

12 Community Image

Goals

- Promote commercial and residential development/redevelopment that is carefully considered, aesthetically pleasing and functional.
- Improve the highly visible public parks/open space/roadways to maintain community character and increase public safety.
- Enhance the identity and appearance of mixed use/commercial districts and residential neighborhoods.
- Protect and enhance Southfield's natural attributes.

Introduction

A community's physical image is composed of both natural and man-made features. Distinct or unique features such as the elaborate design of a landmark building, maintenance of a concrete median, or debris along the roadway are all elements that play a part in defining community image.

Many of the elements that make up the community's physical image have to be accepted as givens or beyond local public control. The natural features which make up the physical environment of Southfield, such as the general topography, rivers and streams and existing vegetation, are elements which cannot be easily changed and must be considered permanent. Also, many of the region's economic and man-made structures and features are the result of forces beyond the local control and need to be accepted or accommodated. Some of these larger forces include the following: dominance of the automobile, new technologies and changing market trends.

Dominance of the Automobile. One of the greatest impacts on our lifestyles and on our urban environment has been the emergence of the "automobile culture." The auto, while providing convenient and comfortable transportation, has also contributed to urban sprawl, air and water pollution, and the need for an extensive network of roads and parking facilities. These factors tend to be a primary component of our visual environment. How to

accommodate the auto is perhaps the single most critical challenge in contemporary urban design.

New Technologies and Changing Market Trends. Technology is changing how we design our homes and communities. Communication technologies, such as television, the computer, video recorders and the Internet are changing many of our personal habits and patterns, ranging from how we shop to how we interact and are entertained. For instance, before the advent of movies, television and videos, people would frequently sit on front porches and socialize with their neighbors. Conversely, the current trend is to rent a video and watch it at home or go to a multi-screen movie complex. Regarding shopping, the market trend has been to develop large, single-stop, "big box" retailers. In the future, more shopping will be done via the Internet without leaving the home or office. Coupled with Internet shopping use, many communities and their residents long to venture out in the community and interact/socialize in a community and/or neighborhood multi-store commercial districts/node where they can feel a part of a larger diverse community. These trends are not absolute, but they do show that our general living patterns are changing and these changes need to be continuously monitored in order to provide the appropriate response in our physical environment.

All these major forces can be appropriately managed and controlled to minimize most of their negative environment and visual impacts. The essential requirements are to recognize that these forces are a major factor in our lives and address them realistically and appropriately.

The community Image Plan was prepared with the understanding that Southfield wants to improve and enhance its physical environment, even if the enhancements will require extra effort in terms of capital costs, upkeep and maintenance expenditures. Common, day-to-day housekeeping items, such as the need to keep streets clean, prune and trim street trees, pick up litter and debris, and remove weeds and unsightly vegetation, are assumed to be basic requirements and are not discussed in this chapter. However, their importance in presenting a good community image is critical and must be funded at appropriate levels.

Various elements combine to form community image. In using the Comprehensive Master Plan as a tool to enhance image, it is important to consider the issues that shape Southfield’s image. The following questions help to frame the challenges/issues related to community image:

- Can the commercial corridors be visually improved?
- Should and/or how can the image of Southfield be improved in the minds of residents and non-residents?
- How can the sense of “place” be enhanced?
- Should neighborhoods be more clearly defined and identified?
- How can the entrances (or gateways) to Southfield be more clearly identified?
- Do the City, business community and school district market themselves effectively to existing and prospective residents (especially families)?

The answer to these questions will help guide actions related to community image. Some of these issues are explored in greater detail in the remainder of this chapter.

Community Appearance

The appearance of Southfield is important to its livability and its physical and economic development. Residents, business and property owners recognize the value of an impressionable community and are committed to its betterment. They desire welcoming entryways, attractive corridors, unique and inviting districts, pleasant and quiet neighborhoods, beautiful parks and public open spaces, well-kept properties, and a community presence that exhibits its unending pride. This is a keen awareness that qualities such as charm and character do not just happen; rather, they require the involvement of the whole community to make improvements - both individually and collectively - to achieve the overall community vision.

Southfield’s physical character is perhaps the single most evident glimpse of its economic viability, government proactiveness and civic pride. The initial impression of the community is formed by the quality appearance of its physical development, including the nature of community aesthetics; condition of municipal facilities and spaces; amount of public open space; maintenance of roadways and public infrastructure; and the overall attractiveness of the community. The appearance of the community contributes to quality of life and livability for those

who reside in Southfield, as well as those who may be making an investment or relocation decision.

Simply put, beauty adds value to the community. The appearance of Southfield is one of the foremost influences in value and one of its most regarded assets. Residents take pride in their community and its attractive and interesting places. Businesses also like to locate in attractive environments, which improve their ability to recruit employees, host clients and investors, and continue to invest in their facilities.

The appearance of Southfield is formed by many factors. While some areas rely on the beauty of their natural environment, such as the Rouge River corridor and its tributaries and open spaces, other areas must focus their attention toward design of their public spaces, municipal buildings and infrastructure, while taking a proactive stance to ensure their land use standards deliver quality development/ redevelopment outcomes. Without focusing attention on the quality and sustainability of physical development, character is left to chance, leaving little opportunity for the community to control the destiny of its appearance.

The image, character and appearance of Southfield are of top priority according to the community that participated in the residential opinion survey and key person interviews and community forums. Residents, business and property owners, and community stakeholders recognize the importance of quality of life in the success of their economic development; therefore, both desire and expect quality new development and redevelopment. There is a strong desire to improve the entrances to the City with distinctive gateways, enhance the roadway environs with streetscape improvements, create an identifiable community center “downtown,” add more landscaping and screening of parking and storage areas, control the size and location of public and private signs, incorporate public displays of art and community history, manage the appearance of structures and vacant priorities, and diligently enforce the City’s codes.

The focus of this Chapter is the character and appearance of Southfield, which emphasize how the physical elements of individual corridors and districts fit together to form a unified whole community. It also expresses how the framework of the community ties important locations together and helps orient people within the community, how new construction relates to the physical elements already in place, how districts and neighborhoods are to function and be designed, and how government processes work to effectively achieve these goals.

This chapter also focuses on character and design issues and is intended as a community image vision for the future of Southfield. The Community Image Plan emphasizes the primary attributes of the community, the features that make it special, the policies that can preserve its valued assets, and how character and design may be used to improve community appearance. This plan is important because:

- Sensitive design and development policies can enhance the livability and quality of life in Southfield, which strengthens the community’s competitive position.
- Good design and quality development increase property values and, therefore, tax revenues.
- A community with character has been demanded by the public, which articulated their desire for an enhanced community appearance through their involvement in the comprehensive master planning process.
- An attractive community is achievable as the City uses its financial resources, regulatory means, strategic policy decisions, and its own sense of design on public projects to influence private development.

Community Appearance Issues

In conjunction with the Comprehensive Master Plan Steering Committee, input received from interviews, meetings with sub-area stakeholders and input from the Resident Public Opinion Survey, there are a number of key appearance issues identified, including the following:

Development Pattern and Form that Contribute to Visual Appeal. The evolution of development in Southfield has radiated from the center of Detroit with its freeway systems traversing through the City and a grid street system, with principal arteries spaced evenly on the mile section lines. As a result of local and regional traffic patterns and volumes, higher land values exist adjacent to these thoroughfares leading to more intensive non-residential use. Telegraph, Southfield, Greenfield, Evergreen, and 8 Mile Roads; sections of 9 Mile, 10 Mile and 12 Mile Roads; and other arterial roadways have developed or are developing with commercial/office/service uses. The resulting street environment is a patchwork of parking lots for each individual business with, in many cases, multiple property entry and exit points. Signage for each of the businesses shares the limited space immediately adjacent to the street with power and light poles, sidewalks, traffic devices and street signs, and other public displays.

Enhanced Corridor Environments. As described in the previous issue statements, the appearance of the corridors is perhaps the most significant issue pertaining to community appearance. After all, these are the most frequently traveled roadways in the community, carrying both those who travel them daily and those who are introduced to the community for the first time. The appearance of the corridors may be characterized in two ways. They are characterized by either their wide street sections or by varying building setbacks and expanses of parking adjacent to the street, limited provision of green space or landscaping, multiple points of ingress and egress interrupting the pedestrian ways, a proliferation of signs with little consistency as to its placement and size, and widely varying building styles and use of materials. Achieving enhanced corridor environments involves policies, programs, regulations and incentives addressing each of the contributing factors. Enhancement of a single factor will help but will not result in a positive visual impact. Instead, each of the factors must be handled together to revitalize and re-establish a desired character and appearance.

There are two separate, yet related, components involved in improving the appearance of corridors. First is the street right-of-way, which is owned and controlled by the City, Oakland County or the Michigan Department of Transportation. Within the public rights-of-way, the design of the pavement surface, including whether the roadway is undivided or divided by a raised median, improved with curb and gutter, or constructed of asphalt or concrete, contributes to the appearance of the corridor. Maintenance of the pavement surface, as well as the open space within the rights-of-way, is also significant to its visual appeal. The preservation of natural features, such as vegetation and wetlands, and provision of green space and landscaping helps to soften the roadway environs and enhance views. The design of structures, such as bridges and overpasses, retaining walls, and drainage improvements, are also important elements in the overall design scheme. Each of these improvements is largely at the discretion of the City in coordination with Oakland County and Michigan Department of Transportation.

The second component involves private property, which must be either regulated or provided with incentives to achieve the desired development outcomes. Typically, regulations and design guidelines pertaining to building appearance, signs, landscaping, screening and buffering, and open space are applied city-wide or to the properties within a certain distance of specified corridors. Incentives for compliance with the standards/guidelines may

include automatic approval, increased density or intensity, relaxed parking requirements, reduced dimensional standards, or financial participation through grants or when done in conjunction with a public infrastructure improvement.

Preserved Vegetation and Community

“Greenness.” Trees and vegetation - or a lack thereof - contribute significantly to the appearance of the community. Landscaping is useful in the design of individual sites, corridors, and districts to enhance aesthetics, frame quality views, buffer adjacent uses, and screen activity areas or undesirable views, as well as serve an important environmental function by altering the microclimate. Regulations and guidelines imposed by the City on new development, redevelopment or building additions should require preservation of mature trees, as they are commonly felled during construction and replaced with small caliper trees-if any at all. Furthermore, limited landscaping within buffer yards, throughout large parking areas, in the streetscape areas, and around the perimeter of the site, is more often than not the first to be lost to project budget woes. As a percentage of overall project costs, though, the added price of landscaping is nominal, yet proven to add value and return to the development. People are naturally attracted to pleasant environments, whether they are well-designed neighborhoods, commercial centers, a downtown district, or public spaces; therefore, the value of landscaping and open space must not be overlooked.

Well-defined Community Gateways and District

Portals. Based on the comments received by residents, business and property owners, and community stakeholders the appearance of community entrances is important. They are proud of their community and would like to continue to portray a positive first impression on those who visit or pass through the community for the first time. Understanding this pride, the City has installed community entry signs/markers in cooperation with Lawrence Technological University at select entrance points to the City. The entry markers identify the community entrances but these gateways offer further opportunities to establish an image, convey community values, and attract attention to local attractions and destinations.

Southfield is somewhat unique because it has multiple entrances. Most travelers, other than local residents, enter the community from the Lodge/Northwestern highways, the Southfield freeway, Telegraph Road or I-696. It is recommended that formal gateway improvements are

focused at these locations, with less significant entrance treatments at the other arterial roadways.

Entryway enhancements to establish formal gateways include improvements to the roadways, such as well designed landscaped medians and landscaped freeway embankments, significant entry monuments, upgraded lighting standards, wayfinding signage and well-maintained and attractive adjacent properties.

In addition to the gateways to the community, there are also multiple opportunities for enhancement of special district portals. Examples include notable areas that distinguish themselves by way of their character, such as City Centre, Cornerstone Development Authority (CDA) district, North Southfield Road corridor, the Telegraph Technology corridor and individual neighborhoods. Portals to these districts create identity, form a sense of belonging for those who visit or live there, and create additional opportunities for aesthetic enhancement around the community. The CDA has constructed a series of portal and wayfinding sign systems in the district, which could lead as an example and provide uniformity for other Special District portal improvements.

Attractive Public Buildings, Spaces and

Infrastructure. The City, Southfield Public School District, Lawrence Technological University and other public or semi-public entities and agencies have the opportunity to lead by example. There are several models of highly attractive and notable structures that contribute to the character of the community. For instance, the Southfield Public Library, Thompson Farm, The Burgh Historic Park, The Rouge River corridor, Beech Woods Recreation Center, Valley Woods Nature Preserve, Carpenter Lake Nature Preserve and other individual buildings and neighborhoods are local landmarks that communicate to the public a message of community pride and heritage. These facilities, along with numerous faith-based institutions, must be acknowledged for their presence and contribution to the fabric of Southfield by continued diligence in their upkeep and preservation.

Local landmarks require a substantial investment on behalf of the City or their sponsoring entity or agency. These investments pay dividends, not only in their functional use, but also by way of giving the community form. The quality of public buildings, spaces and infrastructure is reflective of how the community views itself and the priority placed on its presence within the region and state. It is warranted for the community to concern themselves with improvements, as well as their function.

Public expenditures often lead to private investment. For example, streetscape enhancements commonly result in improvements to adjacent properties. Once an individual owner commits to upgrade the appearance and/or redevelopment of their property, the action tends to spur other improvements and investments by nearby land or business owners. While public financial resources are always limited, increasing the investment will benefit in the long-term by a resulting increase to the tax base and enhancement of community character and identity.

Community Image Areas

The overall image of the community is derived by the collective appearance of individual areas. Rather than evaluating the character and appeal of each neighborhood or roadway individually, the community is organized into image areas. See following Map 12-1. The design principles and character improvements described in this chapter may be applied universally to the framework areas, which together form the aesthetic fabric of Southfield.

The image areas include the following:

Corridors. Corridors provide connections for people, commerce, and infrastructure, as well as natural river systems. Corridors provide the visual and functional imagery of the community at large. In other words, the impression made by the corridors largely represents the image of the community as a whole. The design and appearance of Southfield's corridors is significant in forming a positive experience and lasting image for those who visit or pass through Southfield. The general principles for enhancing the community's corridors include enclosing or framing each street with the use of the natural (trees and vegetation) and built (buildings) environments; arranging buildings and parking areas to complement the streetscape, placing emphasis on form, as well as function; balancing the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists with that of automobiles; substantially enhancing the overall level of design quality; and creating an improved visual setting for local commerce.

Districts. Districts represent the places that are unique and have individual identity. These are the places that commonly attract people for specific purposes, such as education, cultural/historic attractions, shopping, government, public gatherings, employment, health care and living. They represent a common place where people come together for a variety of reasons. They are each unique in their physical character by way of their use, the density

(units per acre) and intensity (bulk, scale and height) of the development, the architectural style, or other distinctive features and amenities. The general principles for establishing stronger identities of Southfield's districts include exploiting their visual distinctiveness with portal features and treatments (monuments, fencing, landscaping, signs, etc.); creating an individual style; enhancing the streetscape for pedestrian use; and promoting a common identity through signs and other means.

Gateways and Portals. Gateways and portals are intended to help create identity for the community as a whole, as well as each individual district. They are visual icons that are designed to attract attention and portray an image or message. For entrants, they are an introduction to the area. They shape the identity and form a sense of belonging for those who live or work within the boundaries of the district. The physical improvements give form and establish an edge to the districts.

The general principles used to establish formal gateways include improvements to the roadways, such as well designed landscaped medians and landscaped freeway embankments, significant entry monuments, upgraded lighting standards, wayfinding signage and well-maintained and attractive adjacent properties.

Portals create district identity, form a sense of belonging for those who visit or live there, and create additional opportunities for aesthetic enhancement around the community. The general principle is to establish portals at entrances to and within the unique districts by creating a theme/brand that can be portrayed in the district's streetscape, gateway markers, street and pedestrian lighting, etc. by using a select style of materials, colors, placement, and more.

