PUBLIC, PRIVATE & NONPROFIT COLLABORATION TRANSFORM PORT HURON

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Introduction

Port Huron is a city with many identities. It is at once both a small town and a major international gateway; a tourist destination and a collection of deep-rooted neighborhoods; a blue-collar industrial town and an island teeming with natural resources. In a sense, Port Huron has been blessed with a uniqueness that many cities seek to create year after year. In the real estate world, the mantra *"location, location, location"* is everything. As planners and economic developers know, physical location is not enough; there are many intricate components that converge with one another to classify a location as 'good' or 'bad.' Port Huron's history can be defined by its struggle to get all of those components working in harmony.

Sitting at the base of Michigan's Thumb, at the south end of Lake Huron, and on the edge of the Metropolitan Detroit area, Port Huron connects with Sarnia, Ontario by means of the Blue Water Bridge over the St. Clair River. Port Huron is strategically located at the intersection of Interstate 94 and Interstate 69 – two of North America's most critical transportation corridors. This location puts the city about an hour away from downtown Detroit and exactly halfway between Toronto and Grand Rapids.

About the Authors

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Table 1

Year	Population	# Change from Previous Decade	% Change from Previous Decade
1940	32,759	-	-
1950	35,725	2,966	9.1%
1960	36,084	359	1.0%
1970	35,794	-290	-0.8%
1980	33,981	-1,813	-5.1%
1990	33,694	-287	-0.8%
2000	32,338	-1,356	-4.0%
2010	30,184	-2,154	-6.7%
2016 estimate	30,046	-138	-0.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, SEMCOG Community Profiles, 2017

City of Port Huron Population, 1940-2016

As such, the city's economy has been historically tied to the auto industry.

But just as importantly, Port Huron serves as a gateway to the Blue Water Area as the Blue Water Bridge is an international gateway with the third busiest commercial truck crossing and busiest rail crossing on the U.S.- Canadian border. In addition to the St. Clair River and Lake Huron, the Black River meanders through the city to the St. Clair River and provides an abundance of water resources, recreational opportunities, and scenic vistas.

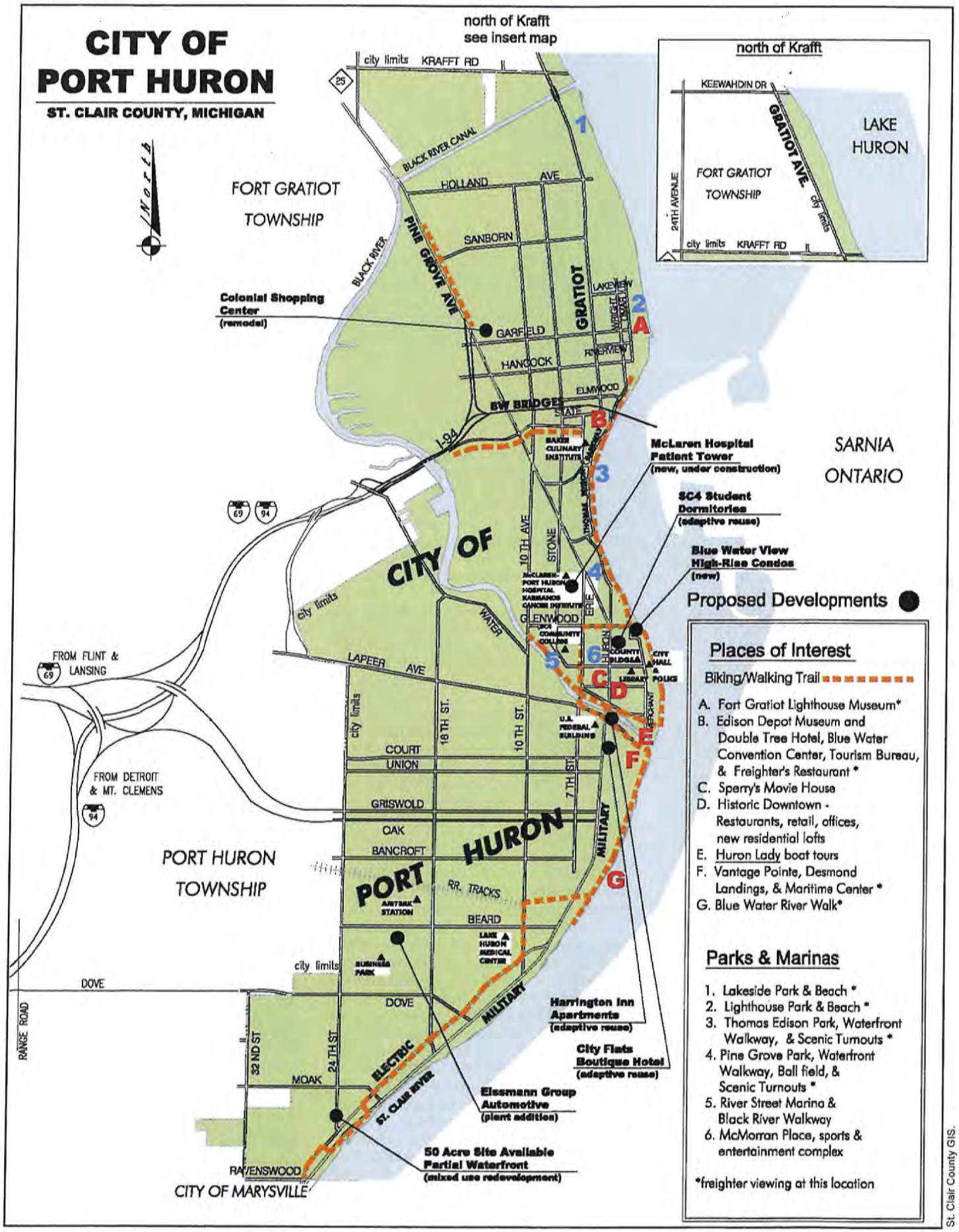
The city is home to about 30,000 residents. It is the largest community in St. Clair County, which has a population of about 160,000. Since its peak of 36,000 persons in the 1960s, the city's population has declined with each new Census, see Table 1. With its close ties to the auto industry, Port Huron's neighborhoods and population felt the deep impact of the 2008 recession as many manufacturing facilities in the region closed or cut back on employment. But this decline in population is modest compared with other cities in the Midwest and masks the amazing new development taking place in the city as described in the rest of this article.

Coming out of the recession, the city is focused on diversifying its economy, rebuilding neighborhoods, and capturing the attention of tourists. Recreation and cultural amenities have provided increasing opportunities for the city to tell a new story. After years of ignoring the St. Clair River, stakeholders have made the river a destination to be celebrated. In the late 1990s, philanthropist James Acheson began his transformational waterfront redevelopment project just south of the Black River. Twenty years later in 2014, the St. Clair River, Black River, Black River Canal, and Lake Huron – also known as the Island Loop paddling route, became the first National Water Trail designated in Michigan by the U.S. Department of the Interior. During the summer months, the Huron Lady II cruises up and down the St. Clair River giving tourists a fresh view of Port Huron (and of Sarnia) from the water

Photos courtesy of Trevor Floyd, St. Clair County GIS.

The International Day Parade and Boat Night are major draws for downtown Port Huron each year leading up to the Bell's Beer Bayview Mackinac Race.

Map 1


CITY OF PORT HURON
ST. CLAIR COUNTY, MICHIGAN
north of Krafft see insert map
north of Krafft
KEEWAHDIN DR
GRATIOT AVE.
LAKE HURON
FORT GRATIOT TOWNSHIP
24TH AVENUE
city limits
KRAFFT RD
BLACK RIVER CANAL
HOLLAND AVE
SANBORN
BLACK RIVER
PINE GROVE AVE
GRATIOT
GARFIELD
HANCOCK
RIVERVIEW
ELMWOOD
BW BRIDGES
STATE
I-94
Colonial Shopping Center (remodel)
McLaren Hospital Patient Tower (new, under construction)
SC4 Student Dormitories (adaptive reuse)
Blue Water View High-Rise Condos (new)
SARNIA ONTARIO
Proposed Developments
CITY OF PORT HURON
10 TH AVE
STONE
WATER
GLENWOOD
LAPEER AVE
FROM FLINT & LANSING
FROM DETROIT & MT. CLEMENS
COURT
UNION
GRISWOLD
OAK
BANCROFT
RR. TRACKS
BEARD
DOVE
MOAK
RAVENSWOOD
CITY OF MARYSVILLE
PORT HURON TOWNSHIP
18 TH ST.
10 TH ST.
7 TH ST.
32 ND ST
24 TH ST
RANGE ROAD
MILITARY
ELECTRIC
ST. CLAIR RIVER
Harrington Inn Apartments (adaptive reuse)
City Flats Boutique Hotel (adaptive reuse)
Elssmann Group Automotive (plant addition)
50 Acre Site Available Partial Waterfront (mixed use redevelopment)
Places of Interest
Biking/Walking Trail
A. Fort Gratiot Lighthouse Museum*
B. Edison Depot Museum and Double Tree Hotel, Blue Water Convention Center, Tourism Bureau, & Freighter's Restaurant *
C. Sperry's Movie House
D. Historic Downtown - Restaurants, retail, offices, new residential lofts
E. Huron Lady boat tours
F. Vantage Pointe, Desmond Landings, & Maritime Center *
G. Blue Water River Walk*
Parks & Marinas
1. Lakeside Park & Beach *
2. Lighthouse Park & Beach *
3. Thomas Edison Park, Waterfront Walkway, & Scenic Turnouts *
4. Pine Grove Park, Waterfront Walkway, Ball field, & Scenic Turnouts *
5. River Street Marina & Black River Walkway
6. McMorran Place, sports & entertainment complex
*freighter viewing at this location
St. Clair County GIS.

as they take in stories from the city's past. See Map 1 for some of the new highlights in the city as discussed in this article.

Over the years, major cultural events have become engrained in the fabric of the city. The Bell's Beer Bayview Mackinac Race is the signature event each July, drawing tens of thousands of people into the city for a week of fun and reconnecting with old friends and family. This annual event includes the world-famous Port Huron-to-Mackinac sailboat race and the week-long Blue Water Fest which features the International Day Parade, Family Night, and Boat Night in advance of the Saturday morning race. Other events include the St. Patrick's Day Pub Crawl, Blue Water Sand Fest, and the 'unofficial' Float Down, which draws groups of people and their inflatable tubes to float down the St. Clair River from the Blue Water Bridge to neighboring Marysville.

Port Huron and its diverse array of community stakeholders have embraced placemaking wholeheartedly, focusing on ***people, place, and prosperity*** as the backbone of planning efforts. For too many years – throughout the 1990s and early 2000s in particular – downtown Port Huron was devoid of real activity. Many shops were closed on weekends. In the evenings, Military Street/Huron Avenue – the main street running through the heart of the city – was virtually empty. County and city employees who worked at their respective municipal campuses downtown would clear out at the end of the day, and it would be unusual to see a lot of foot traffic at night. *Fast forward to today and downtown Port Huron is booming!* There has been an influx of new restaurants and bars. Developers have come in and are transforming the upper levels of downtown buildings into beautiful lofts which are all full. Downtown is commonly lined with cars parallel parked in front of new retail shops and new entertainment venues such as the Sperry's Movie House and the newly redeveloped Citadel Theater.

Sitting beneath the Blue Water Bridge is the Blue Water Convention Center, which is attached to the Port Huron DoubleTree Hotel and Freighters Restaurant – the result of an ambitious public-private partnership in 2011 that redeveloped the left-for-dead Thomas Edison Inn property into a new economic driver for the city and region. Baker College joined in that partnership and built its new Culinary Institute right next door.

Like most cities, Port Huron has had its challenges – challenges that have caused people to be skeptical of grand plans and ideas that initially caused anticipation to build, build, and build – only to crash. While the stunning Blue Water Bridge is an asset to the city and to forces much bigger than Port Huron and the region, it has also been the root of city setbacks. As a major international border crossing, the Federal Highways Administration and

Photo source: St. Clair County GIS.

Aerial view of the Blue Water Bridge plaza in 2015 showing surrounding propertywhere homes and businesses once stood.

Michigan Department of Transportation began studying options for expanding the bridge plaza in 2002 to accommodate more inspection booths, improve efficiencies, and enhance Customs and Border Protection (CBP) following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. After a lengthy planning and analysis phase, MDOT's environmental impact statement was finalized in 2009. The $165 million project required the demolition of more than 100 properties around the bridge plaza, including 150 homes and 30 businesses. Then, things changed. The economy took a turn for the worse and there was no federal funding to see the bridge plaza expanded as planned. The project stalled in 2010, leaving the city with tracts of vacant land surrounding the plaza and the loss of tax base to go with it. In 2016, MDOT revived the Blue Water Bridge plaza plan but by then, CBP's needs had changed, technology had changed, and there was uncertainty over how much of a footprint would be needed for a new plaza.

As the Blue Water Bridge plaza expansion plans stalled following the removal of city homes and businesses, MDOT provided the city with funding to mitigate the loss of tax base and help the city deal with the economic impacts of losing residential and commercial assets. In 2009, a portion of those funds were used to develop an economic development strategic plan for Port Huron and the surrounding region. The effort led to over 100 people who live and work in the region meeting regularly to create a vision for the future, and with that vision for what would become known as ***"Blue Meets Green"*** was born. The finalized economic development strategic plan included the following vision: *"Develop the Blue Water Region into a prosperous, sustainable economic environment through the united effort and commitment of the private, public, and nonprofit sectors."* From the very start, the project stakeholders were clear about the core values of the region:

- the **People** of the region;
- this **Place** and the value those who live here place on the water, the beauty of the region, and the location; and
- the importance of shared **Prosperity** for the people and businesses in the Blue Water Region.

Stakeholders were adamant that this could not be a case of *"business as usual."* Success would require dedication and commitment to partnerships from all of the towns, cities, and the county; from school districts, economic development and tourism organizations; from elected officials, civic groups, churches, and community organizations. In April 2017, the Blue Meets Green group completed the fourth phase of the *"Blue Meets Green Strategic Plan,"* which highlights key areas of focus, validates goals and objectives under the People, Place, and Prosperity mission, and identifies priority projects that will impact the entire region.[1] *As you read about the various catalytic projects that have helped revitalize Port Huron, you will see how the Blue Meets Green group and their guiding strategic plan impacts planning in the city and region. This new dawn of collaboration and partnerships has had a profound impact on the transformation in Port Huron by creating community support and political influence for big impact projects.* Blue Meets Green does not implement projects and it does not have any funding. However, it represents the first time ever such a wide array of community stakeholders have enjoyed sustained collaborative interaction. Prior to its formation, intergovernmental relationships and interactions with other community organizations were characterized by fragmentation.

The establishment of Blue Meets Green has been transformative for the city and region. As Randy Maiers, president of the Community Foundation of St. Clair County, notes,

"The recession of 2008 was actually the spark we needed, or the kick in the pants, to put aside differences and collectively determine our future. We have developed a culture of sharing, communicating, and working together towards common outcomes. The fact that our region has published and promoted agreed upon regional economic priorities has been an incredibly uniting impact."

In Maiers' view, the biggest change he has seen in the city since he first joined the Community Foundation in 2002 has been

"the development of an emboldened perception that we can in fact succeed by taking the initiative ourselves, and that we do have the talent, resources, and passion already existing here in our community to create a new map for prosperity. We no longer wait for a solution to come from the outside."

This article highlights the rebirth of the City of Port Huron beginning with the historical context that set the stage for today, followed by an examination of key planning and zoning efforts, then an overview of city and private investment. Last, the article will explore what the future holds for Port Huron and its quality of life going forward.

Historical Context

Port Huron's history has developed as a result of its deep connections to a number of key resources and its location as a waterfront, international border community. The city was initially established as Fort Gratiot by the U.S. government following the War of 1812. This set into motion the large-scale settlement of the area as a result of industry sprouting up to take advantage of the city's prime location and resources at the time – forestry, shipbuilding, shipping, and ultimately rail transportation.

Photos courtesy of the City of Port Huron and the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

St. Clair County Community College and McMorran Place have been downtown fixtures since the 1960s.

Port Huron grew into a bustling Michigan town bolstered by its proximity to Canada and Detroit. Designated as the county seat in 1871, the St. Clair Rail Tunnel was completed in 1890. By 1938, the first span of the Blue Water Bridge was completed leading to increase shipping activity and vehicular traffic from people in the metro area traveling to and from Canada.

As the population peaked (36,000) in the 1960s, the city started to experience disinvestment and blight. This era ushered in a long-term urban renewal effort to help resuscitate the downtown. Urban renewal resulted in the demolition of rundown buildings, the removal of railroad tracks, and derelict industrial facilities. It also led to the downtown consolidation of St. Clair County Community College (SC4) and the construction of the McMorran Place civic arena.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a deliberate effort to create a new image of the city by modernizing the downtown at the expense of the historic buildings. Urban renewal removed city blocks of historic buildings in favor of modern designed office buildings. It was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that there was a change in the view of historic buildings. Now they are considered an asset and a prerequisite for many of the state funding programs.

As the city worked to revitalize its urban core and increase accessibility to the St. Clair and Black Rivers, many other communities in the region were growing suburbs with regional shopping centers that further detracted from downtown Port Huron and similar cities.

The history of Port Huron's neighborhoods began at the turn-of-the-century when most of the city's housing stock was built – many by affluent homeowners. When the depression hit, it became difficult to maintain these large family homes. During this time, many of the properties were subdivided into multifamily units in order to provide some income and reduce the cost of maintaining the property. This trend of subdividing continued on a modest scale until the 1980s and 1990s when the city experienced an accelerated exodus of families to the surrounding townships. The townships offered new subdivisions with homes that had larger lots and homes with modern features. As families moved out, investors bought the homes in the neighborhoods and continued to subdivide them into multiple units. As time progressed, Port Huron went from being a primarily owner-occupied residential community in the 1960s to being predominantly rental units with over 50% being non-owner occupied in the present day.

Photos courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

Aerial photos of Desmond Landing in 1999 prior to being cleaned up by James Acheson and post-cleanup in 2005.

Retired city planning director Kim Harmer notes that the biggest challenge the city faced in the 1980s and 1990s from a planning standpoint was the competition from 'greenfield' sites in the surrounding townships available for large, inexpensive construction of homes, schools, and commercial buildings.

Photo courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

A birdseye view of Desmond Landing where the Black River meets the St. Clair River in 1999, pre-cleanup.

"Thankfully, in the 1980s after the heady 'Urban Renewal' days when demolition and new construction were the popular approach, historic preservation became the new trend – finding ways to repurpose large, older buildings within modern downtowns and neighborhoods. Downtowns responded to malls by finding ways to embrace their historic architecture and use empty second and third floors," said Harmer.

In order to understand the importance of the revitalization of both the St. Clair River and the Black River shorelines, it is necessary to take a step back to the early 1900s. Edward Goodrich Acheson founded the Acheson Oildag Company in Port Huron in 1908. Acheson was an inventor, scientist, and entrepreneur responsible for over 70 patents in his lifetime. One of his products was a revolutionary graphite coating called "Aquadag" which enabled Thomas Edison – who grew up in Port Huron – to produce the first truly durable incandescent light bulb in 1907. Many of Acheson's inventions had a large impact on how people lived and he built a successful corporation around these inventions which allowed him and his family to give back to the community.

His grandson, James Acheson, continued that legacy of giving back to Port Huron in 1999 with an ambitious waterfront redevelopment project that, if implemented, would forever change the city's southside waterfront. It is important to note that Acheson's plans were entirely conceptual in nature and not official city plans. The intent was to provide opportunity for developers to come along and bring the concept to life.

Photos courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

The Harborside Office Complex and the new Blue Water YMCA sit along the St. Clair River at Desmond Landing following cleanup of the riverfront by James Acheson.

The Acheson properties were created through the acquisition of the CN rail yards and Black River Marina, covering about 72 acres of the 100 total acres that make up the south side waterfront – also known as Desmond Landing. The overall site is essentially a triangle bound by the Black River to the north, Military Street on the west, and the St. Clair River on the east. In the 1990s, the site was accessible by rail, road, and water. The Canadian National rail tunnel connecting Canada and the United States travels directly under the site. Cleanup and redevelopment of the south side waterfront represented a $60 million investment in the city. The original plan called for transforming the one-mile stretch of industrial riverfront property into a downtown anchor that would house a terminal and deep-water port and a mixed-use development with residential options, an office complex that would become the headquarters for SEMCO Energy, and public open space. In 2002, the project received a $2.2 million brownfield tax credit from the Michigan Economic Growth Authority. Infrastructure improvements were intended to be funded through tax increment financing, with the captured tax revenue split between Acheson Ventures and the city. SEMCO Energy has consolidated its headquarters in the $24 million, 100,000-square-foot Harborside Office Center that features a 500-car parking garage. The Blue Water YMCA relocated from its previous location north of downtown and built a state-of-the-art facility just south of the Harborside complex. So far, the Harborside project is the only piece of Acheson's original concept plan that has come to fruition.

In the midst of Acheson Ventures cleaning up Port Huron's dirty, industrial riverfront, downtown Port Huron struggled to flourish.

Planning for the Future, Overcoming Challenges

Port Huron has a long history of planning and working toward economic prosperity and a high quality of life for residents, though its planning initiatives have not always been through regular comprehensive master plan updates. The city is in the process of finalizing its first big update to the master plan since 2002. Prior to that, aside from minor reviews every so often, the master plan had not gone through a major update since 1967. There have been a number of special area plans or targeted studies that have been developed throughout the years, many of which are listed in the sidebar.

The gap in major rewrites of the city's master plan can partially be attributed to the culture of city government over time. As retired city planning director Harmer notes, the city had five different city managers from 1998 to 2014 – a stark contrast from earlier decades, when Gerry Bouchard managed the city for 32 years.

Additionally, the city had its share of contentious city council elections that, as Harmer points out

"saw majorities sway on the council from one extreme to the other regarding philosophy on fiscal priorities, economic development, neighborhood needs, and government oversight. This resulted in many programs taking a long time for design and start up, only to become a short-lived program that was eliminated or disregarded with new leadership goals."

Port Huron Plans and Studies

- Resource Team Report for the City of Port Huron developed by the National Main Street Center (1991)
- Land Use Development Plan City of Port Huron Downtown Development Authority (1991)
- City of Port Huron Southside Strategic Land Use Plan (1999)
- City of Port Huron Master Plan prepared by LSL Planning (2002)
- Downtown Port Huron Economic Re-urbanization Plan prepared by Development Concepts (2003)
- Port Huron Michigan Development Opportunities Study (2003)
- Downtown Port Huron Commercial Development Action Plan (2004)
- Downtown Port Huron Marketing Survey Conducted by SC4 Marketing Class (2004)
- Marketing Media Strategy prepared for the City of Port Huron (2004)
- Analysis of Downtown Port Huron Retail Market prepared by Strategic Edge (2004)
- City of Port Huron Downtown Parking Study prepared by Carl Walker (2006 & 2014)
- Residential Market Potential Downtown Port Huron Study prepared by Zimmerman Volk (2007)
- Destination Port Huron Vision Team Report (2008)
- Target Market Residential Analysis prepared by LandUse USA (2017)
- City of Port Huron Master Plan Update prepared by staff (2017)

The 2002 master plan was an in-depth analysis of all the commercial corridors, downtown Port Huron, and the condition all of the neighborhoods. The key recommendations were to focus on issues of blight and improve the quality of housing stock, along with the development of commercial corridors leading into and out of the downtown area. The plan broke the city into 21 neighborhood planning areas to provide an enhanced focus on specific neighborhoods, corridors, and community assets. It also included a visual neighborhood condition survey to assess negative site factors. Through the neighborhood condition survey, the city learned that the majority of site factors related to basic housing rehabilitation needs. Over 40% of the site factors observed related to the presence of litter/debris, junk vehicles, and miscellaneous junk.[2]

The plan also included a riverfront plan, which focused on enhancing downtown by creating a civic boulevard that would run west to east from the Black River to the St. Clair River and connect with existing and future pedestrian pathways. The riverfront plan also called for the establishment of retail and entertainment gateways in the downtown. During the 2002 planning process, there was a clear perception that the city was not taking full advantage of assets that could create new economic niches, particularly with waterfront areas that were once industrial in nature. While the 2002 plan called for economic diversification, downtown enhancement, and neighborhood improvements, the efforts of city officials, economic developers, and stakeholder organizations were bogged down by the recession that hit the county hard later in the decade.

Concern for neighborhood stabilization and improving community character has long been a cornerstone of city planning efforts. While activities and efforts to bolster downtown Port Huron tend to get more publicity, there have been numerous planning efforts to improve city neighborhoods as well. One of the most notable endeavors was the Southside Housing Summit in 1998, which focused on the concerns of Southside residents and stakeholders in reviewing the future land use in the community. These meetings focused on the desire to preserve the residential character of the neighborhood and to encourage new residential development on available vacant land versus continued expansion of the industrial park located in the neighborhood. In addition the community felt that the neighborhood should be serviced by an improved commercial area. The study was adopted by city council in March 2000 with the hope that it would be a guide for new investment and development in the Southside neighborhoods.

There have been ongoing revitalization efforts within the neighborhoods to specifically deal with blighted properties. The city has made a concerted effort through demolition to remove properties that are now at the end of their economic life. The blighted properties created a drain in the neighborhood both physically and economically. The city has used a variety of resources to fund the removal of blighted homes including HUD and MSHDA grant funds and Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) funds in partnership with the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission. A total of 94 dilapidated homes have been removed from the neighborhoods in the past five years.

A major goal of the city is to attract new residents, which will require that neighborhoods are clean, safe, and active. The 2017 master plan update is the first major update completed since the 2002 plan, aside from periodic reviews. The updated plan includes new strategic focal areas that were not included in the previous plan, including participating in the MEDC's Redevelopment Ready Communities program, inclusion of an updated five-year recreation plan, establishing walkable community criteria, and recommendations to develop a sub-area study for the reuse of the cleared land surrounding the Blue Water Bridge Plaza.[3]

Additionally, the city worked with LandUseUSA in 2017 to develop a residential Target Market Analysis focused on recommendations for future housing stock based on market demand along with its estimated price points and design standards. These recommendations were based on national and regional trends in

Photos courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

A view from above the Thomas Edison Inn property just south of the Blue Water Bridge in 1999.

the housing market with an emphasis on developing housing for 'the Missing Middle.' The Target Market Analysis will guide city officials in navigating future residential development opportunities by identifying appropriate housing products for infill properties.

The extent to which resources could be directed to effectively deal with neighborhood issues within the city was limited by a state-mandated sewer separation project that has been a fiscal drag on the city for 20 years. In 1998, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality issued the city an ultimatum to end the discharge of combined sewage and storm water into the Black River within 14 years. While the project would have significant positive water quality impacts, the total cost for the sewer separation project was $176 million. The cost of the project escalated due to the fact that it was decided to also address street improvements at the same time as sewer separation. There was an effort to address these costs, but due to the political nature of raising water rates this was postponed again and again, to the point where large rate increases were necessary in order to cover the debt payments required on the loan.

Following a number of extensions, the sewer separation project is just about complete, with only one combined sewer section remaining and the debt has been reduced to approximately $90 million. This has dramatically improved the water quality in the Black River and St. Clair River. Twenty years ago the city was discharging 309 million gallons of combined water into these waterways each year. That number has been reduced to two million gallons on an annual basis.

Public and Private Investment: Recent Development Projects

Under the Bridge: New Convention Center/Hotel/Culinary Area

It's a funny thing about community development and momentum. In many cases, it just takes one catalytic project to kick off the 'snowball effect' of success. Such is the case in Port Huron. The public-private partnership that resulted in the new Port Huron DoubleTree Hotel, the Blue Water Convention Center, and the Baker College Culinary Institute created the starter 'snowballs' for the community to get rolling. In 2010, St. Clair County, the City of Port Huron, and Grand Rapids-based Orion Construction announced the game-changing project just below the Blue Water Bridge along the St. Clair River that would initiate a new wave of interest from developers – both from within and outside of the community. The Thomas Edison Inn was an old fixture in Port Huron. As of 2010, the hotel was left for dead. Sitting vacant and in foreclosure, one of the most prime pieces of property in the city sat on display to people crossing the Blue Water Bridge – an immediate monument to the recession that hit St. Clair County harder than most communities in Southeast Michigan. At the same time, city leaders commissioned a feasibility study to see if the McMorran Place complex downtown would thrive as a convention space in the city. The numbers just were not there.

Photo courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

The new Sperry's Movie House opened in 2016 and also houses The Underground Business Incubator in the basement of the building.

Following that initial study, then city manager Bruce Brown and then county administrator Bill Kauffman began discussions with Orion Construction. One of the issues with McMorran serving as the convention center was the lack of nearby hotel rooms. There were rooms up the road at the Thomas Edison Inn. The city and the county explored the options for the dying hotel and found that potential existed. The Economic Development Alliance of St. Clair County did an additional economic impact study for a new convention center and hotel at the Thomas Edison Inn location. Orion saw an opportunity in an untapped market. Thus, there was a new lifeline for one of the city's key economic assets. The Blue Water Convention Center is a $9 million investment owned by St. Clair County that is a 34,000-square-foot state-of-the-art event and meeting space managed by SMG, a facility management company whose clients include Cobo Center, DeVos Place, and McCormick Place.[4]

Attached to the convention center is the Hilton DoubleTree hotel – a $10.3 million investment with 143 rooms, a Freighters restaurant and taproom. The hotel was an investment of John Wheeler from Orion Construction. In 2014, the DoubleTree in Port Huron was ranked 14th in the world for service in the company's brand ranking. It has been an overwhelming success.

Right next door is the Baker College Culinary Institute of Michigan – a $4 million investment. As discussions and planning took place for the convention center and hotel, Baker College jumped into the mix to build a second campus of its award-winning culinary school in Port Huron. Located next to the DoubleTree, it serves as a catalyst for developing fine dining in the St. Clair County area. Students from the culinary school get direct hospitality and food service experience at the hotel and convention center.[5]

Photos courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

On the left is the Baker College Culinary Institute of Michigan and its new dormitory buildings. At right is the new Blue Water Convention Center, DoubleTree Hotel, and Freighters restaurant.

Since its initial opening in 2011, Baker College has added two student dormitories adjacent to the facility, including a $3.5 million, 40,000-square-foot building in 2015 that houses 48 beds with amazing waterfront views and a second, $2.7 million building in 2016 that houses an additional 35 students.

Old Sperry's New Boutique Movie Theater

Meanwhile, the city was working with private developers from outside the region on redeveloping the old Sperry's building in the heart of downtown, built in 1923. In its heyday, Sperry's was a major player in department store retail. It was an anchor institution in downtown Port Huron for decades. Then, following a similar trajectory as other smaller-town department stores in the new suburban shopping mall boom, the property struggled for a number of years – in part because of the growth of Birchwood Mall and other national retail chains that sprouted up in neighboring Fort Gratiot Township to the north. In 2000, the department store closed and sat vacant for 16 years, minus a two-year stint as a House of Denmark furniture store from 2004 to 2006. In 2009, the city began working with private developers on layering financing for yet another revival. Historic tax credits, brownfield tax increment financing, and a BEDI loan (Brownfields and Economic Development Initiative) from HUD were all in the mix. Initial plans called for mixed use development. There would be lofts, shopping, a restaurant, a coffee shop. And then there wasn't. Time went on and the Sperry's building continued to be a 'what if' or a 'will be.' Something was coming soon. And then soon again...and then a little later.

In 2011, the building was purchased by Brent Marsall, a developer from Canada who owns numerous buildings in downtown Port Huron. In 2014, the building caught the eye of West Michigan businessman Chuck Reid – owner of the CityFlats Hotel chain and the Zeeland-based Charter House Innovations. Initially, Reid planned to develop the Sperry's building into a CityFlats Hotel. He already had CityFlats locations in Grand Rapids and Holland. It wasn't long before Reid turned his attention to the old Michigan National Bank building two blocks south of the Sperry's building as the target location for his new hotel. He had new plans for Sperry's. It would become a boutique movie theater – the first theater in downtown Port Huron since the Huron Theater closed its doors in 1990 to move to the new mall in Fort Gratiot Township.

Photo courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

McLaren Port Huron Hospital is in the midst of a $162 million construction project that will add state-of-the-art services for patients throughout the region.

Sperry's Movie House transformed into a $10 million investment that includes 12 intimate boutique theaters with seating for 400 and a restaurant overlooking Huron Avenue. The theater opened for business in December 2016 with a showing of the *Star Wars: Rogue One* film. The redevelopment of the Sperry's building was a triumph for the city, kept on the tracks by city officials, Chuck Reid, and Scott Beedon, who had worked initially as a broker with all the various developers who had plans for the property along the way. When Chuck Reid came to town, Beedon became the General Manager of the new movie house.

In addition to the theaters and restaurant, the new Sperry's building features *The Underground Business Incubator and Service Center.* The Underground is part of a designated Pure Michigan SmartZone network that collaborates with regional partners and nearby universities. Its purpose is to stimulate the growth of technology based companies and jobs. Launched in 2017, The Underground occupies 5,000 square feet in the basement of the Sperry's Movie House. It offers three primary services to entrepreneurs across St. Clair County: business incubation, co-working, and training programs.[6] The Underground is managed by the Economic Development Alliance (EDA) of St. Clair County and is supported by USDA and MEDC grant funding.

With the Sperry's redevelopment completed, Reid is now working to redevelop the old Michigan National Bank building, which sits along the Black River at the edge of the Military Street drawbridge, into his newest CityFlats Hotel. The $7 million project is slated to begin in December 2017 with an anticipated opening in fall 2018. Plans for the development include 35 hotel rooms, a ballroom, and conference space.

Office Space Downtown

Just across Military Street from the future CityFlats Hotel, Michigan Mutual Inc. has completed a $3.5 million conversion of the former Times Herald newspaper production facility into prime office space for over 200 mortgage company employees. Prior to Michigan Mutual moving in, the Times Herald building had no street side windows. The pre-cast industrial building essentially served as a wall along the main downtown thoroughfare. It was just that – an industrial building in the central business district of a community. As part of the redevelopment, Michigan Mutual opened up the façade by installing huge windows, giving the downtown a breath of fresh air. The building now feels as though it is part of the activity going on in the city and is connected to the buildings across the street.

Huge Hospital Investments

McLaren Port Huron Hospital is also making a huge investment in the city with a $162 million construction project that includes the new Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute, a new patient tower, and other renovations throughout the hospital. The plan calls for an additional 200,000 square feet to be added to the existing

Photo courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

The old Michigan National Bank building along the Black River will be redeveloped into a new CityFlats Hotel. Construction will start this winter.

Photo courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

Upper levels of downtown buildings have been renovated into beautiful lofts and the streetscape has been refreshed through façade improvements.

Photo courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

The Black River Harbor Place on Quay Street was developed by Dave and Georgina Witt and features ten lofts, a penthouse, and five retail stores.

hospital facility and the renovation of another 100,000 square feet. The Karmanos Cancer Institute opened in July 2016, offering residents in the region state-of-the-art cancer services. The new 165,000 square foot, four-story patient tower will house over 70 private rooms, a new emergency center, an observation unit, an expanded intensive care unit, and four new operating rooms.[7]

Community College & Baker College Investments

In April 2016, St. Clair County Community College (SC4) purchased the McMorran Pavilion from the City of Port Huron and renovated the facility into its new fieldhouse, which opened in October 2017. The new 25,000 square foot SC4 Fieldhouse houses a gym with seating for 1,700, a fitness center open to the public and SC4 students, and an indoor running track. It will also become the home of the Port Huron Sports Hall of Fame. In addition to being a state-of-the-art amenity for students and residents, the facility is already proving to be a huge economic development driver that is attracting junior college, high school and youth athletic tournaments.[8]

Like Baker College, SC4 is also expanding options for student housing in downtown Port Huron. In September 2017, the college purchased the former Main Street Lodge and Suites hotel for $550,000 with the intent to renovate the building into a 40-room housing complex for SC4 students. This $2 million investment will provide students the ability to live downtown, within walking distance of the SC4 campus, numerous bars and restaurants, shopping, and entertainment venues that should all see a boost in customers and potential employees. The Community Foundation of St. Clair County is investing $750,000 in the project in the form of a loan.

Explosion of Downtown Loft Development

Students are not the only ones moving into downtown Port Huron these days. The city has seen an explosion of loft development, with 107 lofts already completed and 36 more currently in the works. City officials estimate that each loft contributes $30,000 to the local economy annually. Loft development in the city has been led primarily by local developers Dave and Georgina Witt, who have developed close to 50 lofts in seven buildings and Larry Jones and Brent Marsall of Landmark Port Huron LLC, who have completed 14 lofts in 3 buildings and have another 31 lofts in 6 different buildings planned. It has been a remarkable transformation of abandoned or underutilized second and third story spaces above street level retail in historic buildings throughout downtown. Most of the loft projects in the city have received funding assistance through the MEDC's Community Revitalization Program (CRP), as well as partial financing through federal historic preservation tax credits and grant assistance for environmental assessments through the St. Clair County Brownfield Redevelopment Authority's EPA-funded assessment program.

The Witts also utilized $200,000 in CRP funds to complete the $2 million redevelopment of the 12,000-square-foot Citadel building downtown (built in 1903), which included the Citadel Theater, two retail spaces at street level, and six new lofts up above. The 150-seat theater is being used by Enter Stage Right, a local theater group.

Photo courtesy of Trevor Floyd, St. Clair County GIS.

The old YMCA facility in Port Huron was demolished in 2010, clearing the way for future redevelopment.

Photo source: http://www.bluewaterviewcondos.com/

A conceptual rendering of the new Blue Water View Condos that will be developed at the former YMCA site in downtown Port Huron.

Photos courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

The Blue Water Area Transit Bus Transfer Center opened in 2015.

New Condominium Development

Building off of the massive success of the downtown loft developments, a new high-rise condominium project is planned along the St. Clair River on the site of the former YMCA building. In 2010, the city purchased the property for $200,000 and then spent an additional $335,000 to demolish the building to make the site development ready. The city also owned two vacant lots adjacent to the old YMCA site which were bundled together to be marketed for redevelopment.

The Blue Water View Condos project is an eight-story complex by New York developer Allen Stevens – a Port Huron native – that will house 28 units and represents between $15-20 million of investment. Stevens purchased the bundled property from the city for $950,000 in 2015. Plans call for one and two-bedroom units between 1,600 and 2,500 square feet with great views of the St. Clair River. The project will also feature an indoor pool and underground parking. Construction on this first phase is expected to begin this winter. Once the market is established, Stevens has plans for a second phase which would add a second 12-story tower with about 40 additional units adjacent to the first phase.

New Restaurants & Bars Downtown

Loft development was only one piece of the revitalization puzzle in Port Huron. Another huge piece was the opening of new restaurants and bars downtown. Places such as the Vintage Tavern, Fuel Woodfire Grill, Casey's Pizza and Subs, Lynch's Irish Tavern, and the Raven Cafe are now downtown mainstays. The development of the restaurants created a reason to come back to the downtown. The owners of the restaurants recognized this fact and decided to form a collective in order to work as a group to create awareness of what they had to offer. This reintroduced the downtown to many people that had not been downtown in years. This also helped add to the desirability for the lofts as there were now activities and nightlife to explore in the evening. The recent addition of the Sperry's Movie House, the Citadel Theater, and a refreshed McMorran Place is adding to that activity.

Transit Improvements

With the rejuvenation of downtown, Blue Water Area Transit (BWAT) saw a need to expand and improve its downtown transit operations to better serve the 2,000 riders who board buses downtown every weekday. In 2015, BWAT opened its new $9.8 million bus transfer center between McMorran Boulevard and Grand River Avenue, east of Erie Street.[9] The transfer center received 70% of its funding from federal transit funds, 17.5% from state transit funds, and the rest from BWAT funds. The 7,400 square feet facility includes heated waiting areas, ticket vend-

ing machines, and a convenience store operated by St. Clair County Community Mental Health. Prior to the new bus transfer center, BWAT's downtown transfer area was essentially a row of buses parallel parked along Quay Street, with no real shelter areas for riders waiting for a bus.

Blue Water Area Transit also operates the Blue Water Trolley in conjunction with local area merchants. The trolley takes riders on a one-hour tour around local points of interest in downtown Port Huron and along the St. Clair River, providing great sightseeing opportunities at the Blue Water Bridge, the Thomas Edison Statue and Depot. The tour costs just 10 cents per person – 5 cents for people who are ages 60 and up. It runs each day from June through September and then on Saturdays through mid-October.

New Bike Share Program

In July 2017, the city welcomed a bike share program as a result of a $36,000 public-private partnership that included support from the Blue Water Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, Blue Water Area Transit, Downtown Port Huron, SC4, and the law firm of Fletcher Fealko Shoudy & Francis. The app-based bike share program run by a company called Zagster includes 20 bikes at stations in four locations: the Blue Water Convention Center, SC4, the Community Foundation of St. Clair County, and the Blue Water Transit Bus Transfer Center. The bikes are maintained by Alpine Cycles, a local bike shop.

The bike share program enhances the connectivity of downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods. Moreover, it provides an alternate mode of transportation for people staying at the DoubleTree Hotel for a conference to easily access downtown restaurants, shopping, and other services. There is no shortage of places to ride. The Thomas Edison Parkway lines the St. Clair River shoreline from the Blue Water Bridge, allowing people to safely ride into town – all part of the Bridge to Bay Trail, a 54-mile hike/bike path that runs from Lakeport State Park in Burtchville Township to the north, to Anchor Bay in southern St. Clair County. The St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) continues to work in conjunction with 13 local units of government to fill in missing segments along the trail.

Photo courtesy of Dale Merrill, Blue Water Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The Blue Water River Walk was developed through a public-private partnership spearheaded by the Community Foundation of St. Clair County on land initially donated by philanthropist James Acheson.

Photo courtesy of the St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission.

The St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission received grant funding from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to develop a wetland park at the southern end of the Blue Water River Walk.

New Trails

The Blue Water River Walk is a one-mile stretch of St. Clair River shoreline immediately south of the mouth of the Black River. It is open to the public year-round. The property used to develop the River Walk was donated by James Acheson to the Community Foundation of St. Clair County in 2011. The Community Foundation took that initial donation of land, valued at $1.5 million, and created a public-private partnership to leverage an investment of more than $6 million, which included grants and donations. The Blue Water River Walk features a fully-restored railroad ferry dock that dates back to the early 1900s and is now used as an observation dock. The Foundation also secured Transportation Enhancement Grant funds from MDOT to assist in funding the construction of a 10-foot wide asphalt pedestrian trail along the entire length of the shoreline. At the north end of the River Walk is an outdoor classroom, which is intended to educate the public about the St. Clair River ecosystem. Other amenities at the River Walk include a fishing pier and a variety of public art.

The city has been a driving force behind public art displays around town. The Port Huron Art Initiative was organized in 2010 by then city manager Bruce Brown when he invited a small group of individuals interested in promoting the arts in the City of Port Huron to start the initiative. The committee consists of David Korff, Mino Duffy, Lee Jones, Patti Yunker, and Nicole Hayden. They have successfully raised funds through grants and donations using

City of Port Huron Dept. Planning & Community Development.

One of 20 pieces of the Midwest Sculpture Initiative.

Photo courtesy of the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

A group attending the Michigan Transportation Planning Association (MTPA) conference in Port Huron get ready to paddle the Island Loop National Water Trail in 2015.

local contributors and the Michigan Council of Arts and Cultural Affairs (MCACA), which is part of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. In addition, they have partnered with the Midwest Sculpture initiative to bring a touring art exhibit featured along the Thomas Edison Parkway on the St. Clair River, directly in front of the Blue Water Convention Center and the DoubleTree Hotel.

In 2013, about 4,300 feet of St. Clair River shoreline was restored and rehabilitated with funding assistance from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. The following year, the Foundation completed efforts to restore the shallow water habitat. Upon completion of the shoreline and habitat restoration, roughly 7,000 tons of debris was removed from the site.[10]

Furthering the collaborative nature of the public-private partnership, the St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission used two Michigan Natural Resource Trust Fund grants to acquire 4.85 acres of land and received a $1,039,500 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to develop a 2.75-acre wetland park at the very southern end of the River Walk.

As noted earlier, it has only been recently that the waterfront has been viewed as a destination place itself. After all of the environmental cleanup, the shoreline restoration, and holding a new perspective on placemaking, the water resources in the community are looked at very differently. In 2010, the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission received a $50,000 Coastal Management Program grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality to develop an interactive system of water trails throughout St. Clair County. Over the next year and a half, county planners worked with partners from the Land Information Access Association (LIAA) and the St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission, as well as paddlers and other stakeholders to identify and map paddling routes and public access points along nine different water bodies in St. Clair County. As such, the ***Blueways of St. Clair*** was born – initially a system of 16 water trails countywide (the 17th Blueway was added in June 2017). One of the more popular routes in the system is the Island Loop National Water Trail that meanders through the City of Port Huron, Port Huron Township, and Fort Gratiot Township. The 10.2-mile run offers four options for paddling that can take between two and four hours to finish. The Island Loop runs along four different water bodies: the Black River, the Black River Canal, Lake Huron, and the St. Clair River. In 2013, the Island Loop became the 12th national water trail in the nation and the first designated in Michigan.[11]

All of these development activities and public-private investments have come about due to collaboration in the city and the region. Dan Casey has been the CEO of the Economic Development Alliance (EDA) of St. Clair County since 2011. As Casey notes,

"Collaboration has become the key transformer in the city. Outside investment has been critical too. In some cases, these investors have seen greater opportunity here than residents. I think sometimes we get used to our environment and lose sight of what it has to offer. It's on the leadership in the city to build off of our recent successes, to make the change sustainable, and to stay focused on collaboration and communication. The energy of the city is

Photo courtesy of Frank E. Quinlan

Downtown Port Huron is alive once again. Military Street/Huron Avenue is consistently lined with cars and draws people in to dine, shop, and have fun.

different today. There's a vibrancy and collective enthusiasm for the positive changes that are occurring. What's interesting is that our collaboration has drowned out the doubters and demonstrated that no one person or organization is solely responsible for our economic future."

Looking Toward the Future

As outlined in the previous pages, the city is in somewhat unchartered waters as it is riding a wave of momentum it has not previously experienced. The 'snowball' that gathered speed with the redevelopment of the Thomas Edison Inn into the Blue Water Convention Center and Hilton DoubleTree complex is still rolling. The collaboration that began with the formation of the *Blue Meets Green* group is stronger than ever throughout Port Huron and the region. As such, the city and its partners will continue to look for ways to capitalize on opportunities that will enrich the quality of life in Port Huron. The three pillars of *people, place, and prosperity* permeates every planning effort in the community these days, which helps create a path of least resistance for new development and ideas for improving the community.

There are still key properties in downtown Port Huron that are waiting to latch on to that snowball of momentum. The old Art Van building on Grand River Avenue, adjacent to the St. Clair County Administration Building, is a property very much on the radar of the Blue Meets Green group and city and county officials. While there have been prospective developers and concepts for the site, nothing has come to fruition.

In August 2017, the iconic Harrington Inn announced it would be closing within a month. The Harrington Inn is an historic landmark situated in the heart of Port Huron that originally opened in 1896 as a four-star hotel and is an established building marking Port Huron's history. The building was renovated in 1988 and converted to a non-licensed assisted living facility which provided assistance for seniors and adults with or without disabilities. The building consists of 68 units on five floors with a full commercial kitchen and dining area. The building presents an opportunity for future residential living that could include continuation as apartments or being redeveloped into a hotel and thus returning it to its former glory.

Like many communities, Port Huron has always been concerned with availability of parking and has commissioned its share of parking studies over the years in order to review the demand, availability and location of its municipal parking lots. The conclusion of these studies has been that the issue is not with the lack of parking, but rather how parking areas are being utilized and the willingness of patrons to walk to where they want to go. This issue is magnified now with all of the new loft residents, SC4 students and new bars, restaurants, and entertainment options. To the question of utilization, the city now is implementing a parking plan. This plan will designate certain areas of parking that will be reserved for each of the three main customer segments. It would include a permit-parking area for employees and loft residents with the closest parking availability being reserved for customers of local businesses.

Improving the city's infrastructure and diversifying the economy will also be critical for quality of life and economic development – especially as the world changes so quickly around us. According to Dan Casey of the EDA of St. Clair County,

> *"The city will have to embrace an emerging economy and infrastructure around autonomous vehicles and integrated communications networks. Smart cities promise to reshape our downtowns, transportation corridors, and even the way we plan for development."*

Neighborhoods will continue to be a central focus of city planning efforts. The residential neighborhoods in Port Huron comprise 70% of the taxable value for the community and contribute to the sustainability of downtown. City officials feel the next area of growth for the community will be in the neighborhoods surrounding downtown Port Huron, as some of those who live in the downtown will at some point take the next step in their lives by looking at detached housing. The city is currently in the process of acquiring properties and rehabbing homes in multiple neighborhoods, with an initial focus on those closest to the downtown. The Port Huron Neighborhood Housing Corporation serves as the entity for the purchase and rehabilitation of these properties for first-time home buyers. Officials are also investigating other tools such as the use of a Neighborhood Enterprise Zone and facade grant programs to provide further incentives to locate in these areas.

Improving the neighborhoods in Port Huron and in St. Clair County is critical to attracting talent and companies to the area. As Randy Maiers of the Community Foundation of St. Clair County notes, *"The awesome transformation of Detroit has created a talent magnet. People are flocking to Detroit to be a part of that buzz and excitement. Regions like ours need to create our own attractive identity to lure talent here."* Maiers believes that in the next five to ten years, the city will see *"a greater culture of entrepreneurship, further maximizing both our close proximity to Metro Detroit and our small town, waterfront appeal. This will make us a destination in Southeast Michigan."*

Going forward, collaboration will continue to be the driver behind future planning and economic development efforts in the city and the larger region. The importance of the Blue Meets Green group and the collaborative relationships and teamwork that have permeated the local governments, nonprofit organizations, and the business community in the Port Huron region cannot be understated. In June 2017, when SC4 was working to secure state funding to renovate its A.J. Theisen Building on campus to consolidate its allied health programs, the membership of Blue Meets Green pulled together over 40 letters of support in a matter of a day to boost the college's request. The state ultimately provided $4.9 million toward the $9.8 million project.

One of the key takeaways from this new collaborative environment is that *"your community is not the only entity to face that challenge,"* notes Kim Harmer, the retired city planning director. With Blue Meets Green, everyone is in it for the greater good. Municipal leaders communicate now more than ever, meeting regularly and sharing ideas and lessons learned. Port Huron and St. Clair County will continue to benefit from a shared vision and engaged leaders from throughout the region who are all heading in the same direction putting in the work, sharing responsibility, and celebrating success with each new project, wherever it may happen.

FOOTNOTES

1. Blue Meets Green http://www.edascc.com/about-us/news/blue-meets-green-announces-new-regional-priorities
2. 2002 Master Plan http://www.porthuron.org/pdfs/planning_rental_insp/Port%20Huron%20Plan.pdf
3. 2017 Master Plan Update http://www.porthuron.org/MasterPlan.pdf
4. Blue Water Convention Center https://www.bluewaterconventioncenter.com/
5. Baker College Culinary Institute https://www.baker.edu/academics/affiliated-institutions/culinary-institute-of-michigan/facilities/port-huron-campus
6. The Underground http://www.startunderground.com/our-story.html
7. McLaren Construction http://www.mclaren.org/porthuron/mclaren-construction-facts.aspx
8. SC4 Fieldhouse https://www.sc4.edu/campus-life/sc4-fieldhouse/
9. Blue Water Transit Transfer Center http://bwbus.com/downtown-transfer-center/
10. Blue Water River Walk www.stclairfoundation.org/riverwalk
11. Blueways of St. Clair http://www.bluewaysofstclair.org/ ❑