

Charter Township of Highland Planning Commission

**Micro-Area Analysis**  
Historic Highland Station Area  
(centered upon Milford Road and Livingston Road)

INTRODUCTION

Highland Township can trace its roots to the commercial activity that developed around the railroad stop at Livingston Road, just east of Milford Road. A thriving community emerged, with a vibrant economy based on grain mills, lumber and the pickle factories. Reminders of that by-gone era are evident today in the buildings—the Highland Feed Store, old dance hall, and hotel. Graceful old church buildings have been converted to other uses—including a daycare center on Milford Road and the former home of the Township Library on Livingston Road (planned for conversion to other civic/social uses such as an expansion of the Senior Center).

Part of the charm of the area is the proximity to the Highland Recreation Area. Driving east on Livingston Road, one is lost to the natural beauty of woods and wetlands.

This area is also blessed with publicly owned open space around the Highland Elementary and Highland Middle Schools, as well as the current home of the Township Offices and Senior Center. And not far north of this area, a new Township Library rests on the tree-lined shore of Downey Lake. The Township hopes one day to develop a municipal complex at the site.

The Highland Station area also includes many single family homes in platted lots, with typical lot sizes of about 66 feet by 132 feet (about 4 homes per acre). Some houses have already been converted to office and retail uses.

Groups working on planning projects in this area (including the Beautification Committee, Land Development Committee, Parks and Recreation Committee, Planning Commission and Downtown Development Authority) have repeatedly upheld values of historic preservation and enhancement, and promotion of “depot-style” design elements on a residential and pedestrian scale.

Highland Township is focusing attention on this area in hopes of generating interest in private investment in the area, and creating a lively, inviting, identifiable community core. It is the intent of this micro-area analysis to review the current land use plan for this area in greater detail and consider what amendments would be appropriate to the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and Zoning District Maps. This micro-area analysis will also consider new land-use regulation tools needed to promote and implement the vision expressed in this plan.

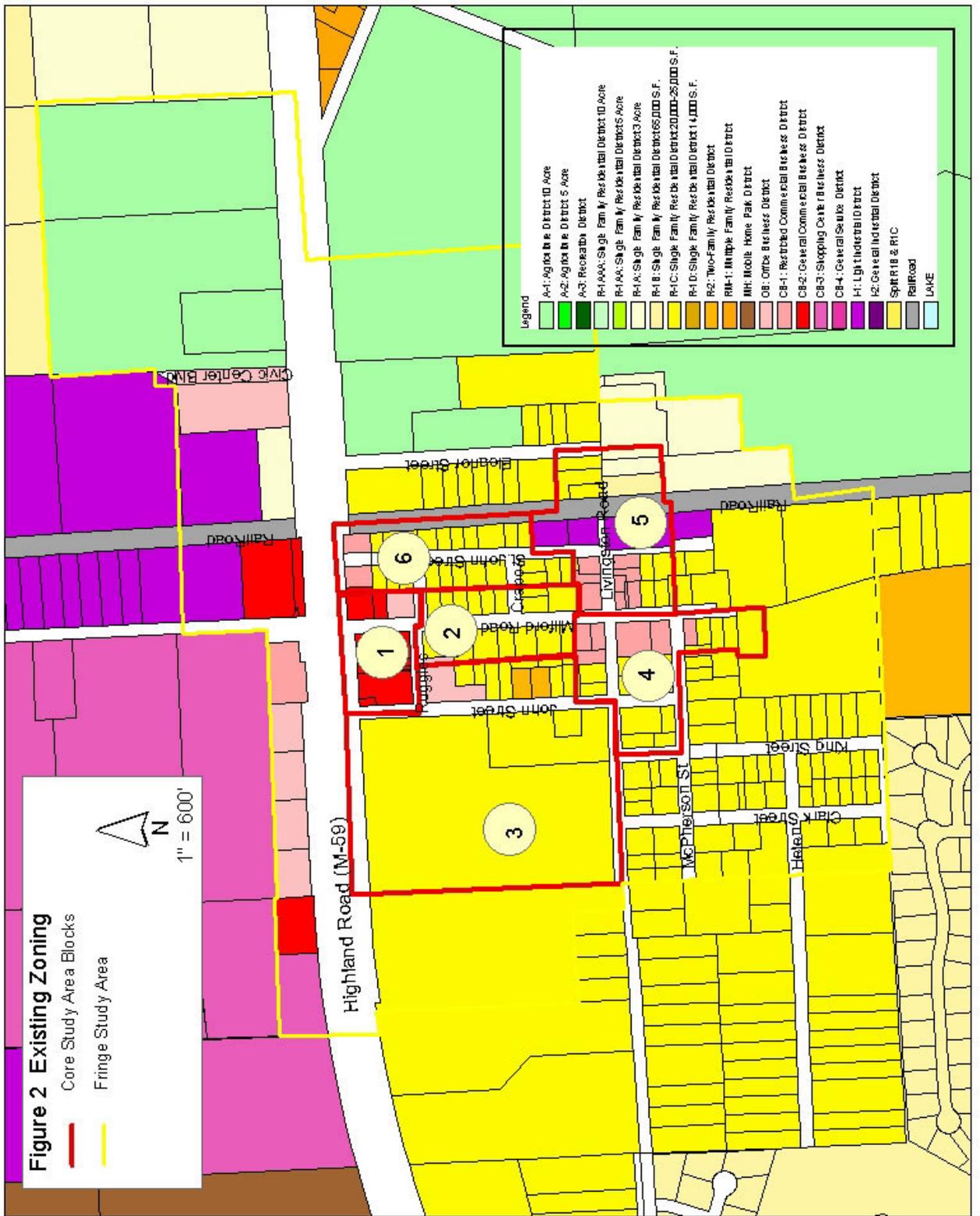
#### DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREA

The study area is roughly bounded by Highland Road (M-59) on the north, Downey Lake on the east, Highland Middle School and Elementary School on the west and McPherson Street on the south. Figure 1 delineates the boundaries of the core area and fringe areas for this analysis. Figure 2 identifies current zoning classifications for the core area. Figure 3 identifies the existing comprehensive land use designations for the core area.

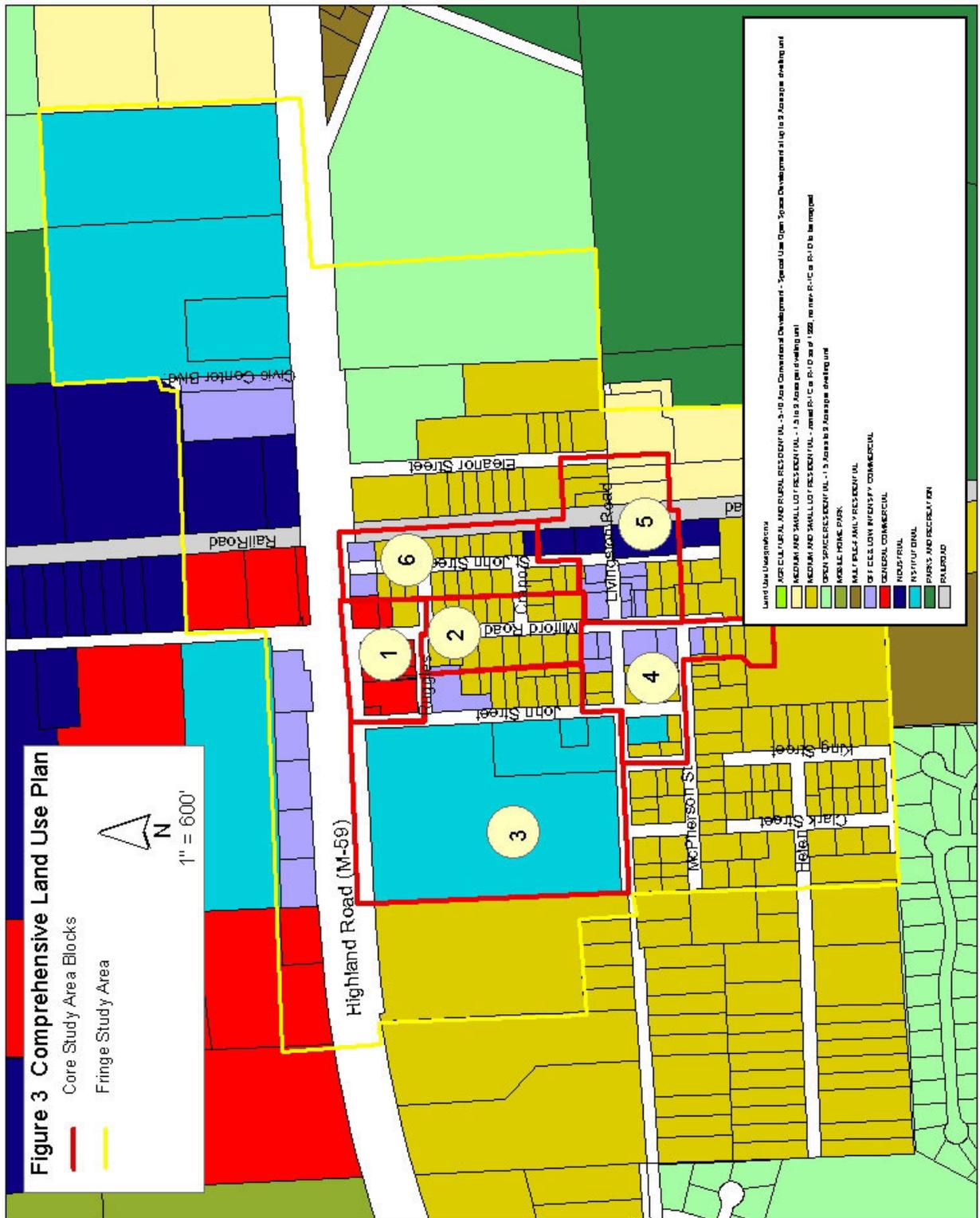
Major streets within the study area include Highland Road (M-59), which provides an east-west corridor for travel between US-23 and much of Oakland County. Milford Road is a significant north-south road, identified in the West Oakland Corridor Study (2002) as one of four major routes linking I-96 with M-59. Livingston Road is a “mile road”, which mostly provides for the needs of local traffic.



Note: Figures are not to stated scale



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The core study area has been divided into six subarea “blocks”, which group parcels with similar characteristics such as street frontage, existing land use, parcel size, and architectural style.

Block 1 includes parcels fronting M-59, Milford Road, John Street and Ruggles Street. Existing land uses on the west side of Milford Road include the Highland Lumber Company, a number of smaller retail ventures, including auto parts, cigar shop and bicycle shop and two small residential properties. The buildings facing M-59 have little or no setback from the right-of-way line, and currently utilize the right-of-way to provide parking for customers. On the east side of Milford Road, land uses include a gas station/convenience store and daycare center in a historic church building.

Block 2 includes parcels fronting Milford Road. These properties are primarily homesites on small parcels (typically 66 feet by 132 feet).

Block 3 includes primarily parcels fronting John Street, including the Highland Middle School, Highland Elementary School, Township Offices and Senior Center, Oakland County Sheriff substation and Highland Township Fire Hall on the west side of the street. On the east side of John Street there are five single family residential homesites and the Huron Valley Schools Credit Union.

Block 4 includes primarily parcels fronting Livingston Street, west of Milford Road. While there are still a number of residential homesites on both sides of the street, this block also includes a National Historic Registry Landmark Building (formerly the Episcopal/Methodist Church), planned for use as a civic/social center. Those parcels within this block that front Milford Road are primarily used as commercial sites, including Highlander House—a former single family house partitioned into a number of business spaces.

Block 5 includes primarily parcels fronting Livingston Street, east of Milford Road. Few parcels in this block are still used as homesites, except for the parcels east of the railroad tracks. Land uses include office space, a tack shop, plumbing contractor’s office and supply yard, a feed store in the historic hotel building and an auto repair facility.

Block 6 includes single family homesites fronting St. John Street.

Appendix A includes a listing of all parcels within the core study area, as well as the parcel size, current land use, and existing setbacks.

#### GENERAL TOWNSHIP PLANNING OBJECTIVES AS APPLIED TO STUDY AREA

The Comprehensive Land Use Plan for Highland Township describes a number of planning objectives, aimed at preserving “rural character” and open space, promoting responsible stewardship of our natural resources, and concentrating commercial activity within existing activity centers. The objectives for commercial land use are meant to strengthen the commercial sector and tax base, while promoting convenience for residents, effectively managing traffic issues and guarding against “sprawling” patterns of strip development.

Revitalization and redevelopment of the Highland Station Area would further these objectives while providing unique opportunities to offer a pedestrian oriented, “walkable” environment where residential and commercial uses can coexist and support each other. A pedestrian network should provide linkages to Prestwick Village and other established neighborhoods outside the core area. Similarly, multi-purpose pathways should provide linkages to planned bikeways along M-59 and possibly to the Highland State Recreation Area to promote bicycle and equestrian traffic into and from the Highland Station Area.

Another specific objective identified for commercial land use is to improve the visual image of existing commercial areas. Highland Station is a central location within the Township, and should offer an inviting image of the community through the mix of land uses, scale of development, streetscape features, park and other public space amenities, and architectural flavor.

Careful consideration of the type and scale of development might also attenuate traffic concerns related to the prominence of Milford Road as a major north/south route between M-59 and I-96.

## MASTER LAND USE PLAN FOR HIGHLAND STATION

Highland Station is envisioned as a “Small Town Center”, integrating commercial, residential and public land uses to create a sense of place and foster a community identity. The existing land use patterns in Highland Station evolved based largely on community need and opportunity, rather than more modern concepts of relegating different land uses to separate and sometimes isolated zoning districts based on judgments of “incompatibility”.

The vision for Highland Station is to attract a diverse population of residents, businesses and shoppers to this “Small Town Center” to interact with each other and involve themselves in a vibrant community life. This will require a more flexible approach to land use planning based on key principles and objectives identified by participants in this planning process:

- Provide for a mix of uses within the Highland Station Area, including a mix of residential and office/commercial uses within the same building
- Provide for a mix of housing types, costs and ownership opportunities
- Encourage adaptive reuse of historic buildings and houses
- Promote site design that encourages greater pedestrian traffic, and reinforces pedestrian safety, comfort and convenience
- Provide pathways for pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians with linkages to neighborhoods and developments outside the core area of Highland Station
- Recognize the need to create a “critical mass” of uses to establish the Highland Station area as a destination
- Provide opportunities for greater community involvement, such as art fairs, merchant sidewalk sales and other civic events
- Provide appropriate public investments in infrastructure improvements to encourage greater private investment and to promote public-private partnerships
- Allow for the flexibility to respond to new opportunities as they arise

These “Small Town Center” objectives would be achieved through an evolution of land use as follows:

Block 1 is envisioned as a more intensely developed commercial center, with all existing residential use eventually replaced with commercial activity. Buildings would front M-59, with minimal setbacks to accommodate pedestrian pathways, canopies or covered entrances. Vehicle access to parking would be from Ruggles and John Streets.

The Township would maintain a landscaped park adjacent to the MDOT-owned clear vision triangle on the southwest corner of M-59 and Milford Road. This space would accommodate a lighted community evergreen during the winter holiday season, and could provide a small gathering space for some community events.

Block 2 is a transitional zone, where existing houses would be converted to home occupied businesses such as professional services offices, small retail shops, and other businesses that are typically low traffic generators. Parking would be provided in rear yards, with shared driveways and parking lots encouraged to limit the number of access points to Milford Road.

Where existing housing stock cannot be readily adapted to new uses, new buildings would observe setbacks and bulk regulations based on study of adjacent parcels. Front yards would be landscaped, possibly with small inviting courtyards adjacent to the sidewalk. Streetscape elements along Milford Road would be designed to provide a sense of separation between the pedestrian and vehicle traffic—including a low decorative wall, shrubs or other similar barrier.

Most of the area in Block 3 is currently committed to public land use, including Highland Middle and Highland Elementary Schools and the Township Complex. The Township plans to construct new administrative offices in the “fringe area” adjacent to the Township Library and U.S. Post Office on the north side of M-59, west of Downey Lake. The long-term plan for this “Civic Center” also includes a new home for the Highland Senior Center, which currently occupies space attached to the Township Hall. There are no current plans to relocate the Fire Hall, Oakland County Sheriff substation or Veteran’s Park.

The area vacated by the Township would be converted to office space and meeting space, possibly for fire officials or the Sheriff's Department. Residential uses on the east side of John Street would also eventually be replaced by office land use.

Currently, through a cooperative arrangement with the schools, this area provides parking for community events, such as the annual "Hi-White parade." Similarly, this area might continue to provide parking and space for expanded community offerings, such as merchant "sidewalk sales", art festivals or other civic events meant to promote downtown businesses.

Block 4 is already undergoing a slow conversion to commercial land use, particularly those buildings with frontage on Milford Road. It is expected that these existing homes might be adapted to low intensity commercial use, such as artist's galleries, craft shops and similar uses, following the model of "Highlander House" on the southwest corner of Milford and Livingston Roads.

Block 5 provides potential for creating a "mainstreet" experience. Land uses would include commercial and office space, with loft apartments, as well as restaurants and other entertainment uses. The merchants would share planned parking areas, and would maintain public amenities such as gazebos, information kiosks and possibly a "landmark" monument such as a statue, fountain or clock-tower.

The Highland Downtown Development Group, an organization of property owners and investors with interest in the properties on Livingston Road, between Milford Road and the railroad tracks, have presented a design concept as a case study for Planning Commission consideration. Their design includes pedestrian-scale site design and architectural elements reminiscent of Highland's past. Design materials prepared by this group are included in Appendix B.

Block 6 would also be a transitional block, supporting a mixture of single-family homes and unobtrusive owner-occupied home businesses that do not typically generate customer traffic or require heavy deliveries. These would be businesses with no more than one outside

employee, with little or no need for on-street parking or parking areas other than typical residential driveways.

## TOOLS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

### ***Zoning Regulations and Design Guidelines***

The Planning Commission recognizes that while the current Zoning Ordinance is well-suited to promoting the orderly and efficient development of most areas of the Township, especially large vacant parcels, a different approach is needed to facilitate redevelopment of the Highland Station Area.

The Highland Township Comprehensive Land Use Plan includes a detailed discussion of regulatory techniques, including Planned Unit Development techniques. The community hopes to encourage assemblage of small lots, or cooperative planning efforts between adjacent property owners, in order to promote integrated developments. Such techniques may include relaxed development controls such as setbacks, mixed land uses and density. Shared parking and access agreements would be encouraged.

For smaller lots that are developed on a parcel by parcel basis, it would be prudent to develop a “Small Town Center” District to include all parcels in the core area, with its own standards based in large upon the setbacks, coverage and other features exhibited by the parcels as they are currently developed. Different parking standards will be required that recognize the synergy of neighboring uses, and hourly variations in parking demand of different businesses.

New sign regulations would apply in order to encourage use of smaller signs that respect the architectural intent and integrity of the area, perhaps reminiscent of the old “shingle” hanging from the porch or fencepost. Community sponsored “way-finding” signage at key intersections or entry points would promote uniform signage and identity of the area.

New standards are required to accommodate home occupations, loft apartments and other mixed land use considerations.

The preferred approach is to draft an ordinance with very clear intent and purpose statements, but with greater flexibility for the Planning Commission in determining whether the intent has been met with the proposed site design. The Planning Commission may consider a performance-based ordinance, which rewards a developer for advancing Township Planning objectives. A pictorial design guidebook would be developed to show the best examples of site design and architecture within the community, and to otherwise communicate the community's vision with pictures and sketches.

### ***Public-Private Investment in Infrastructure Improvements***

When asked to identify constraints that currently limit development and redevelopment potential of the Highland Station area, the nearly uniform response is “lack of sanitary sewer service”. Oakland County Health Division guidelines limit the density of development for properties served by onsite sewage disposal systems as a means of protecting the groundwater aquifers that supply drinking water for all residents. The result of these limitations is that the land requirements needed to support a high-intensity water user such as a full-service restaurant are burdensome, especially in areas where parcel sizes are historically small, such as Highland Station.

The Township has developed a public water supply system, and the Water System Master Plan calls for transmission mains to be extended to serve the Highland Station Area. Water main is currently available within one half mile of the study area at Avanti Drive, and is expected to be extended slightly north through a project financed through a Special Assessment District in 2003.

A second constraint is managing storm water issues. There are no natural watercourses providing drainage outlets for much of the study area. The storm sewer systems that are in place were not designed to carry significant storm events. Any runoff that is not handled by infiltration to the soils, tends to drain towards the southeast to the railroad tracks.

Yet another consideration is traffic volumes on Milford Road. This road was identified as a major north/south corridor connecting I-96 and M-59 for the West Oakland Corridor Study (WOCS). Although Milford Road was originally proposed as one of several potential routes

for a major state trunkline, WOCS steering committee members expressed many concerns about the impact such a designation would have on the character of the community and local control over land use, particularly if major improvements diverted more traffic to this corridor.

Ultimately, the study effort was redirected to consider capacity and safety improvements across a wide number of north/south routes. The recommendation is that Milford Road would be improved to a three lane cross section throughout the Highland Station area. Three other major north/south routes and several east/west routes would also be improved. Given these improvements, the study projects adequate levels of service for the projected 2025 traffic forecast, which includes approximately 30 percent increase in trips over 2000 levels.

The study conclusions rely on the communities to implement several land use recommendations, which are generally consistent with the goals and objectives of this micro-area analysis. Relevant excerpts from the final study report are included as Appendix C.

Although much of Milford Road is currently three-lane section throughout the study area, there are still segments that must be widened, as well as capacity improvements at the Milford/Livingston Road intersection that should be implemented as part of any significant redevelopment effort at that location. Future designs for streets and streetscape improvements should incorporate appropriate traffic calming features, as well as elements to separate pedestrian traffic from vehicle traffic. These include such measures as pedestrian islands at intersections, use of brick pavers at crosswalks, and signal timing strategies that slow traffic in the study area.

The Township is committed to expanding the recreational pathway and provide pedestrian linkages wherever possible. Planned improvements include pathways along M-59, which are to be built in 2003 with TEA-21 grant funding (with a Township match through Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds). The Township is also working with adjacent communities in Milford Township, Village of Milford and White Lake Township to plan for a multi-jurisdictional pathway between Kensington MetroPark, the Highland Recreation Area and Indian Springs Recreation Area. The Township will pursue other grant funding

opportunities, such as those available from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and the Southeast Michigan Community Foundation. See Figure 4 for a plan of proposed pedestrian paths in the study area.

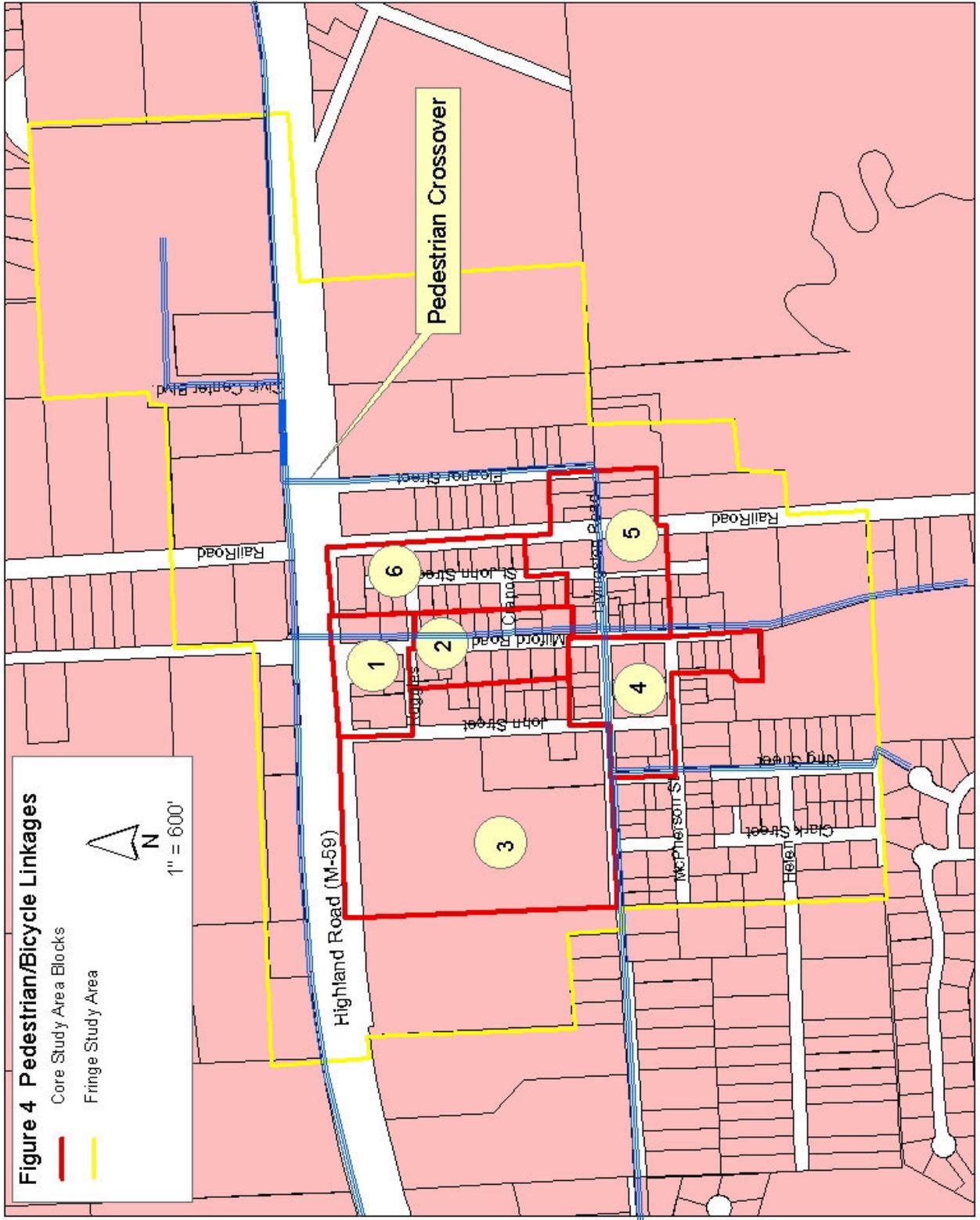
Existing overhead utilities are also identified as a limiting factor in achieving the environment envisioned for the Highland Station area. DDA Board members have explored the costs of relocating these utilities underground and have found the costs to be staggering.

It is recommended that the Township undertake a feasibility study to identify and prioritize infrastructure improvements to address these issues. Historically, the costs of infrastructure improvements have been borne by the benefiting properties through Special Assessment Districts. The Township has used its resources, whenever possible, to study and plan for such projects, and to pursue other funding sources where available.

#### ***“Downtown” Management Opportunities***

The Highland Station core area, with the exception of the tax-exempt property owned by the Huron Valley School District and Highland Township, is contained within the Downtown Development Area, established by the Board of Trustees in October 2000. This area is subject to Tax Increment Financing (TIF), which provides funding for activities of the Downtown Development Authority Board (DDA). Oakland County has opted out of the TIF capture, which limits the available funding through the TIF source, and has therefore limited the scope of projects the DDA Board can assume at this time.

One of the DDA Board’s early accomplishments was establishment of a lighting standard for the Highland Station era that included Victorian-era style scrollwork with a wide round reflector, reminiscent of an old depot. The DDA Board has also incorporated the “railroad theme” into its logo for use on future promotional materials for the Highland Station area. The DDA Board’s management of a lighting program to facilitate use of this light standard in the Highland Station area is also expected to generate funding for DDA projects in the Downtown Development District.



Note: Figures are not to stated scale

The DDA Board has also taken up the challenge of organizing the annual “Sparks in the Park” day to raise money and to raise awareness of the opportunities in the DDA District. The DDA Board has discussed other possibilities for community events located in and around the Highland Station Area.

Long-term goals for the DDA Board include providing the resources to manage economic development projects and to organize and promote business within the entire DDA district, especially in the Highland Station area. The DDA Board hopes to encourage private investment in the Highland Station Area by developing mini-grant programs to update facades, improve signage and facilitate other site improvements.

APPENDIX A

PARCELS IN CORE AREA AND  
PARCEL CHARACTERISTICS

APPENDIX B

HIGHLAND DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT GROUP  
CORRESPONDENCE AND DESIGN GUIDELINES

APPENDIX C

EXCERPTS

WEST OAKLAND CORRIDOR STUDY

APPENDIX D

CORRESPONDENCE

OAKLAND COUNTY PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SERVICES