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MICHIGAN PLANNER

Michigan Chapter
American Planning Association

TRANSPORTATION BONANZA

In partnership with:

Safe Routes to School

MICHIGAN FITNESS FOUNDATION

MDOT Michigan Department of Transportation

INSIDE

CONNECT

MAP Develops Transportation Land Use Guiding Principles

In the summer of 2024, MAP launched a Transportation Land Use Leadership Task Force. The purpose of the Task Force was to begin a conversation with planning and transportation leaders about how to create sustainable, efficient, safe, multi-modal transportation systems. The Task Force was charged with developing a Transportation Land Use Framework, to be used to guide by MAP's programming and advocacy efforts. Vetted at the 2024 Annual Planning Michigan Conference, and presented at the Transportation Bonanza, the Guiding Principles highlight a simple set of ideals that emphasize Public Health and Safety, Align Land Use with Transportation, and Develop a People Centered Transportation Network. This succinct document includes priority actions and concrete steps MAP can take to create a people centered transportation network.

The Task Force is now a MAP Standing Committee, and subcommittees have been formed to begin implementing the recommendations of the Guiding Principles. Look for a link to the Guiding Principles in the upcoming *Michigan Planner E-dition*.

MAP is extremely grateful to the Task Force for developing the principles and for continuing to serve on the Transportation Land Use Committee:

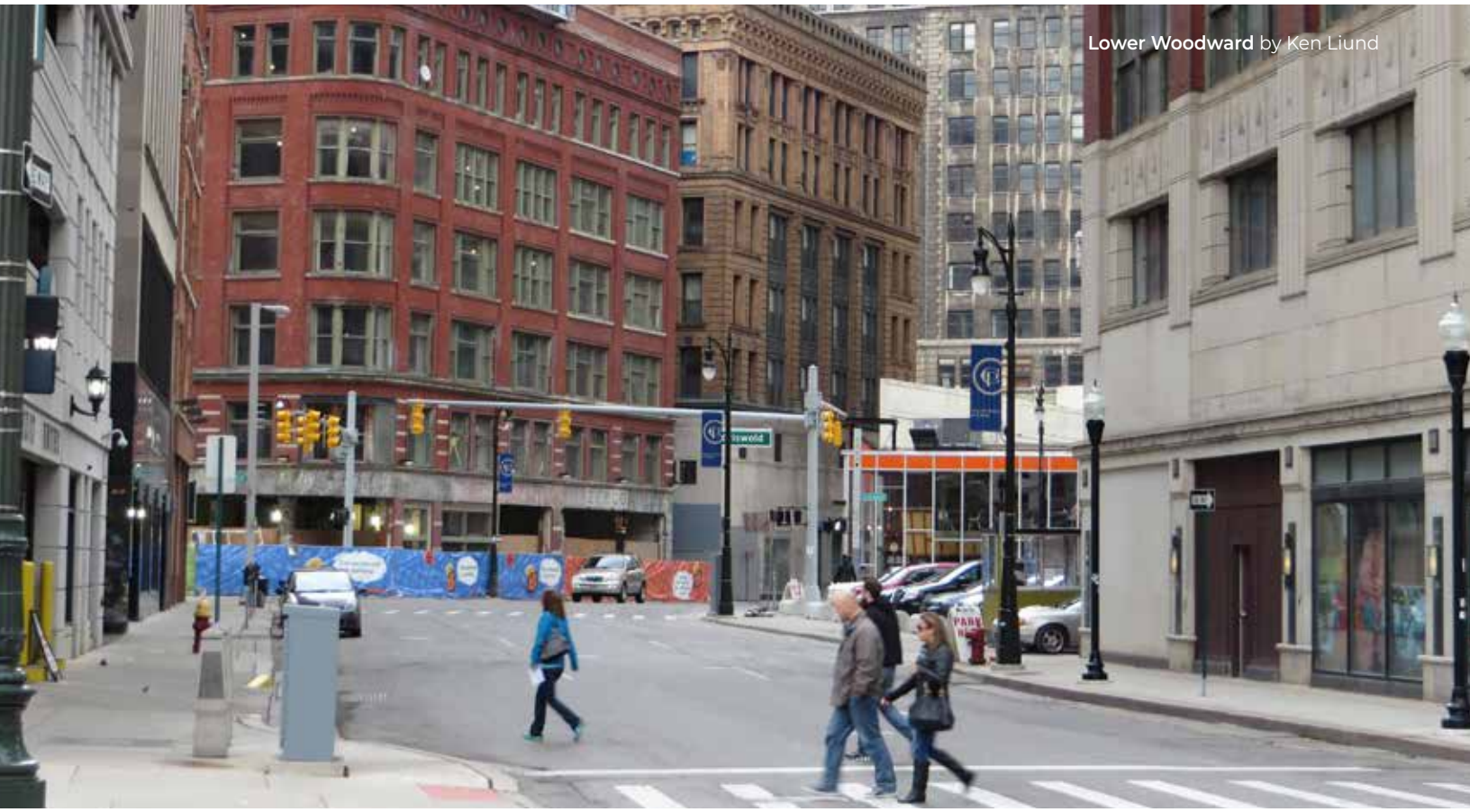
Brad Strader, AICP, *Co-Chair, C2G* | Jeromie Winsor, AICP, *Co-Chair, AECOM* | Jenya Abromovich, AICP, *SEMCOG* | Eric Bettis, *Wayne State University* | Dave Bulkowski, *Disability Advocates of Kent County* | Tanya DeOliveira, AICP, *Williams and Works* | Suzann Flowers, *City of Ann Arbor* | Joe Grengs, *University of Michigan* | Laurel Joseph, *Grand Valley Metro Council* | Sarah Lagpacan, AICP, *AECOM* | Amy Lipset, AICP, *Fishbeck* | Arthur Mullen, AICP, *Wade Trim* | Melanie Piana, *Regional Transportation Authority* | Suzanne Schulz, FAICP, *Progressive + MI Transportation Commission*

Michigan Zoning MAP

Building on the success of the 2024 Michigan Zoning Atlas pilot in the Grand Rapids Tri County area, MAP is moving forward with a state-wide Michigan Zoning MAP (formerly known as the Michigan Zoning Atlas). Our approach will provide counties with a robust new understanding of how zoning affects land use in the aggregate, concentrating first on how housing is permitted in the state. Our long-term vision is to include more than just housing, so that we - as good planners – understand the relationship between land uses in our state and possess the data necessary to inform local regulatory reforms. This next phase centers on counties in the vitally important SE Michigan Region.

MAP is ramping up its capacity to perform this work, and we are excited to build a product that meets the deep analytic needs of Michigan communities. We have a queue for the next round of counties and RHP regions to add to the Michigan Zoning MAP and are seeking more as we work toward statewide coverage. Various funding sources have been secured to cover the cost of this work, including Regional Housing Partnership funds, County general funds, and community foundations. We are happy to work with you to get your county on the Michigan Zoning MAP. Contact Leah DuMouchel at *ldumouchel@planningmi.org* for more information, or to be added to the list.

ON THE COVER: Photo from Michigan Department of Transportation



Lower Woodward by Ken Liund

Transportation Bonanza

This year, the Michigan Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program is celebrating its 21st anniversary, and Michigan Association of Planning is pleased to have partnered with SRTS for 17 of those years. In 2008, our first product provided members with a "How To" guide institutionalizing SRTS principles within a community's comprehensive plan and zoning regulations.

In 2009, we shifted to an annual one-day training program, engaging those professions and disciplines who work to reshape the planning and design of transportation networks and streets to promote and support economic prosperity, community participation, health, and sustainability while enhancing mobility for all. As a response to the Covid pandemic, we moved the conference to a virtual format in 2021 and learned that this format is also appealing to Michigan professionals. We decided to alternate the conference between virtual and in-person every other year to offer the best of both worlds.

This past February, over 230 participants came together for our 16th Transportation Bonanza. Community leaders, students, and professionals from planning, education, transportation, health, and engineering, joined us to mobilize around the topic of community building for health and accessibility. **Save the date for TB 17: February 10, 2026 at the East Lansing Marriott.**

This year, we are again bringing a piece of the 2025 Transportation Bonanza event to your mailbox. All of the articles in this edition are pertinent to local units of government. Whether it's a success story on how to partner and leverage funding, or a new transportation planning tool, infrastructure to support walkability, or the connection between land use policy and transportation, the Michigan Association of Planning, Michigan Department of Transportation, the Michigan Fitness Foundation, Safe Routes to School and Michigan Department of Health and Human Services are confident you will come away with news you can use.

I would also like to thank Josh DeBruyn, John Martin, Krista Phillips, PE, Brett Schlager, PE, Michael Smith, Colleen Synk, and Christine Zuzga, AICP, who are the core MDOT | SRTS leadership team. Ashley Bradshaw, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services is a fifth-year partner, who guides content and connects us to health experts. We are thankful for our partnership to deliver Safe Routes to School successes with this issue.

Max Fulkerson, *Director of Safe Routes to School, Michigan Fitness Foundation*

Dangerous Road by Ken Firestone

Traffic Engineers and Planners Need to Do Better

Professions need to improve over time. Physicians, for instance, have been around for at least 5,000 years. In those early days, and for a long time since, physicians probably killed more people than they saved. But as an empirical science, they learned and got better. And better. And better. It's still not perfect, but physicians have come a long way. Life expectancy was around 30 years for most of human history, and now it's over 70 years in most of the world today.

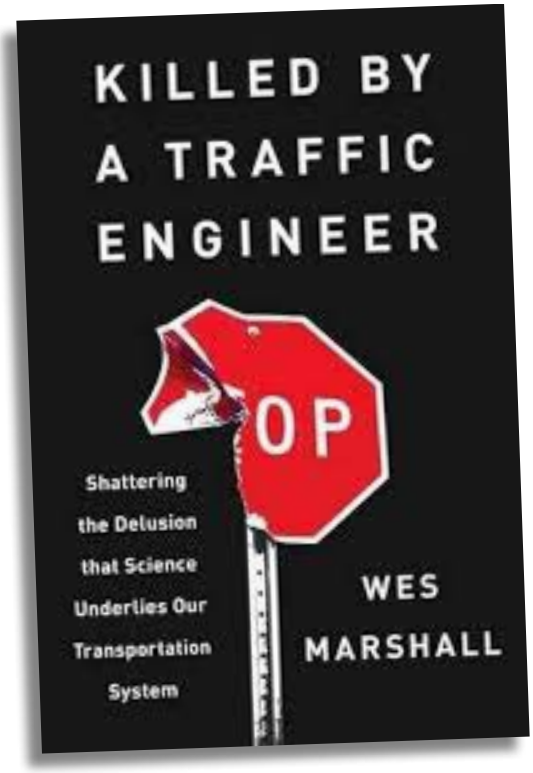
Traffic engineering? Well, my discipline is only about 100 years old. While it may be a while before we can admit this, we still might be killing more people than we save.

Do traffic engineers work to improve road safety? Of course we do, but these efforts tend to be reactive instead of proactive. In other words, our protocols are set up so that we wait for someone to get hurt or die in our transportation system before we step in and try to improve safety. In fact, we need to see more than one person get hurt or die. To be more specific, we usually need to see more than two people get hurt or die in a single location, ideally within a two- or three-year window, for their sacrifice to trigger what's called an MUTCD *warrant*.

The Manuals

A "warrant" refers to the numeric thresholds that the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) uses to justify – or "warrant" – the installation of traffic control devices. The MUTCD tells us what our traffic signs, signals, and markings need to look like. Less logically, the MUTCD also sets thresholds telling us how many pedestrians must risk their lives before a traffic control device such as crosswalk, pedestrian hybrid beacon, or HAWK (high-intensity activated crosswalk beacon) signal would be "warranted".

One Pedestrian Volume warrant says that we need at least 93 pedestrians crossing a major street in the peak hour before a traffic control device would be considered justified. Where that 93 number comes from isn't clear because the MUTCD doesn't cite any research. Even if we do install a signal, the MUTCD tells us that we are welcome to put it in flashing



mode during all the hours of the day when there are fewer than 93 pedestrians per hour. This means that up to and including 92 people per hour would be on their own when it comes to crossing that major street.

The MUTCD is one of a half dozen thousand-page manuals used by traffic engineers. The truth is that they represent guidelines more than standards. This even goes for the MUTCD, which seems the most "standard-y" of all these manuals. The MUTCD itself says we can override any *warrant* through "engineering judgment" and that "documentation of engineering judgment is not required" to do so. Nevertheless, it is easier to blame the road users involved and the warrant for not letting us fix the more systemic problems than to exercise engineering judgment that deviates from our manuals.

The Culture

Unfortunately, the culture of traffic engineering and the fear of liability reinforces that caution. Too many practitioners keep their heads down, cling to these books as standards despite the lack of science that might have gone into their creation, and shy away from empirical data that challenges the long-held beliefs we find in our manuals. When we ask the wrong questions and focus on solving the wrong problems, when we prioritize logical theories over empirical results, when we discount the counterintuitive nature of transportation outcomes, when we overbuild roadways and blame road users for behaving exactly as that roadway suggests, when our resulting crash data misleads us into putting our safety eggs in the Education and Enforcement baskets, and when we ignore the role that Engineering played in people not following the so-called rules-of-the-road, we put ourselves in a position where we don't even realize that business-as-usual might be the problem.

How the Manuals & Culture Work Together

Put traffic engineering manuals and traffic engineering culture together and you get a feedback loop that encourages us to wait for people to get hurt or die while also discouraging us from stepping outside the manuals. The result is a system where prevention is rarely on the agenda.

Here's the crazy part: we don't have to keep doing it this way. We aren't condemned to wait for dead bodies to show up in the street before acting. An ounce of prevention really is worth a pound of cure. Sadly, we seem to think this proverb doesn't apply to us.

How to Do Better

But being more proactive could start with recognizing that many of our road safety-related "symptoms" originate outside of traffic engineering. For example, land use and zoning choices spread destinations and force long, unavoidable car trips. That exposure drives people toward bigger, more dangerous vehicles and inflates crash risk.

I experienced this firsthand. When I lived in suburban Connecticut, I couldn't leave my house without a car, and the nearest grocery store was six miles away. Each way. I now live in Denver in a neighborhood that has six grocery stores within a mile of my house. The difference isn't luck; it's design.

This difference is also one of the more underappreciated aspects of road safety. Traffic engineers call it exposure and treat it as a given. But all this driving isn't a given. It's a symptom of our land use and zoning. And road safety problems? They are a symptom of all this driving.

If planners build communities that help limit exposure – compact, mixed-use communities where short trips are common and walking/biking are viable options – engineers can focus on fine-tuning streets rather than compensating for systemic over-exposure.

Meanwhile, we traffic engineers must embrace the discretion that our manuals already grant us. If a community thinks that a street or intersection needs a safety intervention, we don't need to wait for some of them to sacrifice themselves to prove it's really a problem. We can instead apply current evidence to prevent such problems from happening in the first place.

Traffic engineers can do better. Planners can do better. And together, we can make safety proactive instead of continuing to play this lethal game of Whac-A-Mole.

Wes Marshall *is a professor of Civil Engineering at the University of Colorado Denver, where he holds a joint appointment in urban planning. He serves as director of the CU Denver Human-Centered Transportation program and the Transportation Research Center at CU Denver. He is a licensed Professional Engineer and focuses on transportation teaching and research dedicated to creating safer and more sustainable transportation systems. He is the author of Killed by a Traffic Engineer: Shattering the Delusion that Science Underlies our Transportation System and was a keynote presenter at MAP's Transportation Bonanza conference in February 2025.*

Right Turn on Red: It's Time to Reconsider

We teach kids that red means stop, long before they learn numbers or the alphabet. But across the U.S., red lights often mean "pause briefly, then turn right."

For nearly 50 years, right turn on red (RTOR) has been a staple of American traffic operations. It gained traction in 1975 when Congress, reacting to the OPEC oil embargo, required states to adopt RTOR and other energy conservation measures, believing it would conserve fuel with little downside.

But is RTOR effective and harmless? Closer examination reveals a more nuanced reality: one that is driven by inertia, not evidence.

The Myth of Efficiency

RTOR is often assumed to improve traffic flow. But this benefit depends on specific, often unmet, conditions: no through-traffic blocking the right lane, no pedestrians in the crosswalk, a safe gap in traffic, and an unobstructed view. In practice, many drivers roll into the crosswalk to see around obstructions, then stop scanning for pedestrians or cyclists approaching from their right. The result is a risky, complicated maneuver.

To assess the traditional traffic modeling approach that is used to justify RTOR as a time saving technique, Toole Design's traffic engineering team set up a generic intersection using typical urban characteristics in Synchro to test different signal timing scenarios (RTOR restrictions, cycle length, etc.). The results: RTOR may provide a very small reduction in delay for motorists, but only when there are sufficient gaps in traffic. But how are gaps present in the busiest time of day for motor vehicle trips? When gaps are present, it's more a sign of inefficient signal timing than a need for RTOR. Shorter signal cycles or alternative timing strategies often deliver better performance than RTOR, for all road users.

The Highway Capacity Manual says it's "difficult to predict the RTOR flow rate because it is based on many [8+] factors that vary widely from intersection to intersection." An accompanying graphic shows only minimal differences in delay between right turns that did and did not permit RTOR. Contrary to the popular statement "the model says...", traffic models reflect biased assumptions and is based on limited, fixed data. They are not a lens into the future and do not account for user preference to change routes, modes, or destinations. Or in this instance, all the other factors beyond traffic gaps necessary to make RTOR possible, making even Toole Design's testing likely rosier than reality. Yet, traffic engineers input data into the model and treat the readouts as facts.

The Effect of Right-Turn-on-Red on Pedestrian and Bicyclist Accidents

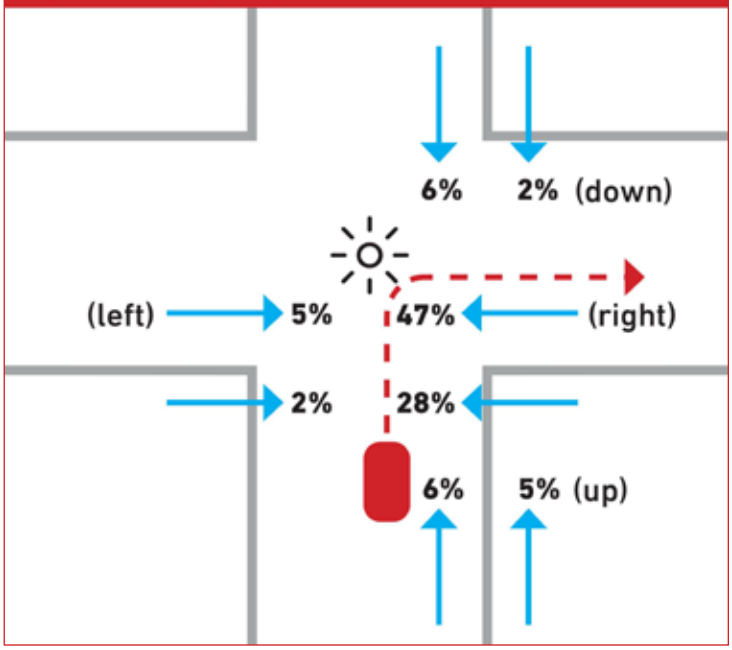
1982 Study Crash Findings:

Ohio	+57%	+80%
Wisconsin	+107%	+72%
New York	+43%	+82%

David F. Preusser, William A. Leaf, Karen B. DeBartolo, Richard D. Blomberg, and Marvin M. Levy

Journal of Safety Research, Vol. 13 pp. 45-55, 1982 0022-4375/82/020045-11$03.00

Proportions of reported bicycle crashes involving right on red by bicycle direction and crash location



Denying Right of Way and Increasing Dangers to People Walking and Bicycling

It has long been believed that this policy is relatively harmless. Complicating this question is the fact that research on this issue is limited because of the rapid, widespread application of this policy in 1980. However, in 1982, the U.S. Department of Transportation funded a study of the impact of RTOR analyzing data before and after the widespread adoption of RTOR. The researchers looked at the rate of pedestrian and bicyclist crashes in three states (New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin) and two cities (Los Angeles and New Orleans).

Researchers noted the rapid onset of crashes: "It was as if the number of right-turning accidents shifted to a new level—50 to 100% higher than the old level—and stayed at that level throughout the data collection period," introducing a persistent safety hazard.

RTOR also prioritizes motorist movement over pedestrian and cyclist mobility. When drivers roll into the crosswalk to turn, they deny vulnerable users their right-of-way. Pedestrians must cross in blind zones or behind vehicles—sometimes outside the crosswalk—heightening their risk and reducing their comfort. These conflicts can discourage walking and biking altogether.

Higher Hoods, Higher Speeds, Higher Risks

Since the late 1990s, vehicle design changes have made RTOR even more dangerous. In 2022, 75% of U.S. vehicle sales were SUVs and trucks. These vehicles are larger, heavier, and have taller hoods and higher front blind zones, often obscuring anything within 10–15 feet ahead. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety has found SUVs and trucks are overrepresented in pedestrian right-turn crashes compared to smaller vehicles.

Compounding this is a culture of speed and aggression. Advertisements glamorize rapid acceleration, like Dodge's "Never Lift" campaign: "Keeping a foot firmly planted on the gas pedal." And some electric vehicles (EVs) now gamify 0–60 mph times. Even though sports cars represent a small share of the market, nearly all EVs offer faster acceleration than most gas-powered sports cars available. This performance allows drivers to accept smaller gaps when turning, increasing crash risks, especially when paired with larger blind zones.

These factors are contributing to a national public health crisis, with pedestrian and cyclist deaths reaching 20-year highs. "I didn't see them" remains a common refrain in police crash reports, echoing the findings from the 1982 study. If Vision Zero is the goal, municipalities must address these recurring failures.

Things Are Changing

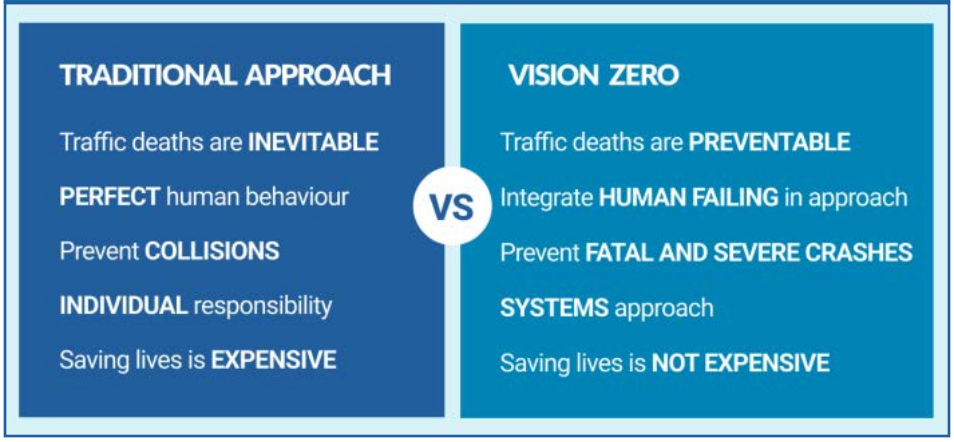
Planners and engineers can't redesign the entire vehicle fleet, but they can redesign intersections and re-evaluate operations. Professional codes of ethics demand that transportation practitioners prioritize the "safety, health, and welfare of the public." RTOR policy falls short of that mandate.

In response, some cities are limiting or eliminating RTOR as part of broader Vision Zero efforts. Washington, DC; Cambridge; Raleigh; Ann Arbor; and Seattle

WHAT IS VISION ZERO?

Vision Zero is a strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries, while increasing safe, healthy, equitable mobility for all. Vision Zero is a significant departure from the status quo in two major ways:

1. Vision Zero recognizes that people will sometimes make mistakes, so the road system and related policies should be designed to ensure those inevitable mistakes do not result in severe injuries or fatalities. This means that system designers and policymakers are expected to improve the roadway environment, policies (such as speed management), and other related systems to lessen the severity of crashes.
2. Vision Zero is a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together diverse and necessary stakeholders to address this complex problem. In the past, meaningful, cross-disciplinary collaboration among local traffic planners and engineers, policymakers, and public health professionals has not been the norm. Vision Zero acknowledges that many factors contribute to safe mobility -- including roadway design, speeds, behaviors, technology, and policies -- and sets clear goals to achieve the shared goal of zero fatalities and severe injuries.



have adopted large-scale NTOR policies. In DC, a pilot at 74 intersections led to a 92% reduction in failure-to-yield incidents and a 97% drop in vehicle conflicts. These benefits came with "minor impacts to traffic operations," according to a 2020 ITE Journal article. NTOR, the city concluded, offers a low-cost safety tool for jurisdictions with limited budgets.

While citywide bans may not be feasible everywhere, a corridor- or district-based approach using NTOR can still support a safe system framework. Applying NTOR consistently—near campuses, downtowns, or high-foot-traffic zones—can improve safety, reduce confusion, and build community support. Strategic NTOR zones align with equity goals, improving access for those walking and biking in historically underserved areas.

A Safer Way Forward

Vision Zero requires more than rhetoric—it demands action to eliminate known risks. RTOR is one such risk that can be eliminated. As vehicle mass, speed, and acceleration increase, vulnerable road users face growing threats. RTOR, once implemented in the name of convenience and efficiency, now poses unnecessary harm.

It's time to shift course. Removing RTOR is a clear, proven way to prioritize people over vehicles and to build streets where everyone can move safely.

Bill Schultheiss, PE *has pioneered new design strategies including cycle tracks, shared streets, arterial traffic calming, rapid-flashing beacons and buffered bike lanes. Bill has designed over 250 miles of bikeways throughout the United States. Bill is an active member of the Bicycle Technical Committee and the Pedestrian Task Force of the National Committee on Uniform Traffic Control Devices.*

Mariel Colman, PE, AICP *is the Engineering Group Manager for Toole Design's Columbus Office. She has focused her career on safe multimodal solutions for people of all ages and abilities. Mariel was a lead author for Ohio DOT's first standalone Multimodal Design Guide and has led numerous trainings on right-sizing roadways and incorporating all modes.*

TOOLE DESIGN

MAP Develops Transportation Land Use Guiding Principles

At the MAP Transportation Bonanza in February 2024, during the closing reception hosted by the APA Transportation Division, an idea emerged that had been brewing for several years: Establish a MAP Transportation Land Use Committee to increase awareness about better transportation planning policies and practices that would result in sustainable, efficient, safe, multi-modal transportation systems. Brad Strader, AICP and Jeromie Winsor, AICP, initiated the conversation, and agreed to co-chair a Leadership Task Force, and together with Andrea Brown, MAP's Executive Director, reached out to some of the best transportation planners in the business to populate it. A Leadership Task Force was established with a foundational objective of shifting the narrative from a car-centric system to one that embodies an approach that includes all modes of transportation and makes a stronger connection between transportation and land use.

Over 3 months, from July to September 2024, the Task Force collaborated to develop a set of simple and practical Guiding Principles that planners can use in their daily work. Vetted at the 2024 Annual Planning Michigan Conference, and presented at the 2025 Transportation Bonanza, this succinct document includes priority actions and concrete steps MAP can take to create a people centered transportation network.

The three guiding principles include the need for planners to:

1. Emphasize Public Health and Safety

People are unnecessarily dying on Michigan roadways. Michigan's roads should provide safe transportation for all users that leads to an improved quality of life for all people. To achieve this, a paradigm shift must occur among planning professionals, public officials, and residents that will refocus conversations centered around neighborhood transportation networks built for the safe movement of people. Planners must work to build a culture and physical environment that places safety first in transportation investment decisions. Priority actions include developing guidance for effective traffic calming measures; use of project selection and design criteria that emphasize health and safety; and the establishment of partnerships with other organizations working in public health and social services.

2. Align Land Use with Transportation

Retaining and attracting people is foundational to our communities' and state's success. Communities that retain and attract people are those that have a strong sense of belonging and that promote well-being – where all residents have transportation choices available to them to meet their needs for housing, education, employment, medical services, fresh food, entertainment, and other goods and services that contribute to quality of life. This means aligning decisions about the placement and design of housing, businesses, parks, campuses, and other destinations with decisions regarding the transportation choices connecting them. Priority actions include planning for density and a mix of well-connected land uses; requiring developments that reduce traffic and parking needs by providing access and amenities for people walking, biking, and riding transit; and promoting infill development that utilizes existing transportation infrastructure.

3. Develop a People-Centered Transportation Network

Building an intentional, inclusive transportation network is essential when creating vibrant places. Ensuring that viable transportation options are available and convenient for everyone fosters economic growth, enhances public health, and promotes social equity. Our communities should provide well-designed transportation networks connecting people to the places they live, work, and play. Priority actions include encouraging policies that make it easier to reduce capacity and restrict the addition of new roadway capacity; adopting design standards that give more flexibility for local priorities; and advocating for increased non-motorized and transit funding.

The Task Force is now a MAP Standing Committee that will continue to advise on how MAP can effectively educate its membership, partner with other organizations, and advocate in the state around these principles. Four subcommittees have been formed to focus on communications, policy, education, and legislative initiatives. Stay tuned for updates on this important work.

Jeromie Winsor, AICP *is Co-Chair of MAP's Transportation Land Use Committee. He is a senior transportation planner who leads AECOM's transit and multimodal planning practice in the Midwest. He has worked with agency partners across the state of Michigan to envision and implement a safer and more balanced transportation system.*

Brad Strader, AICP, PTP, *is Co-Chair of MAP's Transportation Land Use Committee. He is the Planning Director at Cincar Consulting Group (C2G). He works on land use, zoning, transportation, transit and multimodal street design and with transit agencies and developers across 16 states, focusing on projects that impact cities and downtowns, corridor redesign, traffic flow and many other aspects.*

Charlotte Conducts Collaborative Safe Routes to School Project

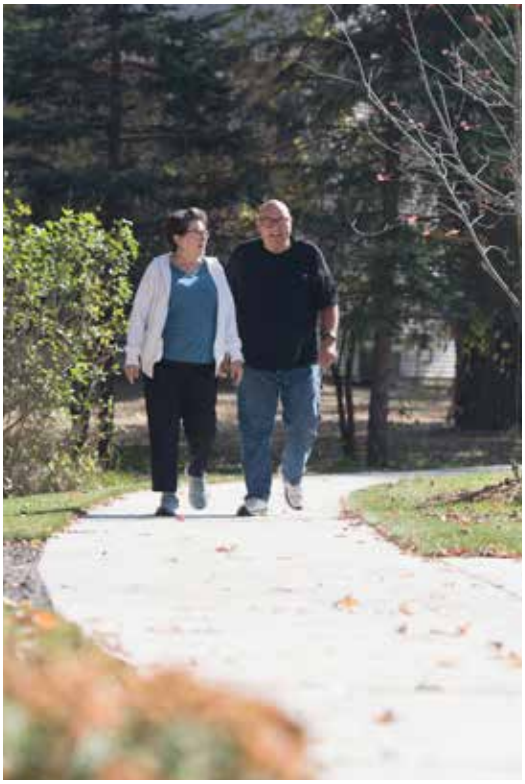
The City of Charlotte is home to a tight knit community with optimistic leaders. One such leader is AL!VE Community Wellness Manager Ellen Dreps who previously chaired a coalition to improve health and walkability in the community. AL!VE is a community wellness facility within University of Michigan Health-Sparrow Eaton.

To improve opportunities for active transportation in Charlotte, Dreps got in touch with the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) team at Michigan Fitness Foundation (MFF) in 2017 to build a Safe Routes to School project for the community. MFF's SRTS team helped to get the ball rolling with technical assistance, as well as the planning and application processes to ensure a successful SRTS grant application.

Dreps forged a local SRTS team using her connections with Charlotte city officials, local schools, business owners, and other community stakeholders to improve walkability in the MidMichigan town. The SRTS team then leveraged their connections to create robust community partnerships with AL!VE Community Health and Wellness Center, Charlotte Public Schools, and St. Mary School to carry out a city-wide and multi-district SRTS project.

SRTS grants allow funding to be used for improvements around schools within a two-mile radius. Fortunately for the small town of Charlotte, the entire city is within the two-mile radius from the project schools. This meant they were able to design a city-wide project that was in keeping with eligible grant funding.

With this in mind, walking audits were conducted throughout the entire city as part of the planning process. Reports showed sidewalks in rough condition; some were crooked, some unmaintained, and others went nowhere. The audits also identified areas where sidewalks did not exist, leading to students having to walk through grass or snow to get to and from school. One identified gap without sidewalk was along Lawrence Highway/M-79, and there was also an issue identified with a rail crossing at Henry Street.



For the SRTS application process, the Charlotte SRTS team needed preliminary design plans, and that meant they needed to raise funds to pay for the preliminary design-engineering costs. So, Dreps wrote a Capital Region Community Foundation grant.

"It was a huge, huge help to have a secondary grant on top of what we were going to be receiving for construction," Dreps explained.

The Lawrence Highway/M-79 gap was missing sidewalks and a safe crossing point for students. Because it was within a Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) right of way, the Charlotte SRTS team secured project support from MDOT's Lansing Transportation Service Center to help remedy the issues.

For the rail crossing at Henry Street, MDOT's Office of Rail Safety was contacted to lead the rail portion of the project. It is important to note when the scope of any active transportation project involves the railroad to work with the Office of Rail early in the planning process.

When working with the Office of Rail Safety, the first step is to fill out the "Notification of Proposed Project Involving a Public Rail Crossing" also known as Form 1425.

"Completion and submittal of Form 1425 is the starting point from where the Office of Rail Safety can work on the project's behalf and ensure that the railroad company is responsive," explained MDOT

Rail Safety Manager Kristian Foondle.

MDOT Office of Rail will also determine whether a Diagnostic Study Team Review (DSTR) is required for the project.

"The DSTR process is a meeting between a road authority representative, a railroad representative, and our rail safety inspector. At this meeting, the group goes over what's being proposed" explained MDOT Local Grade Crossing Analyst Alexis Louth. "That way everybody involved can get on the same page to understand the project and develop an agreement or consensus between all parties to move forward with the identified results, such as extending the crossing to accommodate the trail or sidewalk crossing over the rail."

Several aspects of Charlotte's Henry Street crossing made for a straightforward process. Due to a sidewalk being a legally permissible use of the right of way on public roads, and the presence of an existing sidewalk facility on the north side of the crossing, it was determined that no DSTR was required. If a DSTR was required, the agreement becomes a legal order by the State of Michigan. Without the need for a DSTR and because there was federal/state funding involved, the Office of Rail was able to help the City of Charlotte by coordinating directly with the railroad company since they have standing Master Agreements for crossing work with most railroad companies.

"Reaching out to the Office of Rail ahead of time allows communities to understand and navigate challenges with more ease," said Foondle.

Having navigated the rail challenges and receiving MDOT support for the proposed sidewalk, Charlotte was able to construct a comprehensive network across the city.

The SRTS planning process also helped inform Charlotte's grant application which was submitted in October 2019. Upon review, they received a tentative funding decision with a conditional commitment issued in November 2020, with the grant awarded in 2022.

Because the Charlotte SRTS team was able to identify where improvements were needed, they used SRTS grant funds for city-wide infill and repairs to their existing sidewalk network, serving multiple school districts. Construction was completed in 2024.

"The quality of the sidewalks; there were areas prior to this project that were pretty rough," said Charlotte Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Mandy Stewart. "They look nice now."

In addition to making it safer for students to walk, bike, and roll to school, the project also benefitted the community at large.

"I definitely see more dog walking, families with strollers, people utilizing the sidewalks," observed Stewart. "I think the community really feels those benefits…when you walk around Charlotte now, you see a visible upgrade."

Project Impact:

This project filled gaps in a city-wide network of sidewalks, improving overall accessibility and mobility for all residents to school facilities. It provided safe walkable, bikeable, and rollable routes for Charlotte students, including key features of a railroad crossing and sidewalks along an MDOT road.

- MDOT SRTS Total Infrastructure Budget: $ 1,828,489
- MDOT/SRTS Non-infrastructure Budget: $47,563
- Rail section: $29,445

This project was made possible through the continuing collaborative efforts of the AL!VE Community Health and Wellness Center, Capital Region Community Foundation, Charlotte Public Schools, City of Charlotte, Eaton County Road Commission, Michigan Department of Transportation, Michigan Fitness Foundation, St. Mary School, and Federal Highway Administration

Additional resources for MDOT Office of Rail and Safe Routes to School will be available in next month's *Michigan Planner E-dition* Newsletter.

Evan Stowell *is the Safe Routes to School Intern at Michigan Fitness Foundation and an Urban Planning Intern at American Structurepoint. At the time of this publication, Stowell is a rising senior working on his Bachelor of Science in Urban & Regional Planning at Michigan State University. He believes in accessible transportation systems and smart economic growth for all.*

Connections and Resources to Build Capacity in Rural Communities

Talk with rural leaders across Michigan and you'll likely hear the phrase, "lack of capacity." Rural communities, by definition, have smaller populations and budgets that are spread across larger geographies than their more urban counterparts. With fewer people and dollars at hand, they often struggle to financially support the staffing and technical expertise needed to plan for, develop, finance, manage, and successfully implement projects that will address housing, placemaking, health, or other community needs. But capacity isn't limited to simply staffing – it also requires strong leadership, governance, community engagement, and diverse partners to steward and champion the work. Without these critical elements, communities find themselves unable to build financial or community support to advance projects and deliver services.

Capacity limitations aren't limited to rural areas: local governments of all sizes may experience the funding and capacity challenges that rural communities face. These challenges are rooted in structural causes, and effective solutions will require policy change and sustained investment over the long term. In the short term, however, capacity building programs can support more immediate community efforts to plan and implement projects. Michigan's Office of Rural Prosperity works closely with rural communities to truly understand their needs and has designed programming to build capacity in rural communities.

Resources and Connections that Build Capacity

The Michigan Office of Rural Prosperity currently offers two programs designed to build rural capacity: the Rural Readiness Grant Program and the Rural Readiness Network.

The Rural Readiness Grant Program provides funds for staff, plans, and collaborative initiatives that will catalyze new projects or investment.

The Rural Readiness Network, provides non-financial support for capacity, utilizing staff to work directly with communities to help them identify partners and resources, plan and prioritize projects, collaborate and convene partners, and learn from peers and experts to move projects and initiatives forward. Other capacity-building programs are in the works, including a Rural Leadership initiative that will build long term leadership and governance skills in rural communities across the state.

The Rural Readiness Grant Program

The Michigan Office of Rural Prosperity designed and administers the Rural Readiness Grant Program to provide rural communities (via tax-exempt organizations) with up to $50,000 for capacity building activities, development readiness initiatives, partnership and plan formation, and cross sector collaboration. Since the first round of funding was awarded in 2024, Michigan's Office of Rural Prosperity has awarded over $1.8 million, helping over 40 rural communities with small budgets organize solutions to their most pressing needs — preparing for new housing and businesses, building grant-writing expertise, creating innovative health and childcare solutions and more. With a 13:1 return on investment, the grant program demonstrates the power of investing in community-led solutions in rural Michigan to build prosperity.

The Rural Readiness Network

The Rural Readiness Network strives to build readiness in rural communities through peer connections, targeted training and technical assistance, and connections to resource providers. The Network is comprised of tax-exempt organizations serving rural communities. Each organization completes a brief intake form, sharing key information about the organization's projects, priorities, partners, and capacity which informs a longer, intentional follow-up conversation with one of our staff members. The information and relationships developed through the Network

2025 MAP BOARD ELECTION

The American Planning Association (APA) runs MAP's electronic election. We have 3 open seats and 8 candidates running. Go to www.planningmi.org for details about the nominees. Ballots will be available online starting August 6, and email reminders will be sent by APA to all Michigan APA and Michigan Chapter Only Members. The voting window is open from August 6 through September 5, 2025. Keep your eyes open for an Election Email from APA. MAP will also send reminders. The APA election announcement might go to your spam, especially for our Chapter Only Members (typically planning and zoning officials and elected city council and township board members). MAP will send reminders within a day of all APA voting notices.

allows for targeted referrals and resources that will help communities organize, plan, collaborate, and secure resources for local priorities.

Active engagement in the network provides additional avenues to access information, resources, and experiences that advance community priorities. All network members are invited to:

- Access the Rural Resource Hub, an online platform with curated information about funding and technical assistance opportunities, tools and templates, and a message board to connect with other network members.
- Attend the annual Network Convening, a gathering of rural community leaders and resource partners (agencies, funders, technical support providers) intentionally designed to advance network members priorities.
- Participate in one or more working groups facilitated by Michigan's Office of Rural Prosperity to bring together network members tackling similar projects to identify resources, strategies, and solutions.
- Connect regularly with Rural Prosperity staff who will serve as a point of contact and thought partner.

Building Capacity Builds Community Readiness and Resiliency

As Michigan and the nation continue to experience tremendous shifts in population, the economy, and climate, it's clear that leadership, staff, and expertise are necessary for communities to plan for the future and build resilience to change.

Local governments and community-focused organizations across the state have identified capacity-building as a critical ingredient in planning, writing grants, and developing important community projects, and the Office of Rural Prosperity is honored to support their work with programming designed to meet their capacity needs.

The Office of Rural Prosperity deeply values the work that local, regional and Tribal leaders are doing every day to make their communities stronger and looks forward to continuing work as a partner to find solutions to their most pressing problems. As an interagency liaison between rural communities and state agencies, federal partners, philanthropy, universities and more, the Office of Rural Prosperity is incredibly grateful for the strong partnerships across the state and country that support rural communities.

The Michigan Office of Rural Prosperity was created in 2022 to strategize, coordinate, and advocate for rural needs in policy and program decisions at the state level, help rural communities navigate resources, and build a strong rural network that keeps rural communities connected to each other and the resources they need to meet their goals.

The next Michigan Planner E-dition *will have case studies and inks to Michigan Office of Rural Prosperity programs.*

Shining a Light on Change: 2025 Updates to Michigan's Solar Zoning Guidebook Webinar

September 3 | 12:30 - 2 PM | MAP Members: $15

Through EGLE's Renewable Energy Academy, MAP has partnered with U-M's Graham Sustainability Institute and MSU Extension to provide information on the latest ***Planning & Zoning for Solar Energy Systems: A Guide for Michigan Local Governments, 2025 Edition***. The guide is **free** and is being shipped to all planning commissions within the state of Michigan. Join us to better understand the siting of solar energy systems relative to local planning policies, zoning regulations, and state law. ***Register at www.planningmi.org***

MDOT Offers FREE Technical Advice on Active Transportation Projects!

Does your community have a biking and walking transportation project that it wants to construct? Have you heard about grants and wondered if a project is eligible?

Contact your MDOT grant coordinator! You aren't bothering them. This is what they do. If you want, they will even evaluate projects in your community's capital improvement plan or master plan to determine which are likely the most competitive for federal grant funding.

Don't delay, contact them today to plan future transportation improvements.

Details and links to MDOT's TAP and SRTS programs will be in the upcoming Michigan Planner E-dition.

OR, scan the QR codes below to find your grant coordinator:

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Topics unique to local officials

Reviewing Zoning Board of Appeals Petitions: Part 4 – Variances

Excerpted from the Zoning Board of Appeals Toolkit, a Michigan Association of Planning publication

Variances

One of the several unique responsibilities of the zoning board of appeals is to hear variance requests. A variance is a 'license to use property in a way not permitted under an ordinance.' Variances must be considered carefully and under normal circumstances should be rarely granted. In general, variances should be the minimum necessary to permit use of the land; be reasonable; and crafted as narrowly as possible in the context of the ordinance. Improperly granting variances can undermine the integrity of the ordinance.

Non-use Variances

What is a "non-use" variance?

A non-use variance is a modification of the literal provisions of the ordinance that would cause practical difficulties for the property owner due to circumstances unique to the property. It is a relaxation of underlying zone district standards.

This term, often used interchangeably with "dimensional variance," refers to any variance request that does not deal with the use of the property.

Common examples of non-use variances:

- ☑ Building an accessory structure closer to the property line than what is allowed.
- ☑ Adding onto a house such that the addition encroaches into the required rear yard setback.
- ☑ Adding onto a commercial building that exists on a lot that does not meet the minimum width or area requirement (a legal non-conforming lot).
- ☑ Building or changing a sign that exceeds the height limit for the district.
- ☑ Planting fewer trees than required for a site plan because of existing natural features on a site.

Standards for evaluating non-use variances

As deemed by the Michigan courts, proof of a *practical difficulty* is the key criterion for an applicant to qualify for a non-use variance. This means that the ZBA must find that the applicant has demonstrated a practical difficulty by satisfying all of the mandatory tests. **Each of the following tests must be true in order for the variance to be granted:**

- ☑ Strict compliance with a requirement will have the effect of unreasonably preventing the property owner from using the property for a purpose permitted by the ordinance or would be unnecessarily burdensome. ***Financial burdens are NOT sufficient for justifying a non-use variance.***
- ☑ Substantial justice would be achieved for the applicant as well as for other property owners in the district if the variance is approved.
- ☑ The requested variance is the least relief required in order to afford substantial justice for the property owners involved.
- ☑ The practical difficulty is due to uniquely identified characteristics of the property. ***This means that similar conditions in the surrounding neighborhood are NOT a sufficient justification for a variance.***
- ☑ The difficulty is not self-created.

Variances are not intended to allow property owners to avoid compliance with the zoning ordinance. The variance process is provided to recognize that not all properties have the same physical characteristics. Granting of unwarranted variances has the long term effect of shifting zoning policy making to the ZBA and away from elected officials.

The burden of proof is on the applicant to provide sufficient information to the board in order for the ZBA to evaluate the practical difficulty tests. The community may include the test for practical difficulty on the variance application so the applicant can address each test. Minimally, applicants must be informed about the tests.

When making a motion to approve or deny a non-use variance, the ZBA motion should include "findings of fact." (See Part 2 in this series). These findings should include each of the above criteria and how the ZBA determined the applicant has or has not met the standard. These findings of fact should be included in the official record of the meeting.

Next in the series: Appeals and Interpretations

To purchase a copy of the Zoning Board of Appeals Toolkit, go to www.planningmi.org.

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Check www.planningmi.org for event details.

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September 3, 2025
Virtual

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August 12, 2025
Grand Rapids

Safe Routes to School Regional Training
September 16, 2025
Kalamazoo

Safe Routes to School Regional Training
September 25, 2025
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September 25, 2025
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October 22-24, 2025
Kalamazoo

Transportation Bonanza
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In Person and Virtual

National APA Conference
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