



# Michigan land use council proposes state actions to curb sprawl

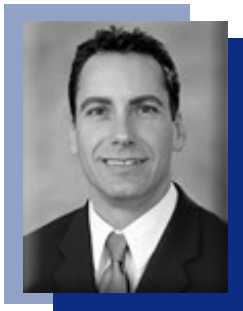
by Mike Murphy  
for Stateline Midwest

The Michigan Land Use Leadership Council has been both lauded and lambasted since the bipartisan group issued its final report in August, six months after the group was formed by Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

For adherents, the lengthy report is a significant step in the right direction. It contains 160 recommendations designed to help fix some of the damage done in Michigan by sprawling urban areas that have left blight in their wake and impinged on the state's open space and farmland.

Critics of the council warn that the recommendations for land reform represent the big hand of state government — one that could threaten private property rights, unnecessarily meddle with the free market, and step into decision-making areas traditionally left to local governments.

Still, the work of the council clearly reflects a growing concern in Michigan about land use



Rep. Chris Kolb

and development patterns. In fact, the 32-member bipartisan council reached agreement on its recommendations with relatively few objections or reservations filed by its 26 voting members.

“That we reached a consensus on these issues is an amazing feat,” says Michigan Rep. Chris Kolb, a Democrat from Ann Arbor, who was one of four state lawmakers to serve on the council.

Some of Michigan's top business, environmental, civic and political leaders served on the council. It was chaired by former Republican Gov. William Milliken and former Democratic Attorney General Frank Kelley.

Outside of its own membership, the group heard from a wide variety of state and national experts on agriculture, urban development and industry as it formulated policy recommendations. Public hearings also were held across the state.

“The state has to pull together,” Kolb adds. “It's not rural vs. urban. And it's not suburban vs. urban. We're in this together. There's nothing new in this report. The difference is we built a set of recommendations that fit the landscape of Michigan.”

According to one study cited in the council's final report, between 1.5 million and 2 million more acres will be urbanized in Michigan by 2020 — an increase of between 63 percent and 87 percent compared to 1990 levels. Currently, 9 percent of the state's land has been developed.

Projections indicate that number could increase to 17 percent by 2040. On average, the state is developing its land eight times faster than its population is growing.

These trends impact all parts of Michigan. Farmland acreage in the state decreased 13.3 percent between 1982 and 1997, while cities have seen their tax bases shrink, property values decrease, and roads and police and fire services deteriorate. Meanwhile, the loss of open space sometimes means the loss of environmental areas that protect critical state natural resources.

## ‘A holistic approach’

Although many of Michigan's major cities are suffering from a lack of growth and deindustrialization, Detroit, because of its size, has become the focus of those problems. In 2000, the population of the state's largest city hemorrhaged to under 1 million, compared to 1.8 million in 1950. That marks the largest population decrease of any American city.

“Nationwide, people think of Detroit as Michigan, and Michigan as Detroit,” says council member Sen. Patty Birkholz, a Republican from Saugatuck Township. “When there's a negative thought of Detroit, there's a negative thought of Michigan.”

Birkholz represents an area struggling with another aspect of the urban sprawl problem. Her district contains large tracts of farmland along with the cities of Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids, both of which are small metropolitan areas experiencing growth-related pressures.

“To save our farms, we have to save our cities,” Birkholz says. “We have to take a holistic approach.”

The approach taken in the council's report (available at [www.michiganlanduse.org](http://www.michiganlanduse.org)) is a prescription for “smart growth,” with incentives designed to curb urban sprawl, preserve open space and agricultural land, and encourage reinvestment in urban areas.

The 160 recommendations contain both quick fixes and long-term goals. Some of the ideas may be turned into actual legislation with relative ease, while others are already proving to be controversial.

For example, incentives for intergovernmental cooperation will face off against the sometimes intense localist tendencies contained within the state, where 1,800 separate governmental units have some type of control over land use.

In some cases, too, the Legislature will have to

perform a delicate balancing act with reforms that otherwise might appear to rob Peter to pay Paul. Sen. Valde Garcia, a Republican from Howell, says he has not thoroughly read the council's report yet.

However, he is alarmed that state road funds could be shifted away from new roads and instead spent on road repairs for aging urban areas.



Sen. Valde Garcia

Garcia's district includes Livingston County, which is the fastest-growing county in the state. The demand in his district is not to fix old roads, but to create new ones or to pave and widen roads that once were rural.

“What that means is that growing communities like Livingston County will suffer,” Garcia says. “You can't try and fix one part of the state and damage another. That's not good public policy.”

The question of local control also will be raised again and again as state policymakers begin considering the recommendations. A spokesman for the Michigan Association of Home Builders (MAHB) has referred to many of the proposals as “schizophrenic,” telling the *Detroit News* that they were “full of lip service to local control” while at the same time “making a case for top-down, state-sponsored control.”

Kolb, who served on the Ann Arbor City Council for seven years before he was elected representative, disagrees.

“There was a fear of the top-down approach, and that's exactly what we didn't want to get into,” Kolb says. “But many of our ordinances and regulations foster the type of growth that we don't want to see.”

“If localities want large-lot zoning, it's not for Lansing to say it's wrong, but the state doesn't have to subsidize the added cost of that type of development.”

Birkholz says many of Michigan's zoning regulations are simply out of date and contradict what the state's objectives for land use should be.

“The laws encourage [developers] to open land rather than develop in urban areas,” Birkholz said. “We shouldn't be making it hard to redevelop. A healthy urban area is very healthy for the smaller communities around it.”

Birkholz believes many of the report's detractors have jumped the gun in criticizing the report, but she also views the criticism as a good sign.

“No good plan or future development project is quality unless it has enemies,” Birkholz says. “That doesn't mean we shouldn't do it.”