

## **HORSES AND PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT**

By M. Jean Ligon, Chair, MHC Environmental, Land Use & Zoning Committee  
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Michigan ranks fourth in the nation in its rate of farmland conversion, losing 85,000 acres per year to development. Michigan loses over 10 acres of open space and farmland every hour to residential and retail development and almost half of all Michigan wetlands have been destroyed. Meanwhile, the American Medical Equestrian Association estimates that approximately 540,000 people may be expected to participate in equestrian recreational activities each year in Michigan, not including tourists from other states that visit Michigan to trail ride. The dramatic and continuing growth of recreational horseback riders places an increasing demand for additional private and public lands available to horseback riders.

According to the Michigan Department of Agriculture, in 1994 there were more than 130,000 horses in Michigan. Importantly, the horses are concentrated in the same areas as people. The southern half of the lower peninsula has 70% of Michigan's 130,000 horses, with most of that 70% in southeast Michigan. With more than 6,000 horses, Livingston County is the state's third most horse-populous county. Oakland County (#1) and Washtenaw County (#4), two of the three other "top four" most populous counties, adjoin Livingston County. As Livingston County develops, the number of people who want to keep horses will provide a strong and growing market for such properties. The demand is already greater than available home sites zoned for horses. This is an important agricultural land use that utilizes smaller parcels (10 acre lots primarily, but also 5 acre lots), and it has not been addressed at all.

Zoning that specifically accommodates and encourages the private keeping of horses has enormous benefits for the local community. Based on Michigan's 1994 study, the Michigan horse industry contributes more than \$2 billion to the state's economy and generates more than \$40 million in taxes each year. The horse industry's contribution to the U.S. gross domestic product is greater than the motion picture services, railroad transportation, furniture and fixtures manufacturing, and tobacco product manufacturing industries. In terms of employment, the industry directly employs more people than railroads, radio and television broadcasting, petroleum and coal products manufacturing, and tobacco product manufacturing.

Most important for local governments, however, is that horse owners spend their money locally. Their purchases of hay, grain, fencing, stables, tack, veterinary, farrier and other products and services are primarily local purchases. And because these expenditures are significant—the average annual maintenance cost *per horse* is roughly \$275 a month (\$3,300 a year), and the vast majority of horse owners own an average of 2.5 equine—horse owners provide great economic benefit to their local communities, both in dollars and jobs.

Oakland County's Highland Township was the first Michigan township to formally recognize the substantial economic contribution of horses on the local economy. In 2003, it declared itself an equestrian community and began active support and encouragement of the equestrian presence in the township. One thing the township has done to that end is to foster interconnected horse trails (called "bridle paths") throughout the township by encouraging developers to include them in their proposed developments. All such bridle paths are also open to pedestrian foot traffic, and where visibility and width are adequate, they may also be able to accommodate

bicycles.

Developments accommodating horse ownership through an interconnecting system of bridle/pedestrian paths in, through, and around the perimeter of individual developments, in addition to providing a significant economic benefit to the local community, also create a sense of neighborhood within the development, link the community's various developments together, and serve as a link between public recreational trails systems. So long as they are not paved—and bridle paths of sod/dirt, crushed limestone, or similar surfaces are preferred for horses—such trails are comparatively inexpensive to build and can be easily maintained in segments by each "parent" homeowners association they traverse.

Experience has shown that these bridle paths increase property values within the development and provide a safe alternative to walking/riding on the shoulders of roads. They also foster small-acre agricultural uses, preserve open space and enhance the rural character of the community.

Finally, contrary to the commonly held notion that horses are kept primarily on large acreage farms, 64% of horses are kept on 20 acres or less. Nationally, a number of communities have zoning that encourages the keeping of horses, some on lots as small as half an acre. Excellent information is available at [www.elcr.org](http://www.elcr.org).

The Master Plan for Livingston County's Putnam Township, a community with a large equine population (every 10<sup>th</sup> "resident" is a horse), recognized the many benefits to the township its equestrian community provides and openly supports and encourages its presence. It's horse-friendly tenor is ground-breaking good news for Michigan horsemen. The Putnam Township Master Plan can be found at: [www.putnamtwp.us](http://www.putnamtwp.us). (Click on "government"; then "planning commission"; then "Master Plan", then "Chapter 4, Future Land Use" and, finally, "Agricultural Preservation (AP)" (page 41)).

County, township and village governments can take advantage of the economic and other benefits that accompany the keeping of horses by servicing and encouraging the growth of their local equestrian community. One excellent way of doing that is by following in the steps of Highland and Putnam Townships and other similarly persuaded communities with respect to zoning and proposed development strategies that are openly "horse friendly."