*Chapter 2:*

Maps and tables for chapter 2: State and National Forest map, climate table, population table, soils map, base geology map, wetlands map, designated uses, desired conditions, planning/zoning table/map, convert water body list to table format.

Watershed Overview

Insert state and national forest map

The Little Manistee River Watershed encompasses 134,329 acres in Lake, Mason, Manistee and a small corner of Wexford counties in Michigan’s northwestern Lower Peninsula.

Significant surface water features include the Little Manistee River and tributaries as well as several dozen small lakes. The river and tributaries are fed year-round by stable groundwater aquifers and are all designated as coldwater trout streams.

The Little Manistee is one of several high-quality streams – including the White, Pere Marquette, Pine, Big Manistee, Betsie and Platte rivers – which flow east to west into Lake Michigan, draining an extensive, forested area of the Lower Peninsula between the Muskegon River and Grand Traverse Bay watersheds.

Among those rivers, the Little Manistee is distinguished by its stable flow and cold water temperatures. Those features make it an ideal habitat for coldwater fish, including migratory steelhead trout. A Michigan Department of Natural Resources weir on the river is the site of an egg-taking operation that provides stock for hatchery operations that supply Little Manistee strain steelhead to streams throughout the Great Lakes region.

The weir is open to the public and is a popular stop for visitors during the egg-taking seasons. The only fish stocked in the Little Manistee are Chinook salmon, of which 150,000 were stocked into the river at or below the weir in 2016 (Tonello, 2016).

Portions of 16 townships and one incorporated village lie within the watershed, as follows:

In Lake County: Parts of the townships of Cherry Valley, Dover, Eden, Elk, Ellsworth, Newkirk, Peacock, Pinora and Sauble, and the entire village of Luther.

In Manistee County: Portions of the townships of Filer, Manistee, Norman and Stronach.

In Mason County: Portions of Meade Township and Free Soil Township

In Wexford County: Part of South Branch Township.

The watershed arises from wetlands in Lake County’s Ellsworth Township, east of the village of Luther, and extends westward just over 60 miles before discharging into Manistee Lake near the community of Stronach in Manistee County.

The Little Manistee River and the “Big” Manistee River flow into separate arms of Manistee Lake, which in turn is connected by a deep-water channel to Lake Michigan. While Manistee Lake is not included in the Little Manistee Watershed, it does provide a link for migratory fish to move between the Great Lakes and the river. The Little Manistee (HUC 0406010306) is a subwatershed of the Manistee River system.

From the Lake County headwaters to the exit point at Manistee Lake, the drop in altitude is approximately 600 feet, or an average of 10 feet per mile. Soil types are primarily well-drained sands and gravels, which provide high rates of groundwater infiltration.

Public lands in the Pere Marquette State Forest and the Huron-Manistee National Forest make up more than half of the total acreage within the watershed. The Village of Luther and the community of Irons each have populations of several hundred persons within the watershed. Services are provided in and around the city of Manistee, just west of the watershed.

Private lands are largely forested, and sparsely populated. The 2010 census shows a majority of the dwellings in the watershed are used as cottages or seasonal recreation properties.

Agricultural land uses, primarily row crops and small livestock operations, occupy about 5 percent of the watershed’s acreage. The largest farm area is in Ellsworth and Newkirk townships, near the headwaters.

The Little Manistee mainstream has one dam, at the village of Luther, which impounds a millpond of about 8 acres. The Luther Dam washed out in 1986 and again in 1993, contributing significant sediment into the river below. From Luther to the mouth – a distance of about 55 miles – the river is free-flowing. A smaller dam on U.S. Forest Service property in Stronach Township impounds a small tributary to form a water body known as Linke’s Pond. That impoundment has been shown to increase water temperature in the stream, and the Forest Service is studying possible changes in management of the site.

The lower section of the river – from the weir to the mouth – is popular with canoeists and kayakers. Upper segments are narrow and considered more difficult except for experienced paddlers.

Off Road Vehicle trails criss-cross much of the public land, and are well used. A segment of the North Country Trail passes through the watershed. The public and private forest land is also popular with deer hunters. The Bear Track campground on U.S. Forest Service land offers rustic tent and R.V. camping on the river. The watershed also has several private campgrounds.

The watershed was heavily logged beginning as early as the 1840s, when a sawmill was built at Old Stronach on the lower river. Historical records indicate that virtually all the native timber had been removed from the Little Manistee and adjoining watersheds by the early 20th century.

The ecosystem was dramatically altered by removal of vegetation, coupled with “log drives” on the river. Banks were eroded; gravel beds were covered with sand; the stream became wider and slower; and woody debris was scoured from the water course. Among the negative impacts was the eradication of the native grayling, which had thrived in the river’s natural condition.

River habitat restoration began in the 1930s with Civilian Conservation Corps members who built campgrounds, stabilized streambanks and planted trees, helping to create what would become the Manistee National Forest.

Two overlapping local groups – the Little Manistee Watershed Conservation Council and the Little Manistee River Restoration Committee – have continued that work to the present time.

The Little Manistee River meets eligibility criteria for state and national natural river designation programs. For that reason, public lands in the river corridor are managed to prevent any degradation of those conditions. For example, managed timber cutting is generally allowed on Manistee National Forest land, but is restricted within a quarter mile of the river.

The U.S. Forest Service describes the river’s status as follows: “The Little Manistee River is a Congressionally Authorized, 5(a), Study River in the National Wild and Scenic River system. As a result, it is subject to the protections afforded by Section 7(b) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The designated reach is 42 miles in length and is within National Forest System Lands. Water resources projects proposed within, below, above or on a stream tributary to the study river will be evaluated as to whether the study river is invaded or the scenic values of the Little Manistee River are diminished.”

**Designated uses table; and desired conditions table**

Climate (and Climate Change)

Insert climate table

The Little Manistee River Watershed is located in a temperate “four-season” region of the Northwest Lower Peninsula of Michigan. Daily average high temperatures are 75 to 80 degrees in July and August; nightly average lows are in the teens in January and February.

Climate in this watershed is significantly moderated by proximity to Lake Michigan. Western sectors of the Watershed, near the Great Lake, are generally snowier than the eastern sectors, with warmer winters and cooler summers. The lake water acts as a heat “sink” in warm weather, and releases some of that warmth in winter.

There are no long-term climate monitoring sites within the watershed. Watershed climate records may be approximated from data collected at nearby stations in Manistee and Baldwin.

Snowfall averages more than 100 inches per winter in Manistee, near Lake Michigan, but about 25 percent less than that at the inland site of Baldwin in Lake County. Much of the snowfall is related to the “lake effect,” which results when cold air absorbs moisture while crossing Lake Michigan, and then releases that moisture as snow over land.

The four-season climate is important to the local economy. While summer is clearly the busiest tourist time, the region also draws visitors for skiing, snowmobiling and ice fishing in winter; steelhead fishing in spring; leaf-color viewing, deer hunting and salmon runs in autumn, and general touring year round.

In planning for future water quality it is important to consider the potential impacts of climate change. “Greenhouse gases” such as carbon dioxide have the physical effect of trapping a portion of the sun’s heat in the atmosphere. Global data indicate that increases in atmospheric CO2 have been occurring in line with burning of fossil fuels since the beginning of the industrial revolution.

Impacts such as rising sea levels, decreasing arctic ice cover and higher average global temperatures have been documented over recent decades, lending strong support to models that show a link between atmospheric CO2 levels and increasing climate change.

While the global issue seems clear, climate predictions are considerably more difficult for a small area such as the Little Manistee Watershed. As the earth retains more of the sun’s heat energy, it is likely that air and sea currents will be impacted, making some areas wetter, some dryer, and possibly even pushing cold air into some areas.

Specific local impacts of those complex interactions remain very much in doubt. There is no consensus, for example, on the question of Great Lakes water levels. Warmer air holds more moisture, so precipitation may increase, potentially raising lake levels. On the other hand, more warmth also means more evaporation, which could result in lower levels.

Add those opposing forces to the natural variability of Lake Michigan, and it’s impossible, given our current knowledge, to accurately forecast lake level changes.

There does, however, appear to be high probability of several local impacts resulting from climate change.

A 2014 report by the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization found that the probability of severe rainstorms – defined in the report as a rainfall of 2 inches or more in a single day – increased by 89 percent in Michigan from 1965 to 2010. (citation 2-1)

The finding comports with most climate models, since warmer air holds more energy and more moisture and is thus capable of producing stronger storms.

In another 2014 study, the United States Geological Survey found that over the next 30 years, Northern Michigan will likely see an increasing percentage of winter precipitation in the form of rain, rather than snow. That, combined with a higher likelihood of midwinter thaws, will have the dual effect of reducing the size of the late winter snowpack, and decreasing the number of days each year when the ground is snow-covered. (citation 2-2)

That will tend to moderately increase stream flows during the normally low-flow winter months, and decrease the rise of streams in the spring. While the change may appear to be modest, the USGS report stated, it may “appreciably alter ecosystem functions … that depend on seasonal dynamics at subannual time periods, such as fish spawning.”

The USGS report further notes that a decrease in days of snow cover would be expected to increase rates of evapo-transpiration which could lead to drier soils in late summer and increased reliance on groundwater for irrigation.

These potential changes reinforce the desirability of meeting the central goals of this Watershed Management Plan.

Best management practices such as native plantings, properly sized stream culverts, stormwater catchment, maintaining forest cover and preserving wetlands are all important to protecting water quality under present climate conditions. They become even more vital as climate changes.

Likewise, as climate uncertainty rises, the need for consistent monitoring of water parameters also increases.

Hydrology

Over a 30-year period, the Little Manistee River Watershed receives approximately 35 inches of precipitation annually, with the highest amounts in September-October and the lowest in late winter. A significant share of the total falls as snow, especially in the portions closest to Lake Michigan. (See table in Climate section, above)

Because of the watershed’s forested land cover and sandy, permeable soils, most of the precipitation can be expected to infiltrate into the ground, with only a relatively small amount becoming surface runoff. This is reflected in the character of the Little Manistee River, in which a stable flow of cold groundwater creates ideal conditions for cold water fish species.

Modeling software provided by the Stroud Water Research Center indicates that only about 3 percent of precipitation falling on the watershed is converted to surface runoff. The rest is accounted for by infiltration into soils, evapo-transpiration by vegetation and direct contributions to water bodies.

The 50 percent probability rainstorm for this region (that is, a 24-hour rainfall expected to occur on average once every two years) is 2.09 inches. That figure was used along with the Stroud modeling to estimate nutrient loads in runoff as part of the pollution Source Inventory in Chapter 3 of this WMP.

The impervious cover model developed by The Center for Watershed Protection indicates that stream quality degradation is likely when impervious surfaces exceed 5-10 percent of total land area. (Citation 2-3) The Little Manistee Watershed as a whole falls well below those levels, as do each of its subwatersheds.

Because of its sparse development, predominantly forested land cover and porous soils, this watershed’s hydrology is close to what existed in the pre-settlement era. However, changes in forest cover and/or significant developments could alter those conditions.

High soil permeability can be considered a positive attribute, in that it tends to reduce volumes of stormwater runoff. On the other hand, the well-drained sands that dominate in the watershed have less filtering capacity than clay or loam. That increases the chance that contaminants such as pesticides, used motor oil or fertilizers may leach into the groundwater.

The WMP envisions an education program to inform local residents and government agencies of proper use and disposal of potential contaminants, as well as general strategies (local zoning, green infrastructure plans, etc.) to protect the groundwater and surface water quality benefits of the area’s natural hydrology.

Lakes and streams in the Little Manistee Watershed

**Named Streams (all considered coldwater streams):**

Little Manistee River

Tank Creek (Stronach Township)

Cool Creek (Elk Township)

Stronach Creek (Elk Township)

Twin Creek (Newkirk Township)

Syers Creek (Peacock Township)

Lincoln Creek (Newkirk and Ellsworth Townships)

Manistee Creek (Ellsworth Township)

**Named Lakes/ponds:**

Linke Pond (Stronach Township)

Black Lake (Meade Township)

Lake of the Woods (Norman Township)

Mud Lake (Norman Township)

Maple Lake (Elk Township)

Beaver Lake (Elk Township)

Upper Pickerel Lake (Elk Township)

Littles Lake (Elk Township)

Cool Lake (Elk Township)

Sand Lake (Elk Township)

Midget Lake (Elk Township)

List Lake (Elk Township)

Walton Lake (Elk Township)

Elbow Lake (Elk Township)

Harper Lake (Elk Township)

Horseshoe Lake (Elk Township)

Wile Lake (Elk Township)

Coon Lake (Elk Township)

Sawmill Lake (Elk Township)

Ingerman Lake (Peacock Township)

Syers Lake (Eden and Peacock Townships)

Water Tank Lake (Eden Township)

Lost Lake (Newkirk Township)

Stewart Lake (Newkirk Township)

Ahmikwan Lake (Newkirk Township)

Rockwell Lake (Ellsworth Township)

Howe Lake (Ellsworth Township)

Luther Millpond (Village of Luther)

Fishery

(Note: Most information in this section is derived from fishery status reports compiled by MDNR biologist Mark Tonello)

The Little Manistee River is the “parent stream” for steelhead trout planted through the Great Lakes region.

Hatchery fish raised from steelhead eggs taken at the Little Manistee Weir have been stocked in streams throughout Michigan and in nine other states, according to Michigan Department of Natural Resources records.

The clean, cold, free-flowing stream supports populations of brook trout, brown trout, and Coho and Chinook salmon, in addition to the steelhead, which are a migratory variant of rainbow trout.

The Little Manistee River is nationally renowned for its fishing for both potomadromous steelhead and salmon and resident brown trout. Fishing pressure is extremely heavy in the spring for steelhead, and also in the summer for Chinook salmon (Tonello, 2008).

An unusual aspect of the Little Manistee fishery is that migratory species, including steelhead and Coho salmon, have developed significant reproduction as result of “off-season” runs, perhaps due to the operation of the weir during the primary spawning seasons.

A major goal of the WMP is to protect and enhance the fishery, which is important to the region as a recreational option, an economic driver and an indicator of environmental quality.

Arctic grayling were most likely the only trout or salmon species native to the Little Manistee. Grayling were abundant in the stream before 1880, but were gone by 1900. Possible causes of the species demise are habitat destruction due to the active logging, and competition from other trout species which were introduced to the stream in the same time period.

Brook trout are native to some Michigan watersheds, but not to the Little Manistee, according to the MDNR data. Reports indicate three trout species – brook, brown and steelhead – were introduced to the watershed in the 1890s or earlier. As biologist Mark Tonello noted in a 2008 report: “Certainly, by the turn of the century (1900) brook trout, steelhead, and brown trout had all become naturalized residents of the Little Manistee River, and the Arctic grayling were gone.”

Attempts to reintroduce grayling to Michigan rivers have thus far been unsuccessful. The DNR and tribal biologists are engaged in planning a new reintroduction of grayling from Western states, perhaps in an upper segment of the Big Manistee River. The Little Manistee is not among streams being considered for that effort at this time.

Pacific salmon were first introduced to Michigan rivers in the 1960s as an effort to recreate a Great Lakes sport fishery that had been decimated by sea lampreys, habitat deterioration and overfishing.

The egg-taking station at the Little Manistee River Weir has been in operation since 1968. It provides the primary broodstock for hatchery-raised steelhead in Michigan. Chinook salmon eggs are also harvested at the Weir during the fall salmon run.

In addition to the egg-taking function, the river weir serves as a barrier to stop sea lamprey from swimming upriver to spawn. The Department of Natural Resources is in process of studying possible changes to improve the weir’s effectiveness against lamprey.

The Little Manistee weir is one of two Chinook egg-take stations in Michigan. Chinook salmon eggs from the Little Manistee weir are also raised and stocked into Lake Michigan by Indiana and Illinois.

Steelhead intercepted at the weir are passed upstream after sufficient eggs have been taken. Salmon are harvested at the site and marketed by a private company. Some Chinook and Coho salmon do make it upriver – especially when the weir is not in operation – and the Little Manistee has some natural reproduction of both.

In recent years, there has been no planting of steelhead or Coho in the Little Manistee. Chinook continue to be stocked at or below the weir, though the numbers have been reduced in recent years as part of an ongoing effort to balance the prey/predator ratio in the Great Lakes.

The Little Manistee weir is open to the public during Chinook salmon and steelhead egg takes, and is heavily visited. During the autumn Chinook salmon egg take, many school groups are given tours of the facility by MDNR personnel. The children get a close up view of weir personnel taking and fertilizing the eggs and performing autopsies on Chinook salmon.

Geology and soils

Add soil map and base geology map

The surface geology of the watershed is dominated by glacial features, including moraines, outwash plains and kettle lakes. Soils are primarily well-drained sands and sandy loams, with some more productive soils in eastern Lake County, upstream of Luther.

The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has created a national soil database that classifies various soil types on the basis of such characteristics as color, permeability, subsurface layers and mineral and organic content.

Predominant soil types in this watershed include the Plainfield, Grattan and Coloma soil series, each of which covers thousands of acres. These soils are deep, course sands that formed on glacial features such as outwash plains and moraines.

According to the Official Soil Series Descriptions published by NRCS, Plainfield sands are “very deep, excessively drained soils” formed in glacial drift areas. Native vegetation on these soils was mixed evergreen and deciduous forest. Areas of Plainfield soils often were cleared and used for cropland or pasture after the native timber was removed. Many of these lands have reverted to woodland over time.

Grattan and Coloma soils are similar, but may have supported more native hardwood trees prior to the timber-cutting era.

All of the course sands are highly permeable to water. They are considered to be at low risk for flooding or for excessive storm runoff because water sinks in so rapidly. For the same reason, these soils often require irrigation if they are used for crop production.

Several historic wetlands in low-lying areas of the watershed have deep, hydric or muck soils.

There are no surface outcroppings of bedrock in the watershed. Elevation in the headwaters area of eastern Lake County is approximately 1,200 feet above sea level. That drops to below 600 feet at the watershed’s exit point at Manistee Lake.

The Udell Hills, located in Stronach Township on the boundary between the Big and Little Manistee watersheds, contain slopes large enough to have operated in the past at the Big M downhill ski area. Today, the site is part of the Manistee National Forest and is managed as a public area for cross country skiing and mountain biking.

The bedrock geology is made up of sedimentary layers, including the Antrim Shale, formed at times when the Michigan Basin was covered by shallow seas. Deep salt and mineral formations that underlie part of the region are reached through solution mining along Manistee Lake just west of the Watershed.

Wetlands

(Insert wetland mapping)

Wetlands provide vital ecological services, including flood mitigation, filtration and groundwater recharge, sediment retention, and wildlife habitat. It is an objective of the WMP to protect and restore wetlands within the watershed.

The National Land Cover Database (NLCD) classifies just over 9 percent of the Little Manistee Watershed as Wetland – including 10,370 acres of woody wetlands and 1,900 acres of emergent herbaceous wetlands.

One notable wetland complex is the large Baylor Swamp, which feeds both branches of Twin Creek in Newkirk Township. Much of the upper reach of the river flows through lowland conifer swamp.

While the majority of soils in the watershed are well-drained course mineral sands, hydric soils in these wetlands often contain thick layers of organic materials, accumulated over the centuries.

Under current regulations, federal and state agencies regulate development in wetlands which have any of the following characteristics:

Connected to one of the Great Lakes or Lake St. Clair.

Located within 1,000 feet of one of the Great Lakes or Lake St. Clair.

Connected to an inland lake, pond, river, or stream.

Located within 500 feet of an inland lake, pond, river or stream.

Not connected to one of the Great Lakes or Lake St. Clair, or an inland lake, pond, stream, or river, but are more than 5 acres in size.

Not connected to one of the Great Lakes or Lake St. Clair, or an inland lake, pond, stream, or river, and less than 5 acres in size, but the DEQ has determined that these wetlands are essential to the preservation of the state's natural resources and has notified the property owner.

Many of the Little Manistee wetlands are protected from development through public ownership as part of the state and federal forest system.

Demographics

Add population tables

The year-round population of the watershed is estimated at 3,700, including 2,300 in Lake County, 1,300 in Manistee County and fewer than 100 in Mason and Wexford counties combined.

Precise demographic calculations are impossible, since the watershed boundary does not follow census block lines as it meanders into parts of 16 townships. The watershed occupies less than 1 percent of Dover and more than 95 percent of Eden Township in Lake County.

Census estimates show overall population in the 16 townships fell by about 1 percent from 2010 to 2016.

Of an estimated 4,500 housing units in the watershed, 2,500, or 57 percent, were vacant during the 2010 census count and categorized as being used for seasonal or occasional occupancy. That result is unsurprising, given the region’s well-known recreational and seasonal attractions.

The sparse population leaves local government with few resources for planning. Of the 16 townships, seven have fewer than 500 residents. Only three of the townships, all near the city of Manistee have populations in excess of 1,000.

The Local Economy

The Little Manistee River area is known primarily as a destination for outdoor recreation, fishing, boating and general tourism. There are few if any large employers directly in the Watershed, with residents more likely to seek employment in the surrounding towns of Baldwin, Manistee, Reed City and Cadillac.

There is a significant population of retirees, who live in the area either year-round or seasonally. Public and private campgrounds help to swell the summer population and provide some seasonal employment.

Fishing is an important component of the economy. A number of fishing guides run trips on the Little Manistee. Out-of-town anglers during salmon and steelhead runs support campgrounds, hotels, restaurants and other businesses in and near the Watershed.

Businesses within the watershed tend to be small and oriented toward retail or the outdoor tourism economy. The Dublin Store at the northern extremity of the watershed has a statewide following for its store-made products, including countless varieties of jerky made from beef and exotic animals. Both Irons and Luther have small business districts that cater to local and tourist trade.

Public and private woodlands provide some timber harvest employment, though milling and processing are done outside the watershed.

Fast food outlets, chain branded motels and other highway services for travelers are non-existent. Only one state highway, M37, transects the watershed and that is in a generally remote segment of Lake County.

The agricultural economy is limited to a few small row crop or pasture operations. In general, soils at the eastern end of the Watershed, in the area around Luther, are more amenable to agriculture.

Land Use Regulation: Master Plan & Zoning Review

(With map of zoned communities; zoning provisions table; survey graphic on land use topics)

Land use is known to have a significant impact on water quality and non-point source pollution. For example agricultural operations, residential on-site waste water systems, impervious surfaces and open space areas all have differing effects on groundwater and lakes and streams throughout the Watershed.

In the Little Manistee Watershed, broad expanses of forest and other undeveloped land have helped to maintain the natural conditions and high water quality desired by local stakeholders. Ensuring that those conditions continue in the future may require some level of regulation to guide potential growth.

Regulations enforced by counties and municipalities; by district health departments; by construction code; soil erosion authorities; and by state agencies such as the Department of Environmental Quality may all limit some types of land development and incentivize others.

Within the Watershed, a total of 21 municipal and county governmental units potentially share some aspect of land use regulation. In support of this Watershed Management Plan, consultants worked with a volunteer from the LMWCC to review master plans, zoning and other ordinances of those units (four counties, 16 townships and one village).

The review showed the following distribution of zoning within the Little Manistee Watershed.

* The two townships in Mason County (Free Soil and Meade), have county-administered zoning.
* The lone township in Wexford County (South Branch) has zoning through a multi-township authority: The Wexford Joint Planning Commission.
* Each of the four Manistee County townships (Manistee, Filer, Stronach and Norman) has its own zoning ordinance.
* In Lake County, two townships (Sauble and Peacock) have their own zoning ordinances. There is no zoning in seven Lake County townships (Elk, Eden, Newkirk, Cherry Valley, Dover, Ellsworth and Pinora) nor in the Village of Luther.

The existing ordinances were reviewed to look for inclusion of two major policy classifications: Regulations that promote land use efficiency; and those that provide environmental protections. (see accompanying table and map).

Provisions that may be protective of natural resources may include zoning districts along or around surface water (including overlay districts); wetland provisions in zoning; surface water protections; setbacks and buffers; groundwater protections; floodplain reviews; limitations to building on steep slopes; and special environmental areas protection.

Research has demonstrated that increasing the density of development in existing growth and investment areas can reduce impervious surfaces compared to low density development for a given amount of new housing-unit creation. This concentration of development also lends itself to lowering the cost and impact of infrastructure, and to preserving open space.

Conversely, environmental benefits may result from well-designed regulations that codify low-density policies in situations where high-density development does not presently exist and is unlikely to exist in the future. Such low-density policies may include: Larger parcel sizes, minimum parcel widths along shorelines; greater setbacks for impervious surfaces (e.g. 50 feet) and nutrient sources (e.g. 100 feet); required woody-plant greenbelts along shorelines; secondary containment site plan design requirements, and so on.

Examples of policies that might promote the efficient use of land resources in rural areas may include allowing a mix of uses on the same site, and clustering to incentivize low impact development techniques.

While zoning is intended to regulate future land uses, master plans serve as instruments which guide the evolution of the community by bringing the social, physical, economic and political considerations into focus. The master plan provides guidance for the future use of the land as well as the employment of other capital resources such as infrastructure to support community goals.

A thoughtful and comprehensive master plan can lay the framework to improve the quality of life, make more efficient use of resources, provide for a cleaner environment, and build an economically vibrant community. The master plan is required as the basis for a zoning ordinance.

Decisions surrounding land use are increasingly complex as we gain more knowledge of effects and interrelationships in our environment that may significantly impact watersheds.

With no large population or commercial centers and relatively little construction of impervious surfaces, the present land uses in the Little Manistee Watershed are generally supportive of good water quality. That means local governments have an opportunity to protect water quality and the area’s rustic character by regulating future development, while causing little immediate impact on existing residences or businesses. This is a major strength of zoning: Being proactive by putting in place preventive measures to protect the resource, rather than depending on enforcement action, lawsuits or environmental remediation after damage has been done to the watershed.

A social indicators survey conducted on-line during the WMP process found significant support for regulation to protect the river corridor.

In the WMP survey, 63 percent of respondents indicated they would be likely to support “Strong local zoning, with requirements that buildings be set back from the river.” Nearly 70 percent indicated support for “State designation of the Little Manistee as a natural river, with development restrictions.”

Insert survey graphics (natural river and zoning)

The survey – with approximately 200 respondents – was one element of the Steering Committee’s commitment to obtain public participation in the planning process. It is not considered to be a statistically valid representation of the Watershed population, since participants were not selected at random. The on-line survey instrument was publicized in local media and all persons with an interest in the Little Manistee Watershed were invited to participate. Of all respondents, 61.4 percent identified themselves as property owners in the watershed.

The full survey results are included as Appendix A to the WMP.

The goal of land use regulation in this watershed should be to guide future growth and developments in ways that are protective of the area’s water resources and rustic character. Regions to the north, south, east and west of the Little Manistee are all more heavily developed than this watershed. Potential growth could come from any direction at any time. It is important for citizens and governmental units to understand the issue, and promote policies that will allow the region to grow in ways that protect water quality and natural resources.

The WMP recommends an extensive education program to inform policymakers of possible options for land use regulation and water quality protection.

Under Michigan law, zoning ordinances are often written at the township level. The seven townships listed above with no zoning ordinance all have small populations, which can make it difficult to maintain individual zoning programs. For that reason, the WMP recommends consideration of the benefits of joint arrangements among several municipalities.

The Michigan Joint Municipal Planning Act allows municipalities (that is, cities, townships and/or villages), to join together for planning and zoning purposes. The statute would enable the entities to engage in zoning for the entire communities, or to do so only along the river corridor and not in the rest of the municipality. Either approach could help to protect the resource while maintaining local control and creating a cost-sharing formula to minimize the expense to each municipality.

Designation as a Michigan natural river could accomplish a similar goal of preserving the river corridor without affecting other areas of the townships. However, the political climate in the state and a general shortage of funding for new natural river designations make it appear that natural river designation would have to come as a grass roots effort from within the watershed. The WMP recommends continuing education on the natural river issue while also developing a further understanding of the interest the watershed residents have in such a designation. If support for the designation is found to be there or can be developed then the plan recommends moving forward with the designation.

Expertise on land use regulation is available through several sources in the region, including the Michigan State University Extension, Networks Northwest, West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission, Michigan Association of Planning, and Manistee and Mason County planning offices. The MSU Extension’s Citizen Planner program offers land use education for local officials through in-person or on-line courses. The WMP recommends seeking grant funding for a coordinated effort to educate the public and develop locally supported land use ordinances that provide long-term protection to the watershed.

Footnotes

2-1 Saunders, Stephen, and Tom Easley, “Extreme Storms I Michigan, Dec. 2014, the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization

2-2 Christiansen, Daniel E., John F. Walker, and Randall J. Hunt, “Basin-Scale Simulation of Current and Potential Climate Changed Hydrologic Conditions in the Lake Michigan Basin, United States”; U.S. Geological Survey, 2014

2-3 Impacts of Impervious Cover on Aquatic Systems, 2003, Center for Watershed Protection,