly, built-out communities should discuss land assembly and the possibility of reenvisioning districts that are primed for reinvestment.

5. Translate vision into future land use categories and industrial place types.

Most plans stop at a future land use label. Strong industrial plans go one step further and describe how industrial areas should function and look and what types of industry are likely to be most successful.

Include:

- A future land use map that identifies where industrial is expected and what scale is appropriate
- Industrial place types that illustrate the desired relationship between buildings, streets, buffering, lot dimensions, and the public realm

Place types are where a community can differentiate between contexts, such as:

-  Large-lot logistics and distribution
-  Advanced manufacturing and research and development
-  Industrial redevelopment corridors
-  Artisan and small-bay production in reuse settings

This is also where you can address modern land use mixes, including when limited compatible commercial or service uses support industrial districts without turning them into general commercial corridors.

6. Write zoning plan recommendations that match the industrial future land use.

The plan should clearly state how zoning will implement the industrial vision. This is where outcomes become enforceable.

Include recommendations for:

- Buffering and screening expectations
- Setbacks and transitions at sensitive edges
- Outdoor storage standards
- Noise, lighting, and operational performance standards
- Building form and materials guidance where it affects compatibility

Keep the plan clear on what should be handled as zoning standards versus what should be handled through site plan review.

See the *“Two Big Challenges” section on Infrastructure Needs* which describes what types of infrastructure different industrial users require. Try to align your community’s assets to appropriate industrial categories to manage expectations and identify likely businesses that would be attracted to your community.

Office-to-Industrial Conversions

Many Detroit Region suburbs have office parks near freeway interchanges with large parcels, simple buildings, and more surface parking than current demand requires. These areas can be viable candidates for industrial repositioning, particularly for modern, lower-impact uses, because they already offer the access and scale that many industrial users need.

In some cases, existing buildings can be adapted for light industrial, flex, R&D, assembly, or small-scale logistics. In others, underused parking fields create room for building expansion, truck circulation, or stormwater upgrades. However, freeway access alone does not make a site industrial-ready. Power capacity, roadway geometry, buffering, and compatibility with nearby uses must be evaluated carefully.

Master plans should provide flexibility in these districts rather than locking them into a single future. That means clearly identifying where industrial reuse may be appropriate, distinguishing between lighter and more truck-intensive uses, and establishing performance standards in advance. By setting expectations for truck routing, lighting, noise, and design up front, communities can reduce vacancy risk while maintaining predictability for developers and surrounding areas.

7. Keep at it by implementing the plan.

A future land use designation is only meaningful if the community has a credible approach to readiness.

Use the plan as a starting point to identify:

- Priority industrial areas where the community will focus infrastructure and regulatory predictability
- A capital improvement strategy with realistic timelines for road and utility projects
- Targeted industrial feasibility and site studies for subdistricts when appropriate, sometimes as sub-area plans that package key information for prospective users

8. Stay current and update intentionally.

Industrial trends change faster than most zoning codes. The plan should direct staff and officials to stay informed about emerging industrial patterns and to revisit industrial assumptions during regular plan updates. The zoning plan of the master plan should describe allowable use types and any changes to zoning that would assist in facilitating development by reducing regulatory barriers.

As part of ongoing updates:

- Re-test industrial land supply against market demand and community outcomes
- Re-check infrastructure capacity and constraint mapping
- Re-evaluate whether zoning language still aligns with modern operations and impacts



Resources and Further Reading

- Michigan Planning Enabling Act*
- Michigan Zoning Enabling Act*
- MSU Extension Planning and Zoning Checklists*

When a Master Plan Hasn't Kept Up

If an industrial prospect arrives and the future land use (FLU) map still reflects designations from 15 years ago, launching a full master plan overhaul to move forward is not needed. Michigan's Planning Enabling Act allows communities to amend specific sections of the plan without rewriting the whole document.

A targeted update using a plan amendment process might mean revising a single chapter on economic development, adding language that acknowledges modern industrial uses like data centers or EV manufacturing, or redesignating specific parcels on the FLU map where industrial development makes sense given current infrastructure and market conditions. The goal is alignment—your master plan should support the zoning decisions you need to make so that rezonings and site plan approvals rest on solid planning rationale rather than ad hoc variances.

Start by considering the FLU map and the economic development goals. Identify where they conflict. Draft a plan amendment scoped narrowly to the issue at hand. While the 42-day comment period still applies, a focused amendment with a well-defined scope can move from draft to adoption in three to four months, which is fast enough to keep a real project on the table while adhering to an established planning process.