URBAN COLLABORATORS
Resource Guide Series

Community Assessment Guide
Collecting the Data
(part 2)

The Urban Collaborators is a group of MSU Extension educators and the School of Planning, Design, and Construction faculty whose goal is to help revitalize Michigan's urban cities by linking research, outreach, and learning. The group helps bring MSU resources to local communities through MSU Extension in eight targeted cities: Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, Jackson, Lansing, Pontiac, Saginaw, and Ypsilanti.

The Urban Collaborators' Resource Guides are a series of bulletins on single topics related to community development and urban planning. These Resource Guides are the result of the successful linkages between research, outreach, and learning that the Urban Collaborators strive for. The Resource Guides provide practical techniques for citizen planners, community activists, and field educators to implement within their own communities. The guides are grounded in research and their practices have been tested in other communities to ensure that they are practical and accurate.

Each year, small teams of students are assigned to work in Michigan's communities for one semester on revitalization projects. The students carry out planning-related studies for community partners ranging from neighborhood associations to municipal governments. In this way, MSU faculty transfer the knowledge they've gained through research to students; students implement the practice through an outreach project in a community; communities gain valuable and practical technical assistance and resources; and students, faculty, and community representatives all learn through a collaborative process. These Resource Guides capture this process and transfer out the lessons learned so that other communities and local organizations can build their capacity to address their own community needs.

Urban Collaborators' Goals

✦ Implement key initiatives that enhance the linkage of research and outreach resources of the University with the community development needs of seven target cities.
✦ Provide substantive support for MSU Extension educators, community and economic development.
✦ Contribute to and learn from community development assignments in urban communities.
✦ Engage communities and scholars in ways that translate into new knowledge.
✦ Build the capacity of local organizations to address urban issues.

Teaching and Learning
Practice and Outreach
Research

Community Assessment Guide
Collecting the Data

What is a Community Assessment?

Community assessment is a process of gathering, analyzing, and reporting information about the needs of a community and the resources that are currently available in it to address those needs. Community assessment is a collaborative process that prioritizes needs, identifies resources, and guides decision-making.

A community assessment begins by convening a group of citizens around a community-wide need, creating a vision, and prioritizing the issues that require change. It is designed to allow those affected by change an opportunity to work alongside professionals and experts to inform them of community needs and also to guide how the change occurs. **Community assessment is a useful tool to gain a clear picture of what a community looks like now and what it could look like in the future.** Working through the community assessment process results in a plan to transform a community.

How is a Community Assessment Conducted?

While the steps involved in conducting a community assessment will vary depending on the community and the issues involved, there are several standard methods to reach the desired outcome.

This Resource Guide will focus on steps 4–6 of the community assessment process. The first three steps are covered in the *Community Assessment Guide: Creating a Vision (part 1)*. Steps 7–9 are discussed briefly below.

Because the process that developed the data for the community assessment was collaborative, it is imperative to report the findings back to the stakeholders. Holding public meetings to report findings, providing summary documents to interested persons, and inviting stakeholders to further visioning and planning meetings are critical.

Lastly, take time to celebrate. Completing a community assessment can be a long and intense process. Celebrate its completion, the work that was accomplished, and the cohesiveness of a community that has gone through an assessment. It is worth taking time to celebrate a community that cares about, is engaged in, and is willing to invest in its future. This will also give stakeholders rest before the next phase of work is started.

A community assessment can be either the means to an end or an iterative process; either way it is used to create a plan of action to take a community to its desired goal. As an end, the results of an assessment can be used to inform other planning initiatives such as master plan or comprehensive development updates or the creation of new plans such as a recreation or corridor development plans. As a means, the community assessment process can be repeated until the desired vision is attained.

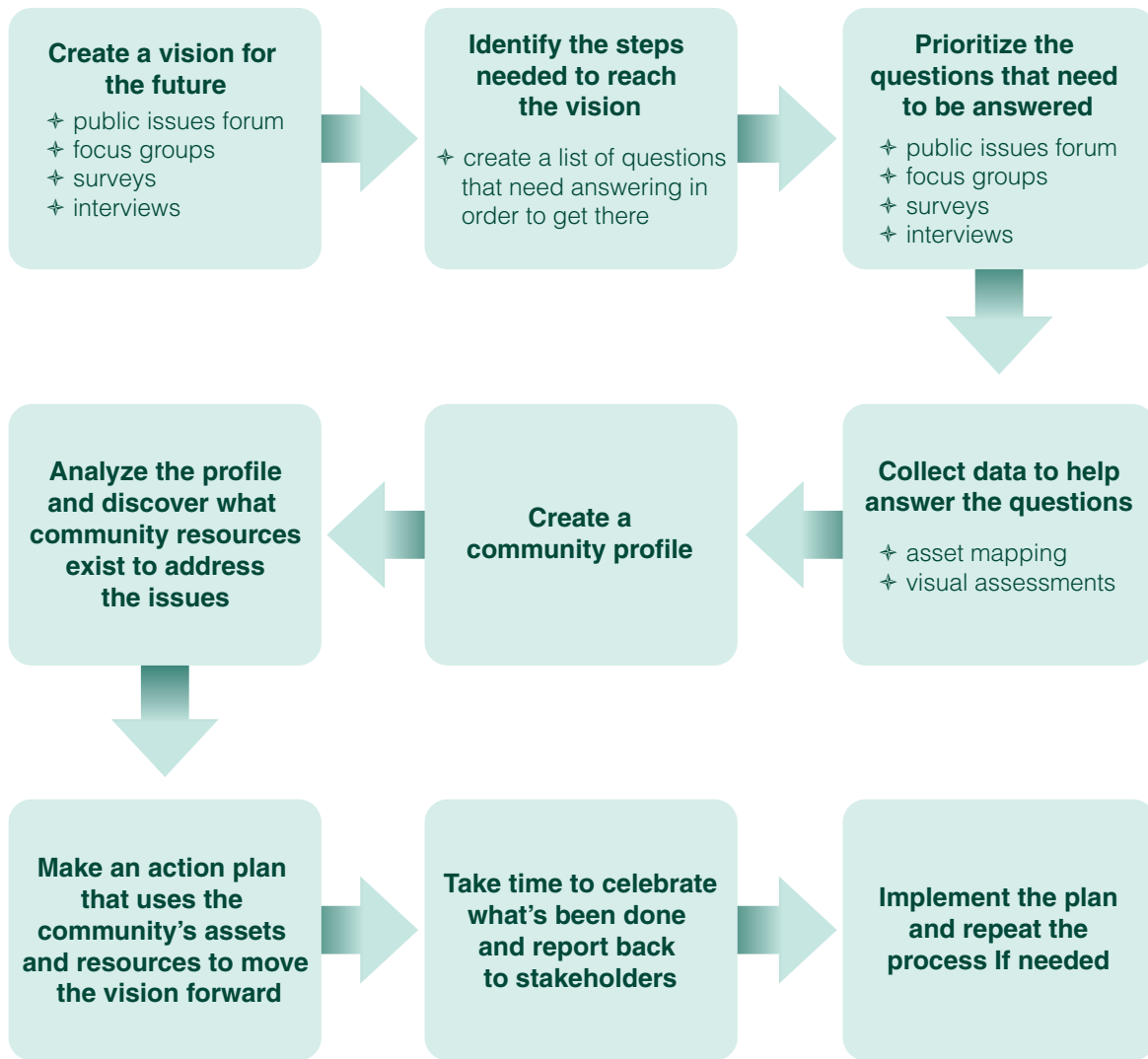---

Successful Community Assessments...

- ✦ provide comprehensive, usable, and accurate information for decision-making
- ✦ assess the current situation
- ✦ identify current capacities, strengths, and resources of the community
- ✦ discover a vision of the future
- ✦ allow questions to drive the information gathering process
- ✦ address issues that stakeholders perceive as important
- ✦ lead to the change desired by stakeholders
- ✦ communicates the information gathered back to stakeholders
- ✦ involve stakeholders in the planning process

Why Should a Community Assessment be Conducted?

While there are several reasons to conduct a community assessment, **its primary purpose is to provide community information and data for collaborative decision-making**. It can provide a snapshot in time of a community to evaluate past planning efforts and/or create a new vision and plan for the future. Community assessments can also provide generalized and unbiased information for planning purposes or raise awareness of a community issue. In addition, many funders may require a community assessment to document and justify the community's needs and resources before they consider providing funding to implement a plan.

Create a vision for the future		Identify the steps needed to reach the vision		Prioritize the questions that need to be answered
✦ public issues forum ✦ focus groups ✦ surveys ✦ interviews	→	✦ create a list of questions that need answering in order to get there	→	✦ public issues forum ✦ focus groups ✦ surveys ✦ interviews

Analyze the profile and discover what community resources exist to address the issues		Create a community profile		Collect data to help answer the questions
	←		←	✦ asset mapping ✦ visual assessments

Make an action plan that uses the community's assets and resources to move the vision forward		Take time to celebrate what's been done and report back to stakeholders		Implement the plan and repeat the process If needed

Collecting Data to Answer Questions

The first steps in a community assessment develop a vision of what stakeholders want their community to look like. There are many techniques that can be used to create a community vision including these four typically used methods, which are described in *Community Assessment Guide: Creating a Vision (part 1)*:

- Focus Groups
- Interviews
- Public Meetings or Public Issues Forums
- Surveys

Collecting information through these tools is called *primary data collection*, and is essential to understanding what a community desires for its future. This is the foundation of a community assessment.

Once stakeholders have established a vision, information about the community must be collected to help answer the questions that will help a community reach its vision. Collecting the data for a community assessment results in the creation of a *community profile*. A community profile is a snapshot in time of a community. It helps stakeholders discover and understand what strengths a community possesses now in order to reach its vision for the future.

Creating the community profile by collecting data provides precise and unbiased information about the community. Data collection should be a thorough, detailed, and extensive exercise. There are many techniques that can be used to create a community profile. This guide

will present two typically used methods, which can be used together or separately:

1. Secondary Data Collection/Creating a Socio-Economic Profile
2. Visually Assessing a Community

While gathering a complete inventory of secondary data may be desirable, the level of detail needed to inform the community assessment process may not require a *complete* inventory of community conditions. Rather, a thorough, cost-effective, and standardized visual assessment of the community may be all that is needed. Both methods are time intensive. Secondary data collection provides unbiased figures about a community. Secondary data are seen through the lens of its population. Visual assessments do allow for biases, and the resulting data are seen through the lens of the built environment. The needs of the community assessment should drive which method is used.

To ensure that an accurate picture of the entire community is created, the information gathered should represent the whole community, not a small section. Therefore, sample sizes are essential to projecting the correct picture of a community. In addition, many types of information are required to create the profile and include such topics as socio-economic, demographic, and housing stock information.

What follows is not an exhaustive list of how to prepare for, conduct, and analyze information gleaned from these techniques, but rather are key points that will help determine how the method will be conducted, identify what is needed to conduct it, and consider the resources available. With these two profiles in hand, community leaders can understand current issues, anticipate future challenges, and identify the community's assets in addressing both.

Community Assessment Guide

Collecting Secondary Data and
Creating the Socio-Economic Profile

COLLECTING SECONDARY DATA AND CREATING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE

> *"The more you know about the past the better prepared are you for the future."*
>
> —Theodore Roosevelt

Secondary data are information about a community that has already been researched and collected. Collecting secondary data requires knowing where to find it, how to mine it, how it was collected, and how to use it. Using secondary data is an efficient means of collecting information about a community because it is typically easy to access, saves time and money, and avoids potential problems associated with primary data collection processes.

It is important to take into account a few factors when considering whether or not to use secondary data to create the community profile.

- Ensure that the representative sample is accurate, correct, and represents the community that is being researched.
- Confirm the sources of the data and only use data from reliable sources. Reliable sources of data are those whose work and results can be replicated accurately.
- Understand how the data were collected. This will help unearth any biased data. If biased data are used, the assumptions (or biases) and reasons for including them should be thoroughly explained.
- Check the accuracy of the data. Even data from official records can be inaccurate, so the data itself should be very carefully scrutinized.

Secondary Data can Provide a Brief History by Answering the Following Questions:

- ✦ How long has the community been in existence?
- ✦ Who established the community?
- ✦ What are the major events/milestones in the history of the community? How did they shape it?
- ✦ What was the most dominant industry of the past? Did it decline? Why?
- ✦ What is the most dominant industry currently? Why did it grow?
- ✦ What is unique about the community?

What Types of Data to Collect

Because the issues among communities vary widely, and the collectible data is equally varied, knowing which data to collect can be difficult to determine. There is no standard format for a community profile. However, in order to understand what a community looks like, it may be important to provide a brief history of the community before exploring the current indicators of a community.

While secondary data can be plentiful, it is important to focus on collecting data (1) that will inform the visioning process so it can move forward and (2) in sectors that may be altered by the visioning process. There are several types of indicators that can be collected. This guide will explore education, housing, and socio-economic data.

- Economic (poverty rates; number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches; young adults in school or employed; housing mobility rates; government revenues; industry statistics; new building permits; consumer price index; unemployment, inflation, and income figures and rates)
- Education (district boundaries, MEAP test results, enrollment, student mobility rates, school dropout and grade-retention rates, rates of Head Start and preschool participation, percentage of children with special needs)

- Environment (water quality monitoring data, beach closings, flood events, air quality monitoring data, septic sewer permits, wastewater treatment data, commute data)
- Health (immunization rates, percentage of low birth weight babies, rates of early prenatal care, rates of births to single mothers and their age)
- Housing (occupancy rates, home value, housing age, foreclosures, new building permits, existing land uses and zoning)
- Public Safety (incarceration rates, crime maps, registered neighborhood watch organizations)
- Socio-Economic Data (population, race, age, ethnicity, household income, educational attainment)

Where to Find Secondary Data

Secondary data are often plentiful and widely available. There are even some websites (e.g. *US Hometown Locator*, Council of Governments) that already have community profiles available, although their content can vary significantly. Community profiles can also be purchased from organizations and businesses (e.g. *Center for Governmental Research*).

Sources of commonly collected secondary data include the following. Published data may change regularly; so check publication dates and look for updates.

- *U.S. Bureau of the Census* (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*)
- U.S. Department of Agriculture's *Census of Agriculture*
- *U.S. Department of Education*
- *U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development*
- *U.S. Department of Justice*
- *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*
- *ESRI*
- *Kids Count data books published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation*
- *The Children's Defense Fund*
- *The National Center for Children in Poverty*
- *The National Center for Education Statistics*
- Annual reports prepared by cities, counties, and states
- State and local departments of health and human services
- State juvenile and criminal justice agencies

- School Service District Statistics including basic client counts, attributes, demographics, social conditions, and program information
- Local police departments
- Local libraries (newspapers, films, old prints, high school yearbooks and similar memorabilia, plat maps, topographic maps, aerial photos, tourist and/or road maps)

When comparing data, it is important to consider the geographic area from which the data are generated. For example, sources that collect data nationally may have data at the state, regional (metropolitan statistical areas), and/or county level. While the type of data may be the same, data from different sources can only be compared when they represent the same indicator and geographic location. It is also important to consider the level of detail that will be needed to inform the community assessment process. Will statewide trends represent what is happening in the community or is county or city-level data required to more accurately reflect current conditions. These considerations will drive which data are appropriate for the community assessment.

Creating the Socio-Economic Profile

Consideration of socio-economic factors is essential to understand community issues and make sound decisions. A review of historical economic and demographic activity helps explain current conditions while projecting future economic and demographic trends can help community leaders anticipate and plan for changes that will impact the community.

The purpose of a socio-economic profile of a community is to help community leaders understand the effects of a proposed change on the community's residents. To do this, community leaders must learn about its residents. Typically, socio-economic data can be collected through census data at a census tract level—a small, relatively permanent statistical subdivision of a county—which is easily translatable for a community.

The four primary sets of indicators or data that should be included are population, education, employment and income, and housing and community facilities. Data should be collected from the community in question, its surrounding neighbors (to develop a regional context), and the state. In order to develop trends during the analysis phase, data should be collected from the current status back twenty years prior, at least.

Population	Education	Employment & Income	Housing & Community Facilities
Total population	Proficiency attained by each school district	Number of persons employed/household	Type: residential (single-family, two-family, multiple-family dwellings), commercial, etc.
Births, deaths, migration	MEAP results	Employment by industry	
Median and average age of residents	School district revenues and expenditures	Median household income	Age
Age distribution	Number of districts	Per capita income	Value
Sex distribution	Number of schools in each district	Median family income	Tenure: owner-occupied, renter-occupied, vacant
Name and number of races and ethnicities	Map illustrating the location of schools and boundaries for each district	Poverty by household size	Total stock or number of units
	Total number of people enrolled in school, including all the levels of education from preschool to graduate school		Household density: number of persons/ dwelling
	Educational attainment		Household makeup: single-parent, married, etc.
	Graduation and dropout rates		Type of construction permits
	Per pupil funding		Construction cost per unit
	Student/teacher ratio		Foreclosures
	Infrastructure funding		

How to Analyze & Report Findings

After collecting the various data, it is time to translate them into information that can inform the community assessment process and help answer questions. For as many indicators as possible:

1. Calculate growth rates between decades
2. Use growth rates to extrapolate trends for projecting future change
3. Calculate percentages of the total
4. Compare the community, region, and state

While it is important to describe the community and tell its story with text, secondary data lend well to visual presentation. Secondary data that are presented in graphs, charts, and tables, allow the reader to quickly assimilate the information and understand the story. Visual presentation also allows quick identification and analysis of trends. Often it is best to utilize the graphs, charts, and tables to tell a community's story, and use text to highlight important or key points.

Once the analysis is complete, prepare the proper report format, which can range from a PowerPoint presentation to a formal report. Be sure to include methods used, major findings, and conclusions. Other sections for a more formal report may include an executive summary, background section that describes the issue being studied, recommendations, and next steps.

Community Assessment Guide

Visually Assessing a Community

VISUALLY ASSESSING A COMMUNITY

Visual assessments are techniques that can be applied to many community initiatives from youth and family to economic development. The focus of this resource guide is on a community assessment process that would be typically used for community planning and development initiatives. Therefore, the assessment techniques presented are most relevant for visually assessing a community's *built* environment.

Visually assessing a community's built environment involves two steps—***inventory and assessment***—and both can be done simultaneously. They typically require a small team of individuals to canvas the community, collecting necessary data. Because individuals will be evaluating (ranking and judging elements on a relative scale) what they see, it is critical to eliminate bias by developing, and training assessors in, standardized methods. The assessors can practice assessing on a small area together to ensure that they are all evaluating conditions similarly. The assessment tool or survey instrument that is used to help assessors evaluate the built environment should also create quantifiable and measurable results.

Visual assessments can be conducted by car or foot, but safety of the assessors must be considered. Teams of 2-3 individuals may be used to enhance personal safety of the individuals. Typically, assessors do not interact with the public or occupants as they complete the survey, and in no instance should the assessors enter onto or into property.

The goal of an assessment is to assess the condition of the built environment and confirm any data already collected. An inventory will count all units and types. While not every structure in a community needs to be assessed (unlike an inventory), it is important to gather a sample that can represent the entire community. In addition, it is worth noting that building conditions can vary greatly from block to block.

Housing Assessment

Housing assessments are often used to understand existing situations and determine future housing needs based on key trends, affordability, and total demand. A housing assessment typically documents the existing number of housing units, types, exterior condition, occupancy, and values. Much of this information is collected during the creation of the socio-economic profile.

EXTERIOR HOUSING SURVEY FORM

Date: _____

Assessor's Name: _____

Street name:_____

House number: _____

Municipality: _____

Occupancy (Check one):

Occupied ☐ **Vacant** ☐

Building use (Check one):

Commercial ☐ **Single family** ☐ **Multi family** ☐ **Apartment** ☐ **Mixed use** (residential/commercial) ☐ **Industrial** ☐

Number of Floors: _____

Assessors can either give each structure a score within a range or assign a condition (poor-excellent) to the structure.

Structure	Condition/Score			
	Poor (0–5)	**Fair** (6–10)	**Good** (11–15)	**Excellent** (16–20)
Roof **Score:** _____	Hole, missing material	Major weathering, Shingles to be replaced missing fascia _____	Minor weathering of shingles or tiles _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Siding, paint, finish **Score:** _____	Most structure has chipped paint missing siding _____	Missing siding water damage _____	Superficial cracks and minor weathering, minor chipped paint _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Porch, steps, sidewalks **Score:** _____	Broken, growing weeds, tiles missing and concrete shifting _____	Missing tile, concrete cracking and shifting _____	Minimal weathering _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Foundation **Score:** _____	Sagging, damaged and decayed base _____	Major repairs required _____	Minimal sagging or decay _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Doors and windows **Score:** _____	Missing or extremely weathered _____	Dirty, missing windows and panes _____	Minor weathering, minor repairs _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Overall Score:				

Commercial Corridor Assessment

A commercial corridor of a community is usually the primary shopping street or district and is generally the economic backbone of the community. A commercial corridor assessment evaluates the existing conditions of a commercial corridor and will help identify both current and future needs. A commercial corridor assessment requires a business inventory and an exterior building survey. In addition, it may be useful to explore past rezoning attempts with the local, governing zoning body.

COMMERCIAL CORRIDOR INVENTORY FORM

Date: _____

Assessor's Name: _____

Address	Business name	Business type

Summary:

This inventory should be accompanied by a summary that discusses the basic categorization of the business. The summary should include vacancies and any unique characters of the corridor. For example, the summary should answer the following questions:

_____

_____

_____

What is the approximate number of vehicles in the district? _____

What are the peak traffic hours? _____

What is the total number of accidents in the past five years? _____

What is the condition of the streets and why?	Poor (0–5)	Fair (6–10)	Good (11–15)	Excellent (16–20)
	☐	☐	☐	☐

Are there sidewalks?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

	Poor (0–5)	Fair (6–10)	Good (11–15)	Excellent (16–20)
What is the condition of the sidewalks for accessibility and why?	☐	☐	☐	☐
What is the condition of the sidewalks for safety and why?	☐	☐	☐	☐

What type of parking is available?   ☐ Lot   ☐ Street

	Poor (0–5)	Fair (6–10)	Good (11–15)	Excellent (16–20)
What is the condition of the parking available and why?	☐	☐	☐	☐

Is there a bus route available?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

How many bus stops are available? _____

EXTERIOR BUSINESS SURVEY FORM

Date: _____

Assessor's Name: _____

Street name:_____

Business number: _____

Plot number: _____

Occupancy (Check one):

Occupied ☐ **Vacant** ☐

Building use (Check one):

Commercial ☐ **Single family** ☐ **Multi family** ☐ **Apartment** ☐ **Mixed use** (residential/commercial) ☐ **Industrial** ☐

Number of Floors: _____

Assessors can either give each structure a score within a range or assign a condition (poor-excellent) to the structure.

| Structure	Condition/Score			
	Poor (0–5)	**Fair** (6–10)	**Good** (11–15)	**Excellent** (16–20)
Roof **Score:**	Hole, missing material _____	Major weathering, Shingles to be replaced missing fascia _____	Minor weathering of shingles or tiles _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Siding, paint, finish **Score:**	Most structure has chipped paint missing siding _____	Missing siding water damage _____	Superficial cracks and minor weathering, minor chipped paint _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Porch, steps, sidewalks **Score:**	Broken, growing weeds, tiles missing and concrete shifting _____	Missing tile, concrete cracking and shifting _____	Minimal weathering _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Foundation **Score:**	Sagging, damaged and decayed base _____	Major repairs required _____	Minimal sagging or decay _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Doors and windows **Score:**	Missing or extremely weathered _____	Dirty, missing windows and panes _____	Minor weathering, minor repairs _____	No visible deterioration, structure intact _____
Overall Score:				

Land Use Inventory

Using the housing and commercial corridor inventories and assessments, a land use inventory map is developed. The result is a map which depicts the current land uses:

- Commercial
- Residential (single-family)
- Residential (multi-family)
- Mixed-use (residential and commercial)
- Industrial
- Vacant

In addition, an inventory of basic information is compiled:

Address	Land Use	Overall Building Condition	Number of Floors
123	Vacant		0
456	Commercial: PQRS printing	Fair	1
789	Apartments	Excellent	2
1010	Commercial: XYZ Store	Poor	3
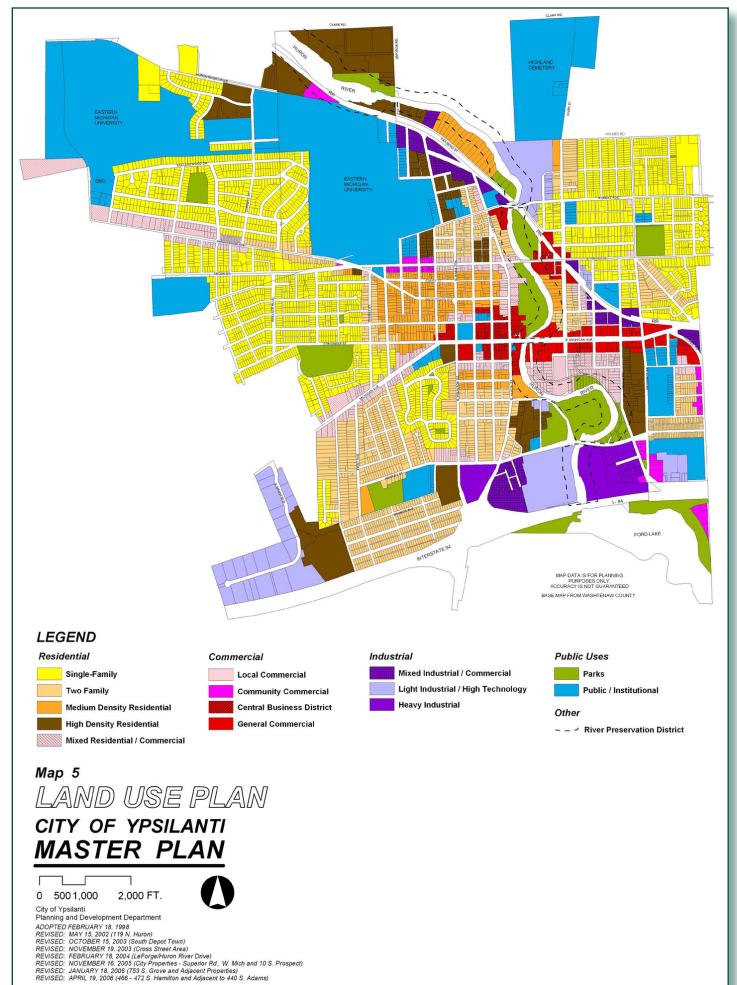
Source: City of Ypsilanti, *http://cityofypsilanti.com/maps/images/ mastermap2006www.jpg* (November 2009)

How to analyze and report findings

After collecting the inventory and assessment data, it is time to translate them into information that can inform the community assessment process and help answer questions. For each assessment type:

1. Calculate overall assessment scores per unit and total by using the assigned score from the assessor or assigning a score to a condition (e.g. Excellent=4).
2. Use the total scores to chart (pie or bar) results.
3. Calculate percentages of the total.
4. Compare areas of the community.
5. Identify areas in need of revitalization or that are thriving. What factors led to its state. What can be done to improve or protect it? Are there lessons to be translated elsewhere in the community?

While it is important to describe the community and tell its story with text, inventory and assessment data lend well to visual presentation. Inventory and assessment data that are presented in graphs, charts, and tables, allow the reader to quickly assimilate the information and understand the story it is telling. Visual presentation also allows quick identification and analysis of trends. Often it is best to utilize the graphs, charts, and tables to tell a community's story, and use text to highlight important or key points.

Once the analysis is complete, prepare the proper report format, which can range from a PowerPoint presentation to a formal report. Be sure to include methods used, major findings, and conclusions. Other sections for a more formal report may include an executive summary, background section that describes the issue being studied, recommendations, and next steps.

Community Spotlight

In 2007, a group of MSU students from the Urban and Regional Planning Program's Practicum class were commissioned by the City of Lansing to examine development and architectural patterns for the various neighborhoods in the City, and prepare a Neighborhood Pattern Book geared toward residents for the purpose of meaningful discussion and gaining valuable citizen input. The project was directly applicable to Phase II (data collection and issue identification) of the City's Master Plan revision process.

The student group employed a visual assessment to gather data on the development and architectural patterns for the various neighborhoods and also created a demographic community profile. They provided a foundation for future work on a broader and more comprehensive visual assessment and profile that included elements on transportation, housing, and urban design. Both of these products fed into the larger master plan revision process that is scheduled to be complete in 2010.

To view the Practicum report, *click here*.
To view the Practicum PowerPoint presentation, *click here*.

"The students' work provided a snapshot in time of our community and valuable legwork on the master planning process."

— Bill Rieske
Interim Planning Manager, *City of Lansing*

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- Restoring coastal habitats for Rhode Island's future: Socioeconomic factors. (*www.edc.uri.edu/restoration/html/tech_sci/socio/profile.htm*)
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ADDITIONAL MSU RESOURCES

- Land Policy Institute: *www.landpolicy.msu.edu*
- MSU Extension: *www.msue.msu.edu/portal*
- Community Development Area of Expertise Team: *www.msue.msu.edu/portal/default.cfm?pageset_id=516158*
- Community and Economic Development Team: *http://web5.msue.msu.edu/eced/*
- Economic Development Area of Expertise Team: *http://web1.msue.msu.edu/aoe/econdevaoe/*
- Land Use Area of Expertise Team: *http://ntweb11.ais.msu.edu/luaoe/index.asp*
- Michigan Citizen Planner Program: *http://citizenplanner.msu.edu/*
- State and Local Government Area of Expertise Team: *http://web5.msue.msu.edu/slg/*
- School of Planning, Design, and Construction: *http://spdc.msu.edu/*
- Small Town Design Initiative/Community Design Initiative: *http://spdc.msu.edu/RealWorldApplicationsofKnowledge/OutreachEngagementExtensionPrograms/SmallTownDesignInitiative.aspx*
- Urban Collaborators: *http://spdc.msu.edu/RealWorldApplicationsofKnowledge/OutreachEngagementExtensionPrograms/UrbanCollaborators.aspx*

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SCHOOL OF
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