

City of Fremont, Michigan Community Action Plan

Michigan **FREMONT** NOW AND ALWAYS - A FINE CITY - A GREAT COMMUNITY

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Photo by Newaygo County Tourism Council



Prepared For:

City of Fremont, Michigan

City Council:

James Rynberg, Mayor

Sandy Siegel, Mayor Pro-Tem

Bob Johnson, Council Member

Lola Harmon-Ramsey, Council Member

Eric Johnson, Council Member

Todd Blake, City Manager/Finance Director

Prepared By:

Fishbeck

1515 Arboretum Drive, SE

Grand Rapids, MI 49546

616.575.3824

fishbeck.com

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Introduction

In January 2022, Governor Gretchen Whitmer's Executive Directive 2022-01 established Michigan's Office of Rural Development within the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD). Governor Whitmer charged the Office with strategically focusing on the needs of rural Michigan including, but not limited to, the areas of economic and workforce development, housing, infrastructure, energy, and sustainability.

The Office developed initial programming and continuously refined its efforts and partnerships in 2023 to respond to the priority needs reflected by rural community leaders. Initial programs and initiatives included the Rural Readiness Grant Program, Virtual Roundtables, Rural Leadership Summits, policy focus groups, technical assistance, and grant application support. In December of 2023, Governor Whitmer moved the Office into the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, and the name was changed to the Office of Rural Prosperity.

Rural Michigan encompasses Michigan's 12 federally recognized tribes, more than 1,400 local governments, and 70 counties considered rural or mostly rural. More than 155,000 firms call rural Michigan home. With over two-thirds of school districts and 21 colleges and universities located in rural areas of the state, rural Michigan is instrumental in preparing the future workforce.¹

The MDARD Office of Rural Development offered a funding opportunity titled the Rural Readiness Grant Program for solutions to build capacity and readiness in rural communities and regions. A maximum of \$50,000 in grant funds provided eligible communities with funding to support collaborative planning and capacity initiatives. Eligible projects needed to advance efforts to address such needs as housing, transportation, broadband, energy, economic development, and placemaking.

Rural communities and tax-exempt organizations that serve rural communities were eligible to apply for grant funds designed to support collaborative planning and capacity-building initiatives that advance efforts to address local needs including, but not limited to, housing, broadband, placemaking, energy, transportation, health, infrastructure, economic development, and workforce. Multi-jurisdictional and multi-sector projects were encouraged.

In 2023, the Fremont Area Community Foundation, Newaygo County, and five communities (Village of Hesperia and Cities of Fremont, Grant, Newaygo, and White Cloud) joined together and applied for Rural Readiness grant funds through the Office of Rural Development, now known as the Office of Rural Prosperity. This project focused on the strengths and opportunities in each community and identification of ways to cooperate and coordinate on plans and projects and resulted in a successful grant award. The point of contact for the project was the Newaygo County Economic Development Partnership, powered by The Right Place in Grand Rapids, Michigan (www.rightplace.org). A Request for Proposal issued by the Fremont Area Community Foundation resulted in a contract with Fishbeck to implement this grant. In early 2024, Fishbeck began gathering data, scheduling community visits, and participating in monthly updates with Julie Burrell from The Right Place.

A separate Action Plan was developed for each of the five communities involved in this planning process. These communities share a fairly close proximity with a driving time of 15–25 minutes between them as well as many familiar issues: a lack of housing, capacity to complete projects, promotion, marketing of the community, and planning for growth and infrastructure needs. However, each community is unique and has a desire to stand out and be recognized for its individuality and rich history in the county. While each plan has been developed for one of the five communities, the various plans may identify similar issues, goals, actions, and steps (tasks), as well as similar data, and ideas and actions may be lifted from any plan and used in another community.

¹ *Michigan's Roadmap to Rural Prosperity*. Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, Office of Rural Prosperity. https://www.michigan.gov/leo/-/media/Project/Websites/leo/Documents/ord/Michigan-Roadmap-to-Rural-Prosperity_Report-FINAL.pdf.

Acknowledgements

The collaborative approach undertaken by five local units of government and several organizations resulted in a successful grant application in 2023 through the Rural Readiness Grant Program of the Office of Rural Prosperity, Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity. The point of contact for the project was the Newaygo County Economic Development Partnership, powered by The Right Place in Grand Rapids, Michigan (www.rightplace.org).

The purpose of this project was to identify challenges and opportunities along with ideas for growth and economic development. The project did not include new surveys or community outreach. The analysis of data was conducted using a method to gather as much existing data as possible and review it for relevancy to this project and reaching out to high school students for a site visit with open discussion, followed by a similar session conducted with local officials a few weeks later. These site visits and open discussion sessions provided an opportunity to capture current opinions and feelings about the community and make some comparisons with prior data. This Community Action Plan was developed to summarize the existing data and plans, review what the community currently has and what it needs, and outline an implementation strategy for the visions through actions and steps.

The following organizations are acknowledged for their participation and efforts to secure this grant award and assist with the steps needed for this initiative in Fremont.

Fremont Area Community Foundation

In-Kind Support: Technology to support marketing materials and use of meeting rooms, applicable administrative support. Assistance with convening stakeholders and associated outreach.

Newaygo County Economic Development Partnership, Powered by The Right Place

In-Kind Support: Comparative analysis of assessment to other local data sources. Assistance with convening stakeholders and associated outreach. Assistance in identifying data sources and research.

The Cities of Fremont, Grant, Newaygo, and White Cloud and Village of Hesperia, which provided in-kind support for this multi-community project with assistance to convene stakeholders, conduct associated outreach, and provide needed documents such as master plans, zoning ordinances, studies, etc.

County of Newaygo, River Country Chamber of Commerce, Fremont Area Chamber of Commerce, and the Hesperia Area Chamber of Commerce

In-Kind Support: Assistance with convening stakeholders and associated outreach.

Newaygo County GIS Department

Mapping services

In addition to the above, the Fremont High School administration assisted with a coordinated effort for junior and senior students at the high school to participate in an onsite visit to complete a short questionnaire and then engage in discussion to gather their opinions on several different topics related to the future of Fremont.

Thanks also go to Julie Burrell, Senior Economic Development Director with Newaygo County and member of The Right Place in Grand Rapids. Ms. Burrell helped steer and oversee this grant project through the entire planning process.

This Action Plan resulted from the collective efforts of the City of Fremont, Fremont High School students, and various organizations and individuals. The City is commended for its dedication to fulfilling the goals and visions of its citizens and for its leadership that has been instrumental in guiding the community toward continued growth and success. The efforts of all those involved demonstrate the power of partnerships and working together to achieve common goals.



Action Plan

For this project, the Community Tool Box² was used as a reference for guidance to encourage community change efforts through an Action Plan. The Community Tool Box is a free online resource dedicated to helping build healthier communities and fostering social change. It is managed by the University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development, and its mission is to promote community health and development by connecting people, ideas, and resources. It offers 200 freely available, skills-building “how-to” sections on topics that range from assessment and planning to evaluation and sustainability.

The Community Tool Box is a valuable resource. Since its inception in 1994, users from 230 countries worldwide have accessed its 7,000 pages of content. The platform offers numerous free “how-to” resources to support community collaboration efforts and an “Ask an Advisor” service for brief response about community work. All online services are free with additional assistance available at a cost. It is accessible through Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (X).

What is an Action Plan?

An Action Plan takes a vision or goal and helps turn it into a reality. Organizations and communities may develop Action Plans for several reasons:

- To demonstrate that things are in order and action items are being completed
- To build credibility
- To lay out reasonable expectations of what can be achieved
- To save time, resources, and energy
- To increase the likelihood that the outlined changes will be accomplished

An Action Plan is a work in progress and should be modified as steps within the plan are completed and as new visions or goals are identified for the community.

A simple model demonstrated on the Community Tool Box website for creating change served as a reference point for developing this document. The following summarizes the phases used for community planning and action:³

1. Understand and listen to the community
2. Conduct strategic planning to identify a vision, mission, objectives, and strategies
3. Develop an Action Plan
4. Document progress and promote celebration and renewal

Fremont’s documents and outreach efforts over the past few years have addressed the first two phases. This document focuses on developing an Action Plan. The final step—documenting progress and promoting celebration and renewal—is crucial for demonstrating and enjoying successes, as well as increasing awareness and interest in the process.

² Community Tool Box, <https://ctb.ku.edu/en>.

³ Fawcett, Stephen B., Ph.D., et al. *Promoting Urban Neighborhood Development: An Action Planning Guide for Improving Housing, Jobs, Education, Safety and Health, and Human Development*. KU Work Group on Health Promotion & Community Development, University of Kansas. May 2001. [https://ctb.ku.edu/sites/default/files/chapter_files/promoting_urban_neighborhood_development.sflb .pdf](https://ctb.ku.edu/sites/default/files/chapter_files/promoting_urban_neighborhood_development.sflb.pdf).

Overview and Key Insights

The City of Fremont is a charming, small rural community in Newaygo County and is widely recognized as being home to the world's largest baby food company, Gerber Products; the National Baby Food Festival; Fremont Lake Park Campground; and beautiful parks that feature passive and active recreational opportunities. With trails, play areas, and places to relax, these parks serve as a central local for residents and visitors. The City takes immense pride in its community spirit, well-maintained recreational facilities, and the beauty of its parks.

The City offers a variety of appealing attractions and events throughout the year that draw visitors to the City, such as fishing, waterfront activities, a local museum, and a downtown with unique shops and places to dine. These attractions and the City's strong emphasis to provide exceptional service to residents and visitors alike make Fremont a desirable destination for vacations and those looking to relocate.

The following are the primary goals outlined in this document:

- Downtown Enhancement
- Placemaking
- Enabling Design
- Developer Incentives
- Involvement/Participation

Fremont is forward thinking and has taken a proactive approach to planning and visioning for its future. However, the City faces challenges such as limited resources, financial constraints, and growing infrastructure demands. Like many rural communities, Fremont is an attractive location for retirees and offers a wealth of recreational opportunities and small-town amenities. The projected increase in the number of older adults, coupled with a shrinking pool of paid caregivers and a shifting ratio from 1:7 paid caregivers to seniors in 2020 to an anticipated 1:3 by 2040, is a critical issue.⁴ This demographic shift will lead to a further strain on local economies and social services due to a greater demand for long-term care needs and an expected decrease in personal and governmental resources.

The City aims to create and maintain a vibrant, accessible community that fulfills residential, commercial, and recreational needs while preserving its small-town charm. The plan outlines specific actions to support the City's proactive efforts for continued progress and meaningful improvements. Successful implementation will require coordinated collaboration among City officials, community members, neighboring towns, and regional partners. Through collective efforts and established partnerships, the community seeks to address current challenges and build a sustainable, thriving future for all residents.

⁴ Greenhouse, M.S., CAPS, Esther. Enabling by Design: Leveraging Home Features for Physical and Financial Independence in Retirement (2021). *CSA Journal*, No. 85, Volume 4. <https://silvertogoldstrategies.com/the-enabling-design-approach/>.

City of Fremont

History

The City of Fremont is located in the western half of the county, south of Hesperia. It is situated along the north shore of Fremont Lake and extends to the William J. Branstrom Park and several lakes (First Lake, Second Lake, and Third Lake, with Fourth Lake lying outside the City limits). Similar to many areas in Michigan, the start of Fremont was associated with the clearing of the dense timber to make way for local farms. Lumbering was a major industry, and a railroad linked Fremont to the national rail network. In 1871, Fremont experienced a large fire that damaged the lumber mills but was able to rebuild. This area has been known as Elm Corners, Weaverville, Fremont Center, and then finally, Fremont. The City of Fremont is located in the Townships of Dayton and Sheridan. There is a strong Dutch community in Fremont due to Dutch immigrant families moving from Holland and Zeeland, Michigan, to Fremont in the early 1870s.

Early records show that the first school was held in the kitchen of a log home, but by the following year, so many people had arrived in the area that a new school was needed. There were two school districts until 1865, when the schools consolidated. Continued population throughout the years led to many renovations and expansions until 1964, when the country schools closed and students were consolidated into the public school system. Currently, there are three elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. Private and parochial schools also exist in the area.

The City also provides recreational opportunities at Branstrom Park, Arboretum Park, and Veterans Memorial Park. The *Newaygo County Histories & Biographies* publication provides a fascinating history of additional landmarks in Fremont such as the Train Station, DeHaas Hotel (now known as the Indigo Inn), The Pioneer Drug Store, Ben Franklin 5 & 10, and Fremont Lumber & Fuel Company.⁵

Numerous churches exist in Fremont, and the first Gerber Hospital was located in a donated home on Maple Street. The current hospital is Corewell Health Gerber and is a community-directed healthcare system. Family practices are also located in Hesperia and Grant.

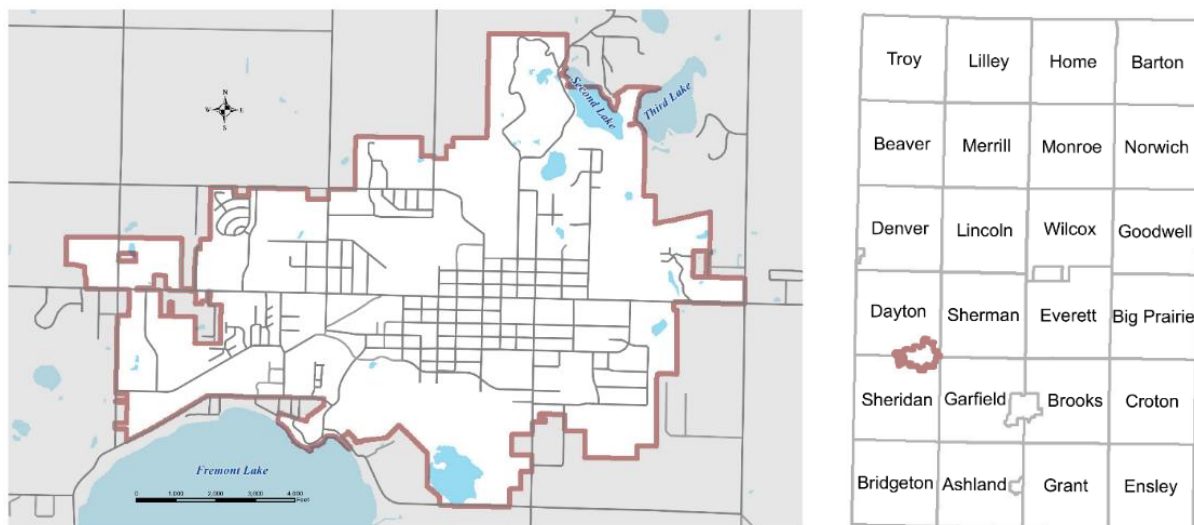


Figure 1: City of Fremont Overview Map

⁵ *Newaygo County Histories & Biographies*, Volume 1, 2006, Section 1, Townships & Cities.

The Community

Fremont has a fairly busy downtown with M-82 running through the City, which can make it difficult for pedestrians crossing the street. The highway is a divider that runs east–west through the City and the downtown area. Fremont is located less than an hour from Grand Rapids and about 35 minutes from Muskegon. The City offices are situated on Main Street, directly across from the District Library. The area is a rural community, surrounded by farms, a few resorts, and residential neighborhoods. The crime rate for Fremont (15 per 1,000 people) is below the national average and lower than other cities of a similar size.⁶ Fremont is considered a safe place to live, work, and raise a family as well as an appealing area for those wishing to relocate and commute to a larger city or work from home.

A wide variety of businesses, recreational opportunities, available space for new development or revitalization projects exist within the City and offer opportunities to investors. In Fremont, the downtown area is typically considered the central business district and is focused around Main Street (M-82), which has a west and east section where many of the City's key businesses, shops, restaurants, and services are situated. This area includes important landmarks and public spaces like Veterans Memorial Park and the Fremont Area District Library.

East Main Street generally encompasses smaller shops, restaurants, a bank, the library, a furniture store, and the Farmers Market while West Main Street includes the Veterans Memorial Park, Nestlé Gerber Products Company, The Harrington Inn, fast-food restaurants, a pharmacy, an EV charging station, hair salons, the Fremont Cinema, and larger shopping stores. The Gateway, a senior apartment community, is located next to the library with curving paved walking areas, seating, and a large sculpture of an oak leaf available to the entire community. The Newaygo County Agricultural Fair grounds are located on the south side of the downtown, just west of Warner Avenue. Overall, the City's downtown functions as a strong center for commerce, social interaction, and cultural activities within the local community.

A major event in Fremont each summer is the National Baby Food Festival. This event is strongly supported by Gerber, Gerber Life Insurance, local businesses, and the community. Locations utilized for the festival include Veterans Memorial Park, Marketplace Pavilion, Fremont schools, and Fremont City Hall. Events held during this multi-day event include rides at the Midway, parades, Queen's Crowning, a softball tournament, a petting zoo, games, races, and numerous other activities. There is a focus on health and safety activities such as car-seat inspections, workout classes, a parent resource center, and a blessing of the babies, expectant mothers, and families.

Just outside the City limits, on the east end, lies the Fremont Area Community Foundation, a nonprofit organization that services families throughout the county, and the Dogwood Center for Performing Arts, which provides a venue for numerous events like concerts, performances, and display areas for artists.

The Fremont Community Joint Comprehensive & Growth Management Plan (Joint Plan) was adopted in 2022 and was a joint venture with the City of Fremont, Dayton Township, and Sheridan Charter Township.⁷ Each community has representation on the Joint Planning Commission. This Joint Plan addresses concerns like sprawl, natural resource threats, and the benefits of higher-density development to manage infrastructure costs. The three communities, pioneers in joint planning with over a decade of collaboration, understand the mutual impact between the City and surrounding townships. The plan focuses on infill development, transportation, pedestrian safety, open space preservation, recreational access, walkable neighborhoods, and diverse housing options. It includes a zoning plan and future land use map and considers a Time of Sale or Transfer septic/well inspection ordinance. There is also an adopted joint zoning ordinance and a joint Zoning Board of Appeals.

⁶ Pros and Cons of Living in Fremont, Michigan. Citytistics. <https://www.citytistics.com/city/fremont-michigan/>.

⁷ *Fremont Community Joint Comprehensive & Growth Management Plan*. November 2022. <https://fremontmi.gov/DocumentCenter/View/2234/Fremont-Community-Comp-Plan>.

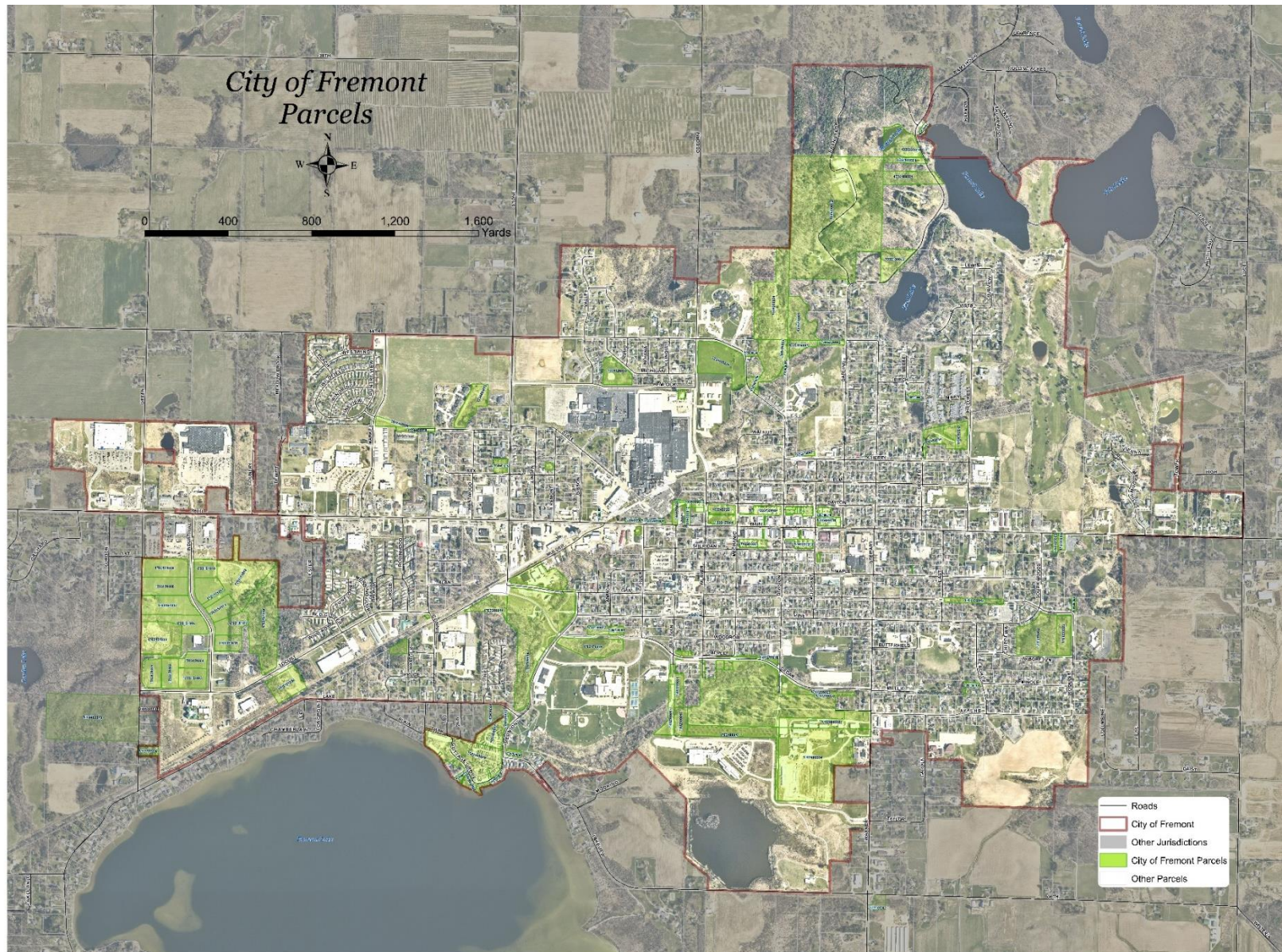


Figure 2: Properties Owned by the City of Fremont

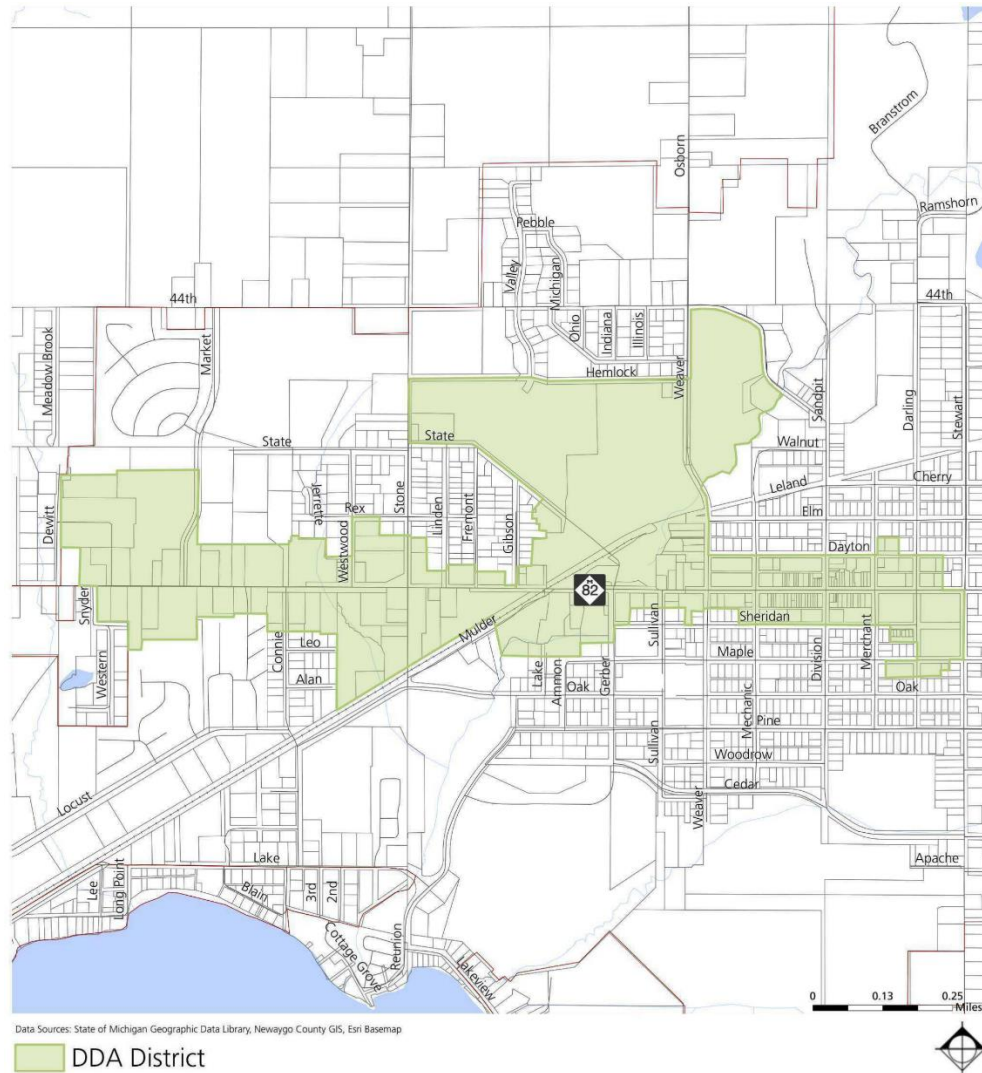


Figure 3: Map of Downtown Development Authority

Natural Resources/Recreation

The first Newaygo County Fair was held in Fremont in 1955 and included exhibits, dairy animals, beef, horses, hogs, poultry, and rabbits. The fair is held in August every year at the Newaygo County Agricultural Fair Grounds and includes showing of animals, kids' events, market sale, exhibit buildings, and truck and tractor pulls.

The City of Fremont contains several parks: Arboretum Park, Branstrom Park, Fremont Lake Park, Veterans Memorial Park, and Fremont Dog Park. Athletic fields are located at the school, and there is public access to Fremont Lake.

According to the Joint Plan, there are 31 recreational facilities in the Fremont community, 16 of which are public, 4 are private, and 11 are associated with an educational institution. The City has numerous recreational amenities; over 90% of all parcels in the City are within 0.5 miles of a recreational area, and almost all residential parcels have access to a park within 1 mile. The Joint Plan, which expires at the end of 2024, includes valuable information on all recreational facilities, proposed park improvements, and future projects.

In 2020, the Parks and Recreation Master Plan was updated to outline priorities for recreation and future projects, which the City can pursue to enhance its current facilities. The Fremont Recreational Center, a valuable

resort serving residents and non-residents, is operated by the Recreation Authority. It offers a swimming pool, gymnasium, indoor and outdoor pickleball courts, space to rent for community events, classes, and various fitness lessons.



Figure 4: Veterans Memorial Park

Housing

Discussions held with the five communities involved in this planning project repeatedly brought up housing as an issue, with few options for affordable housing and limited choices for renters and homeowners.

Newaygo County Housing Partnership Fund

In March of 2023, the Newaygo County Board of Commissioners appropriated \$1,000,000 of ARPA funds to be used in a partnership with Fremont Area Community Foundation for affordable housing. Numerous studies identified the need for additional housing, with all of them pointing to a need for a variety of types of housing and price points. The most recent data indicated 300–400 housing units were needed throughout the county, with the greatest need being for families earning \$45,240 to \$90,840 for a four-person household, which is within 60–120% Area Median Income (AMI) for the county.

The Newaygo County Housing Partnership Fund states that projects must target homeowners or rents with incomes between 60% and 120% of AMI. In the second round of grant applications, Haven Design Build was awarded a \$60,000 grant toward the construction of a duplex in Fremont. Two larger multi-unit projects also received funding: Stone Hill Estates received a \$150,000 grant, and the City of Fremont received a \$150,000 grant. A third round of grant proposals was due in July 2024. Nonprofit and for-profit developers are eligible to apply for these funds.

A June 11, 2024, article regarding a new NBC News analysis found that in Newaygo County, a household income of \$71,000 is needed in order to afford a median-price home.⁸ An affordable home is considered when no more than 30% of the household's monthly income is spent on a mortgage payment. A \$213,000 home would be at

⁸ Murphy, Joe. Interactive map: Where in the U.S. can you afford a home on your income? *NBC News*. June 11, 2024. www.nbcnews.com/data-graphics/map-where-can-you-afford-a-home-in-the-united-states-rcna155286.

the top end of the price for a household with an annual income of \$71,000 in Newaygo County. Buying a home is becoming more difficult, resulting in increased ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) and poverty numbers, couch surfers, and households with more than one family. The median household income in Fremont in 2022 was well below \$71,000, the amount shown in the NBC News analysis as needed to afford a median-price home in Newaygo County, and emphasizes the need for programs such as the Partnership Fund to provide assistance for development of new affordable units.

Transportation

There is no public transportation that services Fremont. The Newaygo County Commission on Aging (COA) does provide some transportation for individuals over the age of 60 or community members with disabilities that need assistance, and also offers trips that take seniors to various locations. Bus and van transportation are provided through the Newaygo County COA Monday through Friday. The major transportation choice for access in and out of Fremont is vehicles.

In 2012, the City worked on a Safe Routes to Schools project after receiving a grant from the state program. The grant helped fund sidewalks, parts of a multi-use path, and a bike lane installation.

The Joint Plan has a chapter devoted to transportation that outlines non-motorized opportunities and provides information on miles of roads and conditions, complete street designs and strategies, bike lanes, policies, and future projects. The City also has an M-82 Corridor Study,⁹ which includes a corridor analysis with information on the buildings, street conditions and traffic flow, traffic data, parking, sidewalks, landscaping, and road improvements. While the study may be dated, there appears to be information and objectives in the plan that might still be useful to the City or could be updated with a new study along with plans to implement changes to the M-82 corridor.



Figure 5: Downtown Fremont

Services

Fremont is serviced by municipal water and sewer, police, fire and rescue, local schools, a hospital, medical offices, City offices, a post office, fire and rescue, a community center, and a library. The City provides additional services such as residential curbside refuse and recycling, leaf collection, pool filling, and hydro mulch services.

⁹ *M-82 Corridor Study*. City of Fremont, Sheridan Charter Township, and Dayton Township. <https://fremontmi.gov/DocumentCenter/View/123/M-82-Corridor-Study-PDF?bidId=>.

There are numerous churches within the City limits along with the Harrington Inn, and a short 15-minute drive takes you to the Village of Hesperia to access the White River or to Newaygo to access the Muskegon River.

There is an EV charging station located on Main Street in Fremont that is maintained by the ChargePoint network. It has two J1772 ports for charging. The closest stations to this location are two charging stations located in the City of Newaygo.¹⁰

Corewell Health Gerber is located in Fremont, and additional medical services are provided at the hospital in Grand Rapids. A Community Health Needs Assessment was completed for 2021–2022 for Spectrum Health Gerber Memorial, now known as Corewell Health Gerber. The assessment was completed for Newaygo County with partners from across the state, including Munson Healthcare, District Health Department No. 2, the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department, and Spectrum Health. A steering committee, work groups, and a design team led this study to identify health issues, access to healthcare, and other issues such as housing, substance misuse, transportation, and food issues. It is another example of a collaborative effort in the county to identify and address issues across borders, and the assessment provides valuable information for communities to use in their planning process.

The City has a listing of quarterly newsletters (called *Fremont City Beat*) on its website dating back to late 2012, which is published three to four times per year. This newsletter updates citizens on activities, events in the community, information on recycling, refuse pickup and road construction, notices for elections, openings on boards and committees, and information about City happenings. The latest issue reported on the new splash pad for Veterans Memorial Park; a second splash pad is to be located at Fremont Lake Park. In addition, the City manages a Facebook page to reach citizens regarding announcements for community events. The City's website currently lacks a language translation feature. Adding such a component could greatly benefit users by enabling the site to be translated into various languages, potentially as part of the next website update. For events that attract a diverse audience, agreements with local schools or college students for translation services could also be established to ensure proper notice and accessibility for non-English speakers.

Economic Development

Fremont has a Downtown Development Authority (DDA), which is responsible for overseeing and promoting the revitalization and improvement of the downtown area. It focuses on enhancing the economic and aesthetic aspects of the downtown district, working on projects such as infrastructure improvements, business development, and community events to stimulate growth and maintain the area's vitality.

Every downtown area faces its own unique challenges as these spaces constantly evolve to meet the needs of changing communities. As businesses close or move and properties change ownership, communities must be proactive and embrace fresh ideas and innovative concepts to keep downtowns vibrant and engaging. This adaptability often requires learning from successful strategies—such as pedestrian-friendly streets, pop-up shops, public art installations, water features, and seasonal events that invite foot traffic—implemented in cities across the country.

Technology plays an important role in downtown development, as visitors often use their phones to find things like menus, sales, coupons, directions, and reviews. Businesses, schools, and organizations need to keep their websites updated, respond to reviews, and answer questions promptly to keep people interested. Adding public Wi-Fi, interactive kiosks, and online services can make downtowns more convenient and fun to visit. When cities use technology along with creative design and public involvement, they create downtowns that are lively and an attractive place for residents and visitors.

¹⁰ ChargeHub, <https://chargehub.com/map/#/en/map>.

Fremont's downtown includes popular restaurants, unique shops, the Harrington Inn, several fast-food locations, and larger stores. This busy area serves as a hub for community events like festivals, concerts, and gatherings. A vibrant downtown improves the tax base, fosters community engagement, and drives economic growth. However, challenges arise when businesses close and properties deteriorate, traffic becomes hard to maneuver, and pedestrian access to the downtown is difficult. To combat this, sustainable communities focus on maintaining well-kept streets and paths with good access and mobility, offering diverse activities, and providing incentives to attract new development to ensure the downtowns remain vital to the cities' prosperity.

An economic development event, Newaygo County Economic Outlook: 2024, was held on March 6, 2024. During the event, it was revealed that building permits were up in the county and the county had a 4-point higher increase than the state for property values. The county is also adding more jobs and outpacing neighboring counties. Key steps for the county to focus on, as noted at the March presentation, were tourism and placemaking. Tourism attracts people to the community and increases revenue. Placemaking enhances the environment through improvements, walkable areas, recreation, and gathering places for events—making areas more attractive for both residents and visitors and increasing the chance that visitors will return.

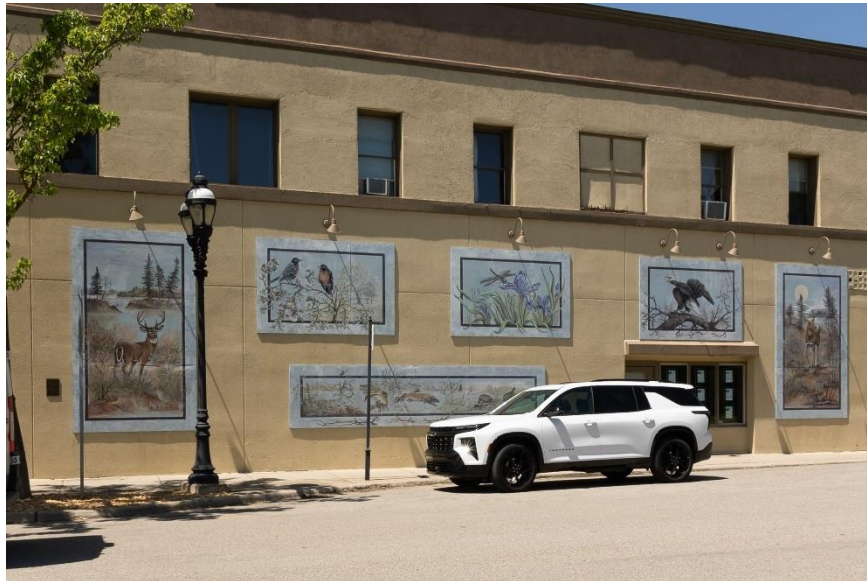


Figure 6: Paintings in the Downtown

Education

School data from the Newaygo County Regional Educational Service Agency shows a decline for all five school districts in Newaygo County from the 2014–2015 school year through the 2023–2024 school year. Fremont's student enrollment decreased in every school year except for 2022–2023 and 2023–2024. Overall, Fremont school district has decreased by 145 students since the 2014–2015 school year. Declining school numbers equate to a loss in state funding for the school district.

According to the Child Care Hub Information Records Portal, there are two family homes (1–6 children), three group homes (7–12 children), and ten centers servicing Fremont as of March 7, 2024. Fremont has more childcare facilities than other communities in Newaygo County, which is important to the workforce, businesses, and schools in the area as these licensed services are needed by parents so they can enter or stay in the workforce. Childcare facilities play a crucial role for schools as families move their children from childcare to preschool and then to elementary school. Having these services conveniently located near homes and schools is a significant advantage for families considering relocation.

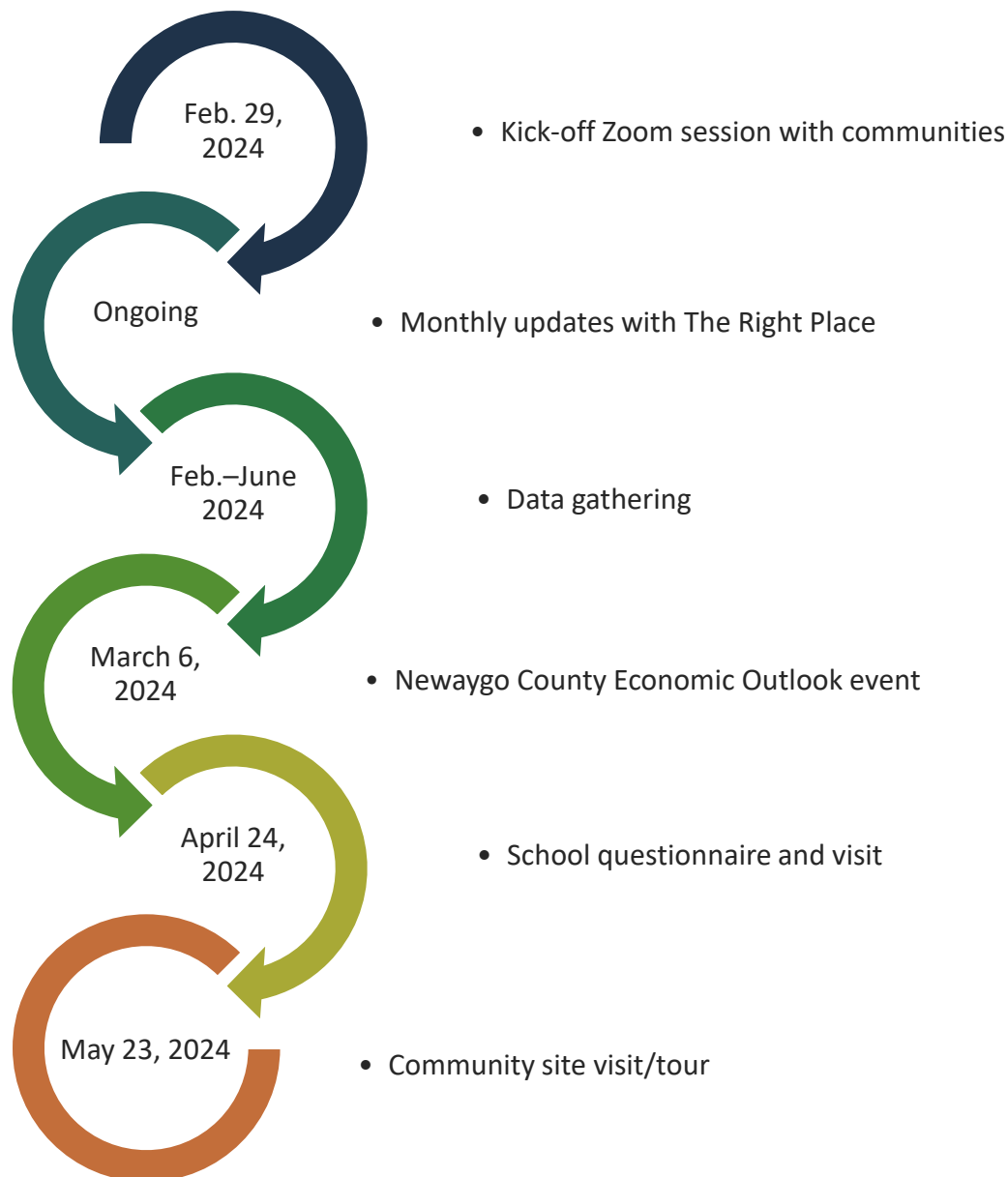
At the Newaygo County Economic Outlook: 2024 event held earlier this year, the presentation included information that 60% of juniors and seniors attended career and technical education programs. This is a huge number for career-tech attendance and is significantly higher than career-tech participation across the state. Career tech offers an alternative to a college degree, and in the future these students can help support the trades industries (e.g., construction, electrical, mechanical, automotive, etc.), which supports essential jobs.

For those seeking higher education, institutions such as Grand Valley State University, Muskegon Community College, Calvin College, Ferris State University, and Hope College can be reached within a one hour drive from Fremont. These schools offer diverse opportunities for high school graduates and adults seeking further education or career changes.

In 2023, the Nestlé Gerber Products Company donated \$25,000 to the Newaygo County Area Promise Zone Board to begin a five-year commitment (\$125,000 pledge) toward the Promise Scholarship. Effective with the graduating class of 2024, Newaygo County high school graduates with a 2.5 unweighted GPA or higher will qualify for the Promise Scholarship, a program to assist students with pursuit of post-secondary education. The Promise Zone began in 2017 and has disbursed more than \$2.5 million in tuition support, benefiting over 300 Newaygo County students who chose to pursue post-secondary education.¹¹

¹¹ Newaygo County Area Promise Zone, <https://promise.zone>.

Data and Methodology



Numerous documents and reports were obtained during data gathering and review including Census data, surveys, the Fremont Area Recreational Master Plan, the Joint Comprehensive & Growth Management Plan, information on childcare facilities, school data, poverty and ALICE data, and maps. This information, along with the school and community visits, gave a clearer picture of the community, its challenges and strengths, and possible next steps.

The community site visit and school visit revealed several key challenges, including a housing shortage, some vacant buildings in the downtown, and an older population resistant to change despite widespread support for growth. The City is becoming more commercial with an increase in resale shops, and there is strong interest for fine-dining experiences, particularly a restaurant with extended evening hours. Residents are eager to preserve the community's character while embracing expansion, noting that blight has become a concern. Participants

also expressed interest in exploring growth opportunities that align with community values, expanding the recreation center, and developing a landing page for the City's website.

As noted in the presentation by TaRita Johnson, Senior Vice President, Talent & Diversity of The Right Place, at the Newaygo County Economic Outlook: 2024 event held in March, branding and retention is extremely important for companies and should also be considered as important to communities. The percentage of job seekers that research company reviews and ratings to determine whether they should apply is 86%. People are also keen on researching businesses prior to visiting them. These branding methods can be utilized in communities as well, highlighting the importance of controlling the things you can and working on things you can directly influence as well as those you indirectly influence. These all lead to perceptions about the community, the staff, and elected and appointed officials. Strong branding can result in a strong, positive reaction about the community from residents and visitors.



Figure 7: Curved Walkway Between The Gateway and Library

*We don't inherit the earth from our ancestors;
we borrow it from our children.*

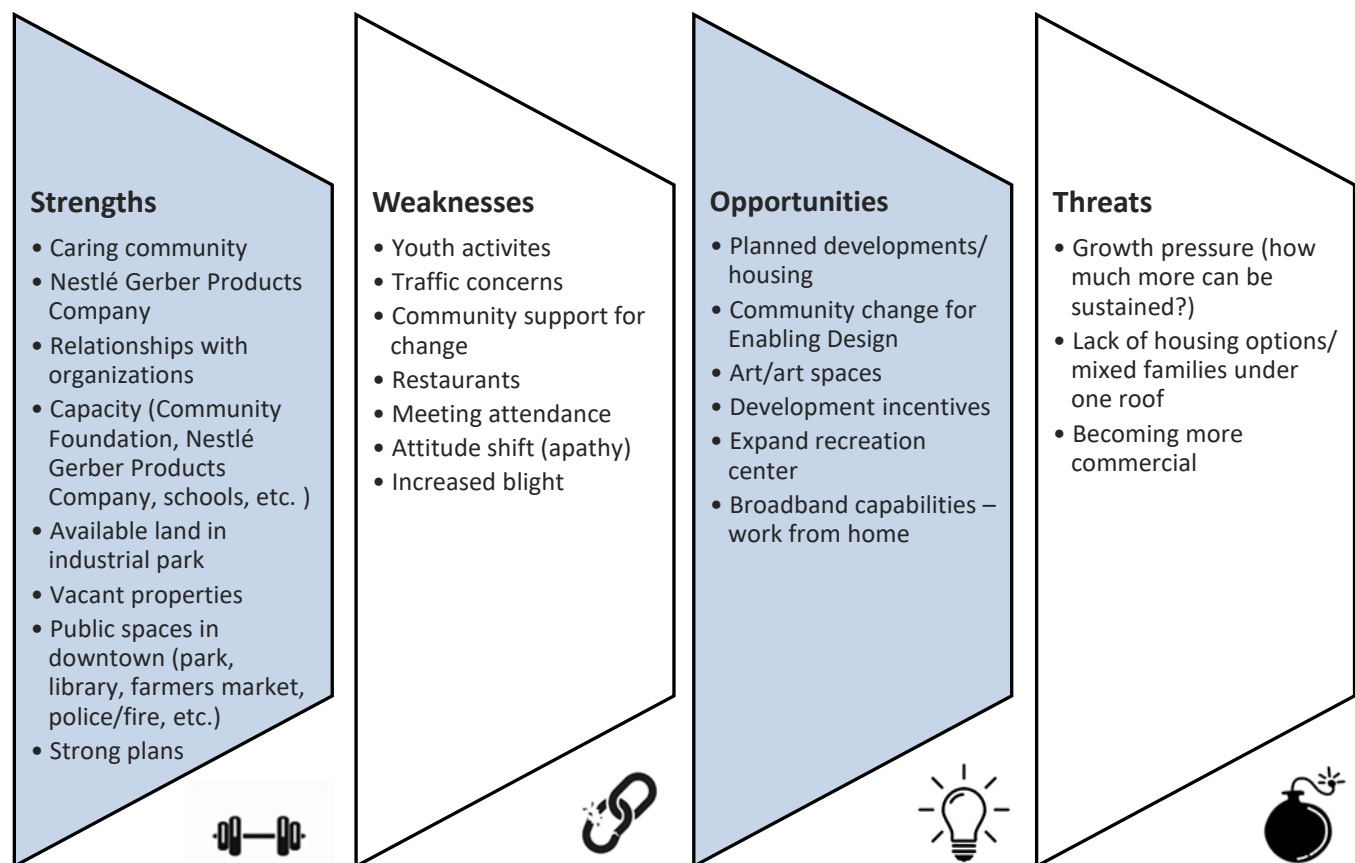


Figure 8: Curved Walkway and Oak Leaf Sculpture

SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats)

The following outlines the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for the City of Fremont. **SWOT** is one of the most common and valuable ways to undertake a strategic analysis. It is typically written in a basic and clear manner for anyone to understand. **SWOT** is meant to generate ideas and is not intended to be a complete listing. A simple explanation of these four categories is:

- **Strength** – Something you do better than others
- **Weakness** – Something you do worse than others
- **Opportunity** – A factor that could benefit you
- **Threat** – A factor that could harm you



Strengths

The City demonstrates significant strengths as a supportive and engaged community, fostering healthy relationships with various organizations and participating in regional partnerships. The City's capacity is boosted by valuable support from entities such as the Community Foundation, The Right Place, Nestlé Gerber Products Company, and local schools. This collaboration and access to resources, tools, and partners enables the community to achieve its goals more efficiently and effectively. By leveraging additional assets, the City can accelerate progress and allocate time and effort toward other important initiatives.

The City also benefits from its Community Recreation Center, located on E. Maple Street. This facility provides a wide range of programs and activities for both adults and youth, including swimming, water aerobics, gym workouts, swimming lessons, and pickleball, among other offerings. The drop-in fee for using the center is \$5.00 per person, making it accessible to many. For residents of Fremont, Dayton Township, and Sheridan Township, the center offers membership rates for individuals, families, and students, with slightly higher rates for non-residents.

Key strengths identified for Fremont include its reputation as a caring and welcoming community, the presence of Nestlé Gerber Products Company, the National Baby Food Festival, the City's strong relationships with other organizations, and good capacity. Additionally, the City benefits from available land in the industrial park, vacant properties, the Community Recreation Center, public spaces, a charming small-town atmosphere, and a historic downtown area.

The City also has comprehensive plans for recreation, transportation, economic development, and collaboration with neighboring townships. These documents, along with the actions outlined in the Joint Plan and this Community Action Plan, position the City well to move forward and implement the needed changes.

Weaknesses

The City faces several challenges, including a notable lack of youth activities. High school students frequently cite this as a major issue, expressing that while they plan to move away after graduation, they are also interested in returning to raise families due to the area's small-town charm, farming community, and child safety. This contradiction highlights a gap between their dissatisfaction with current youth activities and their overall appreciation for the community. Discussions with leaders raised questions about whether students are fully aware of or utilizing available outdoor recreational opportunities. Additionally, the prevalence of technology might contribute to this dissatisfaction. Students also expressed a need for more gathering places, restaurant options, and entertainment such as movie theaters, often traveling to Grand Rapids for these amenities.

Traffic congestion and the safety of pedestrian crossings are additional concerns. Main Street can be difficult to maneuver as a pedestrian, and that creates challenges for visitors who need to access local shops, public spaces, or the trails and lake. West Main Street, in particular, is noted for being particularly difficult to cross, raising concerns about pedestrian safety and mobility. This area also has some vacant properties and underutilized sites that could be redeveloped if developers could be incentivized.

The community site visit further revealed several other weaknesses: low attendance at public meetings, a shift toward community apathy, increased blight, and a lack of support for change. These issues seem to contrast sharply with the City's strength as a "caring community." Addressing these weaknesses promptly is crucial to improving citizen attitudes and engagement, ultimately enhancing the overall vitality and effectiveness of the City. Taking steps to address these challenges could foster a more proactive and supportive community environment, aligning more closely with the City's strengths and aspirations.

Opportunities

Fremont has several opportunities for growth and improvement that could enhance its appeal and functionality. One potential area is the development of new housing projects and planned unit developments, which could address demand and contribute to the City's growth. Embracing community-wide changes to increase ADA accessibility would ensure that all residents and visitors can fully participate in the community. Adding more art

installations and creating designated art spaces could enrich the cultural fabric of the City and make it a more vibrant place to live and visit.

The City is open to offering incentives to attract more developers and stimulate growth, which might include tax breaks or support for infrastructure improvements. Expanding the Community Recreation Center could provide more facilities and programs for residents and students, making it a more valuable asset. Improving broadband capabilities would enable more residents to work from home, supporting remote work and increasing connectivity. Additionally, utilizing the available space in the industrial park could boost the tax base and create new job opportunities, contributing to the City's economic development.

The City is also well positioned with its park space near Fremont Lake, the largest lake in the county. This area is highly valued for its recreational opportunities, including swimming, picnicking, and boating. While much of the shoreline is privately developed, the public park space remains a popular destination and a key asset for the community. Enhancing access and amenities in this area could further capitalize on its appeal and support local recreational activities as well as bring in additional revenue as people visit local restaurants and stores.



Threats

Fremont faces several challenges typical of rural communities, including housing shortages, pressures from growth, and increased commercialization. One significant threat comes from the expansion of big-box stores, which can undermine small, locally owned businesses that are vital to the community's identity and economy. The charm and character of local shops are at risk when large retail chains move in as they may potentially divert revenue away from the community and change its uniqueness and support for local entrepreneurs. In addition to commercial pressures, Fremont struggles with a lack of affordable, quality housing. A lack of adequate housing makes it difficult to attract or retain the workforce needed to support existing businesses, schools, and other institutions.

Another pressing issue is limited job opportunities and activities that appeal to younger generations and skilled workers. The absence of diverse employment options and recreational amenities in the City makes it hard to retain the younger population and attract new talent. This can result in the local economy becoming stagnant, schools facing continued enrollment decline, and difficulty providing services that residents expect. These combined challenges—commercialization, housing shortages, and limited types of jobs—pose a threat to the economy and overall vitality of the City. To address these threats, Fremont must balance growth with the preservation of its local identity and invest in strategies to foster economic diversity, affordable housing, and talent retention.

The Action Plan

Several website examples for Action Plans and strategic plans were reviewed as part of this planning process, including the Community Tool Box, A Comprehensive Guide to Community Action Strategic Planning from California Community Action Partnership Association, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Community Action Roadmap, SMART diagrams (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely), Enabling Design, and templates for Action Plans for other organizations. The City has many goals identified in its Joint Comprehensive & Growth Management Plan with two adjoining townships, as well as in the Parks and Recreation Plan. These visions, along with the information gleaned from site visits and discussions, were utilized to recommend action steps for the City.

An Action Plan takes a vision or goal and helps turn it into a reality. The steps listed below are guides, and additional steps or changes to the order of the actions can be made by the local community. Timelines can also be added.

- **What** – What changes or what actions will occur? What are the problems that need to be addressed? In the following table, the “what” is the *Actions* column.
- **Who** – Who will make these changes happen? This is the *Responsible* column and may include others who need to be involved or informed.
- **Resources** – A list of tools needed (labor, materials, equipment, finances, etc.).
- **Obstacles** – What might be an obstacle or challenge to completing the actions?

A streamlined approach was used for each plan across the five communities in Newaygo County. This plan serves as a foundation rather than a comprehensive list of the City of Fremont's goals. It provides a starting point that can be implemented, revised, and updated annually to guide the City toward its vision. While small, rural communities often face limitations in capacity and funding; the City has demonstrated an ability to secure resources and funding for projects. The City should continue progressing through incremental steps to effectively manage and guide growth while enhancing its assets. It has the capacity to focus on larger projects outlined in previous planning documents and to pursue broader goals and outcomes.

Fremont's Focus

Fremont is an area that has seen growth and is expected to experience additional growth-related pressures from those wishing to live in a small, rural area with access to amenities offered in a larger city, smaller schools, walkable communities, passive and active recreation, and work options. It is also an attractive area for vacationing and tourism and can be further enriched with improvements to the downtown, enhancement and additions of recreational opportunities, and new community events being added to the calendar.

As Fremont faces heightened interest from families wishing to settle in the City, it will also face increased pressure for housing options, both rental and homeownership. No town is a one-stop shop anymore as we live, work, and play across many communities. A job is no longer the reason most people choose to move to a location. When people look to relocate, they are interested in neighborhoods/safety, access to roads, schools, amenities, health care, and broadband. It is important to look at regional housing opportunities to meet the demand for housing that comes with new job opportunities. New jobs may exist in one community while housing options are more plentiful and affordable in a neighboring community. Working together, communities can help entice new developments to Newaygo County and add additional housing and the associated infrastructure.

While growth can bring benefits, it can also present challenges—requiring additional staff, resources, and funds. Elected and appointed officials can face greater demands on their time, which ultimately limits their ability to complete tasks other than day-to-day operations. Increased use of community parks and other recreational


areas leads to higher maintenance and repair costs, along with the rising expectations from new residents relocating from an urban area to a rural area.

To address these challenges, proactive planning is key. Keeping plans, policies, and ordinances up to date and recruiting new personnel will help the City manage development pressures and achieve its goals. A proactive approach streamlines the development process, attracting more developers and enabling the community to handle growth more effectively than reactive strategies. Keeping up with hot topics and what is on the horizon is also important, so that the City is alert and ready for new ideas.

The site visit and discussion with local leaders included a drive around some areas of the community, a visit to the lake, a walk through the downtown, and discussion centering on the future of the City. The City of Fremont has the following goals: bring business, activities, and additional revenue to the City while keeping the small-town feel of the community; improve the City's appearance; create reasons for people to stop and stay; add new housing; and continue collaborative opportunities.

Recommendations

It is important to lessen the identified weaknesses and threats by capitalizing on strengths and opportunities. Fremont has a strong Joint Comprehensive & Growth Management Plan (Joint Plan), which includes specific actions in Chapter 9, Implementation, and covers topics such as housing, natural features, community facilities, transportation, and more. The action steps in the Joint Plan, along with the recommendations below, offer a wide range of changes that can be implemented to improve the City's sustainability and future growth. The City has already completed many of the actions in the Joint Plan, such as steps to reduce minimum lot area per dwelling unit and increase maximum dwelling units per acre in the R-MF districts and expansion of the wastewater treatment plant to connect homes on the south side of Fremont Lake. As with any plan, strong and consistent efforts are needed to implement and measure outcomes in order to lead to successful change. Fremont has demonstrated that ability with the actions they have already completed.



***If you wish to live in a
better community,
better the community
in which you live.***

The following five recommendations, along with goals and objectives already outlined in current plans, should be considered for implementation through a series of short- and long-term initiatives by the City.

1. Enhance Downtown

A thriving community often features a dynamic and engaging downtown area, where residents and visitors alike can experience a variety of activities. In such communities, downtowns are bustling with numerous places to stop, gather, and interact—whether it's for a meal, community event, or casual conversation. These areas encourage spending at local businesses and support a walkable environment that connects the downtown with surrounding neighborhoods and amenities. A vibrant downtown not only serves as the heart of the community but also plays a crucial role in fostering local engagement, supporting economic activity, and enhancing the overall quality of life. For the City, focusing on maintaining and revitalizing its downtown area could help address these threats and strengthen its appeal as a lively and harmonious place to live and work. Likewise, improvements to the Community Recreation Center and additional classes and activities for the youth (and for all ages) will keep the center active and thriving with residents and visitors.



Figure 9: Example of Vegetated Curb “Bump Outs”

Vegetated curb “bump outs” like those shown in the figure above can improve pedestrian and bicycle safety and calm traffic. These areas can also serve as pollinator gardens.

2. Placemaking

Placemaking provides popular and crucial areas throughout a community where people can congregate, share experiences, visit, enjoy food, and leave with a great experience and a reason to return again. It is crucial for communities (especially small, rural communities) to showcase their assets and unique character through experiences held in the city. It is also vitally important that residents and visitors have the ability to move around the City with ease, cross streets, and visit parks and other public spaces and that there are sufficient areas to stop and take a break or just enjoy the City atmosphere.

The City has the benefit of public access to the largest lake in the county, which offers swimming, picnicking, and boating and is a highly valued area for recreation. While much of the shoreline is privately developed, the public park space remains a popular destination and a key asset for the community. Enhancing access and amenities in this area could further capitalize on its appeal and support local recreational activities. However, with this water feature being a good distance from the downtown and understanding that water is an attraction for many visitors, adding water features into the downtown area would also be a plus for the City and provide further enhancements and visual appeal to the downtown.

3. Enabling Design

According to Esther Greenhouse, an environmental gerontologist and expert on the impact of the built environment on the wellbeing of older adults, aging in place is a lifestyle goal and Universal Design (UD) features are a means to that achievement. Ms. Greenhouse defines aging in place as the “ability to successfully live in one’s home of choice through old age” and states that in many cases this can be achieved through the use of UD features in homes for people of all ages. Unfortunately, failing to apply UD commonly prevents successful aging

in place and often comes too late—after a person has already been disabled by the design of their home. Only 1% of the nation’s housing stock has all five key UD features necessary for successful aging in place:¹²

1. A zero-step entry,
2. Single-floor living,
3. Wide halls and doorways that can accommodate a wheelchair (or a walker or person assisting),
4. Electrical controls reachable from a wheelchair, and
5. Lever-style handles on faucets and doors

Ms. Greenhouse notes the role of communities and municipal agencies with this issue and that communities should consider the senior group as starting at the age of 50, as most people experience normal age-related changes to their senses after 50, particularly vision and hearing. The population of Americans aged 50 and older is responsible for a massive amount of economic growth, investment, and buying power. This portion of the economy is known as the Longevity Economy, and research on this sector has found the following:

- The Longevity Economy generates \$0.51 of every dollar in the U.S. economy.
- Looked at independently, the Longevity Economy is the third largest world economy, behind only the U.S. and China.
- It is currently \$8 trillion annually and projected to triple by 2050.¹³

To prepare for programs and funding opportunities, communities can apply the Enabling Design Approach, as defined by Ms. Greenhouse, by assessing their built environment, services, zoning codes, and home modification programs. This helps identify existing assets and needed changes. The Zoning Reform Toolkit¹⁴ developed by the Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) can also be utilized to identify and make changes to current zoning within the community.

Ms. Greenhouse was a speaker several years ago in Leelanau County, where she led a group through a half-day work session followed by the key speaker presentation at the Housing Summit in Traverse City, Michigan. She stressed the importance of using the Enabling Design Approach in communities, homes, and businesses and that communities should incentivize or require specific home design features in renovations and new construction. These efforts can be done independently or as part of an age-friendly community program.

Fremont is home to both the Nestlé Gerber Products Company and Corewell Health Gerber Hospital, making them key potential partners and advocates to advance the City's efforts toward Enabling Design, which can bring about improved changes to the community, improved health and quality of life, and residents being able to age in place. Other partners in this endeavor could include the Fremont Area Community Foundation and the Newaygo County Housing Partnership Fund. By incorporating updates to rehabilitation standards, new construction, design features, and zoning codes, the City can enhance accessibility and mobility in the built environment. Fremont has the opportunity to lead in this area, serving as a model for other communities and counties to follow.

4. Developer Incentives

To attract more developers and stimulate growth, the City could offer additional incentives, which might include tax breaks or support for infrastructure improvements and housing developments. Additionally, expanding the

¹² Greenhouse, M.S., CAPS, Esther. Enabling by Design: Leveraging Home Features for Physical and Financial Independence in Retirement (2021). *CSA Journal*, No. 85, Volume 4. <https://silvertogoldstrategies.com/the-enabling-design-approach/>.

¹³ Accius, Jean, and Joo Yeoun Suh. The Longevity Economy® Outlook: How People Ages 50 and Older Are Fueling Economic Growth, Stimulating Jobs, and Creating Opportunities for All. Washington, DC: AARP Thought Leadership, December 2019. <https://doi.org/10.26419/int.00042.001>.

¹⁴ *Zoning Reform Toolkit*. American Planning Association. August 1, 2022. https://planningmi.org/aws/MAP/pt/sd/product/36335/PARENT/layout_details/false.

Community Recreation Center could provide more facilities and programs for residents and potentially add more jobs, making it a more valuable asset. Improved broadband capabilities would enable more residents to work from home, supporting remote work and increasing connectivity. Additionally, redeveloping vacant land or vacant buildings could boost the tax base and create new job opportunities, contributing to the City's economic development.

5. Involvement/Participation

Community involvement is essential in small, rural areas that depend heavily on volunteers, local business owners, and organizations to generate interest and support for projects aimed at improving downtown areas, public spaces, schools, and recreational facilities. Engaging individuals who enjoy planning, organizing, and taking on responsibilities is key to fostering strong community participation. These individuals are invaluable and should be actively recruited to lead and contribute to these efforts. There are many ways to encourage citizens to participate and become involved if increased effort and new methods for connection are created. Regular recognition and appreciation are also important to sustain their involvement, making it vital to acknowledge their contributions annually to show gratitude and encourage continued support.

The City has comprehensive plans in place that support long-term growth in key areas such as recreation, economic development, land use, and transportation. Regular use, implementation, and updates to these plans is crucial for continued progress and the City's overall well-being.

Strong Towns is an organization working to replace America's postwar pattern of development with a pattern of development that is financially strong and resilient. Strong Towns advocates for cities of all sizes to be safe, livable, and inviting. It elevates local government as the highest level of collaboration for people working together in a place, not merely the lowest level in a hierarchy of governments. Communities can join this organization with any size donation—on their website, www.strongtowns.org.¹⁵

“At Strong Towns, we believe that local government is not the lowest level of government, but the highest level of collaboration for strong citizens working to build a prosperous place.”

Strong Towns

¹⁵ Strong Towns, <https://www.strongtowns.org/>.

Actions (What needs to be done?)	Responsible (Who should take charge to complete?)	Resources Needed	Expected Challenges/ Obstacles
1. <u>Enhance Downtown</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add water features • Artwork/wall paintings • STOP hubs • Design features (i.e., lighting, signage, stamped sidewalks, gardens, dog faucets, use native plants) • Business owner meetings in the downtown • Explore idea of a Social District • Consider a voluntary tax (initiated by local businesses) for downtown improvements 	City Council, DDA, community groups, volunteers, business owners, Michigan State University (MSU) Extension	Grants, supplies, intern/MSU or U of M Planning, Consumers Energy grants	Coordination of efforts, public support, buy-in from business owners, identifying locations
2. <u>Placemaking</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Techniques to slow/calm traffic • Landscaping and streetscaping: improve the sitting/stopping areas • Pocket parks: utilize small spaces between buildings, unused parking areas, small public spaces • Add unique night lighting in the City and to water features • Sign designs/facades used consistently throughout town • Provide linkage to parks, schools, public spaces for events • Focus on walkability and mobility throughout the City • New community events for residents and tourists: winter festival, contests, New Years Eve ball drop • Increase dining and recreation opportunities • Community “branding” • Join Strong Towns, www.strongtowns.org • Use Placer.ai information¹⁶ 	City Council, DDA, volunteers, business owners, Parks & Rec Authority	Grants, consultant, transportation planners, MAP Zoning Reform Toolkit, Pitch North competition	Michigan Department of Transportation, requirements, cost, coordinated effort among businesses

¹⁶ Placer.ai is a location analytics platform that uses mobile device data to analyze foot traffic patterns at physical locations. It provides insights into visitor numbers, duration of stay, origin, and movement patterns, aiding developers, businesses, and local governments in making informed decisions about retail locations, planning, and investments.

Actions (What needs to be done?)	Responsible (Who should take charge to complete?)	Resources Needed	Expected Challenges/ Obstacles
3. <u>Enabling Design</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Citywide (countywide) program to enhance mobility, accessibility, and livability for all Rehab/new construction initiatives for Enabling Design Modify zoning codes and requirements for the built environment Address issues with road crossings, sidewalks, entry/exits, etc. Install ADA kayak launch at the lake Rehab/new construction initiatives for Enabling Design 	City Council, regional groups, Fremont Area Community Foundation, consultant	Memorandums of Understanding, Agreements, new incentives/regulations for housing, MAP Zoning Reform Toolkit	Challenges from regulatory agencies for changes to regulations, push-back from developers/contractors, schedules, timelines
4. <u>Developer Incentives</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a list of incentives/guidebook for developers (housing tax increment financing [TIF], Brownfield Plans, tax abatement, PILOT, etc.) Invite developers to the community for tour/review of available properties 	City, staff, regional organizations, nonprofits (The Right Place, Fremont Area Community Foundation)	Supplies, venues, face-to-face meetings	Schedules, timelines, organization for developer tour
5. <u>Involvement/Participation</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advisory committees representing stakeholders/team briefing meetings Recruit at community events Website with project information and opportunity to comment (PeopleSpeak.org) News releases Radio/TV interviews, news Newsletters/social media Presentations Open houses Public hearings Eye-to-eye communication 	City, volunteers, media	Supplies, meetings, venues for meetings and public sessions, booths for recruiting	Schedules, timelines, securing volunteers and new committee members

The City can expand the above chart to include steps from previous documents and add new community projects with details for each step, timelines, responsibilities, obstacles, and costs. As goals are achieved, they should be removed and replaced with new goals and their resource needs. The City may need additional support

through grants, interns, consultants, or state agencies, and complex tasks should be broken down into manageable steps. Securing funding through collaborations with local organizations and agencies is crucial. Large initiatives often face delays due to changes in leadership or regulatory hurdles, leading to frustration among residents. Community opposition can also slow down or delay a project. It is important that these projects allow for extensive community input and collaboration and involve external assistance when needed.

Collaboration and Partnerships

The City of Fremont has demonstrated its strong collaborative approach through the successful development of a Joint Comprehensive & Growth Management Plan with neighboring jurisdictions. This Joint Plan and the Rural Readiness grant project are just two examples that show the City's ability to collaborate effectively with neighboring communities, share resources, and reduce costs. The success of these types of ventures highlights the benefits of cross-border cooperation, demonstrating that working together leads to more efficient and impactful outcomes. Building on this achievement, the City can apply this model to other areas, such as infrastructure, community services, outreach, developer events, and countywide programs like Enabling Design. By expanding partnerships, the City can draw on the strengths of multiple stakeholders and create a unified and efficient strategy to address shared challenges and pursue common goals. This approach will enhance Fremont's ability to manage large projects, strengthen regional relationships, and support sustainable development. Additionally, partnerships with organizations may provide volunteers to help implement smaller-scale projects within Fremont.

Other Actions

The City should actively seek grant opportunities as they arise and when eligible. Non-grant funded expenses can be managed through the annual budget and the approved Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). Maintaining regular and transparent communication with the community is essential. This can be achieved through various means, including meetings with business owners and the DDA, monthly coffee or breakfast sessions, focus groups, discussions with high school students, pop-up events with elected officials, and other public forums. The City should also use its newsletter, Facebook page, and prominent public spaces to keep residents informed and engaged.

Inviting developers to explore available properties and discuss incentives for redevelopment can be beneficial. Additionally, pre-development meetings with property owners or developers should be encouraged to align new projects with the City's expectations for generational changes, housing construction, and the rehabilitation of existing properties.

Following is an infographic that depicts other ideas that Fremont can explore for community change.



Figure 10: Infographic of Supplemental Action Items

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Related Plans and Studies

Appendix 2: Fremont High School Student Questionnaire/Summary

Appendix 3: Fremont Community Visit

Appendix 1: Related Plans and Studies

Housing Needs Assessment

According to U.S. Census data, the 2020 population of the City is 4,516 with 222 Hispanic/Latino, and has a median age of 37.9 years compared to the state median age of 40.3. English is the primary language spoken at home, and 4.2% of the population speak Spanish. The City's Veterans make up 14.1% of the population as compared to the state's 5.8%.¹

The 2024 Housing Needs Assessment showed a comparative population change of 10% for the City of Fremont from 2012 to 2022. In Fremont, 32.9% of residents were between the ages of 35 and 64 in 2021, which is the largest share of all age groups, and 19.7% of residents were 65 years or older, up from 18.3% in 2011. The City also saw an increase in those under the age of 17 during this time period. Fremont's median household income lags behind Michigan's with a median household income of \$53,125 for Fremont and \$63,000 for the state, as noted in the 2022 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. Fremont's family poverty rate as shown in the Housing Needs Assessment in 2021 was 16.8%, the highest rate in the county as compared to other places within Newaygo. Over 84% of the community is White with 7.8% as "other" and 7.5% as Hispanic/Latino. In 2021, 51.8% of people aged 75 and older had a disability, and 32% of those 65–74 had a disability. The share of all City residents with a disability increased by 5.3% from 2012 to 2022, which was faster than in Michigan as a whole.

The majority of homes within the City are single-family (72%) with multifamily making up 23% and a small category for "other." The study indicates that the share of vacant and available units between 2011 to 2021 decreased and is an indicator the housing market was more constrained in 2021 compared to 2011. The study also indicates a large number of homes built pre-1939, as well as between 1970 and 2009. These older homes require upkeep and awareness, as well as assessment for lead-based paint and asbestos. Keeping these homes in good repair helps keep the housing stock in the community healthy.

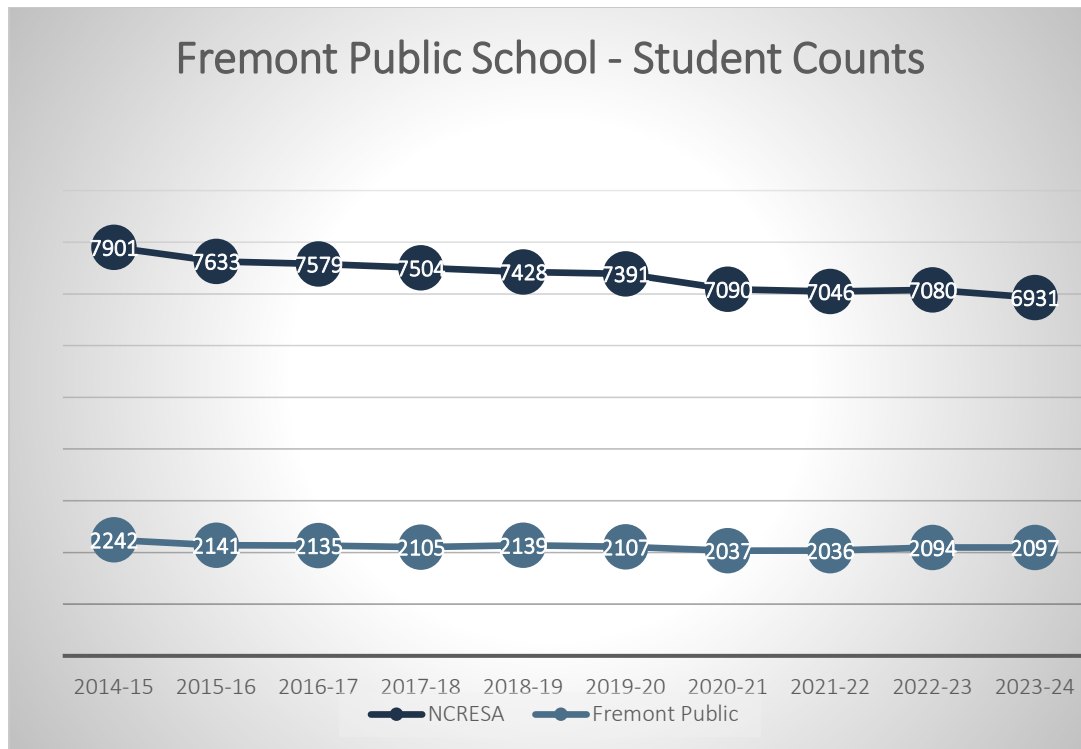
The commuting pattern for Fremont shows that 45.6% of the population commutes out for work, 43% commute in, and only 11.3% both work and live in the City of Fremont.

The ALICE data (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed) from 2022 shows that 50% of the households in Fremont are below the ALICE Threshold—this percentage includes poverty and ALICE. Within the county, the cities of Newaygo (57%), White Cloud (57%), and Grant (56%) were ranked fourth, fifth, and sixth, respectively, for the highest population under the ALICE Threshold; the top three ranked communities were the Townships of Merrill, Denver, and Home. ALICE households are employed and struggling to get by, making difficult choices each month with a limited income and bills that need to be paid. A large car repair or unexpected medical expense can put them into an even more precarious position.²

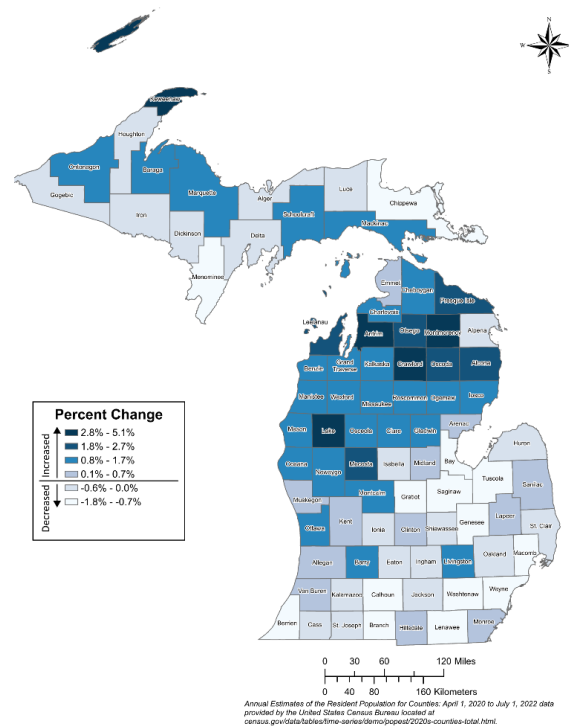
School enrollment from the 2014–2015 school year to the 2023–2024 school year shows a decline in students with a total of 2,242 in the 2014–2015 school year and 2,097 for 2023–2024, as shown in the following chart.

¹ Data from U.S. Census Bureau, <https://data.census.gov>.

² Michigan County Reports (2022). United for ALICE. <https://unitedforalice.org/county-reports/michigan>.



Newaygo County shows a slight population increase from 2020 to 2022, as noted on the following map.



Map created by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, 5/17/2023

Figure A: Michigan Population Change from 2020 to 2022

Master Plan

The Master Plan is a joint venture with the City of Fremont, Dayton Township, and Sheridan Charter Township which together established the Fremont Community Joint Comprehensive & Growth Management Plan (Joint Plan) in 2022.³ This replaced the 2016 document. The Fremont Community Joint Planning Commission (FCJPC) was formed in 2006 for the City and two townships. Fremont's Mayor appoints representatives who are confirmed by the City Council and each township appoints representatives to the FCJPC.

The 2022 Joint Plan provides a summary of the 2016 Plan and its goals. The 2022 Joint Plan includes data on households, income, employment industries, poverty, housing, education, and local trends. The 2022 document includes policies and projects at the end of the chapters. Chapter 9, Implementation, outlines specific actions for housing, natural features, community facilities, transportation, and economic development and the responsible parties and timeframes to complete these actions.

The Joint Plan recognizes concerns from land use, threats to natural resources due to sprawl, loss of agricultural land, and the benefit of higher density in appropriate locations to contain infrastructure costs. These three communities were among the first in the state to create a joint planning commission, and they are well versed in working together with a history of over 10 years of joint efforts between the City and adjoining municipalities. They realize that what happens in the City impacts the adjoining townships and vice versa. The Joint Plan's policies address growth issues such as infill development, transportation planning, options for pedestrian safety and reduction of traffic issues, preservation of open space and farmland, increased and accessible recreational uses for residents and visitors, walkable communities that connect neighborhoods and the downtown, and a range of housing options. The Joint Plan contains a zoning plan and future land use map and considers future development of a Time of Sale or Transfer (TOST) septic/well inspection ordinance.

Consistent guiding goals in the Master Plan can enhance community confidence in its direction and stability of public opinion on growth management. However, true success depends on the effective implementation of policies and regulations by the community. Challenges often arise, such as increasing density in areas with existing infrastructure, introducing new developer incentives, and expanding affordable housing. These issues may surface due to changes in elected officials, declining support from initial advocates, or the departure of engaged citizens. Advancing the goals set by previous leaders can become difficult if there is no sustained commitment to the Plan's core concepts.

Parks and Recreation Plan

The state requires approval by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) by April 1 of each year, in order to apply for grants within the year. Communities are not eligible to apply for Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) or federal Land and Water Conservation Funds if they do not have a DNR-approved plan on file by April 1. If a community has an adopted and DNR-approved 5-year Recreation Plan on file with the state, they are eligible to apply to all three recreational grant programs: Trust Fund, Land and Water, and Recreation Passport. If they don't have an approved Recreation Plan on file, then a community may submit an adopted Capital Improvement Program (CIP) if the project is included in that CIP. The CIP must be according to the Michigan Planning Enabling Act of 2008.

The Fremont Area Recreation Master Plan covers the period of 2020–2024 and highlights the recreational facilities in the community, including public and private locations and those associated with educational institutions. Over 90% of parcels in the City are within 0.5 miles of a recreational area, and nearly all residential parcels have access to a park within 1 mile. The Plan also includes information on the Fremont Recreation

³ *Fremont Community Joint Comprehensive & Growth Management Plan*. November 2022. <https://fremontmi.gov/DocumentCenter/View/2234/Fremont-Community-Comp-Plan>.

Center, which is run by the Recreation Authority. The center offers a swimming pool, gym, pickleball courts, and rental space for community events and fitness classes. The City of Fremont has a fenced, off-leash dog park located on S. Lake Drive on Oak Street. It is open from dawn to dusk each day, year-round. The park includes two fenced areas, one each for small/young dogs and large/mature dogs, along with benches and trash receptacles. Golf courses and a bowling alley in the county are privately owned.

The 2020–2024 Fremont Area Recreation Master Plan focuses on promoting regional cooperation, providing safe and inclusive recreational opportunities, enhancing neighborhoods with accessible parks, and acquiring property for long-term needs. It also emphasizes promoting healthy lifestyles and creating programs that reflect community values while ensuring financial sustainability. Strategies include building a connected community and aligning physical spaces with Recreation Authority goals.

In addition to the recreational amenities in Fremont, the county of Newaygo has thousands of acres of prime birding habitat with over 230 natural lakes, approximately 350 miles of rivers and streams, and over 100,000 acres of National Forest, as well as swamps, marshes, and mature forests.⁴ Within the county, there are many opportunities for birders of all levels with nearly 250 species of birds. Birding is a fast-growing outdoor activity that brings billions of dollars to the birding industry in the United States each year—money spent on tours, equipment, overnight stays, tour guides, and an increased interest in birding photography. The county has a prime location for expanding the birding industry, which can bring in visitors and revenue. A countywide endeavor to enhance birding opportunities and bird photography would benefit all communities.

Newaygo County Parks are numerous and are listed in the Fremont Area Recreation Master Plan, 2020–2024.⁵ These parks offer a wide range of active and passive recreational opportunities. Below are a few of the locations discussed:

- **Camps:** True North (NCCS) Camp Newaygo and Wetland Trail offers summer programs, resident camping, overnight camping for families, and day camping for youths. The boardwalk trail located here is the only one in Michigan to cross a sphagnum bog. Camp Echo—a YMCA camp on Long Lake.
- **Campsites:** Sandy Beach Campground, Henning Park Campground, Pettibone Lake Campground, and White Cloud Campground.
- **National Forest:** Huron-Manistee National Forest contains over 100,000 acres of forest in the county with opportunities for camping, hiking, fishing, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, motorcycling, ATV trails, snowmobiling, swimming, hunting, picnics, and canoeing.
- **Trails:** North Country National Scenic Trail is a 4,000-mile non-motorized trail stretching from the Vermont/New York border to the Lewis and Clark Trail in North Dakota. Newaygo County lies in the center of the trail and has several trailheads within the county. Also the Hardy Dam Rustic Nature Trail along the Muskegon River and Dragon Trail.
- **Water Access/Marinas:** Hardy Dam Marina, Camp Swampy, Newaygo State Park, and Muskegon River.
- **Winter Sports:** NC Winter Sports Park “John Grey’s Lodge” offering hills for sledding and groomed snowmobile trails.

The Fremont City Council adopted an ordinance in 2010 approving amendments to the Development and Tax Increment Finance Plan for the DDA. The City has been proactive in offering incentives to improve and enhance properties. Expanding these efforts and further encouraging developers to take advantage of available incentives will be a valuable strategy for promoting future development and ensuring the sustainability of the downtown area.

⁴ Newaygo County Birding Trail. Newaygo County Tourism Council. <https://newaygocountyexploring.com/birding-trail>.

⁵ Fremont Area Recreation Master Plan, 2020–2024.

Michigan Roadmap to Rural Prosperity

The Michigan Roadmap to Rural Prosperity revealed a growing interest in rural Michigan, particularly in northern Lower Michigan and parts of the Upper Peninsula. On average, the populations in rural Michigan are much older than non-rural areas, and rural communities have seen a dramatic increase in the number of people that are 65 and older and almost an equal decrease in those aged 45 to 54. Rural communities, on average, also have less racial and ethnic diversity than non-rural communities. In Fremont, demographics show an increase in the Hispanic and Latino population and Spanish-speaking residents.

The most rural areas in Michigan experience high rates of poverty and ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). The most cited critical issue facing rural communities across the state, now and into the future, was **housing**, with workforce challenges as the second most cited issue. Lack of local capacity (funding, staffing, and expertise), make it especially challenging for rural communities to respond to complex challenges and attract new investment.⁶ Fremont's capacity is much stronger than other rural communities in Newaygo County, and the City also employs a staff to handle parks, cemeteries, infrastructure, and daily operations of the City. Expanding capacity strengthens the City's ability to carry out future initiatives and achieve its objectives for development and growth.

⁶ *Michigan's Roadmap to Rural Prosperity*, Population and Economic Trends in Rural Michigan. Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, Office of Rural Prosperity. https://www.michigan.gov/leo/-/media/Project/Websites/leo/Documents/ord/Michigan-Roadmap-to-Rural-Prosperity_Report-FINAL.pdf.

Appendix 2: Fremont High School Student Questionnaire/Summary

5421 S Warner Ave
Fremont, MI 49412

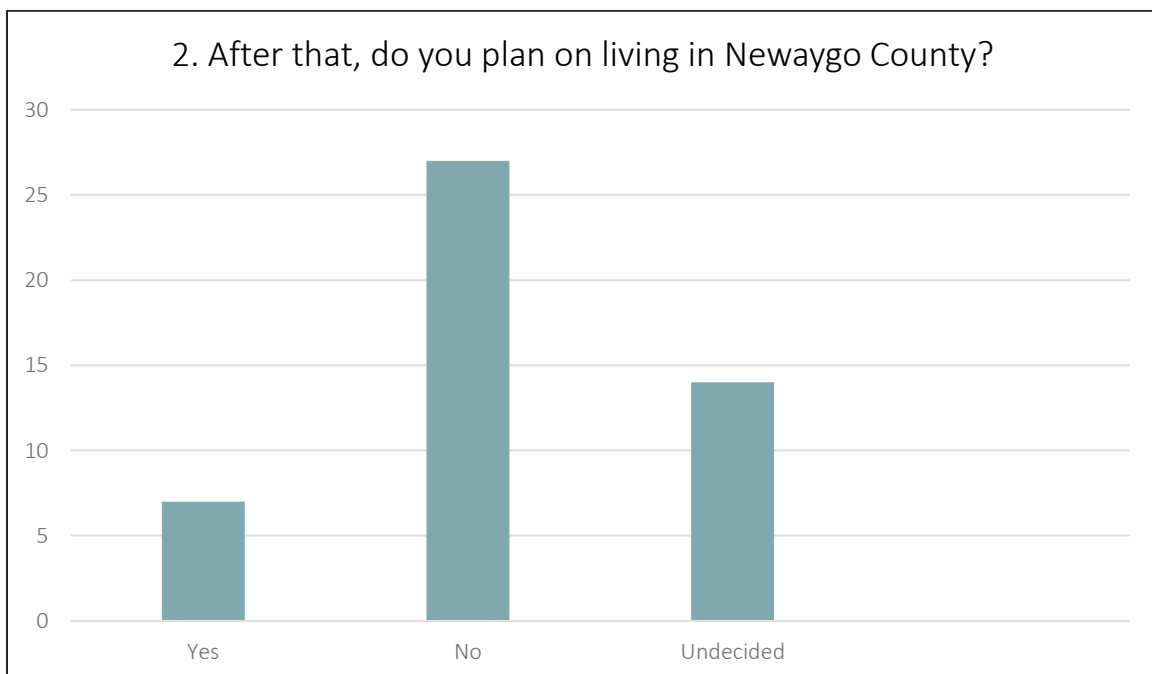
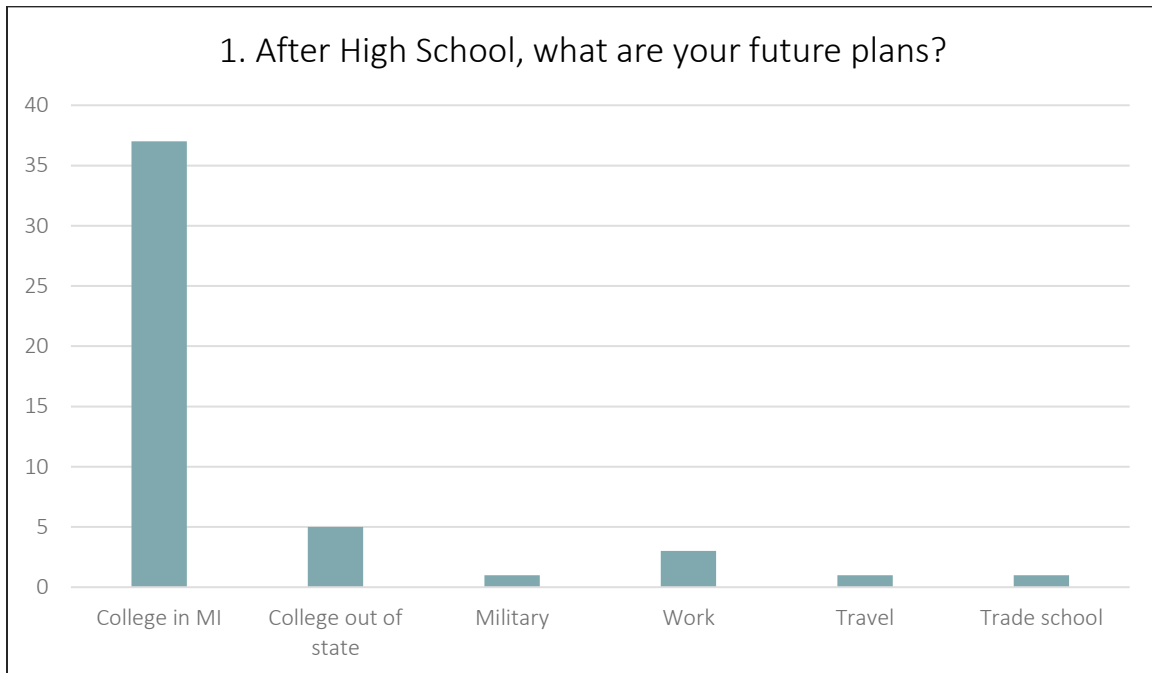
Fishbeck representatives met with high school students on April 24, 2024, to gauge interest and opinions on their community, leaders, future plans, and what factors are important to them when deciding where they will live. All students were first provided with a simple questionnaire followed up by an hour-long discussion. The questionnaire was simple and merely sought to gather some feedback in written form prior to the open dialogue. Students engaged with representatives from Fishbeck and openly discussed concerns and desires with fellow classmates on various topics.

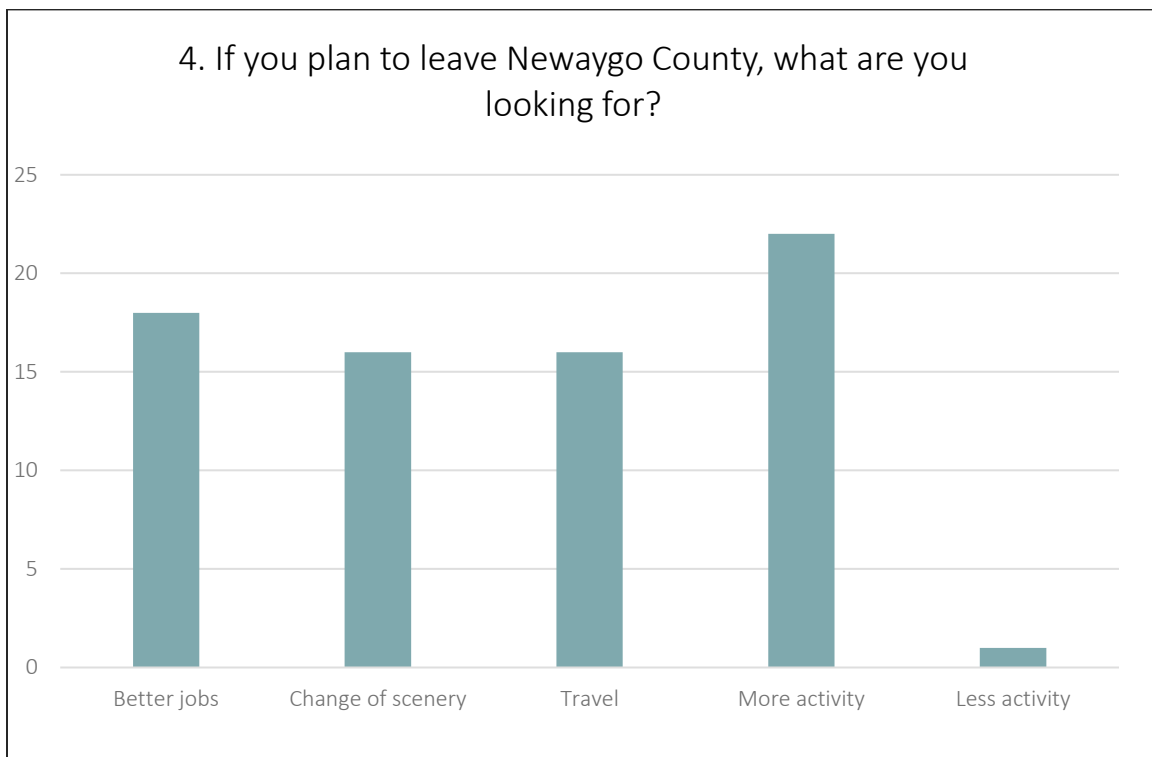
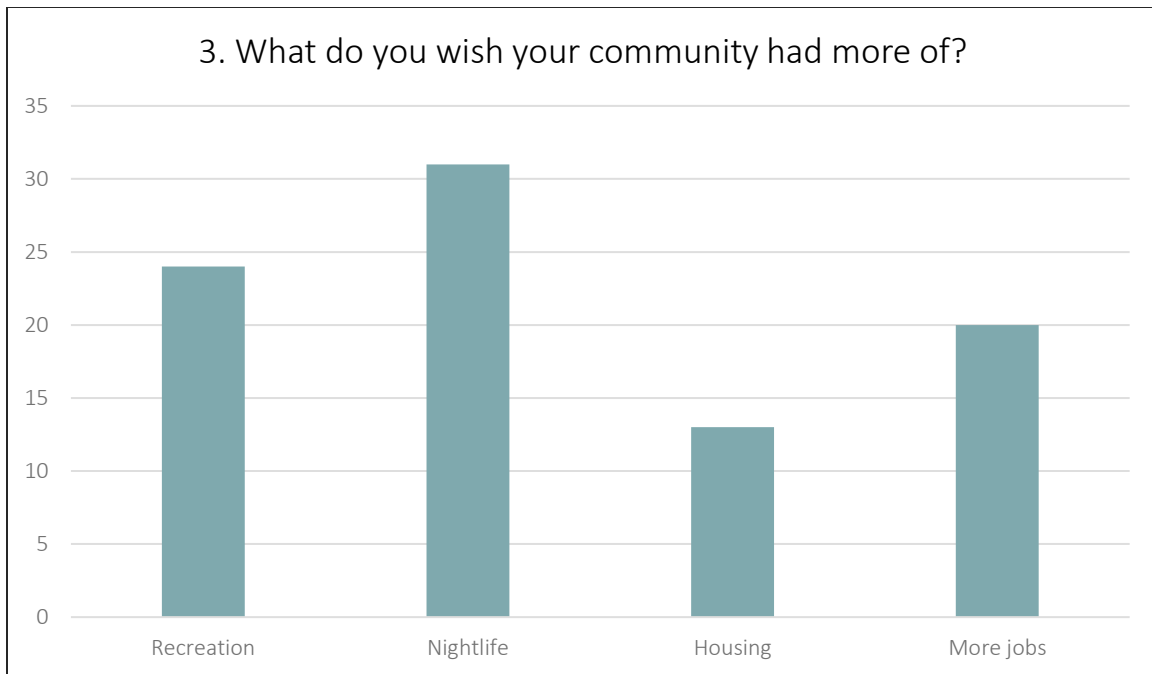
Fremont High School students were strong in their opinions on likes and dislikes, claiming that the lack of public transportation, pollution in Fremont, and lack of places to meet with their friends were negatives about the community. The majority did not want to raise their children in Fremont and when asked why, the top responses were the following: not enough opportunities, looking for better education and more athletics, and the community is unsafe. Positive comments were received on the access to water nearby and ability to canoe/kayak.

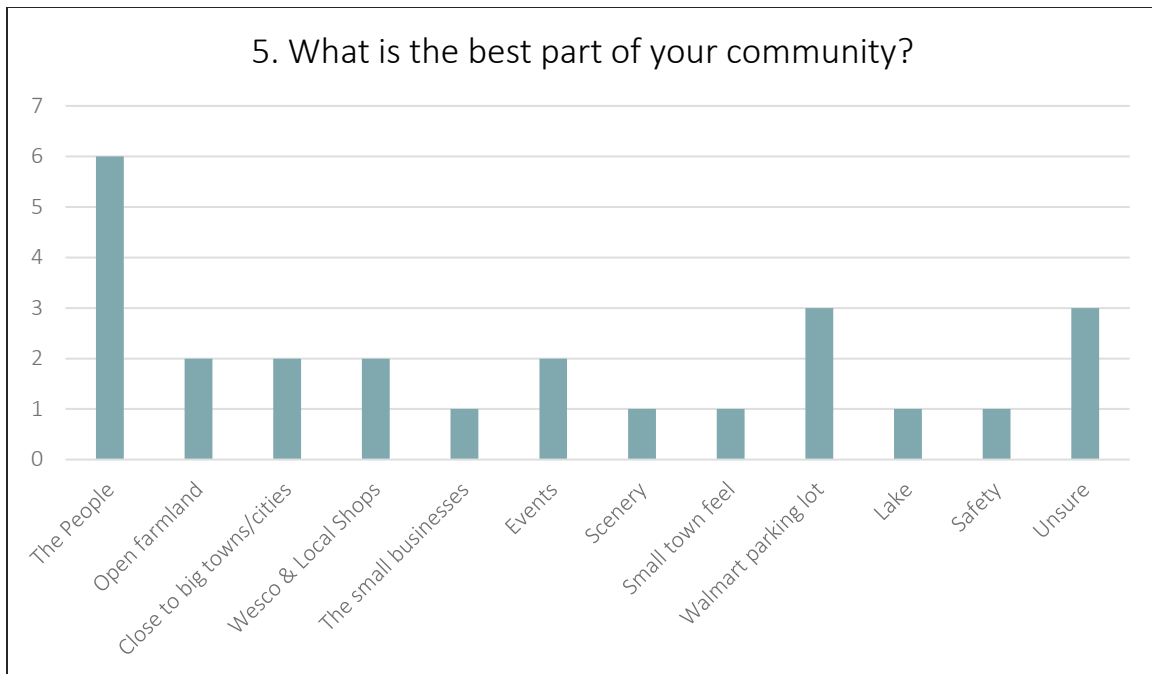
There was a strong theme during the discussion that there were “not enough things for them to do” and they quickly voiced that they were looking for more recreation at lakes, better food, recreation, a Chick-fil-A, and more activities. They wanted more housing choices and less expensive housing, better roads, and closer access to malls, a zoo, and a drive-in movie theatre. When asked what activities they take part in, the students responded: golf, visit Walmart/Meijer, Rancher Park, and Heritage Farms for prom, travel to Muskegon for dinner and shopping, visit Rancher Park, Stony Lake, and Pentwater.

The following additional comments/observations were made:

- Young teachers move out of Fremont because there’s nothing to do
- Travel to Muskegon/Grand Rapids for prom clothes—not enough choices here and too expensive
- We travel at least once a week to Grand Rapids
- Just two students in the class raised their hands that they would stay here
- Housing is a big issue

Questionnaire:





Appendix 3: Fremont Community Visit

May 23, 2024

Present: Julie Burrell (The Right Place), Trudy Galla (Fishbeck), Olivia Selby (Fishbeck), Sandy Siegel, Mayor Pro-Tem, Donna Kipp (Newaygo County Finance Director), Todd Blake (City Manager), Jim Rynberg (Mayor), Lola Harmon-Ramsey (City Council), Brent Deur (Business leader), Matt Hendrie (Fremont Police Dept/School Resource Officer)

Introductions were held, followed by each attendee from Fremont giving a short description of what they like about their community and what makes them proud. The top three items they are proud of include: safe community/people look out for each other, Gerber, and lots of things to do. The attendees also identified the top three needs for the City of Fremont as: housing, restaurants, and improving the blight in downtown.

Discussion was held to gather input and feelings about the likes/dislikes of the community, challenges they are facing, what they need, and some dialogue on the students' input from Fremont High School. The open discussion offered attendees the opportunity to express comments and ideas on other topics as well. Following this interaction was a walking tour of the downtown area and then a drive to several locations in the community to further discuss problems and opportunities.

What you like about your community:

- Safe, everyone looks after each other
- Caring community
- Only hospital in county
- Gerber
- Good relationship with entities
- Family
- Capacity/money here
- Nature amenities
- Christian belief
- A lot here
- Hunting/fishing, water fishing
- Downtown art program/art walk
- Arcade arena
- Rec center/swimming pool

Significant comments:

- Older age group does not support change but majority supports community growth
- No housing
- Want to keep the character of the town but support expansion
- 1 or 2 vacant buildings downtown
- Rental rehab programs on the second floor of downtown buildings
- Fremont becoming more commercial
- Fremont has a workout park
- Re-sale shops are exploding
- The Gateway (three-story building downtown)—38 units of senior living

Challenges:

- Restaurants
- Want to expand the industrial park
- People come to City meetings after zoning ordinances have been established
- Blight has become a problem in Fremont

What do you want to get out of the project:

- What does community think about development/something they're missing?
- Looking for that area of growth to make the community happy
- Specific areas to focus on
- Rec center growth
- Soccer field
- Landing page website
- **Restaurants to stay open later—unable to eat out after work because they close too early