

## CHAPTER THREE

# Village Character & Neighborhoods

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### VISION

*Franklin's visual character makes it one of the most unique communities in Southeast Michigan. Its distinct appearance is obvious when entering the Village, and positive observations about its character are frequently made by residents and visitors. The Village of Franklin's mature tree cover, large lots with well-kept houses, narrow, tree-covered streets, and carefully maintained historic and natural resources contribute to a general feel that has remained more rural than any surrounding community.*

### COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Franklin presents a stark contrast to the built form of surrounding communities, with even through travelers on Thirteen Mile or drivers passing on Telegraph Road noticing distinct transitions as they enter and leave the Village. While Franklin does not retain active agriculture, its larger residential lots, numerous woodlots, and historic Village Center provide it with a more rural feel than other suburbs in the area.

This character is made up of a number of traits that residents wish to maintain and enhance. The Village's historic resources are one important aspect, grounding Franklin's character in history. These resources are discussed in detail in Chapter Four, Historic Areas, which discusses both the Village Center Historic District and some of the features throughout Franklin. The issues and recommendations presented in that chapter are important to any discussion of Franklin's character.

In addition to the historic resources themselves, the Village Center is the most easily definable portion of Franklin's character. With the Village Green, cemetery, homes, small businesses, and civic buildings arranged along the half-mile stretch of Franklin Road from Scenic Highway to the cider mill, just north of Fourteen Mile, the Village Center has a homey, familiar feel completely unlike the parking lot dominated commercial areas that can be found throughout the region.

Finally, the natural landscape throughout Franklin, and the relation of homes to the land, helps define the Village's character. Homes sit on lots of up to 3 acres, most on narrow, winding streets with little sign clutter. Lawns tend to be well-landscaped, and many unbuilt parcels remain wooded, providing habitat for birds and animals. The Franklin Branch of the Rouge River runs through the northeast portion of the Village, and several small ponds and wetlands can be found in the Village.

All of these characteristics are vulnerable to changing times and economic pressures, and require active maintenance. Some mechanisms for preserving them are already in place, such as the Historic District, deed restrictions, and the restriction against sidewalks outside of the Village Center. These measures also provide examples of the tradeoffs involved in preserving a desired character: while limiting sidewalks helps create a more rural feel, the major streets are often hostile to pedestrians and bicyclists; deed restrictions and historic districts maintain certain levels of appearance, but create some limits on owners' ability to use their properties.

Additionally, some specific observations of character will change over time – while horses and historic horse paddocks featured prominently in the 1997 Master Plan Update's discussion of character, very few horses are kept within the Village, making this less important as an aspect of character to focus on.

## Accomplishments since 1997

A number of the recommendations made in the 1997 Master Plan Update have been acted upon since then. Some of these include the *Historic District Design Guidelines* publication created by the Historic District Commission to assist homeowners in maintaining their homes in a fitting fashion, and a community-wide seminar held in 2005 to help residents understand the use of deed restrictions.

Efforts have been taken to bring the Zoning Ordinance into line with the Master Plan, including a revision to height and setback requirements. To address the concern that oversized homes were being constructed on small lots, the zoning was revised to limit the height of a home based on how close it came to the property line, limiting its visual bulk, and setback requirements were increased. The lot split regulations have additionally been amended to provide better control over the creation of new, potentially buildable lots.

Prior to the installation of the sanitary sewer system, malfunctioning septic systems in Franklin posed a risk to groundwater and river water quality. Pressure sanitary sewers have been installed in much of the Village to address this concern. Pressure sewers were used to minimize disruption to the rural-like environment along roadsides.

Finally, efforts have been made to protect and enhance Franklin's tree cover. The Tree Protection Ordinance was enacted to provide better control over tree removal and replacement during new construction, and the Village received a grant from the state Department of Natural Resources for a tree replacement program. This grant is being used, along with Village funds, to plant several hundred hardwoods along Village rights-of-way and provide for the on-going maintenance of the tree cover. In 2005, Franklin was recognized as a Tree City, a designation by the National Arbor Day Foundation and federal Forest Service that endorses the Village's commitment to maintaining a healthy canopy tree cover.

## CHALLENGES TO CHARACTER

Despite existing efforts to maintain Franklin's character, a number of challenges remain. Balancing individuals' ability to enjoy their own properties with the maintenance of the overall character that residents enjoy is a careful process, and regional economic pressures continue to threaten the distinct edge of the community.

### Teardowns and Out-of-Scale Building

Residential construction across the country has been trending towards larger and larger homes, and Franklin has not been immune to this trend. While a few of Franklin's neighborhoods have large enough lots to support the largest contemporary homes, out-of-scale construction can dwarf older and smaller neighboring homes in many neighborhoods. This is a concern both on currently unbuilt lots and in cases where older homes are torn down and replaced with much larger homes.



Additionally, the Village's ability to prevent lot splits is limited by State legislation. Within the minimum lot size requirements of the Zoning Ordinance, lot splits may be possible that would allow new construction to crowd existing homes. While the Zoning Ordinance was recently revised to tie building height to setbacks, limiting the height that could be built close to lot lines, further changes could be considered to limit this phenomenon.

## Non-Residential Encroachment on Village Borders

Those platted lots that have not been built upon and that are on the edges of Franklin present tempting opportunities to commercial developers. This is particularly the case along Telegraph Road and near Northwestern Highway, which are heavily developed outside of the Village. While Franklin's location on these major roads makes the Village particularly desirable to developers, allowing commercial or other non-residential development on Franklin's edges would erode and blur the distinct boundaries of the community. Entering the Village would no longer be such a notable transition.

## Light and Noise Pollution

Some threats to Franklin's character are generally outside of the Village's control. While Franklin's internal streets are mostly low speed, and the Village's Outdoor Light Ordinance forbids illumination, glare, or shadowing on adjacent properties, light and noise from adjacent development spills over into Franklin. Proximity to Telegraph Road, Northwestern Highway, and I-696 provides Franklin residents with excellent access throughout the metropolitan area, but this proximity brings traffic noise and nighttime light pollution from street and parking lot lights. While these impacts detract from the desired feel of living in Franklin, little if anything can be done to mitigate the sources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAINTAINING CHARACTER

Since the maintenance and enhancement of Franklin's character is not separable from other issues in the Village, many recommendations from other chapters in this Plan are applicable, such as creating walking paths alongside major roads, preparing a Landscape Master Plan, and preserving the community of small independent businesses that make up the Village Center. Impacts on Franklin's overall character – positive or negative – should be considered during the implementation of any recommendations from this Plan.

As character is additionally a somewhat subjective measure, efforts to enhance it should involve affected stakeholders as much as is possible. Maintaining a certain character will often mean limiting what may be done on certain property, and should be done with sensitivity to the concerns both of neighborhoods as groups and of individual residents and business owners.

### *Maintain residential uses along boundaries*

One of the goals of the 1997 Master Plan Update is to, "Maintain the integrity of the periphery of the Village so as to prevent intrusion or encroachment of intense development," and this continues to be an important recommendation. Franklin's municipal borders are the clearest and most sensible point at which to draw a clear distinction and notable transition into the Village. From a developer's standpoint, the Telegraph Road frontage in particular is a good place to put commercial or other non-residential development, but allowing more intense uses will blur the edges of the Village.

Single-family homes already exist along all of the major roads within and around the periphery of Franklin, demonstrating that the unbuilt lots are suited to the low-intensity development currently zoned for. Additionally, maintaining the perimeters of Franklin as single-family homes and occasional vacant woodlots will provide a better buffer for sound and light than more intense development will.

### *Encourage permanent preservation of open lots*

In order to maintain a mature tree cover, provide buffers for noise and light pollution, preserve habitat for wildlife, and natural stormwater filtration for the river, among other benefits, the Village should pursue the preservation of natural open space. In a few locations, this has been done in the process of multi-home development by setting aside some land to maintain as natural space, but developments of this type are infrequent. Much more common are individual vacant lots, or single homes on double lots.

The Village could work with property owners to acquire or seek conservation easements on individual lots where preservation would provide important benefits. Owners probably cannot be expected to offer conservation easements without any compensation, but a combination of funding sources could include partial donation of development rights by the owner, combined with Village funds, neighborhood association contributions, and outside funding sources. In the Townships near Ann Arbor, for example, the “greenbelt” purchase of development rights program has received dedicated funding through millages in the City of Ann Arbor and the Townships, used in conjunction with federal farmland preservation grants and donations of up to 10% of the value by the landowners.

The Village of Franklin’s fiscal capacity to purchase land and development rights alone is limited, but could be used to leverage conservation easements on strategic parcels. These parcels might include lots along the river; lots that could be used to provide short, safe pedestrian and bicycle paths from neighborhoods to the Village Center; and parcels that have significant visibility near the entrances to the Village. The Oakland Land Conservancy, Friends of the Rouge, and similar organizations might be able to assist in arranging funding sources for land preservation.

### *Housing style variety*

Hundreds of homes have been built or undergone major renovation in the past two decades. The outcome is a broad variety of styles of architecture, from traditional to avant garde. Modern-day examples of building design coexist with older homes from every decade back to the late 1800s. This mixture of housing styles, sizes, materials, and designs is a part of the Village character. Such variety ought to be encouraged because it adds interest to the community, in contrast to the dull sameness of housing in so many suburbs. Notwithstanding the great variety of housing, the rural characteristics of the Village are the threads of commonality that hold the neighborhoods together.



### *Design pathways to blend in the rural landscape*

A goal of this plan is to develop pathways throughout the Village. The purpose of pathways is to create a network of safe routes for pedestrians and bicyclists to move around the Village. Pathways should be designed to blend into the scenic rural landscape. Accordingly, they should generally be curvilinear and constructed of asphalt or another aggregate material, like crushed limestone. Straight, uniform slabs of concrete sidewalk are not appropriate, except in the Village Center.

### *Continue deed restriction updates*

As deed restrictions can be used to define and protect valued contributions to character at a finer-grained level than the Zoning Code, they may be used to protect character with greater sensitivity to the concerns and property interests of neighborhood residents. The Village should continue to support neighborhoods in renewing and updating deed restriction, and in pursuing enforcement of these regulations.