

Landowner Survey

Lake Township, Huron County, Michigan

Summary Report to the Lake Township Planning Commission



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Lake Township, on the eastern shore of Saginaw Bay in Lake Huron, is trying to sustain its reputation as a desirable place to live and vacation. To learn the opinions of residents about coastal land use in the area, Lake Township officials mailed a survey questionnaire to all 1,529 landowners of record in their coastal community during April, 2005.

Approximately 1% of the surveys were returned as undeliverable before completing the collection of useable surveys in late May. A representative sample of 884 surveys, approximately 59% of the township's 1,512 valid addresses, was used in analysis of landowner opinions. Overall, the survey has a margin of error of $\pm 2\%$ with a confidence level of 95%.* The survey instrument consisted of 15 closed and 5 open-ended questions. It was designed to be completed in approximately 5 minutes while providing respondents with ample opportunity to expand on their feelings and ideas about local issues.

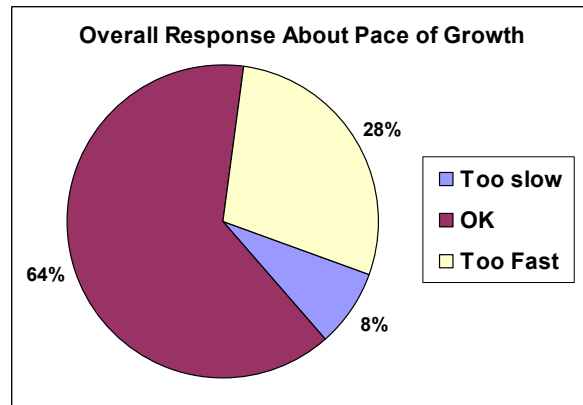
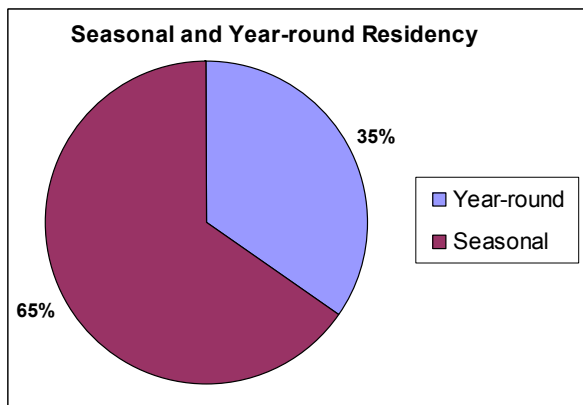
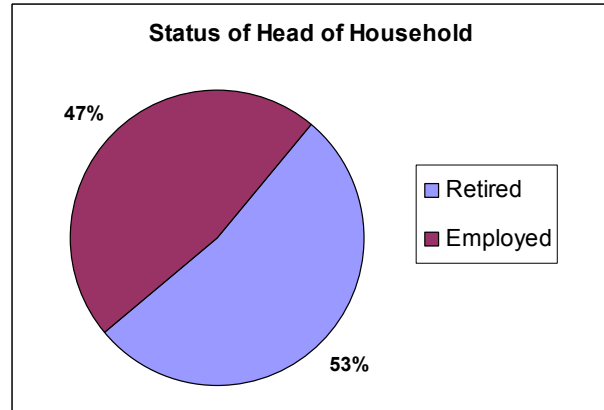
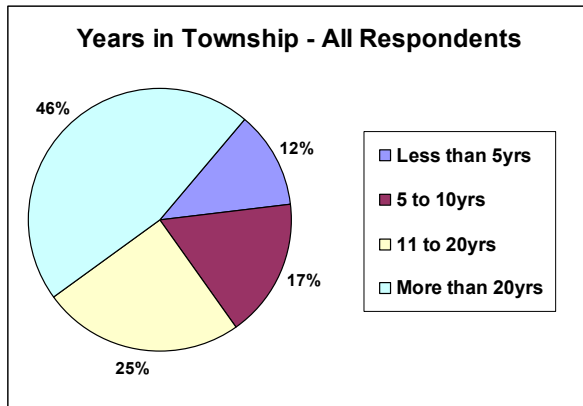
Lake Township (Pop. 996) borders Lake Huron near the tip of Michigan's Thumb. It is adjacent to the Village of Caseville, which provides a fairly wide range of resort community services. Both the Village of Caseville (Pop. 888) and Huron County (Pop. 35,216) have master plans and zoning codes in place. The adjacent coastal jurisdictions of Hume Township (Pop. 801) and Caseville Township (Pop. 2,723) have adopted Master Plans but of these only Caseville Township has a Zoning Ordinance. Hume Township relies on Huron County for zoning control. Chandler Township (Pop. 501), which is the largely agricultural township to the south, does not have a Master Plan but it does have a zoning ordinance. The local economy is underpinned primarily by a mix of agricultural and tourism related business. Michigan Highway M-25 is the main thoroughfare through the area, it parallels the shoreline for approximately six miles as it crosses the width of the township.

The survey was funded in part by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality Coastal Management Program. Michigan Sea Grant provided technical assistance to Lake Township in the development of the survey instrument and analysis of survey responses. For the purposes of this analysis report all fractional percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. This printed report is supplemented by a digital disk which contains more extensive survey results.

*Response rates in this report based on: The American Association for Public Opinion Research. 2000. *Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for Surveys*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: AAPOR

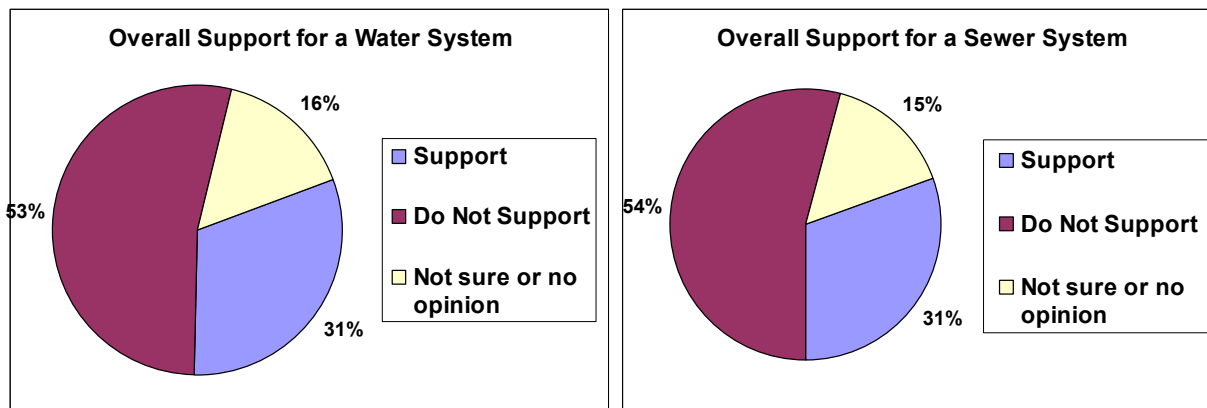
Description of Overall Response from Lake Township Landowners

The survey asked “How long have you been a part of the township,” and similarly, “How long have you owned property in the township?” Nearly one-half of those responding (46%) have been part of the township for more than 20 years and another one-quarter between 11 and 20 years. Notably, the average land ownership tenure of respondents is approximately 21 years. Most landowners (53%) are retired and a minority (35%) describe themselves as year-around residents.



Most respondents (63%) feel that the “pace of growth” in the township is “OK,” while less than one-third (29%) said the pace is “too fast.” Attitudes toward the township taking action “to encourage full-time employment opportunities” are mixed: 40% answered “yes,” 24% said “no,” and 36% said “not sure/no opinion.” Landowners were asked to rank their favorability toward a number of business development ideas. “A restaurant with tablecloths and silverware” is favored (56% favorably and 15% unfavorably), while “a fast food franchise” is not favored (47% unfavorably and 29% favorably). “A neighborhood variety store” is favored (40% favorably and 29% unfavorably) while “a large discount variety store” is not favored (62% unfavorably and 19% favorably). These economic development issues might be fully investigated in a future inquiry.

Although the survey instrument asked two separate questions about the idea of Lake Township building new water and sewer systems, responses are practically identical: 55% said “no” and 31% said “yes” when asked if the township should consider either a water or sewer system.



Roughly one-third (34%) of respondents own Lake Huron beachfront. In fact, 338 (22%) of the township’s 1,529 landowners own beachfront properties. This difference, a type of response bias in the statistics, indicates that a proportionately greater number of responses than was expected were received from beachfront owners. This sub-group returned the survey more than average.

When asked, “*Should the township seek funding to purchase a waterfront parcel along M-25?*” more people said “no” (45%) than “yes” (34%) overall. Responses to a similar question, this one specifically about support for a millage to improve public properties along M-25, are similar: 50% said “no.” Nearly 24% answered “not sure/no opinion” and 24% answered “yes” to the notion of a millage for improving publicly-owned properties along the lake. When asked “*Should the township adopt policies and take actions to keep homesites and commercial properties neat and tidy?*” 82% said “yes” while just 7% said “no” and 11% said “not sure/no opinion.” This question about the township’s role in maintaining community aesthetics provides the strongest positive response recorded by the survey, overall.

The second-ranking positive response among the township population is, as above, also related to township aesthetics. A significant majority (77%) indicates that the “view of Lake Huron from M-25” is very important. When asked specifically if the township should take action to restrict building heights and or widths for the purpose of keeping good highway views most people (65%) said “yes.” However, when asked, “*Imagining 20 years ahead, do you think township residents and visitors are in danger of losing the view of Lake Huron from M-25?*” the message is not so clear: 49% answered “yes,” 34% answered “no,” and nearly 17% expressed no opinion.

One way of looking at these closed-question survey results among all respondents is to simply rank responses from the strongest positive to the least positive in terms of overall percentage. Similarly, the strength of negative responses can be ranked for the whole community. Strong opinion ratings are important to public officials, whether they are positive or negative.

Positive Responses to Selected Questions

	Response	% Positive
Q16 Should the township adopt policies and take actions to keep homesites and commercial properties neat and tidy?	Yes	82.1
Q4 How important is the view of Lake Huron from M-25 to you and your family?	Very	77.4
Q12 Should the township restrict the height and/or width of buildings along Lake Huron for the purpose of keeping good views from the highway?	Yes	67.3
Q8 Can you see Lake Huron from your property?	Yes	52.6
Q3 Do you think residents & visitors are in danger of losing the view of Lake Huron from M-25?	Yes	49.0
Q15 Should the township adopt policies and take actions to encourage full-time employment opportunities?	Yes	40.1
Q9 Should the township seek funding to purchase a waterfront parcel along M-25?	Yes	34.2
Q6 Should Lake Township consider a municipal water system?	Yes	30.7
Q7 Should Lake Township consider a sanitary sewer system?	Yes	30.6
Q10 Would you be willing to support a millage for improvements...along M-25...?	Yes	23.8
Q17 Have you ever had trouble with getting access to Lake Huron?	Yes	11.6

Negative Responses to Selected Questions

	Response	% Negative
Q17 Have you ever had trouble with getting access to Lake Huron?	No	86.7
Q7 Should Lake Township consider a sanitary sewer system?	No	54.1
Q6 Should Lake Township consider a municipal water system?	No	53.7
Q10 Would you be willing to support a millage for improvements...along M-25...?	No	52.2
Q8 Can you see Lake Huron from your property?	No	47.4
Q9 Should the township seek funding to purchase a waterfront parcel along M-25?	No	45.6
Q3 Do you think residents & visitors are in danger of losing the view of Lake Huron from M-25?	No	33.8
Q12 Should the township restrict the height and/or width of buildings along Lake Huron for the purpose of keeping good views from the highway?	No	23.1
Q15 Should the township adopt policies and take actions to encourage full-time employment opportunities?	No	23.8
Q4 How important is the view of Lake Huron from M-25 to you and your family?	Not very	13.5
Q16 Should the township adopt policies and take actions to keep homesites and commercial properties neat and tidy?	No	7.1

A high percentage of “not sure/no opinion” responses can indicate either uncertainty or citizen apathy about an issue, and a low percentage can show the opposite.

No Opinion/Not Sure Responses to Selected Questions

	No opinion / Not sure %
Q15 Should the township adopt policies and take actions to encourage full-time employment opportunities?	36.1
Q10 Would you be willing to support a millage for improvements...along M-25...?	24.6
Q9 Should the township seek funding to purchase a waterfront parcel along M-25?	20.2
Q3 Do you think residents & visitors are in danger of losing the view of Lake Huron from M-25?	17.2
Q6 Should Lake Township consider a municipal water system?	15.6
Q7 Should Lake Township consider a sanitary sewer system?	15.3
Q16 Should the township adopt policies and take actions to keep homesites and commercial properties neat and tidy?	10.4
Q12 Should the township restrict the height and/or width of buildings along Lake Huron for the purpose of keeping good views from the highway?	9.6

Reading of Statements Provided by Respondents

Hundreds of personal comments were received in the form of short answers to open-ended questions. Unlike the raw data compiled and numerically described from the “yes or no” questions and from the scalable questions in the survey, the written comments received cannot be precisely tabulated and compared. That being said, current trends and themes can indeed be found in the written comments. For example, in response to the first question on the survey, “what is the best thing about being in the township?” 50 people mentioned “the lake,” and the words “beach” and “beaches” were used 10 times and 11 times, respectively. Computer software is available to help with assembly of trends and themes from respondent phrases, and it was used to develop the list in the box below from all 5 of the open-ended questions in the survey. However, the comments are perhaps most informative on their face. Township officials who read the comments, now and in the future, will be able to get a sense of public opinions and sentiment by careful consideration of written comments in their entirety. The thoughtfulness and quality of written public comments is noteworthy, in particular to the question: *“Is there anything you wish to add about township land use planning and development?”* Ten written responses to that question, randomly drawn (by number) for this report, were:

1. Keep the balance and keep area nice
2. Careful planning, go forward not backwards like Caseville.
3. Leave the bird sanctuary alone.
4. Township includes more than shoreline property - consider all residents.
5. Sand Road needs crushed stone to cut down on the mud when it rains and to fill pot holes.
6. Just keep it neat. Let people keep their beach fronts neat.
7. I hope the Township isn't just looking for new ways to spend money. People have the ability to see vast shoreline by going to our beautiful state parks. Not the responsibility of property owners to provide views.
8. I would like to see garbage pickup for all residents. I would like to see the County Parks open all year.
9. We like the small town feel but are willing to sacrifice part of that for more conveniences.
10. Don't you think it's a little late for the survey? Shoreline is pretty congested. It used to be a nice drive with the ability to see the lake. Many yards need extreme cleanup.

Most Frequently Used Words in All of the Open-ended Question Responses

LAKE or LAKE HURON= 313

BEACH or BEACHES = 221

QUIET = 112

TOWNSHIP = 87

WATER = 86

PEOPLE = 83

ACCESS = 88

SMALL = 63

PROPERTY = 69

BOAT = 52

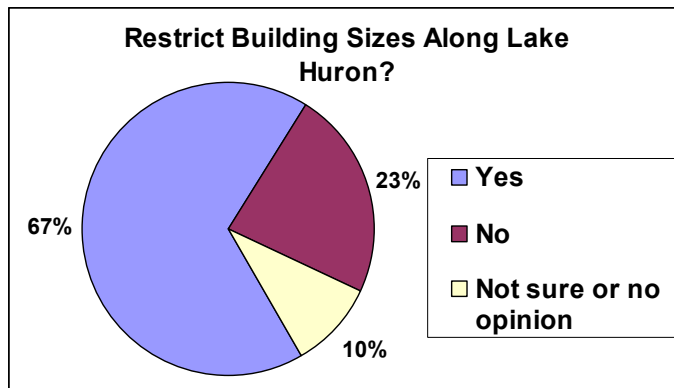
[Note: the words “are” “be” “keep” “more” “no” and “not” were also used more than 50 times by respondents]

For more detail, and to review the written comments of all respondents, the reader is referred to the digital disk accompanying this written report.

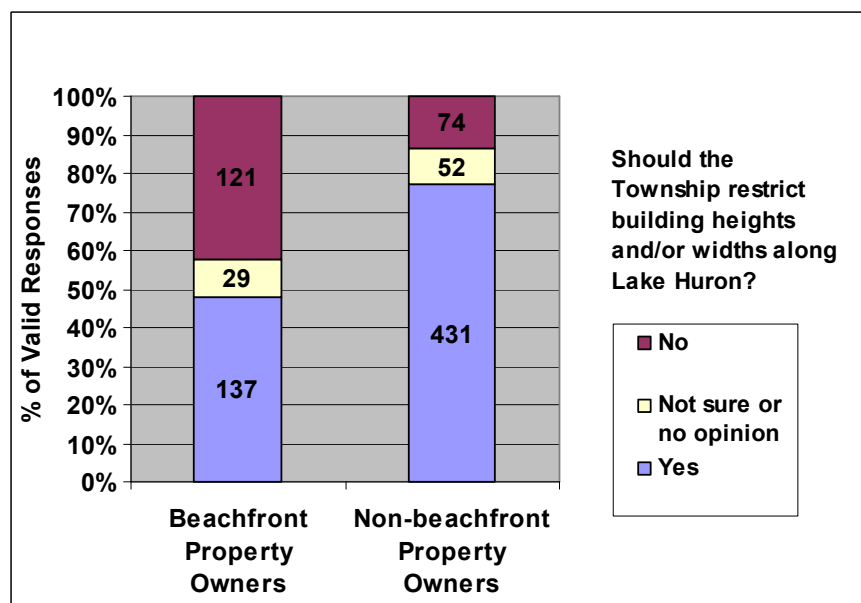
Breakdown of Responses to Key Issues

Support for restricting building size to preserve lake view

The survey tends to show substantial (67%) and nearly consistent support among the whole population of township respondents for placing restrictions on building width and/or height to preserve views of Lake Huron. Majority support for the idea is found in most sub-groups. For example, support is evident regardless of employment status, part-time or year-round residency, or how long a person has been part of the community: longer term residents felt nearly the same (63%) as shorter term residents (68%).



But, opinions about restricting building size are not entirely uniform across all segments of the township population: there is a difference found when property location is considered. A comparison of those who do own beachfront property with those who do not own beachfront shows that slightly less than one-half (49%) of beachfront property owners are in favor of this idea, although more than three-quarters (78%) of non-beachfront respondents indicate they would support restrictions, as seen in the graphic below.

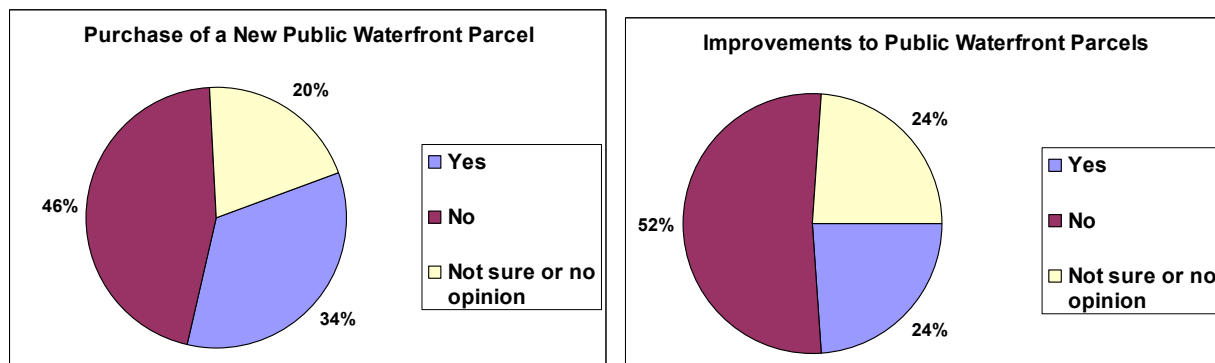


Support for building size restrictions is somewhat higher among the subset in favor of property maintenance codes than it is within the overall community. And there is 77% support for building size restrictions among those who feel the township’s pace of growth is “too fast” (higher than the community-wide rate) while support among those who feel the pace of growth is “too slow” is 46% (lower than the community wide rate). Recall there is a small sub-group of respondents that has had trouble with getting (physical) access to Lake Huron. How do members of this subset feel about using building size restrictions to preserve visual access? A large percentage (81%) is in favor. Not surprisingly, the view of Lake Huron from highway M-25 is more important to non-beachfront property owners than it is to beachfront property owners who responded to the survey. And the view of the lake from M-25 among those in favor of building size restrictions is much higher than it is among those not in favor. Just under 70% of year-round residents said the view from M-25 is very important, while just over 80% of seasonal residents ranked the view as “very important.” Among respondents, support for restrictions on building size is similar between those who are retired and those who are employed.

Support for improved physical access to Lake Huron

While the above question is concerned with visual access to the lake, the survey also contained a few questions about getting physical access to Lake Huron. Visual and physical barriers each present township officials with different types of policy options. Respondent answers to the survey questions about physical access reveal some interesting “split opinions” in the community overall. There is no majority opinion about improving physical access - either for or against.

Opinions about the township’s role in providing or improving physical access are quite uniform around the middle: 46% are opposed to the idea of Lake Township seeking funding to purchase a waterfront parcel and 50% are opposed to the idea of a millage for improvements to lake-front public property.



There was a significant return of “not sure/no opinion” on these two questions (20% and 23%, respectively). A minority in each case (34% and 24%, respectively) was in favor of the township taking steps to provide or improve physical access. Recall that a large majority (87%) answered “no” when asked “Have you ever had trouble with getting access to Lake Huron?”

Support for purchasing new public access property

When the data about support for improved public access are more closely investigated, it appears that supportive sub-groups come from all parts of the population. Significant support for the idea of purchasing new public access property is found among those who feel the view of the lake from M-25 is very important (95%), those who favor property maintenance (89%), those who favor building size restrictions (88%), those who do not own lakefront property (76%), those who feel there is a danger of losing the view of the lake from M-25 (75%), those who are not year around residents (72%), and those who feel the pace of growth is OK (58%). There is a trend of increasing support for the purchase of new public access property as resident tenure is decreased (the strongest support is among those in residence less than 5 years). There was slightly more support among employed respondents than among retirees.

Support for improving the existing township properties

Who makes up the group in favor of seeking a millage to improve existing township property on the waterfront? As in the previous question about physical access, more support is found among respondents who do not own beachfront property (78%) and among part-time residents (71%). Comparing this group to the township overall, support is highest among those who favor property maintenance (91%), those who feel the view from M-25 is very important (90%), those who favor building size restrictions (83%), those who favor the purchase of new public waterfront property (73%), and among those who feel there is a danger of losing the view from M-25 (68%). Support is twice as high among those who have been in the township less than 5 years compared to residents of more than 20 years. Support is nearly twice as high among the employed as among the retired. Not surprisingly, support is nearly twice as high among the minority who indicated they have had trouble gaining physical access in the past.

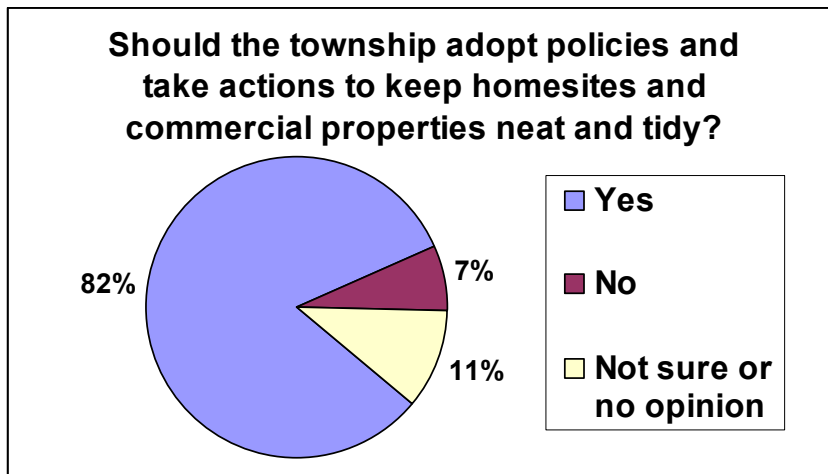
Among those who are uncertain or have no opinion about the idea of a millage to support improvement of existing township beach access properties:

- 81% favor property residential and commercial maintenance action
- 75% favor restrictions on building size to protect the view of the lake
- 69% are seasonal residents
- 68% do not own beachfront property
- 67% feel the pace of growth is OK
- 60% are retired

These data could be useful in any effort to reach the “undecided or uncertain” if proponents of a millage to support improvement of township beach properties were to decide to campaign for a vote on a millage.

Support for building and property maintenance action by the township

One of the highest ranked issues revealed by the survey relates to homesite and commercial property maintenance. The question “Should the township adopt policies and take actions to keep homesites and commercial properties neat and tidy?” received a positive response from 82% of residents. Respondents from nearly all discernable sub-groups appear to favor property maintenance action by the township. The overwhelming majority of support for the idea of building maintenance indicates that this is an area the township should investigate further.



Support for property maintenance action by the township is very nearly equal between year-round residents and seasonals.

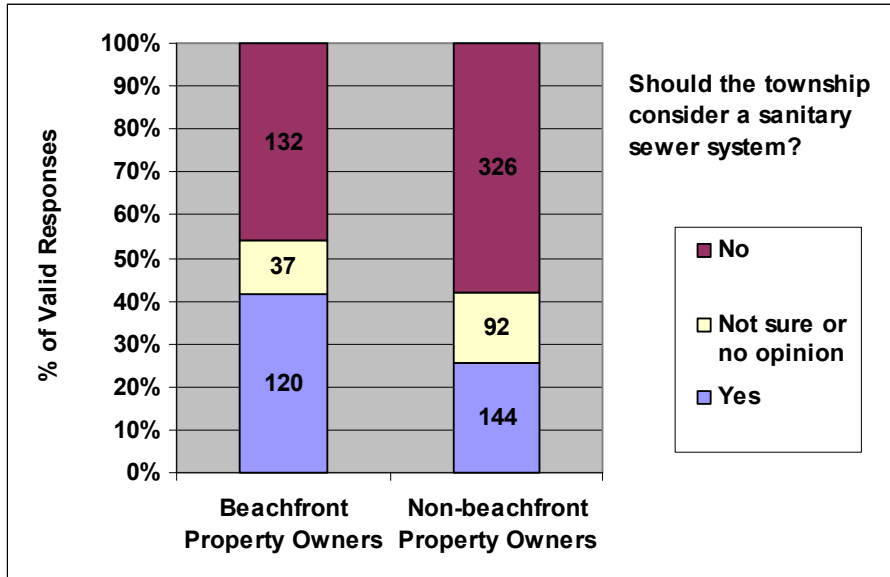
Among the small minority (7%) clearly in opposition to the idea of the township regulating residential and commercial property maintenance, 72% are also opposed to a millage for improvements to publicly owned beachfront property; 70% are not in favor of considering a sewer system, and; 64% are not in favor of a township purchase of waterfront property. Among this same minority group, 41% are long term residents; 40% feel the pace of growth is too fast; 39% did not fear losing the view from M-25; 35% owned beachfront property, and; 22% did not feel the view from M-25 was important. In addition, 61% can see Lake Huron from their property; 59% are employed, and; 44% were year-round residents. Interestingly, among this 7% of the overall community opposing restrictions on property maintenance action by the township, support was substantial (45%) for restriction of building sizes to protect the view of Lake Huron.

Support for new water supply or sewer system

As reported above, there was little support across the community for installation of either a water or sewer system. When the data are examined for differences in support (or in the lack of support) between water supply lines or sewer lines, there are no significant distinctions anywhere in the data. Water and sewer are equally unpopular, just over half responded “no” to both systems.

Some sub-groups were more clearly not in favor of the idea, for example; about 70% of year-round residents answered “no” to the idea of new water or sewer systems. In addition, beachfront

property owner opinions are different from the opinions of those who do not own beachfront property. More than 41% of beachfront property owners felt the township should consider a sewer system while only 25% of non-beachfront property owners felt positively about the idea. The graphic below shows the difference of opinion between these two groups.



Attitudes toward urbanization and development

As noted above, most respondents appear content with the low level of business development and the moderate pace of growth in the township. When asked, “*How do you feel about the pace of growth?*” just 29% said the pace is “too fast.” Although there is some support for the idea that the township should “adopt policies and take actions to encourage full-time employment opportunities,” it is not as strong as might be found in a community of similar size near a large metropolitan center. When asked to indicate which types of commercial services were desired, respondents tended to select the smaller enterprises so familiar in the most rural parts of the state. For example, when given a choice between a “restaurant with tablecloths and silverware” and a “fast food franchise” respondents clearly preferred silverware over fast food. Similarly, a “neighborhood variety store” is more favored than “a large discount variety store.” Written comments show a preference for township land use and development that will enhance a rural environment. Many respondents indicated that they come to Lake Township to “get away” from urbanized and developed areas. Few people want to see an increase in commercial services. The overall impression left by survey responses is one of contentment with the rural atmosphere.

Concluding remarks

Lake Township leaders created this survey to learn more about current public attitudes toward the important land use and development issues they are facing. Respondents clearly appreciate the chance to make their feelings known to township officials: nearly 60% returned useable surveys and thousands of written comments were submitted. The survey responses are a rich source of information for political and business leaders.

Respondents from nearly all discernable sub-groups appear to favor property maintenance code enforcement on residential and commercial properties by the township. The overwhelming majority of support for the idea of building maintenance indicates that this is an area the township should investigate further.

There is clear support for restricting building sizes to preserve the view of Lake Huron, but little support for purchasing or improving waterfront properties. According to survey responses, there have been few difficulties among residents in gaining physical access to Lake Huron, but visual access has been hampered by development and there is substantial concern that visual access will continue to deteriorate. Large new homes are often replacing small summer cottages.

While the view of the lake is clearly a very important community asset, it is clear the township should not expect to find wide support for a millage or other funding proposal to purchase or improve beachfront properties. There was a significant return of “not sure/no opinion” on these two questions (20% and 23%, respectively). Public education and conversation about barriers and solutions to physical access problems might solidify public opinions and lower these “middle-of-the-road” percentages.

When landowners were asked to rank their favorability toward a number of business development ideas, “a restaurant with tablecloths and silverware,” and “a neighborhood variety store” are favored among the limited choices offered. Respondents appear to be indicating a preference for small-town amenities, or at the very least, they appear to want to avoid the fast food franchises and large discount stores found in so many urbanizing areas.

Although the survey instrument asked two separate questions about the idea of building new water and sewer systems, responses are practically identical: 55% said “no” and 31% said “yes” when asked if the township should consider either a water or sewer system. Township officials, who are concerned that the community’s water quality will deteriorate in coming years as it has in other growing areas, may be somewhat ahead of the public on this point. While it is true that coastal county health department beach closure rates have been high across the Great Lakes in recent years, it may be human nature to want to believe that “it can’t happen here.” And while swimming, boating, and drinking water sources are not currently degraded in Lake Township, it is prudent for township officials to anticipate such problems and take steps to mitigate them.