

Summary of Public Opinion Polls on Land Use

INTRODUCTION

The following summary reviews public opinion polls on land use conducted from 1990 through 2002.¹ Although there are many polls on this topic, this review focuses only on polls conducted with the Michigan general public and excludes stakeholder groups such as farmers, developers, local leaders and planners. Because many of the results reviewed here are from the early to mid-1990s, any conclusions drawn about the public appetite for or support of land use policies should be approached somewhat cautiously. Polls are point-in-time snapshots of public opinion and reflect that moment only. This is particularly true for all polls conducted before 2000, which do not take into account the impact of major recent events such as Michigan's budgetary woes, the attack and aftermath of September 11, and the war with Iraq.

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF LAND USE IN MICHIGAN

When Michigan residents are asked to indicate what they see as their most pressing concerns, education, crime and safety, and economic issues typically register before environmental concerns, such as land use. Furthermore, the public does not feel very knowledgeable about the environment or land use issues.

- When asked to name what they consider the most important public policy concerns, only 10 percent of respondents named the environment (PSC 1997). In 2001, just 14 percent of the Michigan public identified the environment as the “most important issue facing the state of Michigan” (PSC 2002).
- One survey found that 52 percent of Michigan residents rated themselves either “slightly informed” or “not very well informed” about land use (PZC 1999). A second survey conducted a few years later found just 18 percent of respondents considered themselves “very informed” or “somewhat informed” about land use (PSC 1997).

Although land use does not register as an immediate concern, the public does consider it an issue worth attending to. The public perceives that there is little land use planning throughout all levels of government and that more planning is needed. They also perceive that to the minimal extent it does exist, land use planning has been a success. It is difficult to discern, however, exactly how the public defines land use planning and what their criteria for success are. Furthermore the public also believes that it is possible to balance environmental protection with economic development.

- Forty-five percent of respondents indicated that they would like more information about land use issues in Michigan (PZC 1999).

¹ Results of some surveys conducted in late 2002 were published in 2003.

- Approximately three-fourths (74 percent) of respondents believe that more land use planning is needed (PZC 1999).
- Two-thirds of respondents believe that what little land use planning has been done is very successful (PZC 1999). A majority (58 percent) of respondents in a different survey also believe that to the extent land use planning exists, it has been successful (PSC 1997).
- Half of Michigan residents believe that their local city, township, or village has done an excellent to good job of managing growth; 26 percent think their local government has done a fair job; and 21 percent perceive believe their city, township, or village has done a poor job of managing growth (PSC 2002).
- Two-thirds believe that it is possible to both protect the environment and provide economic development (PZC 1999).

Perceptions of Michigan Cities

Michigan residents unequivocally agree that the shape of its cities is crucial to the state, but fewer perceive Detroit in this way.

- Nearly all of Michigan residents (99 percent) currently believe that cities are either “somewhat” or “very important” to the well-being of the state; 92 percent believe the same about Detroit (IPPSR 2003).
- While 68 percent of respondent believe the shape of Michigan cities is “very important” to the well-being of the state, only 36 percent believe this to be the case for Detroit (IPPSR 2003).
- Interestingly, while the proportion of Michigianians who believe cities to be very important has not changed since 2001, their ranking of Detroit’s importance has declined significantly. In 2001, almost half of respondents (46 percent) felt that Detroit was “very important” to Michigan’s well being. That proportion declined to just 36 percent in 2002 (IPPSR 2003, 2002).

Public perceptions of cities’ problems focus on education, crime and safety, and the economy.

- Majorities of respondents felt that the quality of public schools is the most pressing problem facing Michigan cities, followed by safety and crime and then jobs and the economy (IPPSR 2003).
- Although this pattern held for assessing the most pressing problems of Detroit in particular, affordable housing and urban sprawl were ranked higher as important problems to Detroit than to other Michigan cities (IPPSR 2003).

Perceptions about the condition of Michigan cities are slipping. Relatively few respondents think Michigan cities are in good shape and the numbers are declining.

- In 2001, 42 percent of respondents felt that Michigan cities were in “very good” or “good” shape. One year later, the number was down to 34 percent (IPPSR 2002, 2003).

- Not surprisingly, respondents think that Detroit in much worse shape than other cities. Just 20 percent in 2001 believed Detroit to be in “very good” or “good” shape; by 2002 that number had declined to 14 percent (IPPSR 2002, 2003).

Perceptions About Sprawl

One of the issues that seem to resonate with the public is “urban sprawl.”

- Forty-two percent of respondents rated “urban sprawl” as a very serious problem for their community. Seventy-five percent of the public is either “somewhat concerned” or “very concerned” about urban sprawl, with 32 percent “very concerned” (EPIC/MRA 2003, PSC 2002).
- “Loss of open space” is also viewed as a problem by 59 percent of Michigianians (PZC 1999).
- The term “sprawl” evokes negative connotations. Sixty percent of respondents said they perceived this term as negative. (PSC 1997).

The media is a powerful influence in shaping perception. In the absence of first-hand knowledge about land use and other environmental issues, the public relies heavily on the media for information.

- Eighty-three percent of respondents cited “the media” as the source of their news about the environment in the six months preceding the time they were surveyed (PSC 2002).
- Public perception of the most pressing environmental and/or land use issues generally parallels those issues that receive the most attention from media: “water/wetlands,” “waste/landfills,” “overdevelopment/sprawl” (PSC 1997).

RESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES OF THE PUBLIC

Although the public tends to believe that “urban sprawl” is negative and more land use planning is needed, surveys of the public reveal a preference toward low-density living on large rural lots or newer subdivisions. The characteristics of people planning to move suggest continued pressures toward “urban sprawl.” Their attitude reflects the “drawbridge mentality” of those who move to gain a sense of privacy but don’t want others to do the same—especially near them.

- One-third of residents indicate that they are “certain” or “likely” to move in the next five years. Of those indicating that they were less likely to move in the next five years, nearly one-quarter (24 percent) said that they would move if they could (EPIC/MRA 2003).
- Those living in metropolitan areas and surrounding suburbs were twice as likely to indicate they plan to move as those in nonmetropolitan counties (EPIC/MRA 2003).
- When Michigan residents were asked where they prefer to live, 49 percent indicated a large, rural lot and 15 percent indicated a newer subdivision. Just under one-quarter (23 percent) would choose to live in a downtown area or in an established neighborhood (PSC 1997).

- Some of the most important reasons for moving from one location to another include: the opportunity to buy a home that increases in value (58 percent), relocating to a quieter area (56 percent), and to get away from traffic congestion (55 percent) (EPIC/MRA 2003).
- In describing what they like best about where they currently live, Michigan residents said they like the fact that their communities are quiet, friendly, and have a “small town atmosphere.” When indicating what they like the least, they were more likely to indicate “overdevelopment” and “traffic congestion” (EPIC/MRA 2003).

PRIORITIES AND PREFERRED ACTIONS FOR LAND USE POLICY IN MICHIGAN

The public generally feels that current environmental regulations are not strong enough to protect the environment and would accept greater regulation or enforcement of existing regulations.

- Sixty-eight percent of the public agrees with the statement, “Michigan’s current environmental laws and enforcement of those laws are not strong enough and need to be stronger.” (PSC 2002).
- Sixty-two percent of respondents believe in protecting the environment even if it means restricting what some property owners can do with their land (PSC 2002).
- Thirty-nine percent believe that environmental laws are not strong enough to protect the environment (PZC 1999).
- Seventy percent of those polled strongly or somewhat support restricting development in wetlands, requiring permits for development, protecting farmland, and enforcing local zoning (PSC 1997).

The Michigan public believes that land use planning should be a coordinated effort between local, county, and state government, but is unclear as to who should take prime responsibility.

- Between 40–50 percent of respondents indicate support for “developing coordinated land use plans to manage growth” (PZC 1999).
- Eighty-five percent of respondents support financial incentives from state government to encourage greater local cooperation, and more than 71 percent support consolidation of local government units if it means greater efficiency or services (IPPSR 2002).
- However, when considering the problems of Michigan cities in general, 50 percent of respondents think that it is up to Michigan cities to fix their own problems and 72 percent of respondents believe it is Detroit’s responsibility to fix its own problems (IPPSR 2003).
- When thinking specifically about alleviating the negative effects of urban sprawl, more citizens think that the state should be primarily responsible (42 percent), compared to cities (24 percent) or counties (17 percent) (IPPSR 2002).

The public prefers a balanced approach to land use planning and management. Such an approach considers the individual rights of property owners as well as concern for the public good.

- Seventy-seven percent of respondents believe that property owners should be compensated if the government either takes their property or severely restricts its use. Forty-nine percent support government “takings” of private land for public use (PSC 1997).
- Fifty-eight percent of citizens do not believe that property owners have an absolute right to do as they wish with their property if they knew about environmental restrictions on the property prior to its purchase (PSC 1997).
- Sixty-four percent do not believe property owners have an absolute right to their property if the public must share in the burden of the cost to develop it (PSC 1997).

Top priority policies for land use preferred by the Michigan public include a combination of redevelopment and preservation strategies. Included in these strategies are financial incentives that either encourage or restrain development in designated areas. Support is highest for the following policy options (EPIC/MRA 2003):

- Preserve farmland/open space via zoning that directs residential growth (88 percent very/somewhat supportive)
- Provide tax incentives for voluntary land preservation (85 percent very/somewhat supportive)
- Concentrate redevelopment and reinvestment in older, downtown areas (84 percent very/somewhat supportive)
- Provide additional funding to schools that engage in joint growth planning (84 percent very/somewhat supportive)
- Pay for farmland/open space preservation at state and local levels (82 percent very/somewhat supportive)
- Pay for infrastructure in designated growth areas to encourage development (81 percent very/somewhat supportive)
- Allow transfer of development rights (79 percent very/somewhat supportive)
- Limit growth to areas already served by municipal services (74 percent very/somewhat supportive)
- Provide tax incentives for those buying in designated residential growth areas (73 percent)

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS: MOVING FORWARD

Although the surveys reviewed here cover a broad range of issues, there are a few gaps in the information they provide.

The Difficulty of Translating Attitude to Action

First, the surveys that have been conducted have shown abstract support for a variety of measures and policy options, including greater regulation and restriction on development.

However, there is a large difference between what respondents say and what they actually do. An excellent example of this is the 1998 defeat of Washtenaw County's Proposal C, designed to fund a program to purchase development rights (PDR) through a property tax increase for ten years. A survey of 400 county residents in 1996 demonstrated widespread support for the concept of PDR. Three-fourths of respondents agreed to the proposal when told about rate of farmland loss in Washtenaw County, even when they were told the program would mean a property tax increase. However, the measure was later defeated by a 14 percent margin. A post-election survey of voters showed that the two most common reasons for voting against the program were that respondents perceived the proposal as poorly written, saw it as simply another tax increase, and did not believe that the millage increase to create the PDR program was the right way to deal with the issue (PZC 1999).

Teasing Out The Dimensions Of Land Use

A second shortcoming of the surveys that have been done to date is a lack of attention to teasing out what the public really understands about land use. It is clear from the information presented here that "urban sprawl" is viewed negatively and considered a problem for the state and Michigan cities. However to what extent Michiganians equate land use with "urban sprawl" or zoning or other planning practices has yet to be determined. It is also unknown whether the public understands and identifies with the different issues and policy options that encompass land use planning and management.

Public Opinion and Public Contradiction

This summary also points to a number of striking contradictions in public opinion. The public believes that urban sprawl is negative and is a problem for their community, yet people prefer to live on large, rural lots. While people don't profess to know much about land use, they have strong opinions about some of the issues related to it. The public wants more information and knowledge about land use, yet its primary source of information is the media. Given current policies that drive individual land use and location decision-making, people prefer sprawling developments, but there is also a sizable tolerance for change. One element of land use that people appear united on however is that both Michigan's cities and its rural character are valued. If there is one commonality that rings true through all the studies, it is the reinforcement of the knowledge that land use is a dynamic and difficult issue to grapple with.

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