

Michigan is blessed with more pristine coastline than any other state, and a burgeoning tourism industry; lush state and national forestlands, replete with towering oaks and pines, invite vigorous hikes, languid strolls and outdoor recreational activities like hunting and camping; bountiful farmland (agriculture is Michigan's second biggest industry) provides fresh and healthy food for Michigan and beyond; medium and small cities and villages dot our landscape and provide homes and commerce for small town dwellers; and our urban centers are teeming with culture, entertainment, sports, fine dining and excitement. What's not to love?

For those of us who call Michigan home, and there are more than 10 million of us, the place is as diverse and amazing as any other. And yet our state is suffering: the economy is in doldrums, and the youthful, creative class is abandoning Michigan in droves for states that are considered hipper, more lucrative, and somehow more satisfying. Many small towns are languishing as independent mom and pop shops are driven out by national conglomerates, and our children relocate to other states. The agricultural industry is at risk as the slow crawl of suburban sprawl absorbs some of our most viable and productive farmland.

In 2006, 1,875,295 (18%) of Michigan's residents lived in rural areas, and 8,220,348 (82%) in urban areas. The rural population, however, is spread out over more than half the state. According to the Mackinac Center, overall about 89% of Michigan's land area is devoted to exclusively rural uses or exists in rural counties. While in recent years attention primarily was focused on the issues facing Michigan's more populous metropolitan areas, small towns and rural communities compose the vast majority of Michigan's land area, and merit the attention of planners and policy makers.

Striking a balance between investment in Michigan's core cities and our small towns and rural areas is difficult; limited funds, and lack of a state land use policy, contribute to the dearth of activity and real action. Considering the immense contributions of our rural areas to the image and quality of life in Michigan, more attention to our small town and rural areas is critically important. Economic viability, pristine natural and water resources, and the agrarian nature of our landscape must be maintained, preserved and enhanced if Michigan expects to attract new business and industry and the knowledge workers that can improve the business and lifestyle climate.

The Michigan Association of Planning is acutely aware of the problem, and in January 2007 the MAP board of directors identified Rural Planning and Development as the major policy it would advance over the next two years. MAP's government relations committee has been researching the topic, and has called upon a national expert to assist in the development of a policy that will advance this issue through our information, education and advocacy efforts. Nearly complete, the MAP board and government relations committee will consider the draft policy in spring 2008, and solicit input and expertise from our members and other land use stakeholders with an interest in the topic.

A draft outline of the policy is available on the MAP webpage [www.planningmi.org](http://www.planningmi.org); take a moment to review the outline, and contact me if you have questions or wish to comment on the contents.

Andrea Brown, AICP  
Executive Director