Technical

GUIDANCE: THE TOOLS

How can we make industrial development a reality?





Our Region's **Transformation**

Generations of families across the Detroit Region have similar stories. Their grandparents came here from other places to secure their dreams through hard work. They set up shop in new neighborhoods, worked in state-of-the-art factories, and established the idea of America's middle class—people can work hard, live well, and grow roots in their communities.

Their efforts built a region whose place in industrial development is unrivaled. From the first assembly lines to the Arsenal of Democracy and from an international transportation hub to the next generation of modern manufacturing, this region has shaped—and been shaped by—industry for more than a century.

That history is not without its challenges. Families here have experienced the impacts of disinvestment, environmental damage, and unemployment. These experiences have left many communities across the region skeptical of opportunities tied to the next wave of industrial growth. Residents may feel that their voices go unheard and communities may be nervous about being saddled with issues created by development.

The following tools help evaluate industrial opportunities honestly, address concerns transparently, build public trust, and position themselves to attract investment on terms that benefit residents and businesses alike. It can feel, understandably, that it takes too much process to get things done. Proactive, thoughtful approaches can actually streamline approvals when done well—saving both time and money.

The future of industry in the Detroit Region is still being written, and every community will have a role in its story. Some may be positioned for large-scale advanced manufacturing. Others may be ready to support logistics, food processing, or data infrastructure. Some are driven by job creation; others have land seeking higher and better uses, or to have excess infrastructure capacity absorbed to pay for improvements and upgrades.

The field-tested guidance found in this Toolkit for communities and developers, economic development officials, professional planners, and others, is intended to direct appropriate investment in a manner that provides predictability for residents, community stakeholders, and businesses that will help our region grow and create a new, proud, modern legacy.

Technical Guidance:
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Each tool states when, how, and by whom it should be used. The intended sector and phase for each tool are described using the icons below.

SECTOR

The Public Sector: government agencies and publicly funded organizations at the local, state, and federal levels. Their role is to guide development in ways that align with community goals.

The Private Sector: businesses, investors, developers, and property owners who bring capital, innovation, and market knowledge to projects. They typically take the lead in financing, designing, constructing, and operating new developments.

PHASE

- ●○○ **Pre-Project**
- ●●○ **Project Commencement**
- ●●● **Construction/Post-Construction**

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TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

1. Roles, Responsibilities, and the Development Process

SECTOR:

PHASE: ●○○

This tool provides a concise overview of **who does what and how an industrial site moves from idea to reality.**

Industrial projects differ from commercial or residential development in ways that require municipalities to prepare differently, including confidential site selection, compressed deal timelines, large power and utility loads, freight and truck circulation, and state/federal environmental permitting. The roles below carry these pressures throughout.



Local Government

Local Government is the most influential actor in shaping a site's development outcomes. While private investment is ultimately guided by economic forces outside of the local government's control, when investment is attracted to a region, the vision, preparedness, and savviness of a local government can have an outsized influence on project outcomes. Municipalities have a responsibility to consider how industrial development affects community wellbeing.

Vision, Policy, and Regulation.

Establish and maintain master plans, zoning, and capital improvement plans that support targeted industrial development and provide regulatory certainty.

Site Readiness.

Pre-position water, sewer, and electrical capacity and advance pre-permitting where possible, so the community can respond to confidential, timeline-driven manufacturer inquiries in days rather than months.

Due Diligence Coordination.

Facilitate access and coordination for environmental studies, surveys, geotechnical work, and utility evaluations and complete an independent analysis of tax abatements being requested.

Community Interface.

Lead public communication, convene stakeholders, manage community concerns, and administer public review and approval processes. Establish development agreements and community benefits agreements when needed.

Local Incentives and Fee Tools.

Provide local incentives and approvals that are typically controlled at the municipal level, such as the State of Michigan's Public Act 198, fee waivers, and local match or letters of support for grants. For more, see *Brownfields and Incentives.*

Approvals.

Administer zoning, site plan, building, occupancy, and local incentive approvals within clear and predictable timelines. *RRC Best Practices* can be utilized to organize a proper approach.

The General Public

The general public brings local knowledge, lived experience, and expectations about environmental quality, traffic, land use, and long-term stewardship. This group includes neighborhood associations, groups focused on environmental concerns or workforce development, and everyday community members.

Community Input.

Provide feedback during planning, zoning, and public hearing processes to inform decisions about land use compatibility, environmental impacts, and quality of life.

Local Knowledge.

Share insights about flooding, traffic, odors, noise, historic uses, or sensitive natural areas that may not be visible through desk research alone.

Accountability.

Hold elected officials and developers accountable for commitments related to jobs, environmental protections, public benefits, and compliance.

Partnership Opportunities.

Participate in community benefit discussions, workforce programs, or advisory committees where appropriate.

Long-Term Stewardship.

Help craft statements of community values, environmental goals, and the municipality's vision for its future.

Engaging Under Confidentiality.

Recognize that industrial site selection often proceeds under non-disclosure constraints, so early-stage details may be limited. Meaningful input still happens once a project becomes public.

Regional and Business Partners

County and regional partners play a critical role in business attraction, economic alignment, incentives, and infrastructure services. Municipalities coordinate with these agencies to ensure that industrial development supports regional growth, access, and environmental goals.

Regional Transportation and Roadway Oversight.

> Plan, approve, and design access points, turning movements, and roadway improvements to safely accommodate truck traffic and protect local street networks.

Watershed Management.

> Oversee drainage districts, floodplain management, and long-term watershed impacts associated with industrial development.

Workforce and Talent Coordination.

> Align workforce development programs and training resources to connect local and regional residents with jobs created by industrial projects.

Regional Transit Planning.

> Evaluate opportunities to extend, modify, or coordinate transit services to support workforce access while maintaining system efficiency.

Site Selection Response.

> Help municipalities assemble the data packages (site, utility, workforce, incentive) that corporate site selectors and brokers expect on short turnaround, since manufacturers frequently evaluate multiple regions simultaneously.

State of Michigan

The State of Michigan plays a central role in industrial development by providing environmental oversight, technical expertise, infrastructure support, and economic development incentives. Working in coordination with local and regional partners, the State helps ensure that industrial projects are environmentally responsible, financially viable, and aligned with statewide economic and infrastructure priorities.

Technical and Due Diligence Support.

> Offer regulatory, scientific, and financial expertise to support site evaluation, remediation planning, and large-scale industrial site readiness.

Economic Development and Incentives.

> Support business attraction or expansion through financial vetting, project qualification, and the structuring of state-level incentives such as grants, loans, tax abatements, and designated development zones.

Brownfield and Redevelopment Support.

> Provide guidance, approvals, and oversight related to brownfield plans, due care obligations, environmental response activities, and liability management.

Environmental Permitting and Review.

> Issue permits for projects with state-regulated environmental impacts, including water, wetlands, air quality, and waste management.

Environmental Compliance and Risk Management.

> Oversee compliance with state environmental regulations to protect public health, natural resources, and long-term site viability.

Water and Natural Resource Protection.

> Evaluate impacts to groundwater, surface water, watersheds, and other sensitive natural systems affected by industrial development.

Utility Providers

Utility providers are essential partners in determining whether an industrial project can be responsibly supported. While utilities aim to facilitate economic development, municipalities and developers must evaluate the long-term impacts of infrastructure extensions, ratepayer costs, and land use implications.

Large-Load Capacity Confirmation.

> Confirm whether existing electrical, water, and gas systems can serve high-demand manufacturing loads—and how quickly. Power availability and the speed of capacity confirmation are among the most common deal-breakers in modern industrial site selection.

Cost and Timeline Estimates.

> Provide accurate estimates that inform municipal decisions about public investments or potential subsidies.

Infrastructure Commitments.

> Design and install necessary extensions or upgrades, balancing service to new industry with long-term municipal maintenance obligations or other utility requirements.

Operational Coordination.

> Work with municipal staff or other utility representatives on outage planning, safety standards, and system resiliency. Support the coordination of easements, permits and other site planning needs.

Public Engagement.

> Work with developers and municipalities to address resident concerns and provide timely information regarding infrastructure improvements.

Energy Efficiency.

> Offer rebates, audits, and incentive programs to reduce energy costs for industrial tenants and developers.

Detroit Regional Partnership

Detroit Regional Partnership (DRP) is the region's business attraction organization. From a municipal perspective, DRP's value lies in aligning local goals with regional economic strategies and helping communities understand how industrial opportunities fit within their long-term plans. For developers, DRP does the initial legwork to catalog and promote development-ready sites that are in line with community goals and fit the appropriate asset class targeted by a given developer.

Project Pipeline Management.

> Bring vetted industrial prospects to the region and communicate their needs to municipal staff early.

Site Intelligence.

> Provide comparative data on infrastructure, workforce, site readiness, and market expectations to support municipal decision-making.

Introductions.

> Convene stakeholders and make connections within the region to encourage collaboration and deal-making.

Coordinated Deal Support.

> Work alongside MEDC, utilities, and local jurisdictions to ensure proposals are realistic and do not overextend municipal resources.

Readiness Evaluation.

> Conduct site gap analyses and provide guidance to help municipalities prioritize strategic investments rather than speculative ones.

Regional Storytelling.

> Market the region's strengths to attract investment while helping municipalities articulate local priorities, constraints, and community expectations.



Planning, Engineering, Design and Environmental Consultants

Planning, engineering, design, and environmental consultants provide technical expertise that shapes both the feasibility and the long-term community impacts of industrial development. Municipalities rely on these professionals not only to verify that a project is technically sound, but also to ensure that environmental, infrastructure, and safety standards uphold the public interest. Their work informs zoning decisions, brownfield strategies, infrastructure planning, and environmental protections.

Community Engagement, Entitlements and Approvals.

> Support municipalities and developers in public engagement, stakeholder coordination, and entitlement processes to shape projects and achieve timely approvals.

Environmental Due Diligence and Risk Management.

> Conduct phase I and II environmental site assessments, as well as wetland and floodplain reviews. Develop due care and remediation strategies to manage risk and support brownfield redevelopment.

Surveying, Site Engineering and Stormwater Compliance.

> Prepare boundary and topographic surveys, grading concepts, site layouts, and stormwater systems necessary for municipal review and regulatory compliance.

Utility and Infrastructure Capacity Analysis.

> Evaluate water, sewer, and stormwater systems; identify required upgrades; and assess long-term operational and maintenance implications.

Traffic, Access and Multimodal Circulation.

> Analyze roadway capacity, truck routing, turning movements, and pedestrian and bicycle access to maintain safety and minimize neighborhood impacts.

Incentives and Redevelopment Documentation.

> Prepare technical and environmental documentation required for brownfield plans, tax increment financing, grants, and other redevelopment funding tools.



Developers

Developers are private real estate professionals who acquire, prepare, and improve land to make it viable for tenants or buyers. They may work on speculative (spec) buildings (which are built before an end-user is identified), long-term land positions, or build-to-suit projects. Developers generally serve as the project manager for all physical, financial, and regulatory components required to complete a development.

Site Control and Feasibility.

> Assemble land, negotiate purchase agreements, assess zoning, and determine whether a project is financially viable.

Capital Investment.

> Secure financing, manage pro formas, raise equity, and coordinate incentives into a fundable structure.

Project Management.

> Oversee engineering, design, environmental consultants, contractors, and permitting processes.

Infrastructure Coordination.

> Work with municipalities and utilities to align site access, utility capacity, stormwater solutions, and public improvements.

Risk Mitigation.

> Conduct environmental due diligence, manage remediation or **due care plans**, and address title, entitlement, or infrastructure constraints.

Spec or Build-to-Suit Delivery.

> Deliver either market-ready space for multiple potential tenants or custom facilities for a specific user.

What is a "due care plan"? It is a plan that outlines the necessary actions to manage and mitigate exposure to hazardous substances on contaminated property to protect public health and ensure compliance with laws.

End Users

End users are the industrial companies that ultimately occupy and operate the facility, and may be the same or different from the developer of a particular site. End users drive the scale, timing, and requirements of the project. Their operational needs ultimately determine whether a site is suitable.

Operational Requirements.

> Define building size, layout, utilities, transportation needs, workforce demands, and timeline constraints.

Fit and Feasibility Testing.

> Conduct test fits, utility reviews, and cost assessments to ensure the site can meet operational thresholds.

Capital Investment.

> Commit private investment in buildings, equipment, and long-term operations. Arrange internal or external financing.

Regulatory Compliance.

> Meet state and local permitting requirements, environmental standards, and any incentive-related milestones.

Incentive Participation.

> Work with municipalities, MEDC, and DRP to package incentives, provide required documentation, and meet performance targets.

Long-Term Operations and Corporate Citizenship.

> Hire and train workforce, manage supply chains, and reinvest or expand as needed. Ensure ongoing compliance with agreements and reporting requirements as specified in development agreements.



The Development Process: At a Glance

PHASE 1: Industrial Visioning and Planning *Ongoing*

MUNICIPALITY

Establish **long-range** land-use vision, industrial strategy, and priority zones

Identify **infrastructure gaps** and needed improvements

Prepare **master plans, zoning strategies**, and **incentive policies**

Build **relationships** with employers and potential developers

Signal **priority** sectors and sites

Ensure all **utilities** are aware and engaged in the planning process

Deliverable: adopted vision, industrial strategy, and identified priority sites

DEVELOPER

Identify **operational needs and business objectives** (e.g., space needs, logistics, workforce)

Establish **project vision** and **preliminary program requirements**

Select **internal project team** and **external advisors**

Conduct **high-level feasibility brainstorming** (costs, timelines, constraints)

Identify **initial** candidate sites or regions

Set **performance criteria** for screening opportunities

Deliverable: defined operational requirements; target site/region shortlist

PHASE 2: Opportunity Assessment and Site Readiness *2 to 6 months for a ready site; 1-3+ years for raw greenfield or brownfield*

MUNICIPALITY

Provide **zoning guidance** and preliminary feedback

Offer data on **infrastructure capacity**, **workforce, utilities**, and **transportation**

Coordinate **environmental and infrastructure information** for site readiness

Prepare or update **brownfield/TIF** analyses if applicable

Advance **site-readiness funding, infrastructure planning**, or **pre-permitting** to **reduce developer risk**

Engage **internal departments** to flag constraints early

Deliverable: site-readiness package assembled; environmental and infrastructure available

DEVELOPER

Perform **site evaluations** (boundary, physical conditions, utilities, transportation access)

Engage all **utility providers**

Run **market** and **competitive analysis**

Conduct **environmental due diligence** (Phase I/II), wetlands review, topography

Estimate **development costs** and **timelines**

Assess **supply chain** and **labor market** conditions

Refine **site program, sizing,** and **functional** requirements

Secure **site control** (option, LOI, purchase agreements)

Deliverable: site control secured; feasibility and pro-forma confirmed

PHASE 3: Approvals and Partnerships *2 to 3 months by right; 6-12 months with rezoning, special land use, or incentives negotiation*

MUNICIPALITY

Review **site plans, zoning requests, environmental reports**, and **transportation studies**

Coordinate **interdepartmental** technical reviews

Negotiate **incentives** and **development agreements**

Facilitate **public meetings**, **planning commission**, and **council approvals**

Ensure **compliance** with ordinances, building codes, utilities, and transportation standards

Finalize **incentive packages** and **performance benchmarks**

Deliverable: approvals administered, development agreement and incentive package executed with performance benchmarks

DEVELOPER

Prepare **concept plans, site plans**, and **schematic designs**

Conduct detailed **financial feasibility** and **pro-forma** analysis

Apply for **zoning approvals, variances, special land use**, etc.

Negotiate **incentives** (tax abatements, TIF, infrastructure support)

Secure **financing commitments**

Finalize **partnerships** (contractors, architects, engineers)

Respond to **municipal comments** and **revise designs**

Deliverable: entitlements approved; financing committed; incentives finalized

PHASE 4: Implementation *8-12 months for simple warehouse; 18-24+ months for complex manufacturing, plus 3-6 months pre-construction*

MUNICIPALITY

Conduct **building inspections** and issue certificates

Deliver **agreed infrastructure improvements**

Monitor **compliance** with incentive agreements

Capture **new tax base, job creation**, and **economic-development** outcomes

Strengthen **partnerships** for future expansions or new phases

Promote the **project as a success story** to attract **additional investment**

Celebrate success! Share the story and benefits

Deliverable: certificates of occupancy issued

DEVELOPER

Oversee **construction, permitting, inspections**, and **change orders**

Manage **budget, schedule, contractors**, and **procurement**

Begin **operations planning** (staffing, equipment, logistics)

Execute **commissioning, occupancy**, and **operational ramp-up**

Track **project performance** against initial objectives

Expand or reinvest based on results

Deliverable: completed facility and end user operations ramp up

Managing Expectations and Conflict

Industrial projects most often become contentious when expectations are misaligned, especially around timelines, decision authority, and what information can be shared.

Timeline mismatch is normal. Developers often work on a deal schedule, while municipalities must follow adopted procedures, public notice requirements, and multi-department reviews. A clear review path and realistic milestones that are established early helps to prevent conflict and delay later.

Clarify decision authority up front. Developers should understand that municipal staff can guide and coordinate, while planning commission and elected officials make decisions.

Use predictable communication to reduce escalation. Share what is known, what isn't, and what happens next. If confidentiality limits details, be transparent about the process instead of going silent.

When roles collide, return to the rules. Re-anchor conversations in ordinance standards, approval steps, and documented commitments, including conditions of approval, development agreements, or a municipality's review timeline.

Set one lane for issue resolution. Identify a single staff point of contact and a defined escalation path. For example, day-to-day communications could lie with a staff member, while more challenging issue resolution would go to the manager or municipal attorney.



Photo by Progressive Companies.

2. Master Planning for Industrial

SECTOR:

PHASE: ●○○

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.

MASTER PLAN
Vision and Goals

Establishes community's economic development priorities, industrial strategy, and growth direction

FUTURE LAND USE MAP
Where and What

Designates specific areas for industrial use based on access, infrastructure, and compatibility

ZONING ORDINANCE
Rules and Standards

Defines permitted uses, dimensional standards, and performance requirements that implement the plan

INFRASTRUCTURE CAPACITY
Can it actually work?

Confirms power, water, sewer, broadband, and road access support designated industrial uses

These four elements must align. When they don't, communities lose projects.

X

MISALIGNED
Industrial land on paper, but not in practice.

Future land use map designates industrial, but site lacks power capacity

Zoning permits manufacturing, but the roads can't handle truck traffic

Master plan prioritizes jobs, but no sites are actually buildable

✓

ALIGNED
Site-ready land that can move to construction.

Future land use map designates sites where utilities can support demand

Plan identifies industrial growth areas near highway access

Zoning allows modern industrial uses with clear standards

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.



TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

3. Conducting Exploratory Meetings

SECTOR:

PHASE: ●○○

Exploratory meetings are the first opportunity to build a productive relationship with the community and **establish the foundation** for a successful process.

Early local knowledge builds the relationships that support long-term expansion. Meet with community staff to share about the proposed project, hear their priorities, and get a read on local hot topics. Floating the idea before detailed plans lets a developer test the waters, and staff can then point to the stakeholders worth connecting with.

This is also the moment to articulate why this community was chosen, and how the site, workforce, infrastructure, and long-term vision align with the project's needs. Framing the project as a long-term partnership rather than a transaction signals that a developer values local insight, which makes constructive engagement and formal approval far more likely.

When stakeholders see that the project fits the community's goals, and that their insights are valued, they are more likely to view the proposal positively, engage constructively, and support the project as it moves through the formal approval process.

Meeting Preparation

Early conversations with municipal staff, local stakeholders, and key partners set the tone for the entire entitlement and approval process. Potential tax incentive programs, too, could be a factor. A well-executed exploratory meeting helps a developer understand community priorities, anticipate challenges, and discover opportunities that may not have been realized prior. Comprehensive preparation ensures the meeting is mutually beneficial and positions the developer as a collaborative partner.

1. Find out who to speak with.

Many communities have a protocol (formal or informal) about speaking with local officials and staff. Is the municipal staff member heavily involved in the process, or are exploratory conversations delegated to staff? DRP, MEDC, and/or other county or regional economic development programs are able to assist in making introductions and provide insights into the local unit's communication and meeting preferences.

2. Do the research.

Every project and every community is different. Spend time reviewing local comprehensive plans, zoning regulations, economic development strategies, ordinances, legislative body agendas, and recent community and stakeholder conversations to understand how the project fits within ongoing local priorities. This may entail reviewing recent activity on the municipality's social media pages or viewing board meetings online. Entering the meeting with this knowledge allows the developer to speak the community's language and demonstrates that they've done their homework before asking for input.

3. Be able to tell the project's story.

What is the desired outcome of the meeting? Begin by defining what needs to be learned from the meeting. Whether it's understanding local processes and priorities, identifying potential concerns, learning how best to communicate with neighbors, or how to begin partnerships with stakeholders, know the ask. Being clear about these intentions helps shape the conversation in a way that is purposeful without feeling prescriptive.

Economic Development Agencies are here to help!

Agencies like DRP and MEDC exist to help bridge the gap between large multi-national corporations seeking opportunities for growth and investment, and most local governments that may see one or two major development projects in a generation. Regional economic development agencies play a critical role of translator, convener, and trusted partner in these scenarios.

Meeting Conduct

For developers, this is where you can present your initial thinking without committing to a fixed plan, while also learning how local decision-makers view the site. A well-run meeting shows openness to collaboration and willingness to adapt. Unlike formal public meetings, this setting should feel conversational and collaborative, allowing local officials to speak freely about their needs and expectations.

1. Open with transparency and partnership.

Start by explaining the purpose of the meeting—to share early thinking, listen to local perspectives, and understand community priorities before plans are finalized. Highlight why this community was chosen and how the developer's long-term goals align with the community's.

2. Walk through the concept without over-selling it.

Present the early project concept in a straightforward manner that invites critique and refinement. Emphasize what is still flexible, where input is actively being sought, and what technical studies or design work are still ahead. This encourages officials to share openly rather than feeling they are reacting to a finished product.

3. Invite candid input on community priorities.

Ask community officials to outline their priorities and any concerns related to the industrial use. Their early input helps clarify what matters most locally and highlights potential issues that future engagement should address. Ask for guidance on effective outreach—what formats work best (open houses, focus groups, surveys, etc.) and what times of day are most convenient for residents.

4. Ask about community players and key stakeholders.

Are there groups that may be opposed or have concerns about the project? Who would be in support? Learn about the local landscape and the individuals that may be encountered to begin building an understanding of the community engagement needed and the expectations of local officials.

5. Listen attentively and capture insights correctly.

Document comments from officials and stakeholders thoroughly so the feedback is not lost or misinterpreted later. Show engagement by asking clarifying questions and reflecting back what you heard. The quality of listening during this meeting often determines the tone of future interactions and the strength of your partnership with the community.

During these initial conversations with community officials, key stakeholders may be identified. Utilize steps 1 - 5 again with the various stakeholders that have been deemed a critical component of the project.

Confirm that the community being approached is, in fact, the right fit for the project.

Red flags may emerge when researching a community for a proposed project. While these are not dead-ends, do not ignore them. Give consideration to whether discrepancies in comprehensive plans, ordinances, or known local priorities warrant further conversation or serve as signals to identify a different community that better aligns with the project.

Further Reading

Site Readiness and Feasibility

Moving Forward with Acquired Feedback

Insights from exploratory meetings help shape the fundamental decisions on an industrial project. Municipal staff members know their community well; effectively utilizing initial feedback gathered from them will make upcoming community meetings smoother by allowing the developer to prepare the necessary project details proactively, draft clear responses to potential concerns, and move through the process in partnership with the local municipality.

1. Define the early focus areas for the project.

Use insights from conversation to outline which major issues and opportunities will influence the concept and its path forward. These early focus areas provide direction for the design team and help establish where to concentrate technical work and what to prepare for when engaging with the community. Clarifying these priorities now ensures that the emerging concept reflects both project needs and responds to community interests or concerns. That being said, the plan does not need to be perfect. Refining and revising plans based on interactions with officials and public input received is part of the process and should be expected.

2. Identify anticipated process requirements and decision points on a timeline.

This is an opportunity to become familiar with the local process. Leave with an understanding of how the municipality approaches site plan reviews, zoning change requests, variance requests, and any required meetings with the planning commission, zoning board of appeals, or other boards as necessary. These early conversations often reveal which review elements will carry the most weight with staff and the public as well as what a realistic review process duration may be. Mapping these expectations into a clear timeline allows for preparation of the right analyses at the right time and reduces the risk of unexpected hurdles and delays later. *See The Development Review Process.*

3. Adjust the concept in response to what was heard.

This is the stage where a developer evaluates whether the primary site plan details need refinement based on the discussions that took place. Even modest adjustments can significantly strengthen alignment with local expectations and streamline the review process. Treat these revisions as early course-corrections that make the eventual design stronger and easier to support.

4. Determine if additional focused stakeholder discussions are needed prior to engaging the larger community.

Initial conversations with staff and stakeholders illuminate where additional conversations may be needed or where confusion may arise as the project develops. Use this insight to plan upcoming meetings and identify groups who may need continued, targeted communication. *See Facilitating an Effective Open House*, *Conducting a Successful Public Meeting*, and *Project Communications: FOIAs and NDAs.*





TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

4. Facilitating an **Effective Open House**

SECTOR:

PHASE: ●●○

An open house is an opportunity for early, **informal dialogue that surfaces community concerns** before they harden into opposition.

Uncertainty around a proposed development fuels anxiety, and residents naturally worry when change shows up in their neighborhood. An open house creates space for early conversation, giving the project team a clearer read on what matters locally while helping residents understand what's actually being proposed.

An open house is a meeting that is held in a school, township hall, restaurant, or some other place of assembly where the public can stop in to learn about the project. Information boards that describe the project are typically displayed on easels. This is an opportunity to educate the community and answer questions.

The station-based format keeps things informal (no presentation), lets attendees come and go at their own pace, and supports the kind of candid exchanges that reveal nuance and let the team respond in real time.

Timing matters. Hold open houses early, before local approvals, so feedback can actually shape the project. For large or controversial proposals, budget time and money for more than one. It is particularly helpful to hold a second meeting if changes have been made in response to community input.

Open House Preparation

A well-thought-out approach is needed for a successful open house. Use the insights gained from the *exploratory meeting* to construct a comprehensive outline of what elements will produce the desired outcomes. Thoughtful preparation ensures the event stays focused, avoids mixed messages, and makes it easy for participants to navigate information and engage with experts.

1. Determine the purpose of the open house.

Be clear about the meeting's purpose and identify the desired outcomes. Is the open house primarily to inform the public and facilitate conversation? Is there an opportunity for community input to shape the proposal? Being clear about the intent of the open house is crucial for managing participant expectations.

2. Ask questions that will result in actions.

Before any materials are printed or stations are designed, the project team needs to be aligned on what information the public needs to see and what questions should be posed to result in useful feedback. Consider what questions will meaningfully shape the next phase of project refinement. Presenting the public with opportunities to provide actionable feedback enables the developer to make informed revisions to the plan, adding value to the development and instilling trust.

3. Overshare information about the project to the highest extent that possible.

The project should be strong enough to stand on its own design merits—bring forward a project that is supported by due diligence on community impacts and present these details to the public in your open house materials.

4. Data, and how it is presented, matters.

When a community is uncertain about a proposed development, it is essential to share reliable, factual data. Utilize your research and create a Frequently Asked Questions sheet (FAQ) about the project to engage in conversations that are grounded in established facts. Graphics and visuals are the most effective way of sharing data with the community. Work to tell a story with the data through graphs, charts, and infographics that provide an easily digestible overview of all relevant facts.

5. Prepare materials and establish a run of show.

Be sure there is a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities for the open house and that the team is prepared. As a developer, you may wish to have consultants on hand that can directly answer questions about traffic, stormwater and other environmental conditions, and other areas of known concern. Remember that open houses also carry risks, a poorly planned event can quickly backfire.

Where should the open house to fall on the spectrum of engagement?

The level of participation that is allowed for at your open house determines the role that the community will play in future project decisions. The International Association for Public Participation outlines five participation formats. These are listed below in order from the lowest level of participant impact to highest.

INFORM. Provides the public with the information needed to understand the project, prioritizing opportunities to discuss concerns and share education. "We will keep you informed."

CONSULT. Allows opportunities for participants to ask questions and share their feedback. "We will gather feedback and share how it has been addressed."

INVOLVE. Working directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that concerns and recommendations are understood and considered. "We will ensure that your recommendations are reflected in plan alternatives."

COLLABORATE. Partnering with the public in each phase of project decisions, including the development of the preferred final plans. "We will incorporate your recommendations into the final plans to the maximum extent possible."

EMPOWER. Placing the final decision-making in the hands of the public. "We will implement what you decide."

Consider including the following elements at your open house:

- [ ] **Orientation materials.**

  Welcome sign stating the meeting's purpose, name tags for the project team and attendees, and sign-in sheets to document outreach and enable follow-up

- [ ] **Project context boards.**

  Background information that sets the table—location map, project summary, and proposed timeline. If the community has an adopted master or sub-area plan that supports the request, show how your project aligns with those stated goals.

- [ ] **Site and design information.**

  Site constraints (wetlands, slopes, easements) that shape the layout, a conceptual site plan showing buildings, access points, and drainage, and cross-sections if grade changes affect adjoining properties. The community often has useful insight to add.

- [ ] **Operations and impact information.**

  What will happen inside the building (processes, protocols, and any hazardous materials) and what neighbors will experience outside it (truck routes, lighting, hours of operation). Identify potential nuisances and how you propose to mitigate them. Some of these choices are good candidates for participant input.

- [ ] **Next steps.**

  How the process will proceed from here, whether another open house is planned after comments are processed, and when you expect to submit for local approval

- [ ] **Light refreshments.**

  Water, coffee, and something simple like cookies or pretzels



Leverage the local knowledge of municipal staff.

The local staff know their residents and community best; coordinate with them to determine a date, time, location, and outreach approach for the open house. The decisions made about how, when, and where to facilitate the open house should be uniquely tailored to the community that is being engaged with. Let residents know about the event a month in advance, with reminders shared a week prior to the event. Be sure to consistently and clearly include when, where, and why the open house is being hosted.

Meeting Conduct

An open house is often the community's first direct interaction with the project and the team behind it. The event should feel straightforward and easy to navigate, with clear openings for conversation rather than a formal presentation. How the team welcomes people, explains materials, and responds in the moment shapes how the project gets understood and whether attendees feel comfortable raising concerns.

1. Set the stage and invite feedback.

Start by greeting attendees and briefly explaining why the open house is being held—to share accurate information, answer questions, and gather input that will help refine the project. Encourage participants to sign in and explore the stations at their own pace, noting that there will be opportunities to provide feedback and that team members will be available throughout the stations to answer questions and engage in discussions.

2. Read the room.

If things are slow or people seem to be frustrated with the information, project team members should take turns accompanying open house participants through the various stations. This personalized approach offers an opportunity for more meaningful interaction, particularly when there is a large amount of content to review. People want to feel that they have been listened to and that their concerns have been understood.

3. Maintain a welcoming, well-managed environment.

Throughout the event, ensure that the space remains organized, approachable, and responsive to participants' needs. Team members should circulate to greet newcomers, monitor engagement at stations, and identify when additional support or clarification is needed. A well-managed environment keeps the energy positive and reduces confusion no matter when participants arrive or how long they choose to stay.

4. Take notes.

Document primary questions and concerns that are being heard throughout the open house. These sentiments will guide future engagement needs and plan revisions and it is crucial that they are accurately captured in real time.

5. Offer clear take-home materials and methods for continued conversation.

Provide concise resources such as an FAQ, project overview, and team contact information. Take-homes reinforce what was shared, give attendees something reliable to pass along to neighbors, and signal transparency. Consider a QR code linking to a short survey, and make sure submitted questions get routed to the right person and answered promptly.

Moving Forward with Acquired Feedback

Input gathered at an open house is only valuable if it directly informs the next phase of work. This stage is where developers translate community feedback into updates to the concept, improvements to communication materials, and a clearer engagement strategy. This is the reason why asking the right questions at your event matters. The goal is to identify the themes that will be most relevant in future reviews, particularly those related to site design, traffic, environmental considerations, neighborhood compatibility, and operational impacts. Using feedback effectively helps reduce concerns by improving clarity and demonstrating responsive planning.

1. Establish themes.

The first step is to synthesize the feedback. Identify recurring themes, common questions, points of enthusiasm, and concerns that require follow-up, technical analysis or plan revisions.

2. Update and expand the FAQ.

Use the questions raised at the open house to refine your FAQ so it reflects the issues that were the most prominent. Add explanations where confusion emerged and include new data and responses to address items that residents repeatedly asked about. A well-maintained FAQ becomes a reliable reference tool.

3. Close the loop with transparent follow-up.

Communicate back to the community to show how their input influenced the next phase of work. A simple summary—shared through email updates, a project website, or a follow-up meeting—helps demonstrate responsiveness and prevent misunderstandings about what was changed or not. This step is crucial, as it leads up to the final approval of your plan, ensuring that the community is equipped with the most up-to-date knowledge.

Example FAQs

Plainfield, MI: Brownfield Redevelopment Authority FAQ

Van Buren Data Center FAQ

5. Land Assembly

SECTOR: 

PHASE: ●○○

Land assembly (or land assemblage) is the process **of combining ownership of multiple adjacent parcels** to create a site large enough to fit certain industrial projects.

Land assembly typically creates a value increase called "plottage," since the joined parcels may have more economic utility than individual ones.

The industrial development process requires site control, meaning not just a strong location for development, but the right landowners in place to facilitate the development process. This is why land assembly happens, and why oftentimes economic development entities acquire land in order to be best positioned to get industrial development built.

Why Assemble Land for Modern Manufacturing?

Today, many industrial end users require sites larger than typical parcels, even in rural areas.

The land has to provide:

- Large footprints that include acreage for future expansion, buffers, stormwater, truck parking, and employee parking
- High utility loads
- Clean title and an understanding of environmental constraints.
- Predictable permitting and access (turn lanes, signals, rail, etc.)

That's why states, economic development organizations, and even municipalities put significant money into identifying and preparing sites, and why they prefer sites they can control through public ownership or an option to purchase.

The benefits behind land assembly are:

- Industrial users often need sites that are "ready now." Fragmented ownership can kill a deal.
- Assembling land allows right-sized parcels and easier provisions for traffic flow, site planning, and other considerations.
- Those acquiring and prepping land can make a site less risky for development by absorbing up-front costs.
- A site with clear ownership, known constraints, and a defined path to approvals is far more competitive.

Coordinated assembly reduces holdouts and the potential leverage of being the last parcel sold.

What Municipalities Should Understand

Assembly is usually a multi-year pipeline, not a single transaction.

It is most effective when paired with site readiness work (zoning fit, utilities, access, wetlands/soils, remediation strategy).

Assembly is not anti-transparency; it is a way to manage uncertainty, complexity, and timing.

Paying for Site Control

How Communities Can Take Part in Land Assembly. Tax increment financing (TIF) lets a community recapture the increase in tax revenue a site generates after redevelopment and reinvest it in eligible costs, such as site preparation, environmental remediation, and infrastructure, and in some cases land acquisition. This can reframe up-front readiness spending as a recoverable investment rather than a sunk cost. The right authority depends on the site—a Brownfield Redevelopment Authority for contaminated or blighted property, a Downtown Development Authority (DDA) for downtown/corridor areas, or a Local Development Finance Authority (LDFA) for qualifying manufacturing and high-tech districts.

The right approach depends on the community. Growth or fringe communities with available land can assemble proactively by acquiring and preparing strategic sites ahead of demand. Built-out communities, where large-scale land banking is impractical, focus on keeping flexible funding ready to act fast when parcels become available.

Further Reading

Brownfields and Incentives

How Does an Organization or Municipality Use Land Assembly?

1. Preparation

Land assembly is most effective when it is treated as an implementation strategy that connects to a municipality's master plan, proactive engagement approach, and zoning readiness.

Define the "why" and guardrails. Anchor land assembly in adopted community goals (jobs, tax base, reuse of blight, resiliency, targeted industries). This can be paired with clear non-negotiables that are outcomes of the community's existing planning work.

Choose the lead and delivery structure. Decide who should hold/control land (municipality, land bank, or an Economic Development Organization (EDO) partner) and set a single point of contact plus a clear internal decision path to avoid miscommunication.

Build a realistic site pipeline. Use planning and zoning tools to identify where industrial uses make sense, then screen candidate areas for:

- Site size and configuration
- Ownership complexity
- Utilities and capacity
- Access/truck circulation
- Environmental constraints
- Political feasibility

Plan your outreach early. Aligning with the community's master plan and zoning makes land assembly smoother and minimizes mistrust. Prepare a simple project narrative and FAQ (vetted by legal) to define what information is shared and when. This establishes a transparent channel for the public before they resort to Freedom of Information (FOIA) requests.

2. Building Site Control

Most of what makes land assembly succeed happens well before parcels are closed on. This matters even more for redevelopment sites, where older parcels often come with title issues, legacy environmental conditions, or existing occupants.

Look at control options, not just outright ownership. Use options, right-of-first-refusal, or phased closings to mitigate your own risk.

No one wants to be surprised. Treat assembly as a process to reduce surprises: clarify who is leading, who talks to owners/tenants, and what approvals are needed before you move.

Sequence parcels on purpose. Start with the parcels that unlock the site (access, utilities, stormwater areas, key corners). On redevelopment sites, that often means the parcels with the "hard stuff" first (problem titles, buildings to demo, known contamination), so you don't get stuck later.

Do due diligence early and ongoing. Title/encumbrances, survey/legal descriptions, environmental studies, and basic civil feasibility. Don't pay a premium before you understand constraints.

Treat relocation as schedule-critical. If there are tenants, operating businesses, or informal uses, plan outreach and relocation up front. Expect the process to take longer than you think; build in time contingency.

Plan for the holding period. Who is responsible for maintenance, safety, nuisance mitigation, insurance, and clarity on taxes/assessments while parcels are under public control. If you have total ownership rather than an option to buy, there will be carrying costs.

Use proactive engagement to prevent escalation. Post a simple FAQ and keep the narrative consistent and up to date so people aren't forced into FOIA to understand what's happening.

Know when to stop. Money spent on a project that won't pan out shouldn't justify throwing good money after bad, as this is a common psychological trap for public boards.

3. Disposing of the Site

Project approval is only the first stage. The "finish line" is a site that is actually developed, with clear next steps and fewer surprises.

Package the site in plain language. One clean site summary: ownership status, known constraints, due diligence findings, and a realistic path to approvals. The Site Readiness and Feasibility tool can support this work, as well as DRP's VIP program and MEDC's MI Sites Program.

Match the sales method to the goal. Different ways to dispose of properties provide different pros and cons. Direct sale with performance terms, RFQ/RFP, development agreement, or ground lease are all options.

Put performance in writing. Timelines, milestones, job/investment commitments where applicable. Provide detailed clauses for what happens if performance standards are not met, including reclaiming the site.

Close the loop publicly. Once direction is clear, publish outcomes, next steps, and where the public can track progress, all part of increasing transparency and trust.

Ways to Sell or Transfer Property

Municipalities can transfer assembled land in several ways. The right approach depends on how much uncertainty remains, how important outcomes are beyond price, and how much control the community wants to keep and the needs of the end user.

Methods of Sale

These determine how a buyer is selected.

Direct Sale

A straightforward sale to a selected buyer, paired with written requirements.

> **Best when:** The site is truly ready and the municipality wants speed.
>
> **Trade-off:** Less competitive process and less leverage if terms aren't well written.

RFQ / RFP

The municipality invites proposals and selects a buyer/developer based on qualifications (RFQ) and/or project approach and price (RFP).

> **Best when:** Project quality, experience, and community outcomes matter, or when redevelopment complexity is high.
>
> **Trade-off:** Takes more time and staff effort; requires clear evaluation criteria.

Transfer Structures

These determine the legal and ownership terms of the deal, and can be paired with either method of sale above.

Development Agreement

A contract that spells out responsibilities, timing, public/private improvements, approvals sequencing, and remedies if commitments aren't met. Oftentimes the site can remain under control of the seller until after development is completed.

> **Best when:** The project has moving parts (infrastructure, remediation, phasing) and the municipality needs clarity and enforceability.
>
> **Trade-off:** More negotiation and legal work up front.

Ground Lease

The municipality retains ownership and leases the land long-term (often 30–99 years) with defined performance requirements; the developer builds/operates the project.

> **Best when:** The municipality wants long-term control, phased performance, or to prevent land speculation, all common in redevelopment.
>
> **Trade-off:** More ongoing administration; may not fit every development financing model.



CASE STUDY

Strategic Industrial Redevelopment—BAE Systems and the Van Dyke Corridor

The transformation of the former industrial site along Sterling Heights' Van Dyke Corridor into BAE Systems' North American technical and research headquarters exemplifies strategic economic planning that prioritizes long-term impact over short-term commercial gain.

Initially, the site was under contract for a large retail development, consolidating national retailers, restaurants, and other consumer-oriented uses. While retail offers immediate visibility and convenience for residents, the City recognized its lower long-term economic benefits compared to advanced manufacturing, engineering, and defense-related employment, which generate higher wages, stronger economic multipliers, and greater regional spin-offs.

Facing a choice between continued retail growth or fostering high-wage technical jobs, the City supported BAE Systems, allowing the retail opportunity to lapse. This required careful coordination, trust, and ongoing communication among the City, property owner, and BAE Systems, balancing transparency with confidentiality due to sensitive defense-related operations.

To support the redevelopment, the City established a Local Development Finance Authority (LDFA), providing infrastructure and financing for technology-oriented investment and aligning with Michigan's SmartZone initiative. This framework positioned the corridor as a hub for advanced engineering, defense technology, and high-value employment, signaling to other investors the community's commitment to long-term economic competitiveness.

While retail remains valuable for community vitality, this case illustrates the importance of prioritizing an economic ecosystem that fosters high-wage, innovation-driven jobs, which in turn support broader economic growth, including retail, housing, and additional private investment. These are opportunities to consider a different future for areas planned for retail or office use. Modern industry can fit into the existing fabric of a community.



Photo by Tip Ranks.

The Sterling Heights–BAE Systems partnership highlights how strategic planning, infrastructure development, confidentiality management, and long-term visioning can reshape a corridor for sustained economic impact.

6. Site Readiness and Feasibility

SECTOR:

PHASE: ●○○

Readiness and feasibility are related but **not the same.**

Across Michigan, communities use the term **"site readiness"** to describe how prepared a property is for industrial development. As with many planning terms, there is no universally accepted definition. "Ready" can mean different things depending on the industry, infrastructure systems, or environmental constraints involved.

"Site feasibility" asks a different question—when looking at the land, infrastructure, and zoning requirements as they exist today, what types of industrial uses are actually possible on this site, and under what conditions? In other words, feasibility depends on physical, environmental, financial, and regulatory factors that vary from parcel to parcel. "Site feasibility" may also be called "site constructability."

Programs like the MEDC's MI Sites Program or DRP's Verified Industrial Properties (VIP) program offer a structured process for documenting both readiness and feasibility. They do not dictate what a site must become; instead, they help communities compile reliable information that reduces uncertainty for themselves, regional partners, and eventually for developers. It is encouraged that municipalities apply this approach whether or not they pursue formal verification.

Establishing a Baseline: What the Site Is Today

Both readiness and feasibility rely on a clear understanding of existing conditions.

It can be a challenge to manage sites with long histories, environmental questions, and a loss of site knowledge due to staff turnover or record loss. The first step is establishing a baseline of what is known and what needs further study.

This typically includes:

> Environmental due diligence (Phase I and if necessary, Phase II)
>
> Wetland and floodplain mapping
>
> Natural features inventories
>
> Soil conditions and geotechnical context
>
> Historical land use and prior industrial activity

Site readiness programs formalize these requirements in order to create a reliable reference point for planning and decision-making.

A site cannot be considered "ready" without this baseline, and its feasibility cannot be evaluated without understanding these constraints.

Readiness Through Land Use and Zoning Clarity

Site readiness includes determining whether industrial uses are allowable or achievable under current zoning.

Feasibility, meanwhile, requires understanding whether zoning supports the building forms, intensities, and operational characteristics associated with modern industrial activity. *See Industrial Zoning District Guidelines.*

Municipalities can review:

> Permitted and special uses within the zoning district
>
> The master plan and its future land use recommendations
>
> Dimensional standards (setbacks, height, lot coverage)
>
> Loading, parking, and access requirements
>
> Compatibility with surrounding land uses

If zoning is out of sync with current patterns or infrastructure capacity, feasibility may be limited even if development is technically permitted. A strong site readiness program should include zoning documentation for this reason. It helps municipalities understand what their own code enables and where adjustments may be needed.

Site Selection Is Site Elimination

Most industrial projects use professional site selectors, and their process works by elimination, not selection. Sites with little completed due diligence require an unacceptable amount of time, effort, and expense in the site selection process and are discarded early. Clients have low tolerance for risk and uncertainty, and missing baseline information—environmental studies, utility capacity, ownership clarity—signals exactly that.

Site selection phases are now a matter of weeks, not months or years, and requests for information (RFIs) need answers within days, not weeks. A site that cannot produce organized, verified data on demand does not get a second look. It simply falls off the list before the community knows it was ever on one.

This is why programs like DRP's VIP program or the MI Sites program matter. Verified sites offer the facts, transparency, and predictability that move a property from a prospect list to a final decision. Communities that invest in documentation are not just preparing a site. They are keeping it in the conversation.

Infrastructure: What Exists, What Works, and What Would Be Required

Infrastructure is where readiness and feasibility intersect most clearly.

Readiness. Can the existing site conditions, utilities, and infrastructure be described accurately?

Feasibility. What types of uses can the site conditions, utilities, and infrastructure support?

Documenting water, sewer, stormwater, electric, gas, and fiber availability helps partners key in on realistic paths. In some cases, upgrades may be possible within normal municipal planning cycles, while in other cases the site will be difficult to develop without a more significant investment, carrying risks.

Utility documentation processes provide a template for how communities can assemble this information. Maintaining updated utility information helps municipalities anticipate infrastructure needs and evaluate whether certain industrial uses or sites are practical. Municipalities should engage with other utility providers to build this information as well; it is important to share the municipality's interest for a proactive approach and understand each utility in more detail.

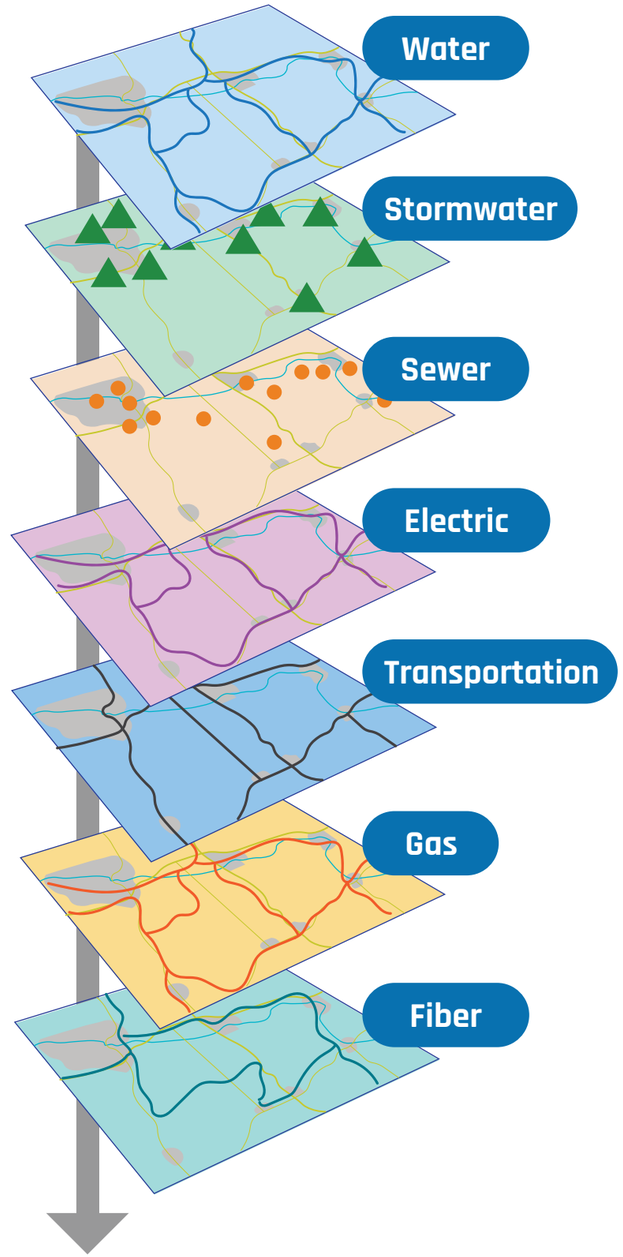
Integrate Feasibility into the Municipal Planning Process

Municipalities should integrate feasibility analysis during the master planning and zoning process to ensure land-use updates reflect modern industrial requirements. A site marked industrial on a future land use map is only feasible if the rest of the site conditions back up industrial development.

While industrial land was historically clustered near rail, modern users may prioritize direct highway on-ramp access, which streamlines logistics and reduces heavy truck traffic on local neighborhood roads. Communities should evaluate whether their industrial-designated sites actually align with current access patterns, or whether they reflect legacy configurations that no longer match demand.

Strategic planning must examine the specific location and capacity of sewer, water, and high-voltage transmission lines to determine which sites can realistically support industrial activity. A site without adequate power or water service is not a viable industrial site regardless of what the zoning map says. Identifying these gaps during the planning process gives communities time to coordinate with utility providers, right-size infrastructure investments, and avoid losing projects to better-prepared competitors.

Aligning the master plan, the zoning ordinance, and actual infrastructure capacity is what moves a community from having industrial land on paper to having industrial land that works.



Transportation and Access Will Shape Feasibility

Transportation will affect the operational viability of industrial sites as well as their community impacts.

Evaluating access helps municipalities understand not just what improvements may be needed, but whether a site's location can support certain industries at all, and if those uses can be accommodated within the broader community. Depending on the end user, sites will require different transportation access, whether that be rail, highway, or proximity to airports.

Key factors include:

- Truck routing and turning movements
- Road jurisdictions and maintenance responsibilities
- Traffic volumes and conflict points
- Rail access or potential future service
- Worker access (walking, biking, and transit)

Site readiness programs include a review of transportation access to assess readiness. Municipalities can take this a step further by using that information to assess feasibility, identifying which industrial activities fit well with the site's access characteristics and which may not.

Permitting and Process Transparency

Municipalities benefit both themselves and end users by clearly describing their development review process.

This information helps determine whether the review path aligns with the type and pace of development the site might attract.

Clarifying:

- Review bodies (planning commission, board, etc.)
- Decision points
- Typical timelines
- Required studies or submittals
- Engineering and building review processes

This gives municipalities and developers a clearer understanding of how a project would move through its system and whether the site's likely development patterns are compatible with local processes. Site readiness programs capture these elements to assess readiness; municipalities can extend this to feasibility by testing different development scenarios through their review structure.



When readiness (clear documentation) and feasibility (clear analysis) are combined, municipalities gain a more complete picture of the site's potential roles.

This might reveal:

> That the site is suitable for a wide range of industrial uses or a narrow range depending on site constraints
>
> Opportunities for phased development
>
> Opportunities for community benefits and other types of development

Site readiness programs help organize these inputs. Municipalities can use the resulting information to inform capital planning, land use updates, stakeholder engagement needed and long-term redevelopment priorities. However, having a great site does not mean that your community will support it; maintaining a master plan that supports community goals is crucial. *See Master Planning for Industrial* and *Infrastructure Needs.*

What if a site isn't what a community wants it to be?

If a community finds gaps such as inadequate infrastructure, environmental liabilities, or market misalignment, it does not signify the end of the process. For infrastructure, a community can partner with the MEDC or utility providers to align targeted site uses with potential infrastructure and utility upgrades. Similarly, partnering with those entities or engaging proactively with developers can help a community refine its vision for a site to align with market realities or infrastructure requirements and phasing.

Further Reading

MI Sites Program

VIP by DRP

Site Selectors Guild Best Practices



TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

7. Industrial Zoning District Guidelines

SECTOR: 

PHASE: ●○○

Establishing **zoning district standards and regulations** related to industrial development has not been a priority in professional planning circles for decades.

Prior to an issue on Sustainable Urban Industrial Development in 2014, the last time the American Planning Association's Planning Advisory Service had published an issue related to industrial development was 1957.

Consequently, most industrial zoning districts today are a patchwork of amendments made over many years in reaction to changing circumstances. These districts reflect evolving approaches to land use regulation, combining performance-based zoning, detailed use definitions, and large setback and buffering distances designed to address industrial operations that produced far more significant nuisance effects than modern industry.

The outdated status of most industrial zoning districts creates significant uncertainty for modern manufacturing facilities and developers. *See Industry Matters*. These facilities require precision equipment and large capital investments timed to capture rapidly evolving markets. A few months of delay can be the difference between capturing a market opportunity and missing it entirely.

Communities have an opportunity to align zoning requirements with modern industrial development. Combined with site readiness programs like *VIP by DRP*, straightforward zoning amendments can lower barriers to industrial development and position communities to attract investment that generates revenue and employment.

A Caution about Zoning

Zoning is often blamed for development challenges and just as often expected to solve them. It can do neither on its own.

A well-conceived zoning ordinance must be part of a series of aligned policies that reflect a community's vision for future development.

Zoning also has the ability to regulate industrial uses based on their performance in a manner that protects the surrounding community. Performance zoning is a flexible land-use planning system that regulates development based on measurable, outcome-based standards (e.g., noise levels, traffic generation, environmental impact) rather than strict separation of land uses.

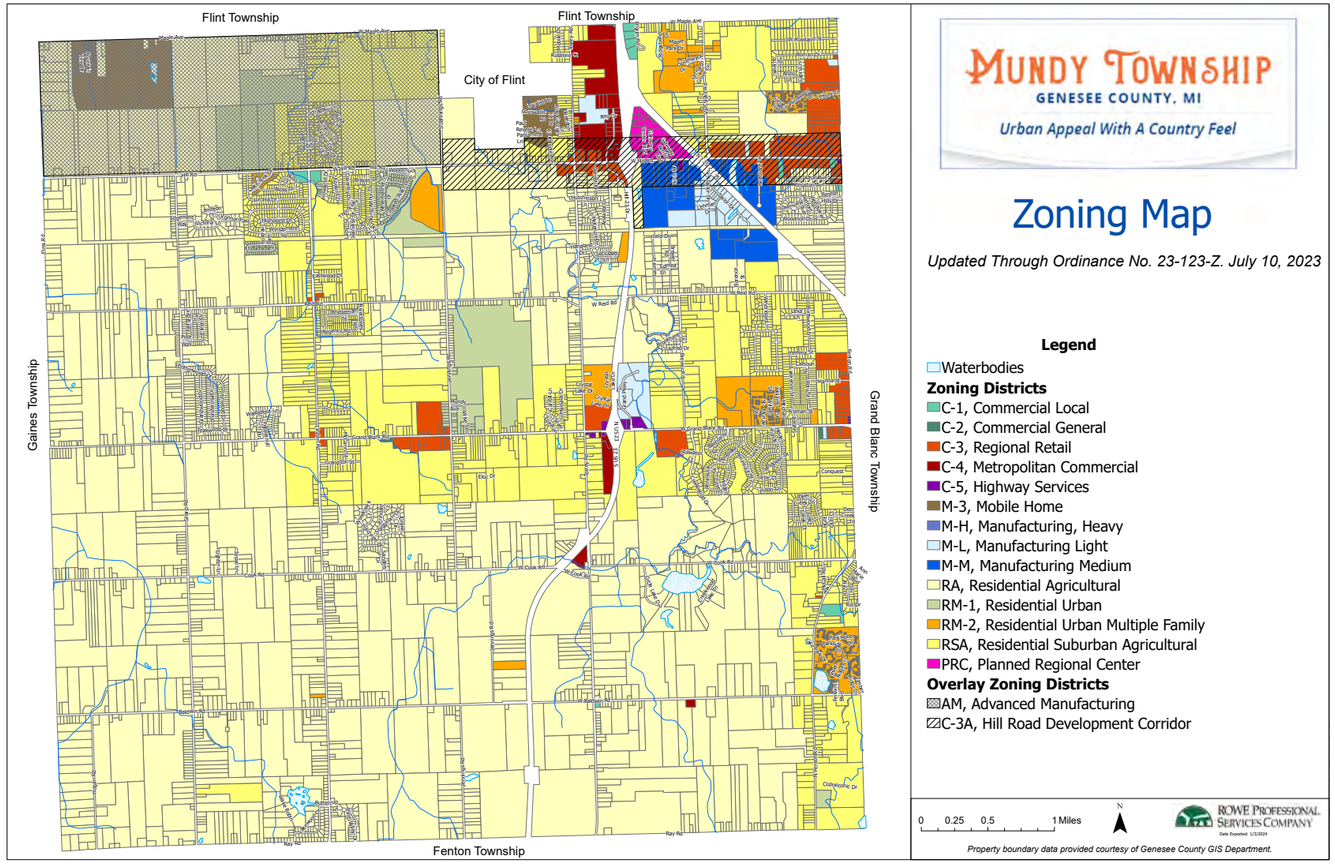
When considering zoning changes to support industrial development, a community should evaluate the following:

Does the community master plan support industrial development and amendments to the zoning code?

Michigan state law requires zoning to be based on a plan. *See Master Planning for Industrial.*

Are other elements of the development review process aligned with the zoning review process?

Zoning is just the first step in the project review process. *See Roles, Responsibilities, and the Development Process.*



If the project is requesting development incentives, does a clear policy exist that allows the developer to understand whether they are likely to qualify?

A proactive development incentive provides a critical starting point for negotiations that significantly accelerates the process. *See Brownfields and Incentives.*

Changing zoning requirements does not change the physical characteristics of a parcel.

It is important to be sure the parcels identified for industrial development have the right characteristics to attract development. *See Site Readiness and Feasibility* and *VIP by DRP Program.*

Recommendations for Modern Industrial Zoning Districts

Industrial zoning districts vary widely across DRP's member communities, but common patterns emerge.

To produce this tool, 17 representative zoning ordinances were reviewed to ensure these recommendations are relevant and necessary for most communities.

The following recommendations provide more certainty in the review process for both developers and communities. They also make new investments and expansions for small- and medium-sized manufacturers simpler and less likely to require variances or other complicated approval processes.

Consolidate Uses

Many industrial zoning districts include long lists of uses with complex definitions referencing specific industrial processes common across many types of manufacturing. These undefined, general use lists are often dated, listing materials like bone, fur, and asbestos that are either no longer utilized or have been effectively outlawed. Consolidating long use lists into use groups with clear definitions, common features, and similar potential for off-site impacts is a significant improvement.

Recommended use groups include:

- Modern manufacturing and assembly
- Industrial manufacturing and processing
- Warehousing and storage
- Logistics, trucking, and transportation
- Hazardous materials storage and disposal
- Chemical processing
- Fuel storage and refineries
- Waste disposal and processing

Best Practices

Van Buren. The Charter Township of Van Buren utilizes broader industrial use classifications, such as Manufacturing and Processing (light and heavy) in M-1 Light Industrial and M-2 General Industrial respectively, rather than building lengthy lists of individual industrial uses. This use-type structure allows the ordinance to focus on performance standards and site development requirements to address potential impacts, while maintaining flexibility for evolving industrial activities. *(Van Buren Zoning Code, Section 3.115: M-1, Light Industrial District and 3.117: M-2, General Industrial District)*

Monroe. Within districts such as the Industrial Warehouse (I-W), Light Industrial (I-1), General Industrial (I-2), and Port Industrial (I-P) districts, the zoning ordinance organizes industrial activity using broad categories such as manufacturing facilities, distribution and logistics, warehouse facilities, and wholesale facilities. This approach allows the ordinance to regulate industrial activity based on operational characteristics and potential impacts rather than maintaining extensive lists of individual industrial processes that may become outdated over time. *(City of Monroe Zoning Code, Section 2.14: I-W, Warehouse District, Section 2.15: I-1, Light Industrial District, Section 2.16: I-2, General Industrial District, and Section 2.17: I-P, Port Industrial District)*

Zoning Ordinances Reviewed for Best Practices

Cities:

- Ann Arbor
- Dearborn
- Flint
- Grand Rapids
- Livonia
- Monroe
- Port Huron
- Romulus
- Warren

Townships:

- Bloomfield Township
- Brighton Township
- Frenchtown Township
- Mundy Township
- Shelby Township
- Van Buren Township
- Vernon Township
- Ypsilanti Township

Emphasize Benefits of Performance Zoning

Nearly all zoning codes include some elements of performance zoning, generally limiting or prohibiting adverse impacts of noise, smoke, dust, vibration, glare, or odors beyond the property lines of an industrial use. If the code provides specific standards for measurement of impacts—for example a decibel limit for sound or use of the Ringelmann Chart to limit the intensity of smoke emitted—ensure your community has processes in place to measure these impacts and is comfortable enforcing them. Being confident in your community's performance-based zoning standards and enforcement is critical to addressing public concerns about impacts of industrial development.

Best Practices

Grand Rapids. The City of Grand Rapids utilizes general performance standards to limit off-site impacts such as noise, odors, smoke, fumes, and dust generated by industrial or intensive land uses. Rather than prescribing detailed measurement thresholds, the ordinance focuses on preventing nuisance conditions on adjacent properties and ensuring operational impacts remain within the site. *(City of Grand Rapids Zoning Code, Sec. 5.7.04. - Special District - Industrial-Transportation, SD-IT)*

Warren. While some communities rely on general performance standards to prevent nuisance conditions, others establish more detailed and measurable thresholds for operational impacts. The City of Warren provides an example of performance zoning standards that include clearly defined and measurable limits. The ordinance establishes specific thresholds for operational impacts such as noise (measured in decibels at the street or property line which ever causes the largest reading), smoke opacity (measured using the Ringelmann Chart), and particulate emissions, providing objective criteria that can be consistently monitored and enforced. *(City of Warren Zoning Code, Section 17.02, Industrial Standards)*

Carefully Consider Dimensional Standards

Setbacks, lot coverage, building height, and requirements for lot size that are arbitrary and don't consider the physical dynamics of the property within the zoning district can unintentionally limit industrial development while having no substantive benefit for the community.

Evaluate the zoning ordinance and districts to consider whether they are designed to accommodate large parcels or developments at scale, or designed for smaller traditional manufacturers in modest buildings. While large setbacks, minimum lot sizes, and buffer standards may be appropriate for major development projects, they are prohibitive for most modern industry.

The following dimensional standards are critical to supporting industrial development.

> Height limits should be flexible and allow for taller buildings with adequate separation and visual screening techniques from residential areas.
>
> Minimum lot sizes are typically arbitrary, especially within established industrial areas. Smaller lot sizes encourage redevelopment and reinvestment.
>
> Low lot coverage standards that require a significant amount of greenspace are an inefficient use of industrial property. These standards cause industrial developments to consume significantly more land and impact more properties than necessary. Consider minimum greenspace requirements or regional stormwater management as an alternative.
>
> Large minimum setback distances from right of ways or other industrial properties also create an inefficient use of industrial land. Setback distances from residential property should carefully consider landscaping and buffering standards, as well as industrial building height to ensure they have the intended effect.

Best Practices

Flint. The ordinance allows flexible building heights, high lot coverage allowances, and minimal setbacks within industrial districts while increasing setbacks where development is adjacent to residential areas, supporting efficient industrial land use while maintaining compatibility with nearby neighborhoods. *(City of Flint Zoning Code, Section 50-44, Site, Building Placement, and Bulk Standards)*

Van Buren. The Township's industrial districts allow flexible building heights, moderate setback requirements, and dimensional standards that support efficient site utilization within established industrial areas. At the same time, additional setbacks and buffering requirements are applied where industrial development is adjacent to residential districts, ensuring appropriate separation while allowing industrial properties to operate efficiently. *(Van Buren Zoning Code, Section 3.115 - 3.117, M-1, Light Industrial District, M-T, Industrial Transportation District, and M-2, General Industrial District)*

Evaluate the Utility of Special Land Uses and Discretionary Reviews

A special land use review process (often called a conditional use process) is a zoning procedure used by local governments to evaluate proposed developments that are not automatically permitted "by right" in a specific zoning district. A special land use requires administrative (staff) review, a public hearing, and approval by either the planning commission or legislative body.

Most industrial zoning districts contain a series of performance standards, and require careful evaluation of potential traffic impacts. These typically duplicate most special land use review processes, thereby limiting the usefulness of special land use review. Moving more industrial uses, within established industrial areas, to an administrative review process allows staff to focus on the details of the project and its impacts, rather than educating the public and local officials about the details of industrial development.

The special land use process can be a mechanism that allows a community to collapse its zone districts into one industrial district, instead of two or more. "Light"/low-impact uses can be administratively approved, while more "heavy"/high-impact uses could then be designated for special land use review. This approach appropriately focuses the public hearing process where it is needed the most, reduces the likelihood for rezonings, and increases clarity.

Best Practices

Flint. The City's zoning ordinance distinguishes between Permitted Uses ("P") and Special Land Uses ("S") within its use tables, allowing many industrial uses to proceed by right while reserving planning commission review for more intensive or potentially impactful uses. This structure allows routine industrial activities to move forward through administrative review and site plan compliance while focusing discretionary review on uses that may require additional oversight. *(City of Flint Zoning Code, Article 5 – Production Center and Green Innovation Districts, Section 50-37 Permitted Uses and Use Table).*

Van Buren. The Township's M-1 and M-2 industrial districts permit many manufacturing, warehousing, and industrial service uses by right, while reserving special land use approval for more intensive or potentially disruptive activities. This structure allows most industrial development to proceed through site plan review focused on technical standards such as site design, buffering, and traffic impacts, rather than requiring discretionary review for typical industrial operations. *(Van Buren Zoning Code, Section 3.104, Permitted Uses by District)*

Adopt Common Sense Building Design Standards

Most zoning ordinances require consideration of building materials for non-residential structures, with a preference for brick, masonry, or products designed to imitate those materials. These standards are based on the assumption that buildings with those materials contribute more positively to community character and aesthetics by indicating a sense of permanence and high-quality construction. While this approach is valid for downtowns and commercial districts, in industrial districts, and particularly within industrial development areas, the utility of these requirements is limited.

A simple modification to provide flexibility for industrial districts is to require high-quality materials on building walls that face public right of way and serve as a building or development's "front door." This allows other non-public facing building facades to be composed of metal paneling or other materials that are long-lasting but significantly more affordable with fewer maintenance requirements. Furthermore, window transparency, articulation, and other architectural standards should be limited to the main building face and entrance, and not apply to long blank walls that contain a manufacturing line or warehousing facility without any relationship to adjacent streets or property.

Best Practices

Frenchtown. Frenchtown Charter Township provides an example of emphasizing site design and operational compatibility in the review of industrial and non-residential development. Through its site plan review process, the Township evaluates factors such as circulation, lighting, screening, buffering, noise, and stormwater management to ensure compatibility with surrounding properties. While some architectural standards apply to non-residential buildings, the ordinance places greater emphasis on site layout, operational impacts, and buffering rather than extensive architectural design requirements typically found in commercial or downtown districts. (*Frenchtown Zoning Code, Section 7.03, Site Plan and Development Review)*

Monroe. The City of Monroe provides an example of limiting architectural design standards within industrial districts. While the ordinance includes detailed building material and architectural requirements for downtown and commercial districts, the City's I-1 Light Industrial and I-2 General Industrial districts do not apply these architectural standards. This approach recognizes that industrial buildings are primarily functional facilities and allows flexibility in building materials and façade design while focusing regulatory standards on site layout, buffering, and operational impacts. (*City of Monroe Zoning Code, Section 2.15, I-1, Light Industrial District)*



Treat Major Projects Differently from Traditional Industrial

Zoning district standards should match the type of development the master plan envisions. Too often, industrial zoning districts apply one set of standards to all projects, setting requirements based on the largest, most intensive use possible, then applying those same requirements to modest expansions and mid-size manufacturers. The result is that routine projects face regulatory burdens designed for worst-case scenarios. Large-scale modern manufacturing operates very differently from traditional small-scale industrial, and the zoning framework should reflect that distinction. These developments are likely to include many buildings and accessory uses designed in a campus-like setting that may need to be secured with perimeter fencing. When considering major development projects over many acres, a planned unit development or overlay district may be appropriate to provide the developer with greater flexibility, while allowing the local unit of government to emphasize design considerations that align with its priorities for limiting nuisance impacts and ensuring orderly development.

Best Practices

Mundy. Mundy Township established an *Advanced Manufacturing (AM) District* to support modern industrial development that often occurs on large parcels and may include multiple buildings, supporting infrastructure, and campus-style layouts. Rather than applying conventional industrial zoning standards designed for smaller operations, the AM District allows greater flexibility in site design and development layout while maintaining oversight through standards addressing traffic, access management, buffering, and compatibility with surrounding properties. This approach functions similarly to a planned development framework, allowing the Township to accommodate major industrial investments while ensuring that large projects are designed in a manner consistent with community planning goals.

Evaluate Vacant Industrially-Zoned Properties Carefully

Many communities have significant tracts of vacant property zoned for industrial that has been untouched or unchanged for decades. Consider whether this land is vacant for a reason, and evaluate whether other land with access to infrastructure, transportation networks, and other resources would be more appropriate and/or provide greater opportunities for investment. *See Master Planning for Industrial* and *Infrastructure Needs.*

Further Reading

MAP Zoning Reform Toolkit

Michigan Zoning Enabling Act

Michigan Advance

Data Center Developer Takes a Small Michigan Farming Community to Court

Following a pricey settlement, Related Digital will make rural Saline Township, Michigan, the home of its latest data center project.

BY: **K.R. CALLAWAY - INSIDE CLIMATE NEWS** - OCTOBER 27, 2025 7:10 AM

A rendering of Related Digital's planned data center in Saline Township, Mich. Credit: Related Digital



Important Learning Opportunity

The experience of Saline Township highlights the importance of proactively planning for large-scale industrial and technology developments. In recent years, the Township was faced with a proposal for a large data center development that raised community concerns regarding energy demand, infrastructure capacity, and long-term land use compatibility. The proposal prompted significant public discussion and highlighted the challenges communities face when existing zoning districts are not clearly structured to address emerging industrial uses such as hyperscale data centers.

This experience underscores the value of evaluating zoning ordinances in advance and considering whether new industrial technologies or large-scale developments warrant distinct zoning standards, performance criteria, or special districts to ensure that community goals and infrastructure capacity are appropriately addressed.

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

8. Rezonings and PUDs

SECTOR:

PHASE: ●○○

Many major industrial development projects do not easily align with local land use and zoning requirements because communities **have not focused on planning for industrial growth.**

Zoning codes are written with the most common projects and uses in mind, and large industrial developments have not been the priority for most communities over the past several decades. As a result, when an industrial project is proposed—particularly one that covers many acres—the zoning map and ordinance requirements often do not accommodate project realities. The project then enters a phase of "making it work" within the existing zoning code, which often requires a rezoning and/or a planned unit development (PUD).

A rezoning is generally a simpler process, while PUDs are typically more complex. A rezoning changes the zoning district applied to a particular property or properties. A PUD often functions as both a rezoning and a conceptual development plan. Because rezonings and PUDs are often related, it is important to understand whether the question being addressed is a straightforward zoning map change or something more complex.

Regardless of the tool, clarifying the step-by-step review process for rezoning and PUD decisions is essential. A simple process graphic (not necessarily detailed) can be extremely helpful. The MEDC's *Redevelopment Ready Communities (RRC) program* provides examples communities can draw from.

A Quick Guide for Choosing the Right Tool

Use this tool selection logic to clarify what decision is being requested.

Rezoning

Rezoning when the main issue is district mismatch and the community is comfortable allowing the use generally.

Planned Unit Development (PUD)

PUD when the community needs flexibility on setbacks, layout, circulation, or phasing and wants a framework that ties flexibility to a concept plan and standards.

Conditional Rezoning

Conditional rezoning when a rezoning is appropriate but officials need limited, enforceable commitments tied to a specific use or concept. (Note: A developer must offer conditions to the community.)

Development Agreement

Development agreement when the community needs to document performance, phasing, public improvements, or mitigation measures that go beyond what zoning alone can reliably enforce.

From a Developer's Point of View: Why Zoning is the Strongest Tool in the Box

Many communities that are experienced with development often utilize PUDs. Utilizing PUDs for larger projects provides the community with the ability for increased input and discretion.

However, developers are often hesitant to pursue a PUD for the following reasons:

Uncertain process. The legislative body is in control of the final decision, with no guarantee that a developer will be able to carry out the project.

Expensive. The extensive nature of the PUD process often requires significant investments by developers in fees, engineering, architecture, and other studies before getting to a decision.

Timeframe. The PUD process often consists of several steps and public meetings, depending upon community requirements, which adds time.

Communities may be able to attract increased industrial development by considering the following:

Review the master plan and future land use map regularly. Are there areas that make sense for industrial? Can land use flexibility be inserted into the master plan so that rezoning won't necessarily require a master plan amendment?

Review your required PUD process, applications and checklists. Is the process overly cumbersome? Is the level of detail required at each step of the application process appropriate or excessive for staff, elected officials and the planning commission to be able to make a decision?

Proactive rezoning. Can an industrial zone district be updated that contains the same conditions of approval typically applied to a PUD so that a developer can just rely on the zoning instead of going through a PUD process?

What is a Rezoning?

A rezoning is formally referred to as an "amendment to the zoning map" in Michigan and must be adopted by ordinance. It requires a recommendation by the planning commission (in an advisory capacity) and final approval by the legislative body (city council/commission, township board, or village council). While the legislative body must receive a recommendation from the planning commission, it is non-binding, and the final decision-making authority rests solely with the elected body. Michigan state law requires a public hearing at the planning commission. A public hearing at the legislative body is optional under state law, although local ordinances may have different requirements.

What Officials are Deciding

A rezoning is a legislative decision to change what is allowed on a site, not an approval of a specific development. Officials should be clear about two separate questions:

Policy question. Is this zoning district appropriate here, based on the master plan and surrounding context?

Project question. If a specific project is driving the request, where and how will that project be reviewed later?

Rezonings: Public Sector

When considering a rezoning request, it is important that reviewing bodies clearly understand what they are deciding.

Because most development applications include a site plan and clear description of the proposed development, officials often expect similar detail for a rezoning. While understanding the anticipated development can be helpful context, a simple rezoning does not commit the site to a specific project. The request is only to change the zoning district. It is common for the anticipated use at the time of rezoning to change by the time a site plan is submitted.

Conditional rezonings can provide some assurance in these situations, but they are more complex and can only be offered by the applicant. In Michigan, local units of government cannot require a conditional rezoning.

It is generally considered best practice to include decision-making standards to guide planning commissions and legislative bodies on rezoning requests.

Common rezoning review standards include:

> Evaluation of the request's consistency with the current master plan.
>
> If the request is not consistent with the master plan, evaluation of whether an error exists in the plan or if there has been a significant change in conditions that would justify a deviation from the plan to approve the rezoning.

Because a rezoning is a legislative decision, local units of government should consult with their municipal attorney prior to making changes to the decision-making process or ordinance language.

Are there parcels in your community that could be proactively rezoned or reconsidered within the master plan for industrial use?

A community should review their master plan and future land use map every five years to ensure its relevance and adapt to changing conditions. Proactive, city-initiated rezoning serves as a powerful tool for creating industrial and commercial sites. This approach provides immediate value to landowners through bypassing the traditional application process, saving them substantial capital and months of lead time while ensuring the property is positioned for development as envisioned in the master plan.

Conditional Rezonings

In Michigan, conditional rezoning can add project-specific commitments to a rezoning request, but it must be offered by the applicant. Communities cannot require it.

Common conditions include:

> Limiting permitted uses to a defined set
>
> Committing to specific access points or truck routing
>
> Requiring buffering and screening at sensitive edges
>
> Setting a conceptual development pattern

Use conditional rezoning carefully—conditions should be clear, enforceable, and directly related to land use impacts.

Rezonings: Private Sector

Before pursuing a rezoning request, understand the degree of consistency with the community's comprehensive master plan. Alignment with the master plan should be a primary factor in evaluating the likelihood of approval. Reviewing the master plan relative to a rezoning request is typically a two-step process:

1. Is there consistency with the future land use map and zoning plan?

The master plan future land use map includes designations that, through the zoning plan, relate to zoning districts. Use these documents to confirm whether the property is consistent with the future land use designation.

2. Is there consistency with master plan goals, objectives, and policies?

In addition to the future land use map, master plans identify community priorities for development and may include subarea plans or focus areas relevant to the property. Review these elements to determine the degree to which the rezoning is consistent with stated goals.

If the answer to both questions above is "yes," the rezoning request is more likely to be approved. If one or both answers are "no," the likelihood is lower. If both are "no," approval is unlikely unless there is a clear error in the plan or a change in conditions that supports deviation from the plan's guidance.

It is also important to note that, unlike an administrative review process where staff analysis typically carries significant weight, rezoning decisions are more dependent on the interpretation and judgment of local officials—especially if the zoning ordinance does not include clear standards to guide evaluation of the request.

Communicate with neighbors proactively.

Prior to a public hearing for a rezoning request, a public notice is sent out to neighbors surrounding the subject property. Hosting a project open house prior to the mailing of the rezoning notices is a great way to proactively engage with the neighbors, allowing them to gain an understanding of the project. *See Facilitating an Effective Open House.*

Notification rules:

> **10 or fewer properties.** Notification will be sent to all occupants and property owners within 300 feet of the property.
>
> **11 or more properties.** Direct, address-specific notice is not required, but the planning commission must still publish a notice in a newspaper of general circulation at least 15 days before the public hearing. (Per Sections 103(2), 103(4)(b) and 125.3202 of the Zoning Enabling Act.)

Conditional Rezonings

Stakeholders often worry about the 'worst-case scenario' allowed by a new zoning designation. If you don't intend to use your property for every activity permitted 'by right,' you can use conditional rezoning to specifically exclude uses. This voluntary restriction acts as a sign of good will, addressing community pushback while keeping your primary project on track.

What is a PUD?

While not common in industrial development contexts, a PUD can be used to develop multiple properties or parcels as part of a larger project that does not align well with traditional zoning districts. The Michigan Zoning Enabling Act provides local governments significant discretion in defining PUD processes, so procedures vary widely. Before beginning any PUD process, it is critical that the developer and the local unit of government share a clear understanding of the process, submittal expectations, decision points, and anticipated timeline.

Unlike a straightforward rezoning, a PUD typically combines zoning flexibility with a conceptual development plan. The decision is not only about whether a use is appropriate, but also whether the proposed layout, standards, and flexibility produce outcomes that justify departure from conventional zoning requirements.

PUDs: Public Sector

Traditional industrial zoning districts often fail to address the realities of modern manufacturing and industrial site selection.

A PUD approach allows a community and property owner(s) to balance the evolving needs of manufacturing facilities with community priorities for higher-quality industrial environments that protect long-term tax base, improve aesthetics, support workforce attraction, and are compatible with adjacent land uses.

The use of a comprehensive industrial PUD framework is increasingly recognized as a best practice because it allows communities to proactively establish development standards, infrastructure expectations, operational controls, and design standards before industrial users arrive. This creates greater predictability for municipalities, developers, infrastructure providers, and future industrial occupants alike.

Establishing an industrial PUD is appropriate in communities with the following characteristics:

> Current industrial zoning standards are prohibitive or inadequate, and establishing a PUD is a more efficient and effective means to generate the outcomes desired versus zoning amendments.
>
> The community's master plan identifies the area within the PUD as appropriate for the uses permitted within the PUD.
>
> The site has appropriate physical characteristics and access to infrastructure to support modern manufacturing. *See Infrastructure Needs* and *Site Design for Industrial Development.*

To be effective, an industrial PUD must address the following issues clearly and provide significant benefits over the traditional zoning process. It is critical for the PUD to take the "guess work" out of the development process:

> Coordinated plans for installation of infrastructure, including roads, sewer and water, power, sidewalks, stormwater detention, and broadband access. The use of regional stormwater detention systems can be particularly beneficial.
>
> A predictable and speedy entitlement and review process if proposed developments are consistent with the PUD conceptual plan, including administrative approval of site plans whenever possible.
>
> Clear development standards related to building size and massing, parking and circulation, landscaping, building materials, and performance standards.
>
> Strong expectations for frontage treatments, landscaping, and signage that presents a high-quality appearance and positively contributes to the community's overall character.
>
> Coordinated plans for transportation that address the needs of industrial properties related to truck traffic and circulation, as well as access for employees by car, bike, bus, or foot.
>
> A phasing plan that ensures orderly development and efficient use of land, while allowing for reconfiguration of lots and site designs according to the overall PUD framework.

Review your PUD process to ensure steps are clear and standards for approval are reasonable.

Confirm that industrial development is permitted within the PUD framework, as some ordinances require a residential component.

In addition:

> Allow for a conceptual approval and final approval phase. (Conceptual approval should not require fully detailed engineered drawings, but sufficient information to determine feasibility.)
>
> Clearly define what level of detail is required at each stage
>
> Ensure approval standards are objective enough to guide decision-making but flexible enough to evaluate complex projects
>
> Identify how commitments will be documented and enforced

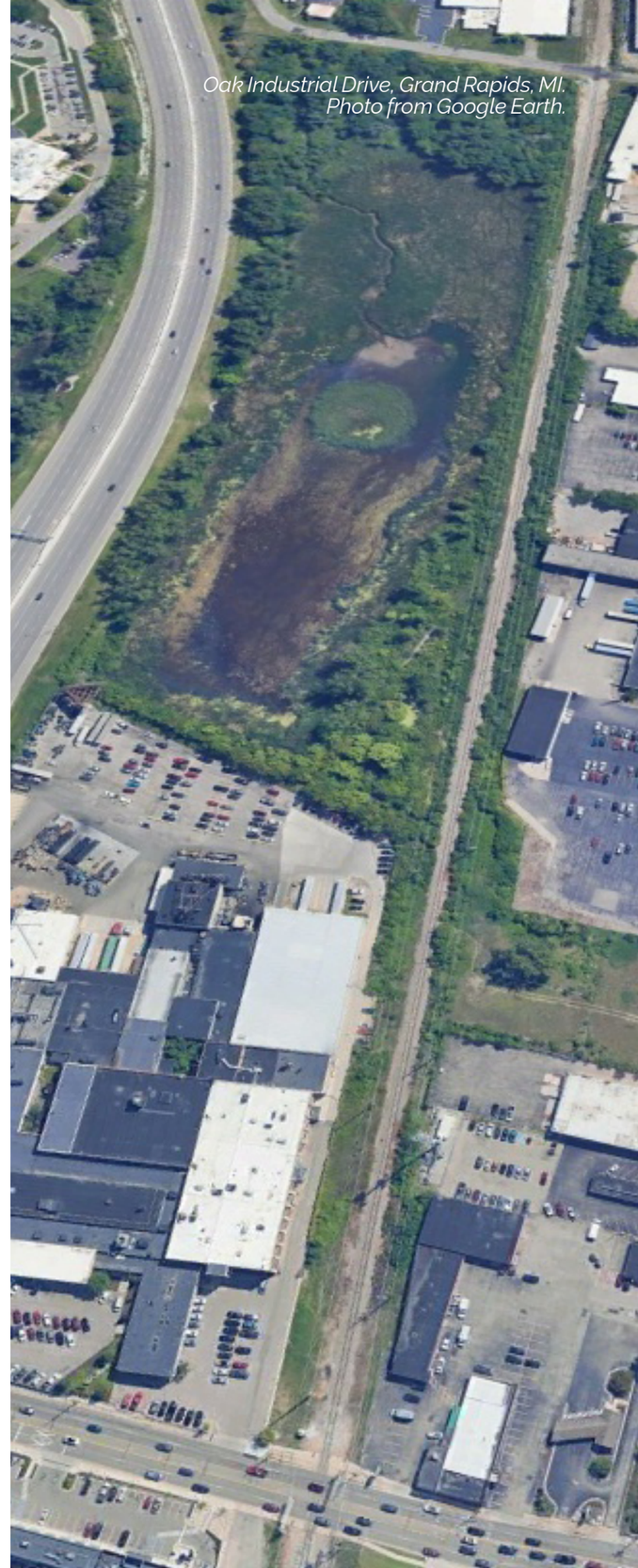
If flexibility is being granted, there should be a clear articulation of what the community receives in return, whether that is improved buffering, enhanced circulation, infrastructure participation, or other community benefits.

PUDs: What Reviewing Bodies are Deciding

When evaluating a PUD request, officials are generally determining:

> Is the proposed flexibility being requested consistent with the intent of the master plan?
>
> Does the conceptual plan demonstrate compatibility with surrounding land uses?
>
> Are the requested deviations justified by providing improved outcomes?
>
> Will the proposed commitments provide enough clarity to carry forward into final site engineering and permitting?

Because PUDs often involve discretion, clarity about expectations and documentation is essential.



Oak Industrial Drive, Grand Rapids, MI. Photo from Google Earth.

PUDs: Private Sector

Evaluate the Benefits of Pursuing a PUD Versus a Traditional Zoning Process

PUDs generally take more time and include greater discretion than site plan review or special land use approval.

If the PUD operates as a rezoning, provide the appropriate level of detail for each stage. For example, if the ordinance allows conceptual plan approval without detailed engineering, you can advance the concept plan while detailed civil engineering is developed in parallel.

Clearly describe the value proposition of the PUD for both the project and the community. Beyond jobs and tax base, what does the PUD enable that a traditional approach would not? Does flexibility allow better site circulation and safety, more green space, wetland protection, improved stormwater outcomes, or stronger landscape screening?

In addition:

> Be explicit about which ordinance standards you are requesting flexibility from and why.
>
> Provide a clear narrative linking flexibility to improved site performance.
>
> Avoid treating the PUD as a shortcut; it is typically a more structured and negotiated process, not a faster one.

Development Agreements and Documenting Commitments

In many industrial PUDs, commitments may be formalized through conditions of approval or a development agreement. These tools can document responsibilities related to infrastructure improvements, buffering, phasing, maintenance, or other negotiated elements that extend beyond the zoning text itself.

Where a rezoning changes what is allowed, and a PUD shapes how it may be built, development agreements often clarify who is responsible for delivering specific improvements and when.

When a PUD May Not Be Necessary

A PUD may not be appropriate if:

The project can be accommodated through a straightforward rezoning and site plan review.

The requested flexibility is minimal and could be addressed through variances or ordinance amendments that benefit multiple sites.

The complexity of the PUD process would outweigh the practical benefit of flexibility.

Further Reading

RRC "Conditions" Quick Sheet (conditional rezoning)

Michigan Zoning Enabling Act, Section 405

Reference: RRC Best Practice 3 (RRC Library)

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

9. Site Design for Industrial Development

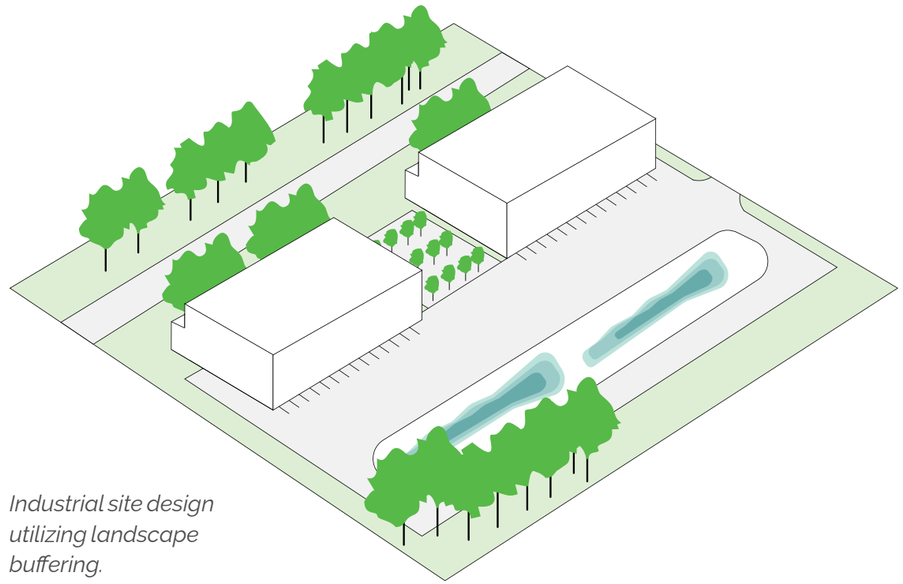
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How municipalities can review, approve, and shape industrial sites that **strengthen long-term community value.**

Municipal site review is one of the most powerful tools a community has to steer industrial development toward long-term health, resiliency, and fiscal stability. The review process shapes how a site looks, feels, functions, and ages, and whether it becomes a durable community asset or a maintenance burden.

This chapter provides guidance for municipalities reviewing industrial site plans, while also offering cues for developers who want to build sites that perform well, win community support, and deliver long-term value.



Industrial site design utilizing landscape buffering.

Core Site Design Principles

Regardless of site type, effective industrial site design should:

- Separate truck circulation from employee and visitor access where feasible.
- Protect sensitive edges like residential, parks, or schools, through buffering and orientation.
- Treat stormwater and natural features as organizing elements, not leftover space.
- Preserve flexibility for phased expansion and evolving industrial needs.
- Align site access with existing roadway capacity and regional freight routes.

Begin with a clear understanding of the sites you already have.

From master planning to site review, the first question should always be: How can our parcels meet the needs of industrial tenants while contributing to community health and long-term value? For many Michigan communities, the most strategic industrial sites are not greenfields, but existing parcels with infrastructure, access, and adjacency to housing and jobs.

Even prior to the review process, a community's visioning and master planning should:

- Encourage redevelopment of underutilized industrial and commercial parcels
- Prioritize sites with existing power, water, and road investments
- Align development with the community's ecological and stormwater realities
- Reduce greenfield pressure and long-term maintenance liabilities

When municipalities signal that site reuse is preferred, developers respond with smarter proposals that build on existing assets.



Focus review on edge conditions.

Prioritize the standards that drive community compatibility, such as edge treatment, noise and light, stormwater, buffering adjacent to sensitive uses. Stay flexible on requirements borrowed from suburban office or retail models such as front-yard greenbelts, parking-lot tree counts, and setbacks; these can impair truck circulation, loading geometry, or expansion without a clear community benefit. The edges—the buffers, trees, lighting, stormwater features, and transitions—determine whether the project fits the community. Municipal review should prioritize the following ideas:

Buffers that perform multiple jobs.

When evaluating buffers, look beyond screening. Ask whether the design:

- Reduces noise and light impacts
- Improves stormwater infiltration and/or uptake
- Contributes tree canopy and shade
- Supports existing ecological corridors, if appropriate
- Improves the experience of nearby homes, schools, or roads

Municipal standards can require layered buffers or native plantings that deliver both environmental and placemaking benefits.

A canopy designed to last.

Tree requirements should not be a checkbox. Site review can ensure:

- Adequate soil volume and spacing
- Climate-resilient species mixes
- Continuous canopy where the public experiences the site
- Integration of trees with stormwater facilities

Developers and communities benefit when trees are treated as long-term site infrastructure rather than ornamental line items.

Respect for natural features.

Site review should require early identification and preservation of natural assets—creeks, wetlands, wooded edges, and natural drainage patterns. These are not obstacles; they are cost-saving systems that reduce the burden on municipal infrastructure. Municipalities can require site plans to work with these systems rather than flattening or engineering them away.

Using this Tool

This tool presents two conceptual site frameworks:

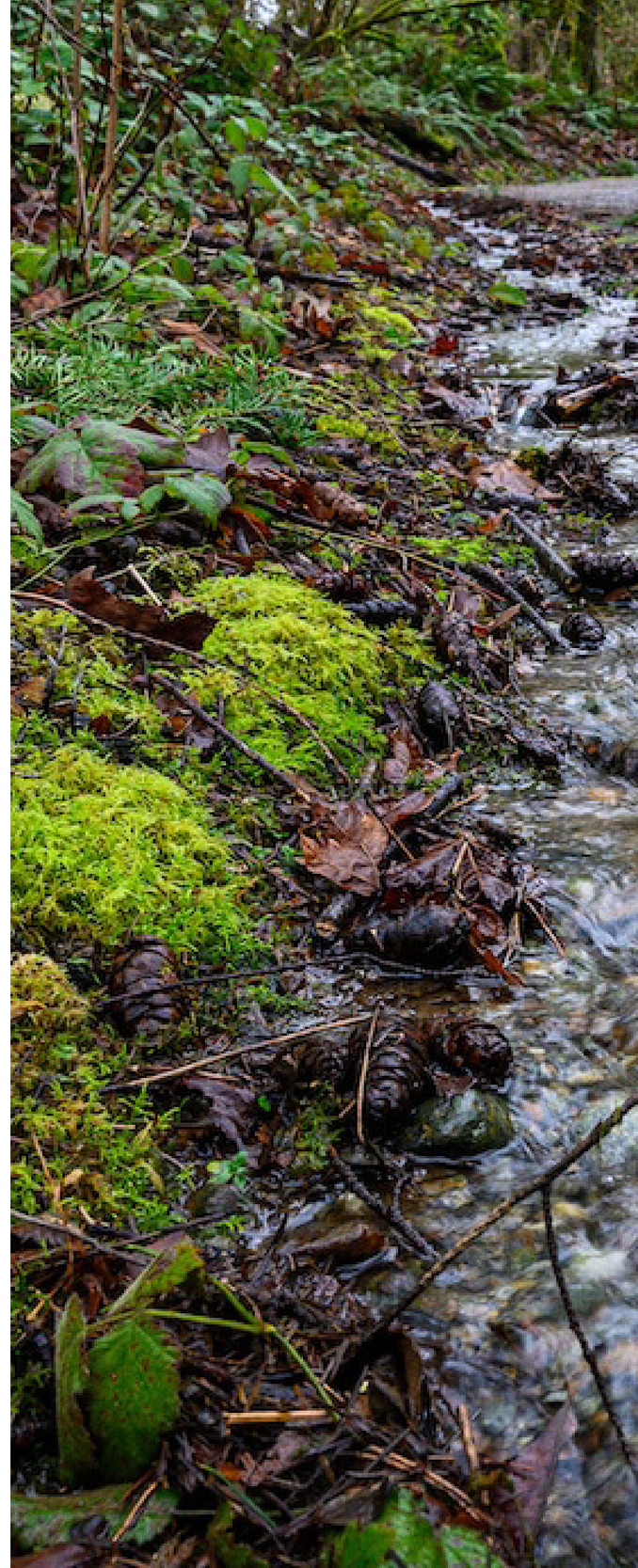
1. A greenfield industrial framework

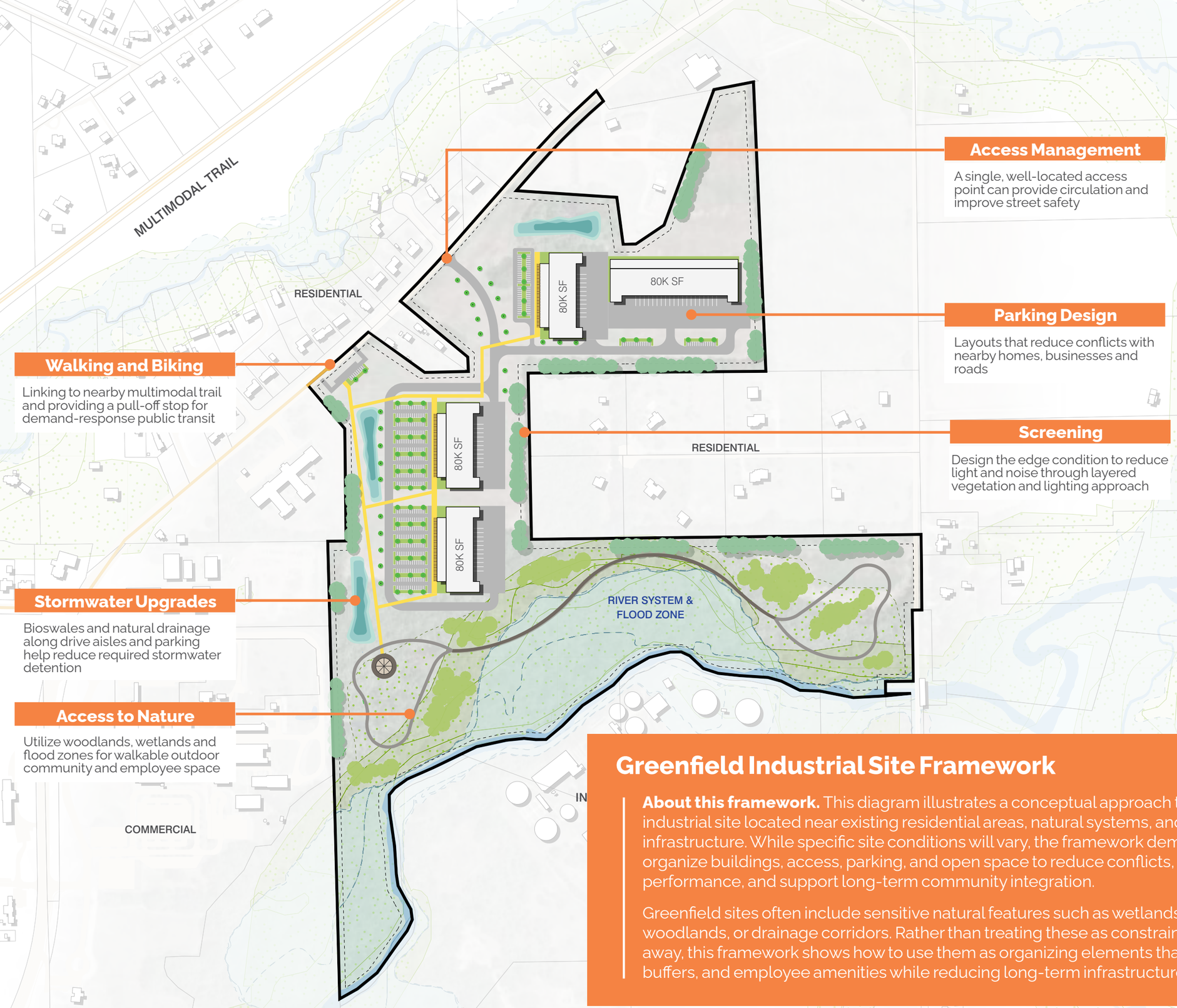
2. A redevelopment / brownfield industrial framework

These are not precedent sites or templates. They illustrate how to organize buildings, access, buffers, and infrastructure under different conditions.

To use this tool:

- Identify whether your site is primarily greenfield or redevelopment.
- Apply the framework principles to your site constraints.
- Translate those principles into zoning standards, site plan requirements, or development agreement terms.





Access Management

A single, well-located access point can provide circulation and improve street safety

Parking Design

Layouts that reduce conflicts with nearby homes, businesses and roads

Screening

Design the edge condition to reduce light and noise through layered vegetation and lighting approach

Walking and Biking

Linking to nearby multimodal trail and providing a pull-off stop for demand-response public transit

Stormwater Upgrades

Bioswales and natural drainage along drive aisles and parking help reduce required stormwater detention

Access to Nature

Utilize woodlands, wetlands and flood zones for walkable outdoor community and employee space

Greenfield Industrial Site Framework

About this framework. This diagram illustrates a conceptual approach to planning a greenfield industrial site located near existing residential areas, natural systems, and regional transportation infrastructure. While specific site conditions will vary, the framework demonstrates how to organize buildings, access, parking, and open space to reduce conflicts, enhance environmental performance, and support long-term community integration.

Greenfield sites often include sensitive natural features such as wetlands, floodplains, woodlands, or drainage corridors. Rather than treating these as constraints to be engineered away, this framework shows how to use them as organizing elements that shape circulation, buffers, and employee amenities while reducing long-term infrastructure costs.

Brownfield Industrial Site Framework

About this framework. This diagram illustrates a conceptual strategy for redeveloping an existing or underutilized industrial site in proximity to established neighborhoods, infrastructure, and natural systems. Brownfield and reuse sites often include legacy buildings, prior industrial uses, rail access, aging utilities, or environmental considerations that inform layout and phasing.

Rather than starting from a blank slate, redevelopment frameworks must work with existing assets, such as rail corridors, street grids, parks, or drainage patterns, while modernizing circulation, utilities, stormwater systems, and site edges to improve compatibility and long-term performance. Site-specific conditions will vary, but the principles shown here include thoughtful access, layered buffers, integrated stormwater, and strengthened connections to surrounding districts. These can be adapted to a wide range of redevelopment contexts.

Support Walkability

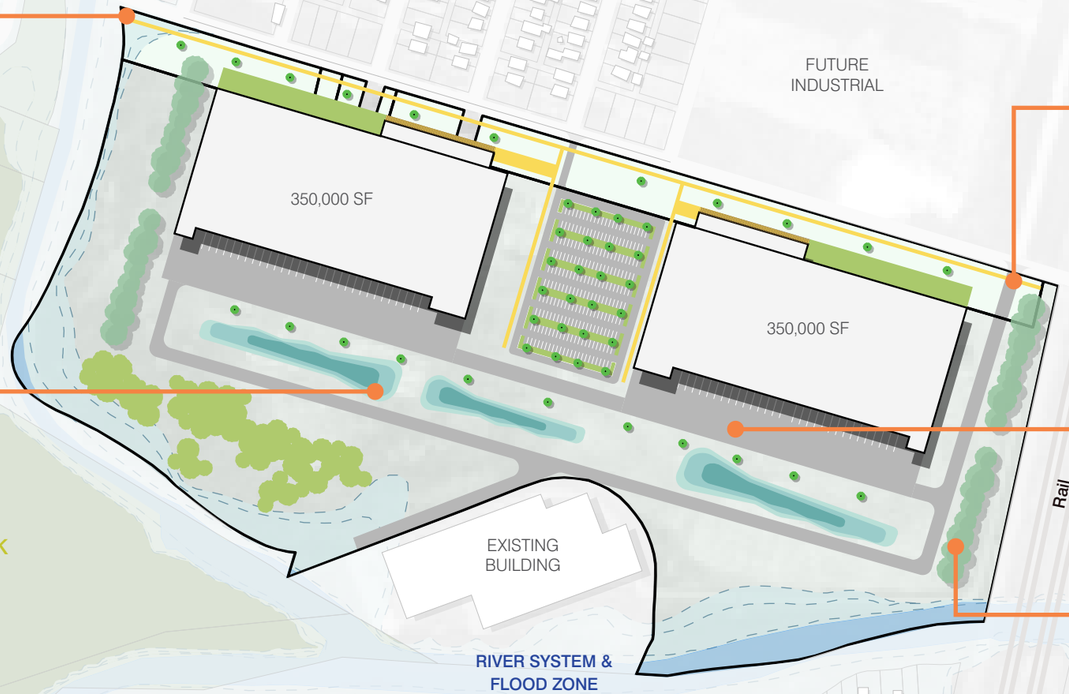
Provide sidewalks and street trees, orient the street facing facade of building to feel welcoming

Access to Nature

Connect to existing assets, such as parks, to provide outdoor employee spaces

Stormwater Upgrades

Bioswales and natural drainage along drive aisles and parking help reduce required stormwater detention



Access Management

Fewer well-located access points that provide site circulation that is adequate for large trucks

Parking Design

Layouts that reduce conflicts with nearby homes, businesses and roads

Screening

Design the edge conditions to reduce light and noise through layered vegetation and lighting

A Site Review Checklist for Municipal Staff

Design Quality and Compatibility

- [ ] Are the standards being applied the ones that matter for compatibility, or is strict compliance forcing an inferior layout that a variance could improve?
- [ ] Does the proposal preserve or integrate natural features?
- [ ] Are buffers designed for multiple benefits, not just visual screening?
- [ ] Is tree canopy placed where it matters, for heat, stormwater, and public edges?
- [ ] Does the stormwater system use natural processes wherever feasible?
- [ ] Do edges meet neighboring sites with care and compatibility?
- [ ] Does the layout improve connectivity and reduce conflicts?
- [ ] Is screening integrated with community character rather than isolating the site?
- [ ] In reuse scenarios, does the conversion improve connectivity and compatibility with neighboring sites and the municipality as a whole?
- [ ] Does the development have the potential to reduce long-term municipal burdens?

Technical Compliance

- [ ] Are building setbacks, maximum height, and lot coverage within dimensional standards?
- [ ] Are heavy machinery, outdoor storage, and HVAC units positioned to minimize noise, odor, and vibration, and has the applicant identified mitigation strategies?
- [ ] Is there a clear, continuous fire lane around the building that fire apparatus can easily navigate?
- [ ] Are loading docks located away from public rights-of-way and adjacent residential areas, and can trucks maneuver without backing onto public streets?

Evaluating the Need for Variances

While site plans ideally comply with all zoning ordinances, strict adherence isn't always possible or even optimal. When reviewing a plan that requests or requires a variance, consider the following:

1. Are they needed? Variances are required when an applicant cannot meet specific dimensional standards (like setbacks, minimum parking counts, or building heights) due to a "practical difficulty" unique to the property's size, shape, or topography. They are not meant to excuse poor planning, accommodate a building that is simply too large for the lot, or solely to save the developer money.

2. Would a variance actually improve the site plan? Sometimes, yes. Strict compliance can occasionally force an inferior design. For example, allowing a front setback variance might enable the developer to preserve a sensitive wetland at the rear of the property, improve the turning radius for emergency vehicles, or shift a noisy loading dock further away from a neighboring residential property line.

3. The Commission's Role. While the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) typically holds the legal authority to grant variances, the planning commission must identify where the site plan falls short of the ordinance.

10. The Development Review Process

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The development review process involves permitting by a range of disciplines and authorities that vary by unit of government. For example, cities in Michigan hold jurisdiction over most reviews and permits, while townships may have relatively limited review authority, with most technical reviews conducted by consultants or county or regional agencies. Because the process varies widely by municipality, there is no single approach to development review, however, there are well-tested best practices that can be employed by municipalities and developers that may help to streamline the process and avoid unnecessary delays.

The development review process generally consists of:

- Informal discussions with staff and preliminary review of project concept.
- Formal site plan and other zoning approvals.
- Building plan and fire marshal review and approval.
- Inspections and permitting by various trades.
- Inspections and permitting by other agencies with jurisdiction.
- Final Certificate of Occupancy (CofO) permit.

Development Review: Public Sector

There are a variety of actions local units of government can take to streamline the development review process without sacrificing authority or the quality of reviews. These best practices generally fall into two categories: ordinance amendments and process improvements.

Ordinance Amendments

Ordinances should be viewed as living documents, not set in stone. An ordinance is an implementation tool used to achieve a desired outcome. For example, the zoning ordinance is a key mechanism for implementing the vision outlined in a community's comprehensive master plan. A strong ordinance relies on sound policy documents to provide a solid foundation. Clearly drafted rules assist in avoiding ambiguity and confusion.

While the zoning ordinance is the local legislation with the greatest impact on development that readily comes to mind, other ordinances can also support high-quality projects. A proactive community can identify regulatory synergies, yielding substantial benefits by layering ordinances to achieve a desired result. Following is a list of ordinances that should be evaluated regularly by local leaders for their effectiveness in supporting quality development outcomes:

Zoning Ordinance

The zoning ordinance should provide a clear process for moving through the development review process. The MEDC's Redevelopment Ready Communities program (RRC) provides a range of zoning reform best practices and examples of zoning review processes.

RRC Online Resource Library

See Industrial Zoning District Guidelines

Stormwater and Soil Erosion

Stormwater management and soil erosion is typically regulated by separate codes, but the review is often conducted by the same agency. These ordinances should align with current best practices as well as local conditions related to stormwater management, soils, and updated Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) floodplain maps. Changes in technology and new approaches can alter regulatory frameworks. For example, green infrastructure solutions for stormwater, such as rain gardens, green roofs, and underground storage facilities, have reduced the land required for retention or detention facilities in some communities.

Utility Connections

Local ordinances regulate the process and requirements for connecting to municipal utilities while setting rates and fees for the connections. It is important to review these ordinances periodically to ensure they align with current practices and provide options to incentivize certain types of development by waiving or reducing connection fees if the local unit of government would like to offer that as a development incentive, and as utility authority agreements allow.

Driveways and Road Standards

Standards for accessing local rights of way are commonly defined in the zoning ordinance but may also be included in local road or street ordinances and engineering standards. These ordinances often reflect their age and can quickly become out of step with current best practices. They should be reviewed every few years to ensure they align with current engineering best practices published by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and similar sources. A focus on a higher-quality roadbed to support industrial traffic rather than an excessively large street can assist in making the best use of limited financial resources while also supporting development.

Airport Zoning

Many significant industrial sites are within close proximity to airports and therefore may be subject to airport zoning requirements. These regulations are primarily focused on building height, but also regulate lighting, reflective materials, and may impact stormwater management. While the ordinance itself falls under the purview of the airport authority, its applicability within the local unit of government depends on collaboration between the local government and the airport authority.

Business Licensing, Health Codes, and Other Police Power Ordinances

There are a variety of other health and safety and licensing ordinances that may impact industrial users in a community. It is critical that each ordinance is well understood, consistently enforced, and regularly updated. Understanding how these codes can work with zoning and other ordinances can allow for a reduction in the amount of regulation, avoid redundancy, and, in some cases, provide an avenue that is more permissive during the construction period and incorporates performance standards once a project is complete if nuisance issues arise.

Process Improvements

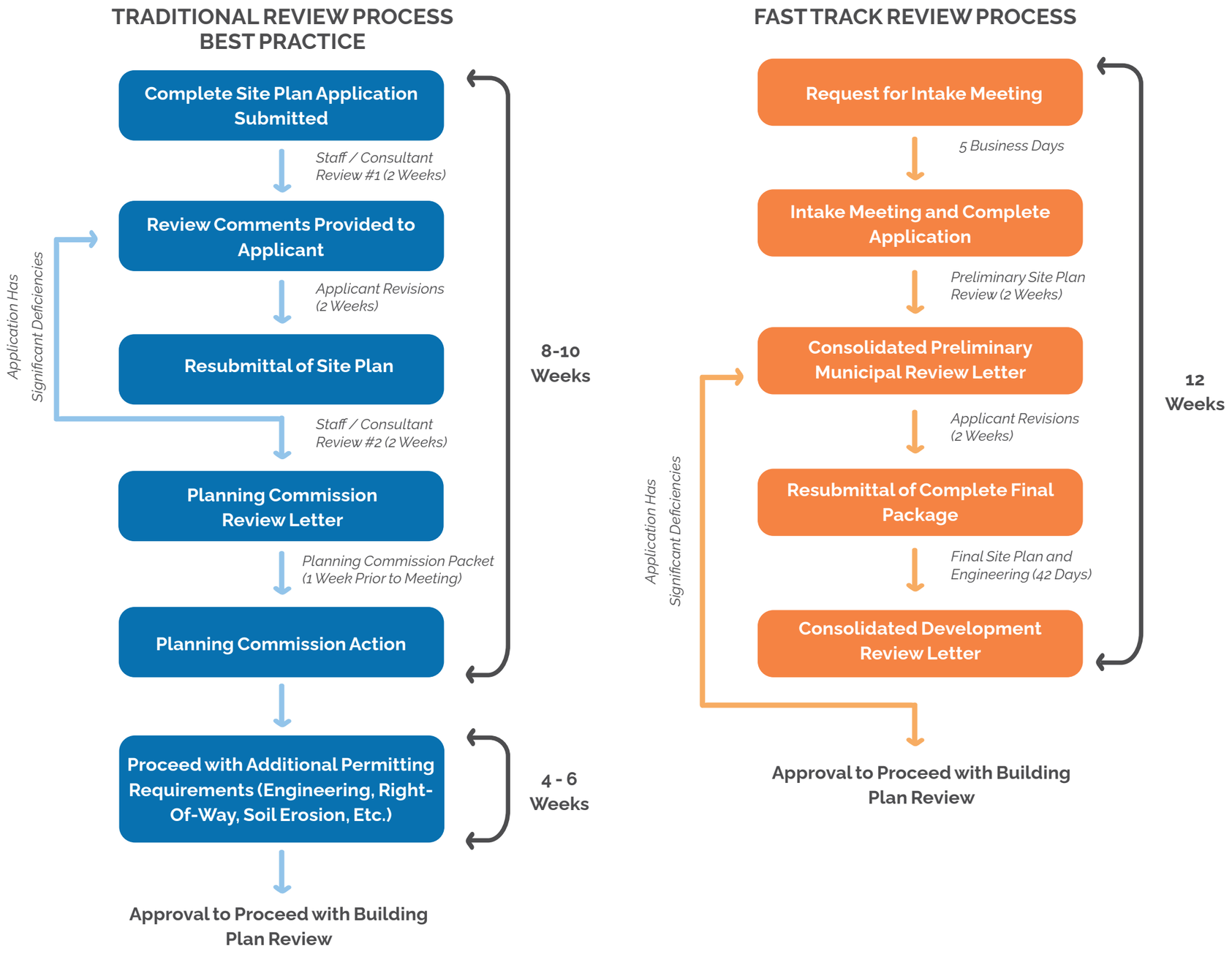
Maintaining efficient and effective development review processes is a never-ending task. They must be refreshed as new uses, technologies, regulations, and best practices are introduced. However, implementing the following actions will go a long way toward establishing a development review process that is responsive to the needs of the development community, residents, and local officials.

While local review processes vary widely between communities, there are common best practices that most communities should be able to implement. A sample site plan review process that utilizes these best practices is provided below.

Prompt reviews. Review of a site plan application by a planner or engineer should not require more than two weeks. The outcome of this review should be a detailed letter and/or checklist that identifies any outstanding deficiencies.

Multiple reviews prior to action. If final action is being taken by planning commission or a public body, completing two reviews of the application prior to the meeting can be extremely helpful. This allows the applicant to address any staff comments or concerns prior to public review, which reduces the likelihood of multiple meetings.

Reasonable overall timeframe. A complete application should be reviewed, with action taken within 60 days of submittal.



Process Improvements

Other general actions communities can take to make the development review process more efficient and effective include:

1. Map your process.

Lay out your development approval process for a layperson. How would you describe the process to your neighbor? Given that every community process may differ, and that developers are not mind readers, how will you describe the steps a person must take to get their doors open?

2. Act as applicant.

Among the most impactful actions a community can take to enhance its development review process is to submit a permit and walk through the process as an applicant. Understanding the process from the applicant's point of view is eye-opening; often, bottlenecks will be discovered, along with simple fixes to streamline the review process. If this is a new practice, start with something simple like a single-family home, and work your way up to more complex applications.

3. Establish a design review committee.

(Also known as a Development Review Team) Establish a standing weekly or bi-weekly meeting of reviewers, depending on your application load, to sit down with all affected departments and other associated agencies in your community to review and discuss applications. Each department and/or agency should come to the meeting prepared with pertinent information and their own comments. This process allows the municipal planner, engineer, building inspector, fire marshal, and others to learn from one another and provide the applicant with a consolidated review letter. This approach avoids putting the applicant in the middle of regulatory disagreements, helps to avoid unnecessary duplication, "ping-ponging" between reviewers, and conflicting guidance. *The City of Romulus* uses an Administrative Review Committee that can be referenced as an example.

4. Track approval timeframes.

Understanding the time required from the date of a complete zoning application to an occupancy permit helps local governments and developers speak the same language. While governments typically think in terms of individual permits or approvals, developers think about the entire process. Tracking the time required from application to final occupancy also allows local units of governments to clearly identify "dos and don'ts" to help accelerate the development review process.

5. Ask for feedback.

A survey response form at the end of the process can help gauge areas of success and frustration. In some cases, a developer who does a lot of business with the community may be concerned about providing honest feedback for fear of retaliation. A Development Council, comprised of local developers that meet on a regular basis, may provide an opportunity for trust-building.

Industrial Development Fast Track Options

Communities that have planned for and are ready to attract modern industrial development should consider establishing an expedited administrative review and permitting framework for industrial projects that are consistent with the community's goals and standards. Creating a fast track for permitting is one of the single greatest competitive advantages a municipality can create.

An expedited industrial review framework should create predictable timelines by allowing staff and consultants across disciplines and departments to review application materials early and on an iterative basis with developers. **Industrial fast track process are most appropriate where projects are:**

1. Located within planned industrial districts.

2. In compliance with adopted zoning standards.

3. Clearly aligned with master plan priorities and previous community engagement that supports the development.

A fast track industrial review process should target completion of final site plan, engineering, and any other technical reviews required prior to building plan review within 90 days of submittal of a complete application.

Development Review: Private Sector

The process governing development review is ultimately in the hands of government officials and agencies, but there are steps developers can take to smooth the process.

1. Clearly document the process in writing.

If the local government does not have a documented review process that includes the relevant agencies and key decision points, create one and confirm it with the community. This can be a simple step-by-step list, but it will help identify potential delays or bottlenecks. For example, a surprise review by an airport zoning authority can significantly alter a project and should be addressed early in the project, not after building plans are submitted.

2. Ask to see "under the hood."

Most communities maintain internal checklists or guides that support review of local ordinances or codes. Ask to see these checklists prior to submittal and evaluate your project against them independently. This will help limit the number of review comments and reduce the overall review timeframe.

3. Get to know the technical folks.

Once you know who is reviewing each aspect of a project submittal, take time to meet with the most consequential reviewers and understand their approach. A good question to ask is, "what issues have you seen on projects like this in the past?"

4. Submit complete plans.

Spend the time and energy needed to provide reviewers with all of the necessary information that is required to avoid delays. Plans that are done "on the cheap" with insufficient information can make the development review process drag on with multiple requests for more detail. And as that additional detail is provided, there may be a cascading effect on other reviewers.

5. Trust but verify.

Oftentimes, developers will rely on professional architects and engineers to shepherd the project through the development review process. Ask to be copied on all communications so you can track project progress. Missed deadlines may result from missing materials or other complications unrelated to the municipal reviewers.

6. Don't shy away from engagement.

Creating opportunities to gather feedback from the community in addition to required public meetings and hearings can be a difference-maker. Plan community engagement into your project in the early stages so it does not derail the project during the later stages of review. *See Community Engagement and Communication.*



TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

11. Conducting a Successful Public Meeting

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The Conducting a Successful Public Meeting tool provides guidance for communities and developers on **how to complete a successful public meeting** during the project review process.

This tool assumes that the issue to be discussed at the meeting is likely to generate controversy and elicit a significant amount of public comment.

The way these meetings are conducted and how the various roles of the parties involved are understood can make all the difference, literally, for whether or not a project moves forward. A contentious meeting that devolves into competing applause between opposed factions or personal attacks on local officials can result in a questionable project denial that is ultimately settled in court.

Using this tool and associated information will help both communities and developers use a more positive and productive approach to conducting public meetings. This change in mindset allows meetings to be seen as creating opportunities for transparency and dialogue rather than something to avoid at all costs.

How Do I Conduct a **Successful Public Meeting?**

Public meeting horror stories are all too common in planning and development circles. Anyone who has been involved in local government and land development for a period of time has their "war stories". The consequence of a "meeting gone wrong" typically results in a great project that died due to misunderstandings, false or inaccurate information, personal attacks, and/or poor preparation on the part of the applicant or community. **This tool is intended to provide guidance before, during, and after the public meeting:**

1. Meeting Preparation

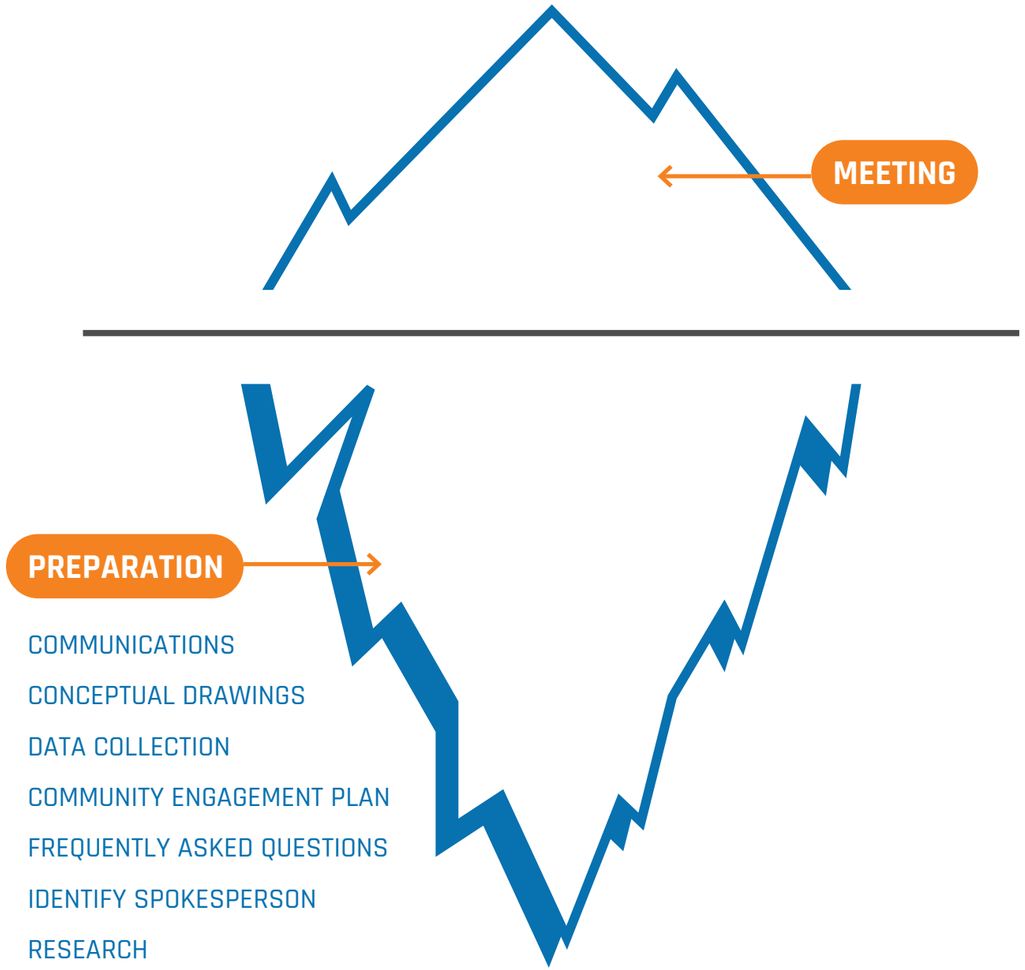
What to do before the meeting to ensure the process is clear, consistent, and organized, so that everyone involved feels they have been made aware of the topic, treated fairly and with respect. Like an iceberg, most of what matters for a public meeting is below the surface in the preparation phase.

2. Meeting Conduct

How to conduct an effective public meeting as a public entity, and how to put your best foot forward as an applicant.

3. Meeting Follow Up

How to respond after a meeting, regardless of the outcome, to maintain relationships and create future opportunities for both the community and developer.



Meeting Preparation: Public Sector

Preparation for effective public meetings on the part of local governments is a process that never truly ends. It requires effective onboarding and training for elected and appointed officials, regular maintenance of bylaws and operating procedures, and effective local policies and codes that foster a high-quality development review process. The following recommendations address those items that are most critical for review of industrial development projects.

1. Start with the rules and procedures.

Many planning commission and elected body rules of procedure are dated and have been replaced over time by "unwritten" rules that apply to how meetings function. It is critical that these rules that govern how a public body conducts business are kept up to date and are followed on a regular basis, with member trainings provided annually. Rules should be reviewed prior to highly contentious meetings and be made accessible to the public to ensure everyone is on the same page. Each board or commission should assign a member responsible for this duty (typically the secretary).

2. Establish a consistent, multi-disciplinary development review procedure.

No one wants to be surprised in a public meeting. Ensure your community has established a consistent process for review of proposed developments that ensures staff, applicants, and the decision-making body have adequate time to fully review a development proposal and to address any simple non-discretionary items before the public meeting.

3. Invest in technology that makes transparency easy.

Uploading meeting agendas, materials, rules, and expectations to a municipal website before a meeting allows those in attendance to understand meeting format and see what is being proposed for themselves, rather than feeling in the dark about the project and process.

4. Adopt a public participation plan.

Establishing a simple public participation plan provides a framework for developers to follow when working with your community on major projects.

Guidance from Redevelopment Ready Communities (RRC)

5. Create a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document.

Nine times out of ten, staff and/or consultants will correctly guess what questions the public will ask. Proactively creating an FAQ that is posted and shared in advance can help answer questions, prevent disinformation, and educate community members about the project. It can also be a useful tool to ensure that staff and decision-makers clearly understand the request before them.

6. Establish ground rules.

On the agenda, or as a separate handout, have listed the expectations and rules for conduct (which, ideally, are outlined in your bylaws). This should include the amount of time allotted per speaker (2-3 minutes), refraining from personal attacks, not displaying posters, and not clapping, shouting, or making other expressions of support/opposition.

When a Meeting Is Highly Contentious

If you are anticipating that a meeting will spark specific contention, preparing for various scenarios and logistics can be critical. To ensure a safe meeting amidst high tensions, consider the following:

What is the anticipated crowd size? Schedule a room that can accommodate a large crowd comfortably, study the fire code for the location you select, and keep doors locked until 30 minutes before the meeting begins.

Placing a barrier between the podium and the board/commission can provide an extra level of safety, with police presence as deemed necessary.

Consider having a sign-up sheet at the door for those that wish to give public comment, allowing the board to announce who is next.

If permissible, have a panel of SMEs join as an agenda item to share project facts.

Resources and Further Reading

Michigan Association of Planning

Michigan Municipal League

Michigan State University Extension Michigan Citizen Planner

Redevelopment Ready Communities

Meeting Conduct: Public Sector

Public meetings with significant attendance and passionate community members offer a great opportunity to showcase your community's level of professionalism and commitment to an open and transparent process. These meetings can also jeopardize long-standing relationships between elected and appointed officials, as well as the careers of staff, if handled poorly. As a local government, the following approaches to conducting public meetings will help maintain a professional and respectful environment that reflects positively on your community.

1. Review the rules.

At the beginning of the meeting and prior to hearing public comment, take a few minutes to review the ground rules for conduct. This should be read by the chairperson and consistently adhered to throughout the meeting to promote helpful discussion and maintain order. Ensure that questions are directed to the reviewing body, not to the applicant. Do not hesitate to call out when a rule has been violated to keep things on track.

2. Avoid back-and-forth.

Responses to public comment should not be made by staff or local officials during the public hearing. This opens the meeting up for unhelpful discussion and can make it difficult to maintain order. Allow public comment to proceed, conduct the business of the board, and then, if members or staff would like to respond to comments, they should do so during the allotted comment period at the end of the meeting.

3. Focus on the "what" not the "who."

A key tenet of land use law is that the land use stays with the property, not with the owner. In reviewing a land use request, do not focus on who the business owner is or where their money comes from; those are not in your decision-making standards. Public comments should be pertinent to the request.

4. Review the process with decision-makers.

At the beginning of the decision-making process, review the procedure and provide a summary of the actions available to local officials at the meeting. Clarify whether the body is making a recommendation to another board or commission, a preliminary or final decision, or some other action.

5. Use your standards.

Your standards are a critical decision-making tool. Read them aloud, discuss each standard in front of the public, and encourage each member of the decision-making body to speak so that the public and the applicant can listen to understand their viewpoint. Open deliberation facilitates a transparent and defensible decision-making process, particularly if the body's final decision is appealed. Many communities find it helpful to provide pre-written sample motion language, making the act of drafting a motion less challenging.

Utilizing "Soft Skills"

Keeping in mind that we are all human, it's important to lead with empathy and kindness, especially in tense or challenging times.

Demonstrate empathy.
Acknowledge people's feelings, understanding that the proposed change can raise anxieties. Set an expectation that everyone will be given a chance to speak without interruption, and people should be treated with respect.

Treat people with kindness.
Many speakers during a public hearing are not familiar with the process and are most likely not used to speaking in public. Acknowledge this reality and welcome speakers. Thank everyone, regardless of their statements, for their comments.

Meeting Follow-Up: Public Sector

Ensuring that there is closure and an understanding of next steps, regardless of the outcome of a public meeting where decisions are made, is a valuable best practice for any development decision. It is particularly important for significant projects.

1. Provide a written summary of next steps.

Once a decision is made, provide the applicant with a letter summarizing the outcome of the decision and what their next steps are in the development process. This should include options for appeal of the decision. These letters will generally include similar information and can be revised with relatively little effort for each application.

2. Follow through on the development process.

Project approval is just the first stage in the development review process. Working with the applicant to coordinate discussions with other reviewing agencies (Road Authority, EGLE, Drain Commission, Utility Companies, etc.) provides a speedier overall review process and helps avoid potentially conflicting feedback between reviewing agencies.



Meeting Preparation: Private Sector

Similar to local governments, effective meeting preparation for developers must begin well in advance of the meeting itself. The quality of due diligence, design, and community engagement conducted prior to the meeting has a greater impact on the outcome than any information presented during the meeting itself.

1. Do your homework.

Review and understand existing local plans and ordinances that impact your development. Discuss with staff any concerns they may have, how the public might respond, and what options should be explored to mitigate potential issues. Inquire about other recently reviewed projects, lessons learned, and effective ways to communicate with the public.

2. Don't avoid public meetings.

Proactively conduct at least one information open house in advance of the development review meeting with neighbors and the community. Share draft designs and information. Listen to people's concerns and know that you don't have to address them on the spot. Use the feedback as an opportunity to improve the design and then share how you addressed community concerns during the public hearing. *See Community Engagement and Communication* and *Facilitating an Effective Open House.*

3. Prepare complete plans.

While many minor issues may be addressed by a conditional approval, the longer the list of conditions required for approval, the more awkward the approval gets for the public body. Ensure you have addressed all non-discretionary items to the best of your ability so the reviewing body can focus on the big picture, not whether or not landscaping provisions have been met.

4. Be responsive.

Staff or consultants will usually conduct a review of your application in advance. Provide a tracked response in writing addressing any concerns or questions that can serve as a supplement to your original submission.

5. Own the narrative.

Do not wait for staff or planning commissioners to come to their own conclusions about whether or not the development meets special land use or rezoning requirements. Rather, provide a clear summary of why the development meets the standards, using information from other community plans and policies to make your argument.

6. Understand the process.

Prior to the meeting, ensure you understand the agenda and the manner in which the public hearing will be conducted. How much time will you have to present? Know when you are expected to speak, and when you are not.

Prepare a Frequently Asked Questions sheet (FAQ).

Having an FAQ sheet can play a vital role in the success and speed of a development review process by doing the following:

1. Providing transparency by proactively speaking to the details of the proposed project, addressing concerns and potential misunderstanding.

2. Allowing for consistency in voice, ensuring that the public is provided with unchanging answers and that all parties are aligned on their responses to key questions.

3. Enhancing project efficiency by supplying thoughtful and readily-available information for all stakeholders, linking to related resources as needed.

Private and public sector individuals involved in a project may consider preparing an FAQ sheet together; each party knows of different questions that will arise and having a shared understanding of the answers to these questions early on in the project sets the tone for success.

Examples

Plainfield, MI: Brownfield Redevelopment Authority FAQ

Van Buren Data Center FAQ

Meeting Conduct: Private Sector

As a developer or applicant in a public meeting, the most important thing you can convey is a commitment to the project's success and a desire to fulfill your obligations. The greater your level of uncertainty and/or the more hypothetical or vague your responses are, the less comfortable local officials and the public will be with the project. If the public is in attendance and has fears or concerns, they are looking for straightforward answers. Provide clear, direct responses and be honest about the business' needs and the limitations of what you can mitigate.

1. Carefully select your messenger.

Communities may perceive an attorney as someone who is there to challenge their authority or decision-making process—putting them in a defensive stance. While this may not always be the case, the plant manager or business owner may be a better representative to authentically present the project (with legal counsel there to advise, if needed).

2. Be prepared.

Have handouts, a PowerPoint presentation, or display boards to share with the reviewing body and audience members. This conveys a sense of openness and willingness to share information. The project details were provided in your submission, so keep your presentation short and simple while also acknowledging and responding to pre-identified concerns.

3. Directly address "the process."

Express to the reviewing body the process for which your proposal is being reviewed and what the standards are that you are addressing. For example, the issues that should be addressed in a rezoning hearing differ significantly from a special land use or site plan review.

4. State facts and avoid pointing out past mistakes.

Provide clear facts and data to support your case, rather than opinions. Past projects, precedents, and experiences in other communities are invaluable for illustrating the potential benefits of a project and how it will not be harmful. Stating that a project should be approved because a worse project exists in the same vicinity, or that the local unit of government has approved similar projects in the past, is not only irrelevant to most land use review standards, but it also places you in an adversarial position with the community.

5. Don't rush a decision.

While waiting another 30 days for a decision is never preferred, pushing for a decision or rushing a body to decide commonly backfires and can produce even more delays in the long run. Going into the meeting, expect that you will receive feedback and will likely need to make changes to your plan. If a board, council, or commission requests additional time or information, provide it. If, for some reason, time is particularly critical, communicate the time constraints at play, but don't necessarily expect a sympathetic response.



Education is key.

Large, complex industrial and manufacturing projects are not common in most communities. Unlike reviewing a new restaurant or housing development, a locality may have one significant industrial project over the course of several years. Be prepared to educate decision-makers and the community about your business operations and materials, industry best practices, and your company's commitment to safety and environmental quality. Pictures can say a thousand words, so a slideshow or display boards that "zoom in" to various elements of a site is a great way to show you are listening to community concerns while also educating everyone in attendance about the project.

Meeting Follow-Up: Private Sector

A final zoning decision is only the first step. Ensuring that you have clear documentation of the decision reached, a final copy of the minutes, and a clear understanding of the next steps in the development review process is absolutely essential.

1. Get the decision in writing.

Ask for clear confirmation, either in the form of an official copy of the meeting minutes or a letter signed by staff or the chairperson of the relevant body, of your project's approval or denial.

2. Additional follow-up.

If you are denied and feel that there were factors that complicated the decision-making process that may have legal arguments, you may wish to request verbatim meeting transcripts or recordings to preserve the record. Meet with the community's staff and elected officials to evaluate alternative approaches. If you are approved, you will want to schedule a follow-up meeting with staff to discuss the development review processes for demolition, movement of soils, utilities, building permits, and other applicable permits.

3. Maintain a positive relationship.

Regardless of the meeting outcome, you're most likely going to be working with the local unit of government again, whether it is on additional project reviews or an appeal process. Keep the door open through professional communication rather than casting blame or immediately threatening legal action.

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

12. Project Communications, FOIAs, and NDAs

SECTOR: 

PHASE: ●○○

Industrial projects **move fast** and **attract attention.**

Communities are often trying to do two things at once—protect legitimate confidential information and maintain public trust through a fair, predictable process. When communication breaks down, FOIA becomes the default channel for residents seeking information, and rumors can fill whatever gaps remain. But this is avoidable. **This tool is a practical guide for local units of government on three linked topics:**

1. Preventing unnecessary FOIAs through proactive communication.
2. Using NDAs appropriately and narrowly.
3. Setting project communication protocols that keep complex projects orderly, transparent, and defensible.

Key definitions include the following:

FOIA. Michigan's Freedom of Information Act (PA 442 of 1976). Provides public access to public records held by government bodies.

FOIA request. A formal or informal request by any person or entity to receive copies of or inspect public records from a unit of government.

NDA. Non-Disclosure Agreement. A legally binding contract establishing confidentiality between parties to protect sensitive information.

OMA. Michigan's Open Meetings Act (PA 267 of 1976). Requires that public bodies conduct business in meetings open to the public, with limited exceptions.

Closed session. A meeting closed to the public, permitted only for specific purposes enumerated in the OMA, such as attorney–client privilege, property acquisition, or pending litigation. Must be properly noticed and voted into by the public body.

Information Governance

Many FOIA and NDA problems arise from unclear internal practices. Before a project becomes public, establish basic information management protocols.

Document management:

- Store project files on shared municipal drives, not personal computers, phones, or personal cloud accounts.
- Avoid using text messages or personal email for project-related discussions. In many cases, these are still subject to FOIA regardless of the device or account used.
- Label drafts clearly as drafts. Include dates and version numbers.
- Avoid creating informal notes, side memos, or commentary outside official project records. If it exists, it may be discoverable.
- Confirm that record retention practices align with your municipality's adopted records retention schedule.

Why This Matters

Good information governance supports proactive public communication and reduces unnecessary exposure in a FOIA response. When documents are organized, labeled, and stored properly, staff can respond to requests efficiently and accurately, rather than scrambling to locate files scattered across personal devices and email threads.



Photo by LogicalDOC.

Communication Protocols

Industrial projects become contentious when messaging is inconsistent, unclear, or absent. Assume that constituents will be curious and watching closely. Establish communication protocols at project kickoff, well before any rumor cycles begin.

Set expectations with all parties.

At the start of any significant industrial project, align messaging expectations with:

- Elected and appointed officials
- Municipal staff
- The developer or applicant team
- Local and regional economic development organizations
- Relevant state partners
- Consultants acting in a staff or advisory capacity

Establish a communication structure.

Agree early on about who handles what. Document this structure internally so there is no ambiguity when questions start arriving.

Municipal spokesperson. Who speaks for the community on this project? It could be the city manager, township supervisor, planning director, mayor, or others, but this should be explicit.

Technical questions. Who answers questions about infrastructure, site conditions, and review status? It is usually the planning director, engineer, or community development director.

Media inquiries. Who responds to reporters? This should be a single point of contact to prevent conflicting statements.

Project updates. Who maintains the project webpage, FAQ document, and public timeline?

Applicant coordination. Who is the primary liaison between the municipality and the developer's team?

Messaging Discipline

Maintain consistent messaging across staff and consultants. Everyone involved should be working from the same set of facts.

Prepare elected officials early on the approval process. Remind them that the local review process includes multiple points where conditions can be imposed, improvements required, or an application denied. This is not a rubber stamp.

Do not let confidentiality become silence. Where you cannot share specifics, address speculation with plain-language explanations of the process and its boundaries. Silence reads as concealment, and surprise breeds contempt.

When in doubt, communicate what you can rather than saying nothing at all.

Media Coordination

Media confusion frequently triggers increased public suspicion and FOIA requests. Get ahead of this by establishing media protocols before the first inquiry arrives.

- Align on announcement timing between the municipality, the developer, and state partners.
- Determine whether public statements will be joint or separate, and draft them in advance.
- Prepare three to five key message points that all parties can reference consistently.
- Avoid conflicting statements across agencies. A developer saying one thing while the community says another is the fastest way to erode credibility.

Decide how social media comments will be addressed.

Identify the various communication channels that will be used, understanding the deadlines for publication of each. Name the point of contact, website address, or other sources that can be referred to for additional information.

FAQs: The Most Effective Trust-Building Tool

A well-maintained Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document reduces FOIAs, improves the quality of public meetings, and limits the spread of misinformation.

It provides a predictable baseline of information without requiring one-off responses to individual inquiries.

A strong FAQ answers the questions residents are actually asking:

> What is being proposed, and what is not?
>
> What stage is the project in right now?
>
> What approvals are required, and when will they be considered?
>
> How can the public participate, and when?
>
> What protections apply, including buffers, truck routes, environmental standards, design requirements?
>
> Where will updates be posted?

Be sure to host the FAQ in an easy-to-access location on the municipal website and share through other channels. Update FAQs regularly as the project evolves. *See FAQ Recommendations in Conducting a Successful Public Meeting.*

Managing Early-Stage Conversations

Many industrial projects begin informally.

A site selector calls, a developer inquires about utility capacity, or a state economic development partner makes an introduction. These early conversations are often the most delicate because they involve market-sensitive information, preliminary feasibility assessments, and parties who have not yet committed to anything.

How a community handles this phase sets the tone for everything that follows.

Best practices:

> Involve municipal counsel early to define the boundaries of what can and cannot be discussed, and with whom.
>
> Keep internal distribution lists focused and documented. Not everyone needs to know everything at this stage, but who knows what should be tracked.
>
> Avoid making policy commitments or zoning assurances before formal review. Saying "we can make that work" in a preliminary conversation can create expectations that are difficult to walk back.
>
> Prepare language explaining why certain details cannot yet be shared. Staff should not have to improvise responses under pressure.
>
> Plan deliberately for the transition from confidential discussions to public process. This shift should feel intentional, not reactive.

Review your community's master plan to assess whether the proposed project aligns with adopted goals and land use designations before discussions progress. *See Master Planning for Industrial.*

Open Meetings Act (OMA) Compliance

While early coordination is vital, teams must be structured to comply with Michigan's OMA:

> **Sub-quorum strategy.** Ensure the number of elected officials from any single jurisdiction is less than a quorum (e.g., no more than 3 members of a 7-member board). This allows the group to act as an "advisory committee" rather than a "public body."
>
> **Advisory nature.** These early meetings should focus on fact-finding and evaluation rather than making final, binding decisions. All formal approvals must still occur during noticed public meetings.
>
> **Avoid "serial quorums."** Do not share deliberations from sub-quorum meetings with the remaining board members in a way that builds a "private consensus" before the public hearing.

FOIAs

1. Prevent FOIAs first.

FOIA exists so the public can access information it is legally entitled to. But in practice, FOIA requests often arrive not because information is being withheld, but because residents do not know who to ask, do not trust what they are hearing, or cannot find basic project information.

The most effective FOIA strategy is to reduce the conditions that trigger requests in the first place.

Give the project a face.

FOIA can feel like submitting a formal complaint to a blank government wall. A named staff point of contact reduces anonymity, builds trust, and provides a channel for questions before they escalate into formal records requests. Many potential FOIA requests are really just questions that nobody answered.

Practical steps that consistently reduce FOIA volume:

- Assign a single staff point of contact for public inquiries, with a designated backup.
- Require a single applicant or developer point of contact.
- Define roles at kickoff—who answers public questions, who manages document routing, who speaks for the applicant.
- Maintain a simple project page on the municipal website with status updates, key documents, and a timeline.
- Publish predictable updates that describe what you know, what you do not yet know, and what happens next.

Municipal counsel should weigh in early on how staff should engage with the public, particularly where confidentiality claims may arise.

2. FOIA Readiness

- Communities should not invent FOIA procedures mid-project. A visible, understandable process builds credibility before it is tested.
- Maintain a documented FOIA policy that describes timelines, routing procedures, fee schedules, and record retention requirements.
- Clearly identify a FOIA coordinator. This is typically the clerk, but may include counsel depending on the municipality's structure.
- Make the FOIA process easy to find on the municipal website, including how to submit requests and expected response timelines.
- Ensure that staff across departments understand the basics—what constitutes a public record, how requests are routed, and what the response obligations are.

Communities should avoid creating the perception that FOIA is the only path to project information. When FOIA becomes the primary communication channel, it signals a trust failure.

3. Know what becomes discoverable.

Assume that project communications may become public. This is not a reason to avoid written communication, but it is a reason to keep communications professional, factual, and disciplined.

- Once information is in the hands of the planning commission or other public body, it is generally discoverable.
- Properly noticed closed sessions are permitted only for specific purposes under the OMA and should be guided by counsel.
- Consultants acting in a staff capacity—planning consultants, engineering firms, environmental consultants—may be subject to FOIA for project-related communications.
- Communications on personal devices and accounts may still be subject to FOIA if they relate to public business.
- OMA requirements should inform all meeting transparency practices, including the use of study sessions, work sessions, and subcommittee meetings.

4. When a FOIA Request Arrives

When a request comes in, the response should be timely, neutral, and professional. The requester is exercising a legal right.

- Route the request immediately to the FOIA coordinator and municipal counsel.
- Counsel determines what qualifies for exemption, such as attorney–client privilege, trade secrets, or personal privacy, and what must be redacted versus released.
- Work with the requester to narrow overly broad requests when possible. A cooperative posture reduces conflict.
- Avoid "document dumps"—the practice of releasing massive volumes of unsorted material as a form of passive resistance. This escalates conflict and damages credibility.
- Maintain structured communication lanes throughout the process. A FOIA response should not contradict or undermine parallel public messaging.

Respond within the timelines required by statute. Extensions are permitted under the Act, but should be communicated clearly and used only when genuinely necessary.

Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs)

NDAs are intended to protect proprietary or market-sensitive information. In industrial development they can be appropriate, but only in limited circumstances. Municipalities operate within transparency laws, and NDAs do not override FOIA or Open Meetings Act requirements.

When NDAs Are Appropriate

NDAs are most appropriate in the following situations:

- Early-stage conversations when a prospective user has not yet made a final site decision and premature disclosure could influence that decision.
- When financial models, proprietary process information, or trade secrets are being shared for feasibility evaluation.
- When premature disclosure could materially affect land pricing, competing bids, or the applicant's competitive positioning.

In these situations, an NDA provides structure and legal clarity while feasibility is being evaluated. It allows parties to share information that would not otherwise be exchanged.

Limitations in a Public Setting

NDAs have important limitations when a public body is a party:

- They do not override FOIA. If a record is subject to disclosure under the Act, an NDA cannot prevent its release.
- Information discussed in an open meeting cannot later be made confidential through an NDA.
- Elected officials may have limited ability to be individually bound, and NDA obligations should not be interpreted as preventing officials from carrying out their public duties.
- Overly broad NDAs create political risk and erode public trust. If residents learn that their elected officials signed a secrecy agreement, the narrative writes itself.

What a Well-Drafted NDA Should Include

Municipalities should work closely with legal counsel to ensure any NDA is narrowly tailored. At a minimum, the agreement should:

- Clearly define what constitutes confidential information by category, not by blanket reference to "all project information."
- Specify the duration of the confidentiality obligation, with a clear expiration date or triggering event.
- Acknowledge that the municipality remains subject to FOIA and the OMA.
- Avoid blanket language that attempts to cover the entire project or all communications between the parties.
- Include a provision allowing the municipality to disclose information required by law, court order, or regulatory obligation.



Photo by Progressive Companies.

The NDA as Boundary, Not Barrier

An NDA defines what cannot be shared. Equally important, it clarifies what can be shared. Even when the identity of a prospective developer or end user must remain confidential, staff can often communicate:

> The type of use being considered (manufacturing, distribution, data center) without naming the company.
>
> The stage of the evaluation process and what decisions remain.
>
> What approvals will be required and what the public's role will be.
>
> What standards, protections, and requirements apply under local ordinances.
>
> What the project is not, correcting misinformation without revealing confidential details.

Think of the NDA as a fence with a gate, not a wall. It defines where the boundary is so that everything outside it can be discussed freely. When paired with proactive messaging and clear communication protocols, NDAs can support orderly project evaluation without undermining public trust.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

The following errors appear frequently in industrial development projects across the region. Each one is avoidable with the practices described in this tool.

Mistake	Why it Matters
Signing overly broad NDAs without understanding scope	Creates legal exposure and political risk when the scope becomes public
Using an NDA as a blanket refusal to discuss process	Residents interpret silence as concealment, triggering opposition and FOIAs
Allowing inconsistent messaging across officials and staff	Contradictory statements destroy credibility faster than anything else
Failing to explain the approval process publicly	Residents assume decisions have already been made behind closed doors
Communicating sensitive information via text or personal email	Creates discoverable records outside of managed systems and complicates FOIA responses
Assuming that "no news" requires no update	Silence is never interpreted as neutral. People assume the worst when they hear nothing
Inventing FOIA procedures mid-project	Signals disorganization and invites suspicion about what is being hidden
Holding informal pre-meetings without documentation	Creates perception of backroom deals and may violate the OMA

Key Takeaway

FOIA, NDAs, and project communication are one system. Communities that establish clear information governance, assign points of contact, publish predictable updates, use NDAs narrowly, and maintain disciplined messaging can preserve transparency without letting the process devolve into crisis response.

The goal is not to eliminate FOIA requests or avoid NDAs entirely. The goal is to create conditions where FOIA is a backstop rather than the primary communication channel, where NDAs protect genuinely sensitive information rather than serving as a blanket for secrecy, and where the public has enough reliable information to engage constructively rather than adversarially.

The communities that manage industrial development most effectively are not the ones that control information the tightest. They are the ones that share the most, the earliest, through the clearest channels.

Further Reading

MML: Open Meetings Act

Freedom Of Information Act Handbook

13. Brownfields and Incentives

SECTOR: 

PHASE: ●●○

Using Michigan's tools to secure the right industrial development on the right sites with clear **community value.**

Incentives are one of the most important tools in industrial development. Using them strategically can allow developers and communities to solve site problems, generate jobs and tax base, and establish a higher standard of project development.

This tool is about using Michigan's brownfield and incentive tools deliberately, with the goal being that communities can make the right projects feasible, especially on contaminated, obsolete, or strategically important sites that would otherwise sit idle.

Incentives belong in true "but for" situations, where the desired project would not move forward without public support, or where incentives can secure public improvements the private sector will not fund on its own. When a community applies this approach to incentives, and pairs it with a transparent, open process, industrial development can be part of a predictable and welcome economic development platform.

Photo by Racer Trust, Buick City in Flint, MI.

Understanding the Michigan Incentive Landscape

Michigan has a deep toolbox for incentives, which can sometimes be confusing for those not involved in the incentives process daily. In general, the tools group into four categories:

- Site-specific brownfield financing
- Local development platforms
- Tax exemptions and abatements
- Performance-based state and federal incentives

An Introduction to Brownfields

A brownfield is not necessarily a contaminated industrial site. Under Michigan law, a property qualifies if it meets at least one of four conditions: it is a contaminated "facility," blighted, functionally obsolete, or a historic resource. A vacant store, an aging office building, or an underused industrial parcel can all qualify with no contamination present. The common thread is that there is an economic roadblock to reuse, which is exactly what brownfield tools are designed to overcome.

Left alone, these vacant or underused sites can suppress nearby property values, concentrate disinvestment, and consume public services while contributing little tax base. Returned to use, they recycle land that already has infrastructure, reduce pressure to develop greenfields elsewhere, and ultimately provide tax revenue for a community. **For many communities looking for shovel-ready sites, targeting their brownfields is often the most realistic first step in providing locations for industrial development, as long as the site's barriers can be financed.**

Act 381 Brownfield TIF: The Backbone of Site Reuse

Public Act 381 of 1996 authorizes a local Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (BRA) to capture the new tax increment generated by redevelopment and use it to reimburse eligible costs, such as environmental remediation, demolition, lead and asbestos abatement, site preparation, and certain public infrastructure. As detailed on the following pages, the BRA is the foundation of nearly every industrial site reuse deal in Michigan.

Core Communities and the Eligibility Gap

The Brownfield Act provides broader eligibility, and broader non-environmental cost reimbursement, inside state-designated "Core Communities" and certain "Qualified Local Governmental Units" (generally older urbanized municipalities with documented disinvestment). Outside Core Communities, your BRA must work hard to demonstrate true blight, functional obsolescence, or contamination on each eligible property. Suburban and greenfield-oriented communities frequently find Brownfield TIF too narrow to support broader economic development goals. In those cases, a Local Development Finance Authority (LDFA) may be more useful.

The Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (BRA)

The BRA is the public entity that makes brownfield financing work. Where there is no active BRA, the most powerful redevelopment financing tool in Michigan simply is not available.

A BRA is more than a pass-through for reimbursements. Its statutory powers include reviewing and recommending brownfield plans, administering TIF reimbursement, managing development agreements, owning or leasing property, accepting grants, issuing bonds, and funding studies such as environmental assessments or housing needs analyses. Used fully, it is an active redevelopment partner, not a paperwork body.

Establishing and Administering a BRA

Creating a BRA follows a defined path—the governing body adopts a resolution of intent, holds a noticed public hearing, then adopts the establishing resolution and files it with the Michigan Department of State.

A board of generally five to nine members is appointed to staggered terms, holds an organizational meeting, adopts bylaws, and elects officers. Many communities streamline governance by appointing members who already serve on a related body, such as a Downtown Development Authority (DDA), planning commission, or Economic Development Corporation (EDC), which can keep the redevelopment conversation coordinated.

Either a local municipality or a county can administer plans; county-administered BRAs are common in smaller communities. Where a county administers a plan, the host local unit must adopt additional resolutions of support before county approval.

Municipal Takeaway: check for a dormant BRA before you build one.

Before launching a new BRA, review old council records, as a community may already have an authority that can be reactivated with far less effort than starting new.

What is an Economic Development Organization?

An Economic Development Organization (EDO) is an entity charged with growing a community's tax base, job count, and investment activity. It can be public, quasi-public, or nonprofit. In Michigan, EDOs typically operate at the county or municipal level, though regional EDOs like DRP coordinate across multiple jurisdictions.

What they do. EDOs sit at the intersection of the public sector, private developers, and site selectors. Core functions can include:

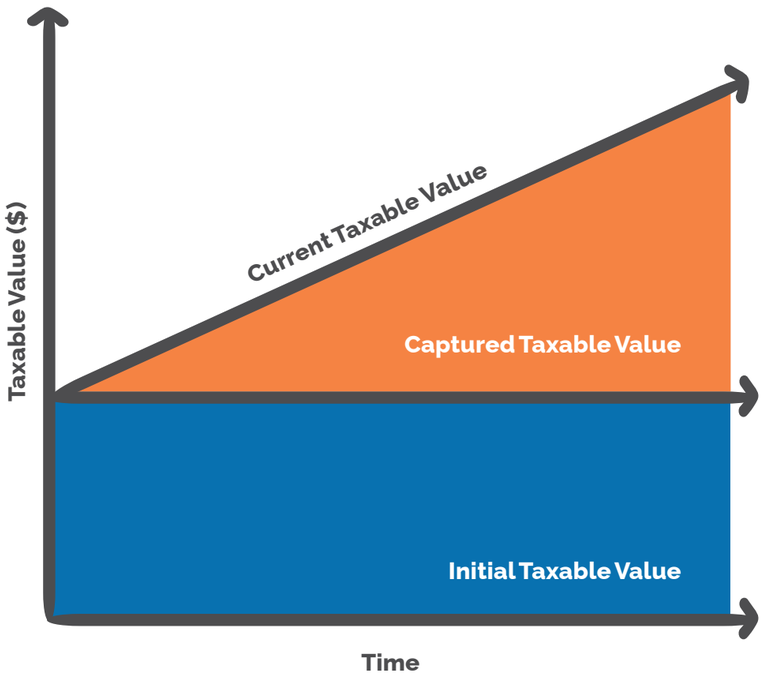
- Business attraction and retention, including responding to site-selector RFIs and managing prospect pipelines
- Site readiness, meaning an inventory of shovel-ready parcels and coordinated due diligence
- Incentive packaging across TIF, Act 381, PA 198 abatements, MSF grants, and Renaissance Zones
- Real estate strategy, including redevelopment planning, land assembly, and RFP issuance
- Workforce and ecosystem coordination with Michigan Works!, MEDC, and local anchors
- Marketing the community to new investors

How they're funded. Funding models vary. Public EDOs are typically supported through general fund appropriations, dedicated millages, or contracts with their host municipality. Quasi-public EDOs are the most common structure, and they blend public funding with private-sector membership dues, foundation grants, or fee-for-service revenue on specific projects. Some capture administrative fees from brownfield or LDFA activity. Regional EDOs often rely heavily on corporate investors and grant funding alongside county contributions.

Why they matter for redevelopment. For a local unit without in-house development staff, the local EDO can provide horsepower to get deals done. They often hold the relationships with organizations like MEDC, know which tools fit which deal, and can quarterback the incentives and negotiation process to help close deals.

How Brownfield TIF Works

Tax increment financing is how many brownfield projects get some of their funding. When a property is redeveloped, its value rises and so do its property taxes. The difference between taxes paid before and after redevelopment is the "increment." The BRA captures that increment for a defined period, up to a statutory maximum of 30 years, to reimburse the developer for eligible costs. Existing tax revenue keeps flowing to the taxing jurisdictions exactly as before; only the new, project-created increment is captured.



Local Tax Capture vs. School Tax Capture

This distinction is where many municipal staff and elected officials get confused. A BRA can capture two streams of tax increment, and they have very different approval paths:

Local tax capture. Increment on local operating, county, library, and other non-school millages. Approved at the local level by the BRA and the governing body. No state sign-off required for local-only capture.

School tax capture. Increment on the State Education Tax (SET) and local school operating millage. Requires a state-approved Work Plan: EGLE for environmental activities, MSF/MEDC for non-environmental. School capture is the high-leverage piece for most deals; treat the work plan as a deliverable, not a formality.

Eligible Activities

Act 381 divides eligible activities into two categories, and that division determines which agency reviews any request to capture school taxes. Environmental activities include Phase I and II assessments, baseline environmental assessments, due care, and response activities such as contaminated soil removal and vapor mitigation, are reviewed by EGLE and require the property to be a contaminated "facility." Non-environmental activities, such as demolition, lead and asbestos abatement, site preparation, and public infrastructure, are reviewed by the MEDC on behalf of the Michigan Strategic Fund (MSF).

Administrative Capture and the LBRF

Administrative capture retains a portion of the increment to cover the authority's ongoing costs. The Local Brownfield Revolving Fund (LBRF) lets the BRA continue capturing increment for up to five years after a developer is fully reimbursed, seeding future work, such as assessments, due care, area-wide planning, or loans to later projects. Two limits apply—only environmental activities can fund the LBRF and school operating tax deposits are subject to a fifty percent cap. Plans can be customized per project, including front-loading the LBRF for a specific identified community need.

The Project Approval Process

A project moves through a predictable sequence—the developer scopes the project with the community; a brownfield plan is drafted identifying the eligible property, activities, costs, and tax impact; the BRA reviews and recommends it; a noticed public hearing is held; the governing body approves the plan; and a reimbursement agreement is executed. Local-only capture requires no state sign-off. If school tax capture is sought, an Act 381 Work Plan goes to the appropriate agency—EGLE for environmental, MSF/MEDC for non-environmental—which typically responds within 60 days. County-administered plans add the local supporting resolutions before county approval.

Myths and Community Concerns

Brownfield redevelopment is widely misunderstood, and those misunderstandings stall good projects at the decision-maker table. Oftentimes, residents can raise legitimate questions. To those not involved in the day-to-day planning of brownfield incentives, the process can appear deliberately confusing or opaque. The following are responses to some of the more common community concerns:

Brownfield programs do not raise taxes or give away public dollars. Tax increment finance reimburses eligible costs only out of the new revenue the project itself creates; existing revenue is untouched and reimbursement is pay-as-you-go.

Brownfield programs are not a developer handout. Reimbursement is capped at documented eligible costs and flows only if the tax increment is created; the financial risk sits primarily with the developer.

Brownfield programs do not take money from schools. New school operating taxes are not always captured, and if they are, the State ensures the funding is covered.

Not every old site qualifies, and failure is not the community's risk. Only properties meeting the statutory criteria are eligible, and plans can be amended or terminated if a project stalls, with the community having nothing to pay back if value is never created.

Educating local officials and the public on these points before a specific project arrives is the single most useful thing a community can do to make brownfield tools usable when the time comes.



Local Development Finance Authority (LDFA): The Untapped Platform

Authorized under the Local Development Financing Act (PA 281), an LDFA lets a municipality establish a development district and capture tax increment within that district to fund a defined set of public purposes. Unlike a BRA, an LDFA does not require you to prove blight, contamination, or functional obsolescence.

Eligible districts include:

- Industrial corridors and manufacturing hubs
- Technology parks and innovation districts
- Research and development campuses
- Defense and mobility supplier clusters
- Strategic redevelopment areas

LDFA increment can fund:

- Public infrastructure: roads, water, sewer, stormwater, parking, sidewalks, lighting, broadband
- Site preparation: demolition, grading, environmental remediation, land assembly
- District-wide improvements that no single project would underwrite alone

The LDFA is often the most powerful tool available for those communities seeking new development as opposed to the redevelopment of existing sites. Some Michigan communities run both: a BRA to address site-specific redevelopment barriers and an LDFA to build a broader development ecosystem and tax capture. A further advantage is the board itself—beyond statutory requirements, an LDFA board can be built to include leaders from advanced manufacturing, defense, logistics, workforce development, higher education, and utilities, allowing the LDFA to build strong relationships with local business leaders.

Tax Exemptions and Abatements

PA 198 Industrial Facilities Exemption (IFT)

PA 198 allows a local unit to grant an Industrial Facilities Exemption Certificate for one to twelve years on eligible manufacturing, high-technology, and industrial property investment, abating a portion of the property tax on the new investment. It is the most commonly used industrial incentive in Michigan.

PA 198 also contains a Plant Rehabilitation District component that covers the reuse of functionally obsolete industrial structures. Because this district already addresses industrial facilities directly, the Obsolete Property Rehabilitation Act (OPRA) is generally not needed for these projects. OPRA is a separate program designed specifically for commercial properties.

PA 198 IFT Policies

A valuable step a community can take with PA 198 is to adopt a formal IFT policy. Without one, applicants, staff, and the public navigate a subjective process, and the community is exposed to being shopped against its neighbors. A formal policy, adopted by resolution of the legislative body, ties exemption terms to measurable criteria like capital investment, job creation and retention, wages, reuse of obsolete property, strategic-industry alignment, and economic impact. Removing the guesswork about desired outcomes and defining the timeline for exemption ensures a consistent and predictable development environment.

PA 198 Industrial Facilities Exemption

A practical structure in a community's policy pairs investment and job creation, each on its own scale.

The example to the right illustrates how a community might tier the amount of investment and job creation alongside the duration of PA 198 tax abatements a project would receive.

One approach commonly used is to add the two recommended terms together, then layer on bonus years for community priorities like brownfield reuse, target-industry alignment, jobs, or wages meaningfully above the county median. The total PA 198 term is capped at 12 years by statute.

Total Property Investment	Recommended Term Length
$500,000 – $999,999	5 Years
$1,000,000 – $2,999,999	6 Years
$3,000,000 – $4,999,999	7 Years
$5,000,000 – $9,999,999	8 Years
$10,000,000 – $19,999,999	9 Years
$20,000,000 – $29,999,999	10 Years
$30,000,000 – $39,999,999	11 Years
$40,000,000 +	12 Years

Job Creation	Recommended Term Length
5 – 10 Jobs	1 Year
11 – 25 Jobs	2 Years
26 – 50 Jobs	3 Years
51+ Jobs	4 Years

Performance-Based State Incentives

The State of Michigan and MEDC often provide competitive tools that are tied to specific performance outcomes. These tools are regularly changing, but are typically tied to strategic priorities set by the State related to job creation and investment.

Michigan Business Development Program (MBDP): grants, loans, or other assistance for projects creating qualified new jobs or significant investment, designed for projects choosing between Michigan and another state.

Michigan Community Revitalization Program (MCRP): gap financing for revitalization projects, most relevant to industrial-adjacent work involving adaptive reuse of historic buildings or placemaking. Closes a documented pro forma shortfall, not a subsidy for projects that already pencil.

Michigan New Jobs Training Program (MNJTP): customized community-college training for new jobs, repaid through captured state income tax withholdings.

Data Center Sales and Use Tax Exemption: a specialized, high-bar exemption for certified enterprise data centers meeting investment and wage thresholds.

Federal Trade Incentives: Foreign-Trade Zones

Foreign-Trade Zones (FTZs) are a federal tool that operate alongside state and local incentives. The Greater Detroit Foreign-Trade Zone, administered across seven Southeast Michigan counties, lets manufacturers, assemblers, and distributors defer, reduce, or eliminate U.S. Customs duties on imported materials. Unlike a property tax abatement, an FTZ does not change the project's tax bill to the municipality. For recruitment to the Detroit Region, FTZ activation status should be part of the conversation early.

When Incentives Are Justified, and When They Are Not

Incentives are most defensible in true "but for" conditions, where the project does not move forward without public support. The common justifications: environmental contamination or Part 201 due care costs the market will not absorb; demolition of obsolete structures or replacement of failing infrastructure; a documented financing gap on a strategic site of regional importance; or community standards above baseline, such as redesigned truck circulation, enhanced stormwater, rail access, deeper buffering, or safety features beyond code.

Conversely, if the site is clean, infrastructure is adequate, zoning is in place, and the model works at market conditions, incentives may not change the outcome, and offering them anyway can transfer public value to private return for no reason. That does not mean walking away: tie any assistance directly to public improvements the project would not otherwise deliver.

State Essential Services Assessment (ESA) and the EMPP

Michigan's manufacturing tax structure is layered, and one piece sits at the State level rather than the local level. The *Eligible Manufacturing Personal Property (EMPP) Exemption* removes most qualifying manufacturing personal property from local ad valorem taxation automatically, with no local approval required. In exchange, the State levies the Essential Services Assessment (ESA), a State-level tax administered by the Department of Treasury. For qualifying projects, the Michigan Strategic Fund can reduce or exempt the ESA.

Since 2013, qualifying manufacturing personal property is already exempt from local taxation before the local unit ever considers a PA 198 abatement. Layering a PA 198 abatement on personal property that is already EMPP-exempt is how communities believe they are providing a larger incentive than they actually are.

Before approving an aggressive PA 198 term, confirm with MEDC or Treasury what the applicant is already receiving at the State level.

Example: A manufacturer proposes a $10M facility with $6M in new manufacturing equipment. That $6M in personal property is already exempt from local taxation under EMPP, with the manufacturer paying ESA to the State instead. A local PA 198 abatement on that personal property abates nothing of value, because there is no local tax to abate. The meaningful local giveaway is the 50% real property abatement on the $4M building. Confirming the EMPP/ESA status up front lets the community calibrate the PA 198 term to what the project actually needs.

Match the Tool to the Problem

Most incentive missteps come from reaching for the wrong instrument. The table below pairs the most common project challenges with the most appropriate Michigan tools.

Project Challenge	Primary Tool(s)
Environmental contamination or Part 201 due care costs (site assessment, cleanup, monitoring, vapor intrusion mitigation, capping, groundwater management)	Act 381 BRA Plan (environmental, EGLE Work Plan); EGLE grants/loans
Demolition, site preparation, asbestos and lead abatement	Act 381 BRA Plan (non-environmental, MEDC/MSF Work Plan)
Planned multi-parcel industrial corridor or innovation district requiring 20+ years of coordinated public infrastructure investment	Local Development Finance Authority (LDFA)
New or expanding manufacturing facility investment	PA 198 Industrial Facilities Exemption and adopted IFT Policy
Functionally obsolete manufacturing facility reuse	PA 198 Plant Rehabilitation District
Significant manufacturing personal property investment (new production equipment, equipment upgrades, facility modernization, robotics and automation, tooling)	EMPP Exemption and MSF-approved ESA reduction or exemption
Competitive job creation against out-of-state location	Michigan Business Development Program (MBDP)
Mixed-use redevelopment with industrial or adaptive reuse components	Michigan Community Revitalization Program (MCRP); consider TBP for very large projects
Workforce training for new jobs	Michigan New Jobs Training Program (MNJTP) with community college partner
Global supply chain or customs duty pressure	Greater Detroit Foreign-Trade Zone (or other Michigan FTZ)
Certified enterprise data center investment	Data Center Sales and Use Tax Exemption

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

14. Community Benefits: Plans, Policies, Ordinances and Agreements

SECTOR:

PHASE: ●○○

Many terms and concepts around community benefits are inter-related, yet distinct. To develop an effective plan and ensure a positive result, it is critical that the terms are clearly defined and there is a common understanding between the developer, the relevant local unit of government, and the neighborhoods or residents impacted by the project.

Figure 1 provides a summary of various terms that are commonly associated with community benefits. Regardless of the terminology, any approach must emphasize the inherent value provided to both the developer and the community as a result of the project. Any approach requires an ongoing process of visioning, coalition building, creating, negotiating, implementing and follow-through.



Community Benefits Illustration (Source: ReImagine Appalachia)

Why Community Benefits?

Community benefits agreements are generally viewed very positively by residents and community advocacy organizations, but with trepidation by developers and municipalities. While there are many reasons to approach community benefits agreements cautiously, a community benefits approach presents many opportunities for helping break a logjam of public opposition to modern industrial development projects.

1. Greater Certainty

A well-conceived community benefits policy or ordinance clearly defines the ground rules for negotiation. Without a policy or ordinance, the perception can be that the community "gets nothing" out of the deal, or that the developer is being gouged for unreasonable project add-ons.

2. Benefits are Stated by the Community

Opposition to projects is often less about the particular project and more about resistance to development of any kind. A community benefits process allows a community and a developer to mutually agree to benefits the project will provide and state them together in writing.

3. Make New Friends

A community benefits agreement that specifies preferences for local contractors can turn people opposed to a project into supporters quickly when they see the potential for tangible financial benefits.

Common Community Benefits Terminology

Community Benefits Plans. As defined by the United States Department of Energy, community benefits plans "are intentionally flexible to generate the best approaches from applicants and their partners. Plans must be specific, actionable, and measurable." Plans are just that, a plan. They do not commit anyone to take any particular action, rather they provide a roadmap for proceeding from a current state to a desired end result to ensure tangible benefits result for the community.

Community Benefits Agreements. A community benefits agreement is a legal document that binds multiple parties to take actions that ensure the benefits of a new development accrue to the community in which it is located. These agreements may be between a developer and a coalition of neighborhood stakeholders and residents, between the developer and the city/local government in which it is located or a combination of developer, coalition, and city/local government. Other agreements may be a part of the overall structure, including good neighbor agreements with existing businesses or buildings that may be impacted by a new development.

Community Benefits Ordinances. Some communities have adopted ordinances that require developments over a certain size or developments that receive significant public subsidies to enter into community benefits agreements with the city and/or neighborhoods impacted by a proposed development. The most commonly cited ordinance in Michigan is the one adopted by the City of Detroit in 2016.

Sample Documents

Nashville MLS Soccer: Community Benefits Agreement

Buffalo Bills Stadium: Erie County, New York: Community Benefits Agreement

Detroit, Michigan: Community Benefits Ordinance

CASE STUDY

City of Grand Rapids, Grand Valley State University, and the Neighbors of Belknap Lookout

In 2016, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) expanded their Health Campus into Grand Rapids' Belknap Neighborhood. With this expansion, GVSU partnered with a developer to construct a 50-unit housing development intended for neighborhood residents.

Partnership between the school, the City, and the Neighbors of Belknap Lookout (NOBL) was instrumental in this work and made the end result stronger. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established for the "Belknap Place Apartments" to ensure the development of affordable, mixed-income housing as a direct response to community concerns regarding displacement and the loss of housing due to expansion projects by GVSU. This $12 million project included a housing mix of 80% affordable and 20% market rate homes.

The MOU entered into by the three parties established a variety of expectations for the university, with explicit approval criteria:

> Creation of a neighborhood master plan to be submitted and approved by the City planning director based on standards clearly identified in the MOU.

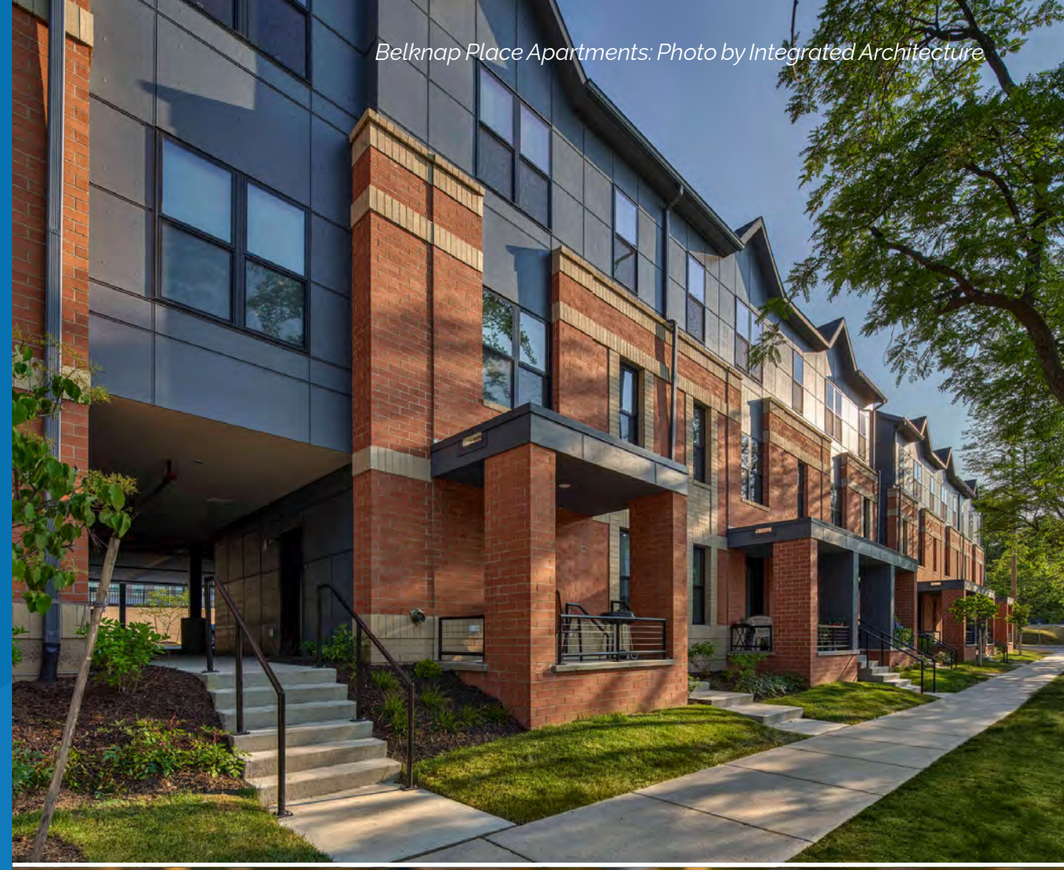
> Reservation of a portion of the site for the creation of affordable housing to be developed through a request for proposals process outlined in the MOU to replace the affordable housing that was to be demolished for university buildings.

> Employment of neighborhood residents during construction and operation of the eventual development.

> Review and development of public infrastructure in the neighborhood consistent with City processes for infrastructure development in other projects.

> Formation of a steering committee to oversee the neighborhood master planning process and ongoing regular communication and collaboration.

The project's use of a MOU allowed GVSU to provide a housing development that its neighbors could support and stand behind. Community benefits pave the way for organizations to live out their values, form lasting relationships and partnerships, and make meaningful projects possible.



Belknap Place Apartments: Photo by Integrated Architecture



Photo by: Kendra Stanley-Mills.

Community Benefits: Public Sector

Development of a community benefits policy or ordinance allows communities to clearly define expectations for major developments within their jurisdiction. Whether the community benefits approach is defined through a policy or formal ordinance, setting ground rules for negotiating community benefits is valuable. The following considerations should be addressed by any community considering formalizing an approach to community benefits.

1. Determine if an ordinance or policy is needed.

Is adoption of a controlling ordinance necessary to clearly set standards while providing a mechanism to address violations, or is development of a policy that clearly sets standards for creation of development agreements that address community benefits adequate? For smaller cities and townships, creating a policy is often more practical than a rigid ordinance, as it provides a flexible framework for negotiating potential development agreements without the intensive time, legal expertise, and administrative overhead required to draft and enforce complex local legislation.

2. Set a threshold for community benefits.

An expectation of providing specific benefits to the community should only be relevant for major development projects that have demonstrable impacts on community quality of life and/or require significant public subsidy. For example, the Detroit Community Benefits Ordinance only requires a community benefits agreement for projects that exceed $75 million in value or receives $1 million or more in property tax or land sale/transfer incentives.

3. Clearly define the process.

A community benefit policy or ordinance primarily serves as a mechanism to require a development agreement between the owner and the local unit of government. This development agreement specifies the additional benefits that accrue to the community. Public input should be a part of this process, but it is important to keep in mind that any benefit expected must serve a legitimate governmental purpose, not just satisfy the complaints of neighbors. In developing a process, also consider the relevance of other community policies governing development, including public participation policies and the zoning ordinance. See item #2 on the next page regarding the role of community benefits.

4. Establish the terms of engagement.

An overly broad community benefits policy or ordinance that requires benefits that are not reasonably associated with the impacts of the development is likely to be counterproductive. Rather, consider focusing desired benefits narrowly on the development and the opportunities it may provide, and what is reasonable.

5. Plan for the long game.

The development agreement ultimately created through the community benefits policy or ordinance must contain provisions that are clearly enforceable, along with appropriate remedies. It is common to establish a steering or advisory committee composed of company representatives, residents, and local government leaders to oversee implementation of the agreement over time and ensure that reporting is transparent.

What are the common elements of community benefit agreements?

1. Employment of residents during construction and/or during operations.

2. Workforce development or training to enable resident employment.

3. Minimum participation in construction by locally-owned businesses.

4. Construction of public infrastructure necessary to service the development, including improvements to nearby roadways or infrastructure that may be impacted by the development.

5. Quality-of-life improvements for neighborhoods potentially impacted by additional noise, light, or visual impacts. These commonly include parks or public space improvements.

6. Public services and resources demanded by the community that also benefit the development or company, for example establishment of on-site childcare facilities that are open to employees as well as nearby residents.

Community Benefits: Private Sector

While navigating the process of a community benefit agreement may seem like an "extra" step for development, the reality is that there are significant benefits to the development community in having a clearly defined process that establishes a level playing field for identifying and negotiating community benefits. The alternative, particularly for significant projects with large incentive packages, can be wide-ranging negotiations with various local government officials all seeking to secure a windfall. A policy or ordinance can provide greater consistency and predictability in the development approval process.

1. Embrace the process.

Work with the local unit of government and relevant players to clearly understand the process. Document expectations and timelines in writing. Avoid conversations around community benefits if the community is not communicating its needs in writing or via a formal written policy.

2. Clearly define the role of community benefits.

A community benefits policy or ordinance should not be a part of a zoning or building permit approval, rather it should be associated with a development agreement where there is a clear exchange of value between the community and the developer beyond a traditional land use approval. In other words, community benefits should be relevant only for those projects that require significant public incentives or subsidies in the form of tax abatements, property transfers, infrastructure improvements, or other public investments beyond the traditional development review process.

3. Take a long-term view.

While a community benefits agreement may be necessary to get a project approved, the agreement itself may have long-lasting implications depending on the commitments made by the parties involved. Ensure that the mechanisms in place to measure the implementation of the agreement are reasonable and that the owner and operator have fair representation on any committees or boards responsible for monitoring implementation.

4. Be proactive.

For major projects where there is a significant amount of public opposition, suggesting a community benefits approach can shift the burden of "proving this is good for our community" from the developer to the municipality and public that are pushing back. In other words, being open to a community benefits agreement puts the onus on the community to clearly state what it expects from the development in terms of benefits rather than asking the developer to hit a moving target.

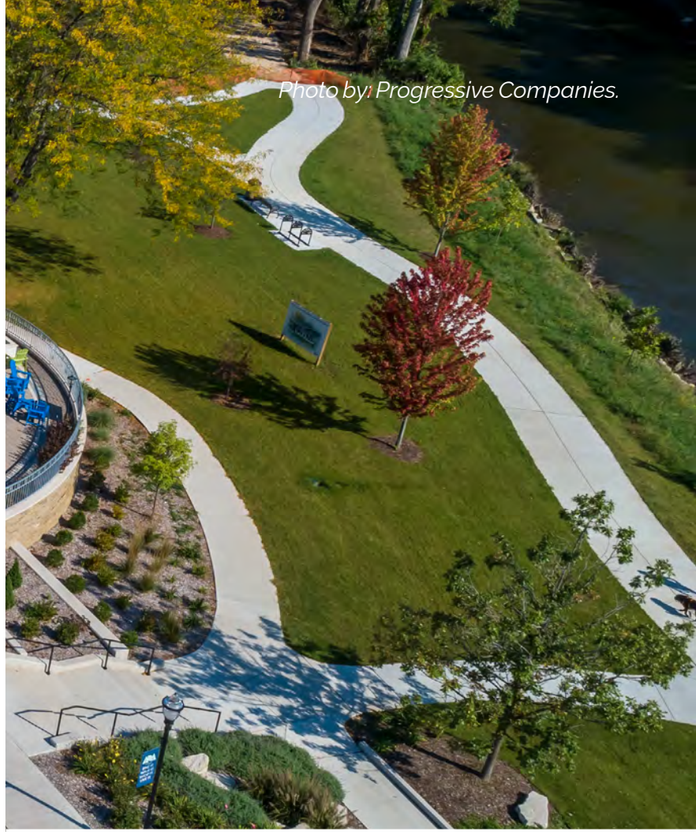


Photo by: Progressive Companies.

Further Reading

Michigan State University White Paper: Community Benefit Planning and Agreements - A Summary Overview

CASE STUDY

Gordie Howe Bridge

The Gordie Howe Bridge Project serves as a large-scale example of community benefits at work. The City of Detroit adopted a Community Benefits Ordinance in 2016, which requires certain types of projects to enter into a development agreement with the City of Detroit governing community benefits. The Gordie Howe International Bridge project conducted community outreach from 2015 through 2019. During the process thousands of stakeholders were engaged with over 230 unique suggestions for community benefits. Engagement included public meetings, one-on-one meetings, focus groups, a public survey, social media, and direct communication.

The process produced a final community benefits plan in June 2019 that addresses a wide range of priorities in both Detroit and Windsor, Canada. The plan focuses on local workforce and training, construction and operational impacts, community safety and connections, aesthetics and landscaping, and regional economic and community development opportunities.

Highlights from the community benefits process so far include:

- $250 million in work awarded to local contractors.
- Installation of public art and murals around construction sites.
- Addition of cycling infrastructure and a multi-use path.
- Construction of a new observation area in a public park to allow for viewing of bridge construction and the Detroit River.
- A $4 million home improvement program in Detroit's Delray Neighborhood.
- Repairs to over 100 properties and counting.

While the project's scale and size, as well as public funding, provides for a much more robust community benefits program than small projects or projects that are public-private partnerships, the reporting efforts and level of transparency represent a best practice that is notable.



Gordie Howe International Bridge: Photo by Bridges and Tunnels.

"In developing the Community Benefits Plan, it was important to the project team that the initiatives selected for implementation would provide positive outcomes for the Windsor-Detroit Region and specifically focus on enhancing the communities of Sandwich and Delray, the neighborhoods closest to the project area."

- Windsor-Detroit Bridge Authority

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

15. 425 Agreements

SECTOR:

PHASE: ●○○

Conditional Land Transfer Agreements allow two or more communities to develop a **win-win scenario that enables development.**

Annexation was once the only way a city could grow. This action was viewed as hostile to the community from which the land was annexed, because it received no benefit and lost its tax base. A 425 agreement (derived from Public Act 425 of 1984, as amended) allows communities to work cooperatively to facilitate land development and to mutually enjoy increased tax revenue and jobs which support the local economy, while avoiding the duplication of infrastructure and services.

Cities have infrastructure, such as water and sewer. The pipes have already been paid for, and more ratepayers can help defray operational costs by using excess capacity. Townships have available land, but not the infrastructure to develop it. Together, the communities can facilitate an economic development project using a 425 agreement. Other items, such as police and fire services, building permit review, zoning approvals, and other municipal services, can also be included.

Understanding When a 425 Agreement Is Useful

A 425 agreement can help when:

- A project needs city utilities or services but lies in an adjacent township
- A municipality wants predictable tax base sharing for shared infrastructure
- A site's long-term development pattern requires unified zoning and permitting
- Multiple jurisdictions want to collaborate on an industrial, commercial, or employment-generating project, either in reaction to a proposed project, or proactively to position a property for economic development.

A 425 agreement should not be used:

- To resolve long-standing political conflicts, or when basic trust doesn't exist between the jurisdictions
- For speculative or nonviable projects that lack clear financing
- When governance responsibilities cannot be clearly assigned

For a developer, a 425 agreement is significantly harder to complete if the jurisdictions have a history of conflict. Interested parties should consult organizations like DRP, MEDC and county EDOs, as well as staff or elected leaders who know the political landscape.

Everyone Can Benefit

The city can benefit by:

- Additional property tax and income tax (if applicable) receipts
- Connecting additional rate payers to the water and sewer system to support infrastructure maintenance and utility upgrades
- Spreading overhead costs associated with services to a larger geographic area
- Having jobs to strengthen the local economy

The township can benefit by:

- Developing land for high-value uses, such as industrial, to increase the tax base
- Forgoing the duplication of city services, including hiring and managing staff
- Avoiding multi-million dollar costs associated with infrastructure and its ongoing maintenance

The developer can benefit by:

- Being able to access economic incentive tools available only to core or distressed communities
- Building on land that best suits their needs, particularly if there is the possibility of long-term growth
- Accessing utilities that can make the project a reality *See Infrastructure Needs*



Preparing to Engage

Most 425 agreements begin with a developer, not a municipality. Municipalities should be prepared when approached and know their role in evaluating feasibility.

A township or city should confirm:

- The project is real and financially viable.
- The developer has the capacity to complete the project.
- Utilities and infrastructure can reasonably serve the site.

In the exploratory stages of industrial development, municipalities utilize NDAs to protect the integrity of the planning process. This allows for the thorough evaluation of tax abatements, jurisdictional issues, and infrastructure requirements, ensuring that only projects with a clear path to feasibility are presented for formal public review.

Municipalities should assemble:

- Elected leadership (supervisor, mayor, council/board members)
- Planning, engineering/DPW, utilities staff
- Legal counsel (ideally with 425 or tax law experience)
- Regional EDO partners

See Project Communications, FOIAs, and NDAs

Arranging a 425 Agreement

Conversations should begin with mutual goals.

- Reliable utility and infrastructure service
- Job creation and tax revenue
- Predictable long-term planning
- A development that benefits both communities
- Leading with developer benefits is less effective; both municipalities must see value.

Before staff or attorneys begin drafting:

- Municipal executives should meet and discuss expectations.
- The agreement's long-term success depends on early alignment.
- A major issue in 425 agreement negotiations is that many municipal attorneys lack familiarity with the statute and its mechanics.

Municipalities should:

- Have the developer pay for the municipality's legal counsel, engineering analysis, and related costs.
- Ask direct questions about experience with 425 agreements, TIF, tax capture, or economic development incentives.

A typical 425 agreement process takes 90–180 days, depending on meeting schedules, complexity, and public notice requirements. Townships that meet only once a month can extend the process significantly.

DO

Be creative—many legal paths exist to resolve issues.

Document every responsibility clearly.

Align the process with real meeting schedules.

Require full cost recovery from the developer.

Bring leadership in early to avoid surprises.

DON'T

Assume cooperation will come easily.

Leave governance vague.

Overreach on revenue or term length.

Rely solely on inexperienced counsel.

Wait to call regional partners until later in the process.

Further Reading

Conditional Land Transfer Agreements: Michigan's Alternative to Annexation

MEDC: Conditional Land Use Transfer (PA 425)

Core Components of a Strong 425 Agreement

A 425 agreement should clearly define:

Term Length

Use the minimum period necessary for the project. Do not default to the maximum; agreements can be extended later if needed.

Identify the local unit that will have jurisdiction over the transferred land once the agreement expires.

Revenue-Sharing Structure

- How taxes are split
- How revenue changes over time
- Treatment of special assessments or millages

Infrastructure and Service Responsibilities

- Utility construction and maintenance
- Emergency services (fire, EMS, police)
- Roads and stormwater
- Building inspections and permitting
- Zoning review and enforcement

Responsibilities

- Who approves site plans
- Who issues permits
- How disagreements are arbitrated
- How public services are coordinated

Compliance and Administration

- Tracking procedures for tax flows
- Annual reporting expectations
- Clear assignment of monitoring responsibilities

Note: Templates or tools for compliance PA 425 agreements are powerful tools but require careful attention to relationships, clarity, timelines, and competence. When used with early communication, reasonable terms, and strong administrative systems, they enable development that would otherwise be impossible—bringing shared benefits to both cities and townships.

Process Checklist

Phase 1: Feasibility and Political Alignment

- [ ] Preliminary staff-level conversation between municipalities
- [ ] Regional EDO consultation for feasibility screening
- [ ] Developer inquiry documented, including project, site control, financial capacity
- [ ] Joint viability assessment: confirm 425 is the right tool
- [ ] Resolutions of intent to negotiate adopted by both governing bodies
- [ ] Affected taxing jurisdictions notified

Phase 2: Negotiation and Drafting

- [ ] Negotiation teams appointed
- [ ] Economic development analysis prepared
- [ ] Key terms established: transfer area, term length, service responsibilities, applicable ordinances
- [ ] Revenue sharing mechanics defined: split, escalators, true-up, TIF treatment
- [ ] Post-term disposition and dispute resolution specified
- [ ] Draft agreement prepared (developer should fund legal and consultant costs)
- [ ] Staff, legal, and financial review by both municipalities

Phase 3: Adoption and Administration

- [ ] Statutory public notice and hearings in each municipality
- [ ] Formal approval by resolution of both governing bodies
- [ ] Agreement recorded with county clerk, register of deeds, Secretary of State
- [ ] Annual administration: revenue reconciliation, service review, joint check-in

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

16. Communicating During **Construction**

SECTOR:

PHASE: ● ● ●

A proactive communication strategy during a construction project is an important best practice that helps **establish trust, transparency, and accountability** between the project team, the municipality, nearby businesses, and residents.

Depending on the scale and location of the project, regular communication regarding temporary lane closures, construction traffic, dust control measures, driveway access, and other short-term impacts can significantly reduce frustration and confusion within the community.

Establishing a clear point of contact for concerns such as debris entering the public right-of-way, blocked business access, vehicle damage claims, or general construction coordination demonstrates that the project team and community are committed to being responsive and solution-oriented throughout the construction process.

Importantly, this approach reinforces that the community embraces manufacturing and industrial investment while also maintaining high expectations for how projects are delivered. Construction sites should reflect professionalism, organization, cleanliness, and respect for surrounding businesses and neighborhoods. A thoughtful communication strategy helps raise the standard for industrial development without creating an overly punitive or burdensome process for manufacturers and developers.

How Do I Communicate Throughout Construction?

Site construction and its associated impacts to the local transportation network open the door to a wide range of public concerns and consternations. From the economic impacts to businesses that line a closed road to the noise and safety impacts of truck traffic diverted to neighborhood streets, construction-related consequences are varied and real. Although a delayed construction timeline or extended road closure may not result in a project being paused or ceased, the detrimental impacts may linger in the community for a long period of time. This in turn may affect the feasibility of future site modifications or expansions. **This tool is intended to help municipalities and developers proactively anticipate and clearly communicate the impacts of redevelopment to the local community before, during, and after the construction phase.**

1. Communicating Before Construction

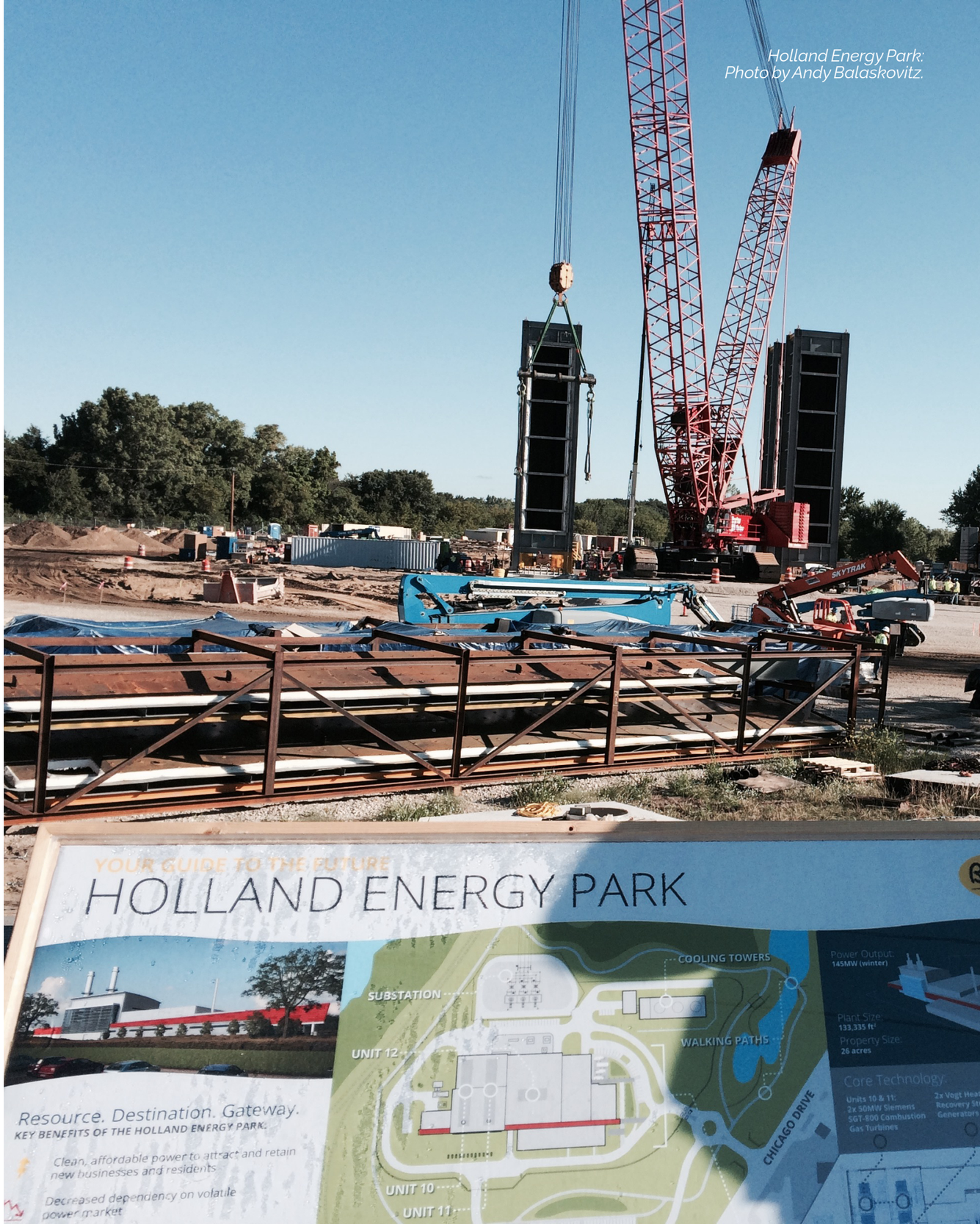
What to do before construction begins to ensure that common challenges are anticipated and that all relevant neighbors and organizations are included in an accessible communication process.

2. Communicating During Construction

What to do while construction is ongoing to mitigate mobility-related impacts, while working to ensure that the developer and the municipality provide consistent and unified information across all channels.

3. Communicating After Construction

What to do once construction is complete and impacts to the transportation network have ended, to note pain points, celebrate successes, and ensure that future site opportunities remain feasible.



Holland Energy Park: Photo by Andy Balaskovitz.

Communicating Before Construction: Public Sector

It is often joked that the state flower of Michigan is the orange construction barrel. Road construction, lane closures, and street detours are commonplace around the Detroit Region, but the timing of private development projects and the tangled web of involved agencies, from state departments of transportation to local utility corporations, add complexity and nuance to the communication process. Effective construction-related communication requires proactive consideration of challenges and constraints that may impact project timelines. The following recommendations help local governments identify these challenges and take actionable steps towards incorporating their impacts into pre-construction communications.

1. Require a traffic control plan.

Require the developer to submit a comprehensive traffic control plan outlining closures, detours, internal circulation, and construction phasing for all modes, providing a clear foundation for public communication.

2. Establish communication roles and a single source.

Define responsibility for construction communications upfront, with the local government serving as the primary public-facing source and the developer providing timely, accurate information to support updates.

3. Adopt a public outreach plan.

Establish outreach methods, timing, and thresholds for notifications (digital, mail, media) prior to construction to ensure consistent and predictable communication.

4. Coordinate with impacted agencies.

Identify and coordinate early with all agencies responsible for affected roads, utilities, transit, and emergency services to align messaging and expectations.

5. Centralize information and feedback.

Create a project webpage with construction updates, maps, schedules, and a clearly identified staff point of contact for public questions and concerns.

6. Prepare for disruptions and safety issues.

Define triggers for additional communication or construction pauses, and install advance and on-site signage to clearly communicate closures, detours, and safety information.



Communicating During Construction: Public Sector

Construction timelines can be unpredictable. Clear communication from a single, trusted source can help smooth over some of the bumps that will surely arise. Providing accessible and accurate information throughout the construction process can help in maintaining relationships between the community and elected officials, even when timelines shift or delays occur.

1. Lead with a safety reminder.

The first priority for both the local government and the developer should be to ensure safe outcomes for everyone working on or traveling around the site. Work zone safety reminders should be one of the first notifications provided to the general public once construction has begun.

2. Update the project website.

The project website should be consistently maintained with updated information about construction phasing, detour changes, and project maps. Any significant changes or alterations to the project timeline or intensity should be communicated on the project website and through a specific notification.

3. Ensure open lines of communication with the developer are maintained.

In order to communicate major changes or general progress updates, that information must first be received from the developer or construction team. Maintaining open lines of communication throughout the construction phase, through formal and scheduled check-ins or informal email communication, can help keep everyone on the same page.

4. Don't forget impacts to walking, bicycling, or transit.

Detours for drivers are generally, at most, an annoyance. In contrast, detours for people walking, bicycling, or trying to find a bus stop can be uncomfortable or unsafe, especially if detour routes do not have dedicated sidewalks or bicycle facilities. Routes should be approved through the traffic control plan, but real-world outcomes should be monitored and adjusted as necessary to promote safety and comfort for everyone traveling around the project site, regardless of whether they are driving or not.

5. Consider livestreaming.

It might be an understatement that public understanding of the countless variables that go into a successful construction project is difficult to achieve. Embedding a livestream of site construction on the project website can provide tangible evidence that progress is occurring, and mobility-related impacts will eventually come to an end.

6. Receive and log public feedback; iterate as necessary.

The designated single point of contact should log and monitor all relevant community feedback. Certain feedback, including general frustration with the fact that impacts are occurring in the first place, may not be actionable, but other feedback, such as damage to detour signage, might be. Staff judgment is imperative when discerning what on-the-ground feedback requires iterative improvements to the traffic control plan.

Communicating After Construction: Public Sector

Reopening a street or ending a detour route may not signify the exact end of construction, but that does not mean that it cannot be celebrated. Clearly communicating that a project has reached substantial completion helps maintain a culture of transparency between the government and the community and provides a final opportunity to solicit feedback and identify lessons learned.

1. Clearly announce completion.

The ending of a street or sidewalk closure should be immediately communicated across all appropriate channels. Key stakeholders, such as schools, neighborhood groups, transit agencies, and others as applicable, should be notified directly rather than through a general channel. Notifications should include information about any temporary restrictions that may remain in place.

2. Close out the project website.

Once construction is complete, all construction-related information should be archived from the project website or portal and replaced with a statement announcing completion. Site photos, such as aerials or before-and-after images, can help the public visualize changes more clearly and serve as concrete proof of change or progress.

3. Remove all construction signage.

Inaccurate or outdated detour or closure signage can cause unnecessary confusion and foster mistrust in the community, especially if a project is already complete. Once all mobility restrictions have been lifted, and project completion has been communicated, all signage should be removed and inventoried to ensure consistency between digital communications and real-world indicators.

4. Conduct a post-construction audit of the process.

Every project represents an opportunity for continuous improvement. The traffic control plan preparation process should be reviewed to identify pain points or challenges that constrained the communication efforts.

5. Close out all public comments.

At a minimum, boilerplate responses should be provided to all relevant public comments solicited via email or response form during the construction process. For comments that initiated changes to traffic control or project timeline, the iterative steps taken to address concerns should be clearly spelled out. All community members deserve to know that their concerns have been heard, especially if feedback inspired valuable change.

6. Release a summary document.

A final summary document, or wrap-up message, can be shared on the project website or provided to local news outlets. This final document should include a summary of the work completed, the rationale behind mobility impacts, a list of community benefits (if applicable), and photos of the completed work. Any community-inspired changes should also be incorporated into the summary document.



Photo by Russel Video.

Celebrating Completed Projects

For significant developments, celebrations such as ribbon-cuttings or public tours can help formally mark the end of construction work and invite the community to celebrate the project's achievements.

Communicating Before Construction: Private Sector

Similar to local governments, pre-construction efforts from developers are vital to ensuring a streamlined and consistent communication process during the construction phase. The design and circulation patterns of the site itself, the quantity and quality of communications with agencies having jurisdiction over the surrounding streets, roads, and highway, and the level of community engagement conducted all impact what information is conveyed and how it is received.

1. Coordinate early with appropriate agencies.

Identifying agencies having jurisdiction over applicable streets, roads, and highways will aid in streamlining the permitting and traffic control process. Modifications to site design, such as providing primary access from a service drive or secondary road, can help expedite the permitting process and limit time consuming and costly improvements that a road agency may require, such as the installation of a left-turn lane.

2. Develop a detailed traffic control plan.

The developer should be responsible for detailing the traffic control process and phasing in a formal traffic control plan. This plan should be reviewed and approved by all applicable agencies, such as a city, MDOT, or a local road commission. The traffic control plan should include, at a minimum, maps and text detailing road closures and detours, truck routes and internal site circulation, sidewalk, bicycle facility, and transit route accommodations, and anticipated project timelines.

3. Coordinate with the municipality on a public communication strategy.

Although the developer is not responsible for ongoing communication efforts during the construction process, they are responsible for providing relevant information to be communicated. Information about project delays or advances, the shifting of phases from one to the next, or impacts to closure timelines should be clearly and immediately communicated between the developer and the municipality; sharing a weekly or bi-weekly status report with the municipality is a great way to keep all parties updated and it establishes a cadence to your communication.



Communicating During Construction: Private Sector

The developer's commitment to project success and completion is paramount in maintaining the level of public trust earned during the Approvals and Partnerships phase. Street or sidewalk closures directly impact everyone in the community who travels around a site, regardless of whether they have any stake in the project itself. Detours that seem unnecessary or closures that extend well beyond a stated timeline can sour public opinion of a project, even if the end result of the site is a net positive for the community. Clear communication about the project timeline that invites responsibility for issues or concerns can help maintain public trust.

1. Notify the local government immediately when changes occur.

Changes in schedule or timeline first need to be known before they can be communicated. The developer should prioritize timely communication about changes in construction phasing or project delays through open channels with local staff.

2. Post signage that directly communicates construction impacts.

In collaboration with the local municipality, post signage on the site that clearly states the anticipated impacts, duration, and reasons for traffic and other changes that will take place during the construction period, allowing the public to gain awareness and plan alternative routes as needed.

3. Update the traffic control plan.

If schedules or timelines shift, the developer should continuously update the traffic control plan to reflect the new timing of detour or closure implementation. This plan should be submitted to local staff to provide a formal record of shifts or adjustments that need to be accounted for and communicated.

4. Update project visuals.

Providing progress imagery of site construction can help aid local staff in crafting weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly status updates.



Communicating After Construction: Private Sector

The end of street closures and detours is not the end of the government-developer relationship. However, it does provide yet another opportunity to build relationships founded in mutual trust and respect between the two bodies that can be leveraged in project closeout and in future opportunities. Providing concise summary documentation and participating in project celebrations can serve to evolve relationships for the better.

1. Coordinate final traffic information.

Once mobility-related impacts are no longer necessary to support successful project construction efforts, the developer should provide a summary of final traffic patterns, including any permanent changes to internal site circulation or external site access for drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users.

2. Provide final visuals.

Aerial or before-and-after pictures can help communicate the extent of change to the site that the public can latch on to. These visuals can be used by local staff when preparing and disseminating project summary information and any lessons learned.

3. Celebrate completion.

Participating in a ribbon-cutting or community tour can help reinforce the partnership between developers and the local community, no matter how bumpy the road to completion may have been. Project celebrations also provide developers with an opportunity to highlight any community investments that may have been made, such as the installation of a new sidewalk or traffic light.



Photo by Auburn Hills.

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

17. Annual Business Retention Check-Ins

SECTOR:

PHASE:

What is **business retention?**

Business operations, community partnership, and ongoing coordination.

An annual check-in is a structured, predictable conversation between a community and an industrial employer that supports a strong long-term partnership. These meetings focus on three things:

1. How the business is doing: workforce, operations, growth plans, and needs the community can help support.

2. How community benefits are progressing: jobs, taxes, procurement, workforce partnerships, and infrastructure.

3. How operational concerns can be coordinated early: truck traffic, noise, lighting, outdoor storage, stormwater, dust and odor, shift changes.

Annual check-ins give employers, municipal staff, and elected leaders a regular opportunity to strengthen relationships, celebrate wins, and address challenges before they become problems. They also create predictability for the business through a routine schedule and consistent expectations for engagement.

This reflects economic development best practices for business retention—keeping communication open, responding quickly to employer needs, and building trust over time. For large industrial projects that often rely on public incentives, a strong retention relationship protects that investment and supports continued growth.

Key Players

The Public Sector

- Economic development/administration
- Planning/zoning
- Public works/engineering/stormwater
- Building/code enforcement (as needed)
- Police/fire (as needed)
- Grants manager

The Private Sector

- Facility or plant manager
- Operations leadership
- Property manager
- Transportation/logistics manager
- Community relations/HR

Regional Partners (as needed)

- Workforce agencies and community colleges
- Road agency/Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)
- Utilities
- Regional economic development partner: Detroit Regional Partnership

Key Outcomes

A good annual check-in produces:

- A shared understanding of how the business is doing and what continued success looks like for both the employer and the community.
- A simple summary of benefits, growth, and any items to coordinate on.
- A clear point of contact and communication channel for questions or concerns.
- A short follow-up action list of support opportunities and next steps.

Industrial development can have a significant impact on a local community, delivering many positive benefits while also introducing the potential for occasional impacts on neighbors. Annual check-ins give employers and municipalities a regular, predictable way to coordinate, strengthening the partnership, addressing concerns early, and making the benefits of the project visible over time.

Most importantly, annual check-ins build trust, transparency, and open communication between the employer, the municipality, and the broader community.



Photo by Progressive Companies.

When Should Annual Check-Ins Happen?

Timing: Once per year, ideally in the same month.

Best window: 30–90 days after the operator's fiscal year close.

More frequent cadence: Consider semi-annual check-ins for the first 24 months of operation, then shift to annual.

How to Conduct an Annual Check-In

1. Plan for Check-Ins

An annual check-in could be hosted by the municipality, or it could be a standing invitation for the employer to proactively share updates with their community. If you can, create a simple policy via the planning commission or elected legislative body that describes annual check-ins as a business retention best practice for larger industrial employers. You can then establish the check-in as a shared expectation during approvals through conditions, development agreements, or a "good neighbor" operating plan. Clear, predictable processes set early help both sides know what to expect.

Minimum items to set up at the outset:

Named community point of contact from the municipality and the appropriate site liaison

A one-page summary of the project and what continued success looks like for both the employer and the community

A simple list of the benefits and items the partnership will track over time

A clear communication channel for questions and concerns

A short list of events the community would appreciate advance notice on. Many of these may already be in your ordinances, but a proactive reminder helps. These may include shift changes, a new outdoor storage area, major equipment changes, a new truck entrance, or expanded hours.

2. Prep (4-6 weeks before)

Public Sector Checklist

- ☐ Pull together the project background. Bring site plan approvals and other documentation that captures the original agreement and expectations for the site, including truck circulation, access points, lighting, outdoor storage, stormwater operations and maintenance, or landscaping buffers.
- ☐ Review any community feedback from the past year, and note anything recurring.
- ☐ Run a staff check-in. For efficiency, consider folding this into the municipality's regular design team meeting. Attendees might include economic development, planning, public works, and building.
- ☐ Decide what, if anything, you'll share publicly afterward, focused on celebrating success and without releasing sensitive or proprietary information.

Employer Checklist

- ☐ A short update on how the business is doing, including jobs, growth, investments, and any community commitments. This is a chance for the business to show they're a good neighbor by describing the positive contributions they're making and how they're addressing any negative impacts. Upcoming operational changes that might affect the community.
- ☐ Examples of improvements or coordination already underway where helpful. These could include photos, logs, operational changes, or any potential site improvements.



3. The Check-In 60-90 minute meeting

PART A — Site walk

A short, collaborative walk-through of the areas where the business and community most often intersect:

> General truck activity and peak-hour patterns
>
> Loading docks and idling practices
>
> Anything affecting safety at access points
>
> Noise, lighting, dust/odor, or screening items
>
> Outdoor storage areas and site upkeep
>
> Site maintenance
>
> Stormwater features and maintenance
>
> Landscaping buffer health and any replacement plans

PART B — Operations and partnership review

1. **Business update.** What's changed since last year? Have there been any changes in workforce, growth, or investments? Will grants or other additional resources be needed in the future to support any expansion plans?
2. **Community benefits.** Jobs, wages, local purchasing, tax base, workforce partnerships, community investments. If incentives or a legal community benefits agreement exist, note any annual reporting timelines so everyone stays on the same page.
2. **Performance standards.** If a community's ordinance or agreements include performance standards for noise, glare, and/or vibration, among other things, the annual check-in is a convenient moment to touch base on them in a spirit of collaboration and coordination. These check-ins provide opportunities to create win-win scenarios if any concerns begin to arise.
3. **Coordination items.** Any concerns that came up over the year, what was done, and what's still open. These should be handled collaboratively as shared problem-solving rather than enforcement.
4. **Next 12 months.** Capital projects, equipment changes, shift changes, or expansions, and how the community can support them.

PART C — Close-out

End with "who does what by when." List action items, owners, and due dates. Decide how best to share success stories and project benefits with the general public.

4. Trust and transparency after the check-in

Public Sector

Within 10 business days:

> Share a 1–2 page recap, describing what was discussed, key takeaways, and the shared action list. If any operational concerns came up, the development agreement or conditions of approval should already provide a path to resolve them.
>
> Most concerns are minor and resolved through simple adjustments within 30 days; the agreement can hold a clear process for the rare persistent issue, kept as a backstop rather than the focus of the relationship. If the employer is intending to grow, research opportunities to leverage the business' aspirations. Find out if any new infrastructure projects are proposed in the vicinity and what, if any, grants or funding resources might be available that municipal staff can begin to line up. (Sometimes it may take 2-3 years for infrastructure funding.)

Optionally, prepare a one-page public-facing summary focused on:

> Benefits delivered
>
> Improvements completed
>
> How residents can raise questions or concerns
>
> What's coming next year, at a high level

Employer

Within one month:

> If applicable, complete any quick-win improvements that were agreed on, such as signage, striping, lighting adjustments, dumpster lids, litter sweeps, or a revised truck operating procedure. Share quotes and schedules for any larger items, if necessary.

Community Benefits: Telling the Value Story

Strong business retention communication connects employers to the broader community, explaining how these projects support all community members and local businesses.

Categories that staff and elected officials can explain clearly:

- Jobs and workforce
- Total jobs on site; year-over-year change
- Typical wage bands or median wage
- Workforce partnerships, such as internships, apprenticeships, community college programs
- Local economic contribution
- Local/regional procurement, ideally as a share of spend for purchasing
- Local contractors used
- Participation in supplier diversity programs, if applicable
- Public revenues and infrastructure
- Property tax contribution trend over time
- Utility upgrades delivered, if part of the project
- Road/turn-lane contributions or maintenance coordination

Good Corporate Citizenship

While the annual check-in is a relationship building opportunity for both the employer and the community, the most effective approach is building these practices into day-to-day operations for long-term community trust.

Some guidelines for ensuring good corporate citizenship include the following:

- Name a site liaison with authority to solve problems
- Maintain a 48-hour response standard for resident concerns or questions, even if the fix may take longer
- Publish a simple "how to reach us" website or contact card
- Enforce truck routing and idling guidelines with dispatch instructions
- Control lighting at the site's edge
- Ensure outdoor storage is well-monitored and remains orderly
- Run routine litter and site boundary clean-ups
- Be transparent about major operational changes before they become a public surprise
- Invest locally in workforce and community benefit efforts in ways that are measurable and repeatable

Working Through a Concern

1. Define it

What's happening, when, and where? Time and location patterns usually point to the operational cause. It's important to specify precise locations and times of day, especially on large campuses.

Who can actually fix it? Sometimes the employer, and sometimes the road agency, utility, landlord, or a contractor. Collaboratively determine who is the responsible party.

2. Match it to the right fix

Operational: signage, striping, gate timing, dispatch instructions, revised shift-change procedures, idling practices, dock management.

Site: lighting shielding/aiming, equipment relocation or sound buffering, expanded screening or storage reconfiguration, pavement repairs that reduce noise.

Policy: clearer truck-route designations, or updating performance-standard language where it's genuinely warranted.

3. Follow up with those raising the concern

Be sure to maintain open lines of communication with neighbors or concerned groups, providing ongoing feedback and explaining how a concern may be addressed.