



Pittsfield Charter Township

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Office of the Supervisor

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April 22nd marked the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. As is well known, on that day in 1970, about 20 million people in the U.S. took part in demonstrations, marches, and environmental cleanups. What is less well-known is that a few weeks earlier, on March 11th, about 1,000 people gathered at University of Michigan's Quad for a mock trial of a 1959 Ford highlighting the role of automobiles in contributing toward pollution and socio-economic divisions (Smithsonian Magazine, April 2020).

In fact, even 50 years later, the role of the automobile remains secondary in mainstream public discourse about promoting sustainability with predominant significance attributed to trees and open space preservation. This has resulted in outcomes such as a doubling of developed land use (i.e., sprawl) in the State of Michigan, over these 50 years, even though our population reminds roughly the same. This sprawled development pattern supports a dependence on automobiles, which are one of the largest contributors to air pollution, and has created physical barriers between economically vibrant and distressed communities, with the current pandemic highlighting these stark divisions.

Over the past decade, our administration has continually promoted equitable sustainability. In the past, these decisions have ranged from facing resistance to the cutting of some trees to facilitate construction of, what is now, a vast, award-winning, greenway and non-motorized network that has contributed to reduced reliance on automobiles. We also faced resistance for infill projects that required taking down berms; but because of these projects, today, many of you in Pittsfield Township have amenities such as pharmacies, groceries, and restaurants within walking/biking distance of where you live. As such, our focus is on both green space preservation and, equally, on promoting multi-modal access that supports local, self-reliance. These outcomes, stemming from an overall commitment to sustainability, are serving our community well during the pandemic crisis. In fact, the greenways, sidewalks, pedestrian crossings, neighborhood parks, and retail centers with multi-modal access are a result of this 10-year focus.

Last Wednesday, we continued this approach by relying on a carbon footprint study that calculated the impact of two development options through carbon sequestration of trees, open space preservation, and degree of reliance on automobiles. The first choice was to retain the entirety of an existing conservation easement that runs through the middle of properties zoned for development; and the other was to retain the majority of the existing conservation easement plus expand it by 125% onto an adjacent, larger location in order to accommodate for multi-modal features. The carbon footprint study concluded that the latter option, even after calculating for the loss of a few trees would, in the long-term, provide for not only better air and soil quality but also equity since it provides for amenities such as a health care facility close to residential areas which will be accessible by walking, biking, and transit from neighborhoods and also from the existing adjacent retail areas.

It is our hope that as we take this deliberative, complex approach, we may provide for a blueprint that promotes not just sustainability but one that is inclusive and respectful of all members of our community as we RISE to the challenge of building a stronger, more unified Pittsfield Township!

Mandy Grewal, Ph.D.
