

# SAGINAW, MICHIGAN:

## RETROFITTING ANYTOWN, USA

Place yourself five miles north of downtown Saginaw, at the intersection of Bay Road and Tittabawassee Road, and you could be in virtually any major shopping area in suburban America. The two roads are lined with 1970s mall developments and 1990s big-box retailers. The fragmented landscape is dominated by massive parking lots in front of the buildings. Since the buildings are far apart and the five lanes of asphalt and traffic between them are intimidating, shoppers must drive between stores that are directly across the street from one another. During rush hour, congestion is severe enough to keep other, less persistent shoppers away.

Yet one thing is different about this suburban commercial site, and that difference is its future. Through a TCSP grant, citizens, planners, and elected officials have come together to envision not only a new concept for this suburban commercial corridor, but also more comprehensive actions to affect land use and infrastructure design for future commercial developments. The process will result in changes to zoning, design standards, and infrastructure to make this and other suburban areas safer, more pedestrian-oriented, transit-friendly, and identifiable as a community with a sense of place.

### THE PROJECT

The subject of Saginaw's TCSP project is a suburban commercial district centered at the intersection of Bay Road and Tittabawassee Road. With its FY 1999 TCSP

#### Project Study Area



Tittabawassee Road, looking east.

grant of \$48,000, the Saginaw Metropolitan Area Transportation Study (SMATS), the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for the Saginaw area, conducted a public charrette to identify design solutions that could be used to "retrofit" the area. SMATS hired a consultant team specializing in community and transportation planning to lead the charrette. A subcontractor added expertise on the local retail market. The charrette was held over a period of five days and included:

- PowerPoint presentations on transportation and design principles;
- A visual preference survey;
- A stakeholder focus group;
- A design workshop;
- Discussions with business representatives and transportation planning staff; and
- Development and presentation of design concepts and implementation steps.

The products of the charrette include a series of conceptual designs focusing on different parts of the study area and a set of recommended "next steps" to implement the concepts. Actions have already been undertaken to implement some of these recommendations.

SMATS has developed an evaluation report that describes the process and products of the TCSP project, identifies how the process compares to the "usual" way of planning, and describes how well the project has met its intended goals and objectives. SMATS has committed to doing follow-up evaluation reports in August 2001, 2003, and 2005 to monitor changes to zoning ordinances, design practices, or other actions that occurred as a result of the project.



## PARTNERSHIPS AND PARTICIPATION

SMATS was the lead agency for this TCSP project. As an MPO, however, SMATS can fill only an advisory role on land use and transportation projects and standards. According to SMATS' Associate Planner Vanessa Farr, the TCSP project coordinator, obtaining the involvement of other state and local agencies was crucial to the success of the project. At project inception, a steering committee was convened consisting of both traditional and non-traditional stakeholders. The committee included representatives from:

- Saginaw and Kochville Townships, which have jurisdictions over land use south and north of Tittabawassee Road, respectively;
- The Saginaw County Road Commission, which has jurisdiction over Tittabawassee Road;
- The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), which has jurisdiction over Bay Road;
- Fashion Square Mall;
- The Saginaw Township Business Association;
- The County Commission on Aging;
- Saginaw Valley State University, located adjacent to the study area;
- Local watershed protection groups; and
- The engineering firm contracted to perform corridor studies on Bay and Tittabawassee Roads.

Approximately 100 people participated in the charrette, including developers and commercial lenders as well as agency officials, area residents, and students. Participants were recruited through mailings to local

residents, a "teaser" postcard mailing campaign targeting local businesses, a media campaign, presentations to service clubs and organizations, and offers of free food. The charrettes also received good media coverage, including television coverage on local news programs and a one-hour radio show, which generated strong public feedback.

Despite some skepticism that current practices should be changed, outreach to the private sector met with considerable interest from local developers and property owners. The manager of the Fashion Square Mall participated in the charrette, and both the manager and the new owner have been kept up to date on recommendations. The consultant team held discussions with St. Mary's Hospital, which was planning a large campus-style medical facility in the area, to recommend changes to the design and layout of the campus. A number of local business - including a hotel, restaurant, and copy center - donated services for the event.

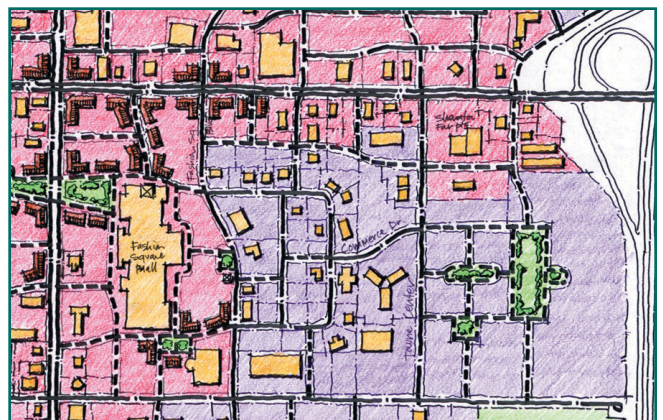
A particularly innovative approach to public participation was to involve schoolchildren in one of the design workshops, which was held on a weekday morning. The involvement of 35 children in the meeting added energy to the process and led to many creative ideas. For example, one group of children placed multicolored boxes on an area map to represent places where people could "live, work, and shop." The adults, recognizing this as "mixed use," found humor in this group's creation, as this concept of development is currently illegal to build in Saginaw and Kochville Townships.

### Current Development



Current development is characterized by large blocks, buildings surrounded by parking lots, few pedestrian connections or amenities, and no public space.

### Potential Development Scenario



The "potential development scenario" is characterized by additional connecting streets, new street-fronting buildings, pedestrian improvements, shared and on-street parking, and outdoor public spaces that serve as a focal point for activity.





## RESULTS

The recommendations emerging from the charrette are based on four urban design principles:

- Orient new development to the street;
- Treat streets as public amenities;
- Develop a mix of uses; and
- Create a network of streets and blocks.

The consultant team developed sketches illustrating the layout of “current development” as compared to a “potential development scenario.” A series of schematic drawings show the steps by which an area might evolve from its current, auto-dominated form to a more pedestrian-scale setting. Computer-aided

illustration techniques show what the area might look like after the changes are made.

These design products lay out a compelling vision for the future of the area. Project participants realized, however, that unless concrete steps are taken to implement the design changes, the vision will not come to fruition. Therefore, the other key product of the charrette was a series of recommended “next steps.” Recommendations developed by the consultants fall into three areas – planning activities, transportation improvements, and design regulations and practices, as described below.

### *Recommendations Emerging from the Saginaw TCSP Design Charrette*

#### **1. Planning Activities**

Continue the planning process - Provide a forum for public participation through implementation committees and study committees; establish a pedestrian/bicycle advisory committee.

Finalize a community vision for the study area - Refine the recommended land use plan for the study area; work with key landowners to coordinate.

Develop partnerships between jurisdictions - County to provide planning services to Kochville Township; townships to work with SMATS to develop a list of implementation projects.

#### **2. Transportation Improvements**

Initiate transportation improvements – Extend the sidewalk network; revise roadway design guidelines; initiate an access management plan on all arterials.

Implement a corridor overlay zone – Retime traffic signal progression to limit speeds; develop a streetscape program for arterials; extend the roadway network; locate a new transit hub; develop a bicycle circulation plan.

#### **3. Design Practice Guidelines and Practices**

Changes to zoning, subdivision, and site regulations – increase floor area ratios; decrease minimum lot size; allow residential mixed-use development; reduce parking ratios and allow shared parking; require cross-access between adjacent properties; reduce setback requirements; allow on-street parking and street trees.

Design review considerations – Windows on facades facing roads; liner buildings 20 feet deep along the roads; architectural details reflecting local character; variation in building height and massing; conversion of Big Box stores to small shops on the exterior with the bigger store inside.

Public sector participation – Create public investment in place-making through the development of streetscapes and parks; form public/private partnerships to create and maintain these public spaces.

## REACTIONS

Since the time of the charrette, progress has been made towards implementing a number of the recommendations emerging from the charrette. The process has been most successful at encouraging local townships to rethink land use and zoning issues. Saginaw Township, slow to become involved at first, has come to appreciate the significance and potential benefits of the project’s recommendations. The

Township has drafted a new parking ordinance that allows for shared parking, pedestrian connections through parking lots, landscaping, and replacement of existing excess parking with buildings.

The involvement of Kochville Township – previously a rural, agricultural township – was spurred in part by new staff charged with addressing the impending



development issues faced by the township. The Township’s community development director, who attended every event, “learned a lot and is now talking about pedestrian issues and building setbacks.” The MPO’s TCSP project coordinator will participate in the development of a master plan for the township, and through this involvement will continue to advocate for the principles developed through the TCSP project.

The TCSP project committee met with mixed success in revising the designs of the two major roads bisecting the area. MDOT is adding sidewalks on Bay Road as part of its widening project (as required by the state), and has been proactive with respect to access management. Saginaw Township has established an Implementation Committee to address recommendations from the Tittabawassee Road Corridor Study, which was completed two years prior to the charrette. Almost all of the committee’s members were participants in the charrette, and the committee is discussing ways to incorporate the charrette’s recommendations regarding parking, access management, and landscaping. The Implementation Committee was unsuccessful, however, in convincing the County Road Commission to create a boulevard along the section of Tittabawassee Road that is being widened. The commission is concerned about both snow removal and the safety implications of having trees in the roadway’s median.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Saginaw’s TCSP project represents a first step toward addressing problems found in suburban commercial centers throughout the country. The project has resulted in principles and design concepts for “retrofitting” commercial areas to make them more walkable and reduce traffic congestion. The successful implementation of these concepts remains to be demonstrated, as does the effectiveness of the concepts at achieving their intended goals of improving transportation and community character.

For other municipalities interested in addressing land use and transportation-related design practices and

standards, the project provides a number of valuable lessons:

- Use the media to generate interest. To spark public participation, Ms. Farr suggests generating coverage prior to the charrette on a “controversial and compelling” issue. For example, planners can point out serious traffic congestion, explain why there is congestion (i.e., auto-oriented layout of development), and describe what people can do about it.
- Use creative techniques to engage people. For those who participated, the charrettes and the visual preference survey proved to be an effective way of getting people to think about planning issues. The participation of school-children also helped to add new ideas to the discussion.
- A single, focused event can serve as a catalyst to discuss larger issues. The TCSP project team focused on a specific development and traffic situation that people understood from their daily experience. Once people had generated ideas for that situation, they became interested in how the ideas could be applied at a broader scale.

Perhaps more significant than the specific recommendations emerging from the charrettes was the broader discussion that the process sparked regarding transportation, land use, and design issues. Ms. Farr acknowledged that taking ideas generated through a visioning process and translating them into reality is a challenge. As a result of the TCSP project and continued discussions, she believes that changes in attitudes are slowly but surely occurring, and that people are willing to consider new ideas.

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Current Development



Potential Development Scenario

