HORIZON
Community Planning

Memorandum

To: City of Saugatuck Planning Commission

Date: October 10, 2025

From: David M. Jirousek, AICP

RE: Master Plan- Survey Results and Open House Event

Community Survey Overview

The City of Saugatuck Master Plan Survey was open from August through early October and received a total of 386 responses. The survey was conducted to gather input from residents, business owners, and stakeholders to inform the development of the City's next Master Plan. The following sections provide preliminary observations from the survey data.

Preliminary Observations

A total of 222 respondents identified as full-time or part-time residents of the City of Saugatuck. In a separate question, 158 respondents identified as full-time primary home residents, while 72 identified as part-time secondary home residents (230 respondents total). These figures represent 46 and 21 percent, respectively, of the 340 individuals who answered that question. Of the residents, 80 percent reported living in single-family detached homes in the City.

Just over half of all participants were 60 years of age or older, and 39 percent were between the ages of 40 and 59. Gender representation was balanced, with 182 females (48 percent) and 178 males (47 percent) responding, while 20 participants (5 percent) chose not to identify their gender.

Almost 20 percent of respondents had a background in business, finance, or law, and 12 percent represented the retail and service industry. Nearly half, or 47 percent, do not currently travel for work, while 23 percent commute outside of Allegan County, and 18 percent travel from home to a place of business within the City.

When asked about reasons to live in the City, the most frequent responses included small-town character, the rivers and Lake Michigan, and arts and culture. In defining small-town community character, respondents most often mentioned a walkable downtown, mom-and-pop shops, arts and culture, quaint, smaller-scale cottages and homes, and walkable neighborhoods.

Participants expressed strong support for maintaining and encouraging local businesses. Most respondents felt the amount of commercial business in the City is appropriate, though several noted that additional retail stores, galleries, and restaurants would be desirable. Over 57 percent of participants believed that establishing a Downtown Development Authority would be important for allowing innovative methods to fund public infrastructure improvements.

Most participants agreed with establishing a multi-use pathway along Perryman and Park Street to Oval Beach and indicated that the chain ferry is an important part of the City's transportation system. Additionally, 87 percent of participants believed that preserving existing neighborhood character should remain a City priority. The majority, or 67 percent, strongly agreed and 25 percent somewhat agreed, that the existing tree canopy should be preserved and new street trees should be planted.

When asked to identify top overall priorities for the City of Saugatuck, respondents most frequently selected the following:

1. A vibrant, strong, and attractive downtown that maintains small-town charm
2. A welcoming and inclusive community
3. Safe and accessible sidewalks, crosswalks, and pathways for pedestrians and cyclists
4. Environmental sustainability and resiliency

For the broader Tri-Communities area, the top four priorities identified were:

1. Tourism
2. Environmental sustainability and resiliency
3. Economic development and job creation
4. Regional pathways

Next Steps

As we continue to assess this data, the Planning Commission may wish to examine how specific groups responded to certain questions, such as comparing residents and non-residents, or identifying how business owners ranked overall priorities. Further review of these cross-tabulations may assist in understanding community perspectives and guiding Master Plan policy direction.

Open House Overview

This section provides a summary of input received during the Saugatuck community engagement event held on September 30, 2025. The session included several interactive feedback boards designed to gather intuitive, first-impression responses regarding community values, priorities, and future vision. A total of 28 participants signed in, although some participants did not check in at the welcome table.

What People Love About Saugatuck

Participants expressed deep appreciation for Saugatuck's small-town charm, strong sense of community, and the friendly, welcoming nature of its residents. Many noted the importance of the City's walkable downtown, local shops and restaurants, historic architecture, and arts and cultural activities. The natural setting, waterfront, and surrounding landscape were also commonly mentioned as defining features that contribute to Saugatuck's unique character and livability.

People Want More

Responses suggested a desire for expanded access to public spaces, greenways, and the waterfront. Participants also expressed interest in more year-round events and activities to support both residents and visitors outside of the peak tourist season. Other priorities included maintaining kindness and inclusivity in community interactions, improving access to public beaches, and better managing the impact of tourism while maintaining the City's character and quality of life.

People Want Less

The most frequent comments focused on limiting the proliferation of short-term rentals (STRs) and reducing crowding during the tourist season. Several participants noted concerns about new structures that block river views, the visual impact of new development, and increased taxes and regulations. There was also a general preference for minimizing overdevelopment and maintaining the City's scale and authenticity.

The Future of Saugatuck – 10 to 20 Years

Participants were divided between wanting to preserve the City's current look and feel and supporting moderate changes that improve livability. Many respondents indicated that Saugatuck should remain much the same, particularly in maintaining its green spaces, parks, and pedestrian-oriented downtown.

Those favoring change emphasized expanding year-round residency, encouraging local employment opportunities, and reducing traffic congestion. Participants also noted a desire to attract businesses that support the local economy while respecting community values.

Top Community Priorities

Based on dot voting, the top priorities identified for the Master Plan included:

- A lively, strong, and appealing downtown that maintains small-town charm.
- Year-round, residential community
- A strong cultural and arts community
- Safe and accessible sidewalks, crosswalks, and pathways for pedestrians and cyclists.

Saugatuck Bucks

- Results from the Saugatuck Bucks activity indicate that participants placed the most significant emphasis on Sidewalks and Paths (40 votes, 1st place), signaling a strong community desire for better walkability, safe crossings, and improved bicycle and pedestrian connections.
- Downtown Improvements (38 votes, tied for 2nd) and Parking (38 votes, tied for 2nd) also ranked highly, reflecting interest in reinvesting in the downtown environment and addressing parking management during peak tourism periods.
- Waterfront Facilities (34 votes, 4th place) followed closely, underscoring the value residents and visitors place on public access to the riverfront and the maintenance of water-related amenities.

- Parks (22 votes, 5th place), Streets (18 votes, 6th place), and Public Art (17 votes, 7th place) received fewer overall tokens but still demonstrate meaningful interest in recreation, infrastructure maintenance, and community aesthetics.

Preserve/Enhance/Transform

Preserve (Green Dots). Preservation areas were the most frequently marked. These comments and dots clustered around:

- Downtown waterfront and harbor front, including Water Street, Main Street, and the area surrounding Wicks Park. Participants expressed a desire to maintain the historic character, walkability, and scale of this area.
- Oval Beach and the surrounding dunes were consistently marked for preservation due to their natural beauty and recreational importance.
- Park Street, Van Dalson Street, and the Kalamazoo River corridor, where residents noted the importance of preserving tree cover, river views, and natural buffers.
- Neighborhood interiors, especially near Francis Street, Elizabeth Street, and north of Main Street, are characterized by the small-town scale and mature trees that contribute to local character.
- Post-it notes also called out the need to preserve river access and view corridors, and to protect wooded residential areas from overdevelopment.

Enhance (Yellow Dots). Enhancement dots were placed in areas where participants saw opportunities for public realm improvements and reinvestment without significant change to land use. Key areas included:

- Downtown intersections and corridors (Butler, Mason, and Culver Streets), where improved pedestrian amenities, landscaping, and streetscape design could strengthen the visitor and resident experience.
- Blue Star Highway corridor, where enhancements such as gateway features, signage, and aesthetic upgrades were recommended.
- School and recreation areas along Elizabeth and Mason Streets were noted by participants for their potential to improve connectivity, provide safe routes, and create community gathering spaces.
- Waterfront access points along the river, where minor improvements could better connect public spaces and parks.

Transform (Red Dots). Transform areas were limited but focused, signaling where the community perceives potential or need for more significant change. These dots were primarily near the marinas, where some participants noted redevelopment potential or reconfiguration to improve waterfront access and other opportunities. Overall, transformation suggestions were strategic and limited to a few specific locations rather than widespread change.

Mobility

Participants placed the most significant emphasis on sidewalk and multi-use path improvements. Specific requests and markings included:

- Filling sidewalk gaps along Butler Street, Griffith Street, and Lake Street.
- Extending sidewalks and paths along Park Street.
- Creating or improving connections to Oval Beach.
- Establishing bike-friendly corridors and safe pedestrian routes linking the downtown to the waterfront and beach areas.
- Post-it notes also called for bike/pedestrian facilities and more bike racks downtown.
- Adding clearer pedestrian signage and designating routes for walking and biking.
- Addressing seasonal congestion and enhancing circulation for all travel modes.

General Comments

Additional written comments emphasized the need for improved bike accommodations, the preservation of the Kalamazoo River, and ensuring that full-time residents continue to have a strong voice in community decisions.