

Muskegon Lake Vision 2020

Executive Summary



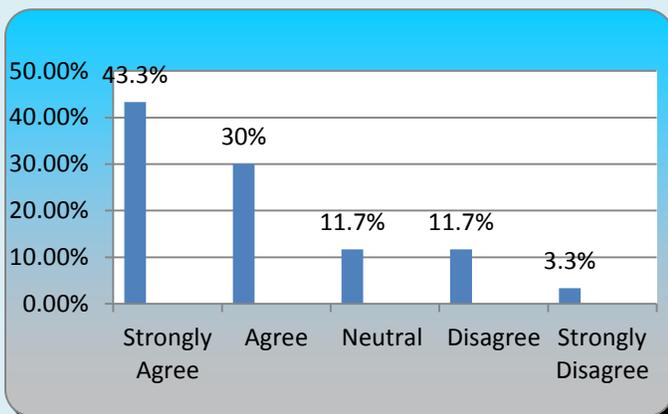
Muskegon Lake Vision 2020 was initiated to gather broad input from the public and private sector, interested citizens and community stakeholders of diverse interests. Through its public input process, it uncovered the perceived quality of Muskegon Lake's economic, environmental, residential, and recreational assets. The purpose of this document is to provide information and a platform for a unified vision that will guide sustainable development and utilization of Muskegon Lake and its shoreline into the future. The document will be useful as reference material for communities, developers, natural resource managers, landowners, and the public as the community develops detailed plans to improve the quality and sustainability of Muskegon Lake's social, economic, residential and recreational assets.

The West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission worked in partnership with the Muskegon County Port Advisory Committee and the Muskegon Lake Watershed Partnership to develop the Vision 2020 planning process and organize community forums. It was decided to hold four separate forums in June 2015 to focus on Muskegon Lake assets: Natural Resources/Environment, Outdoor Recreation, Commerce/Port, and Residential. Each forum featured a presentation by a topic expert and provided factual information regarding the current condition of the forum's subject matter. Attendees then participated in a polling survey designed to evaluate the quantity, distribution, accessibility, and aesthetics of the asset being discussed. Lastly, attendees were divided into four breakout areas where they elaborated upon and discussed responses to the polling questions and provided additional input and suggestions.



Natural Resources/Environment – The Natural Resources/Environment asset was defined as surface water, fish and wildlife habitat, wetlands, the adjacent terrestrial shoreline, aquatic and riparian resources, including native fish and wildlife.

The Sustainability of Muskegon Lake's Natural Resource asset is a local responsibility.



Muskegon Lake is a Great Lakes coastal wetland located on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. It is a drowned river mouth formation, nestled within the largest assemblage of freshwater dunes in the world. Muskegon Lake was designated a Great Lakes Area of Concern (AOC) in 1985 because beneficial uses were impaired by historic, industrial disposal practices and shoreline alterations that filled open waters and degraded aquatic habitat. In recent years, approximately \$40 million in state and federal funds have been invested in AOC cleanup and restoration. It is estimated that by 2018, an additional \$33 million in federal funds will be leveraged to carry out the final restoration needed to remove Muskegon Lake from the list of Great Lakes AOCs.

During the Natural Resources/Environment forum, a wide variety of values were noted, including Muskegon Lake's connection to Lake Michigan, its size and depth, fishing, wildlife, shoreline beauty, scenic views and all types of motorized and non-motorized boating. Strong linkages between valued natural resource assets and recreational activities were evident. Participants discussed the need for post-restoration and management of the restored Muskegon Lake shoreline and the need for comprehensive coastal resiliency planning to protect water quality, natural resources and recreational amenities.

Outdoor Recreation – Outdoor Recreation was defined as structural and service-related amenities that provide access or enhance experiences for water-dependent activities such as boating, swimming, fishing, scenic viewing, biking, walking, birding, hunting, etc.

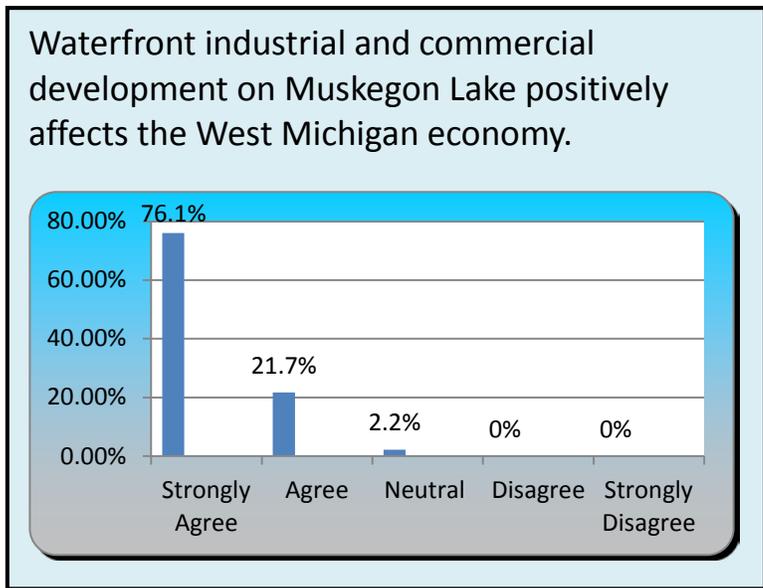
Outdoor recreation associated with Muskegon Lake is comprised of an array of public and private recreation opportunities. They coexist and flourish alongside the spectrum of assets and uses of the lake. Recreation on Muskegon Lake is an attractive selling point for perspective new residents, a staple of the local tourism economy and is a major source of leisure activities for residents and visitors alike. It is widely assumed that recreational opportunities on and around the lake positively contribute to the local quality of life and the economy.

Comments and reactions collected during this forum reflected an overall positive attitude towards Muskegon Lake's outdoor recreation assets. Most of the discussions either focused on or implied matters along the south shoreline of the lake. The most common criticism revolved around the underutilization of Muskegon Lake for recreation and tourism. Participants also noted a strong correlation between the natural resources of the lake and recreation.

- Identified "Needs" or "Opportunities" to improve outdoor recreation around Muskegon Lake:**
- Lakefront dining
 - Children's parks and swimming beaches
 - Downtown Muskegon waterfront access, for both pedestrians and boaters
 - Information, promotion, and signage
 - Kayak/canoe facilities and rentals
 - Transient boat slips
 - Community events and festivals

Commerce/Port – The Commerce/Port asset was defined as light manufacturing, marine, light industrial, logistics, aggregate shipping, foreign trade zones, and container storage. The definition did not include retail, recreation, etc.

Muskegon Lake is a vital asset for commercial activity in the region for several reasons. First, Muskegon Lake is the largest and deepest port located on the east coast of Lake Michigan. The lake's navigational channel to Lake Michigan is maintained at a depth of 29 feet, deep enough to accommodate ocean-going ships. Second, Muskegon Lake is internationally accessible through established marine freight corridors utilizing the Great Lakes system. Third, intermodal connections to the port (rail, highway, and regional airport) connect regional commerce to the world from Muskegon. Finally, the Port of Muskegon hosts a number of established commercial port facilities engaged in commercial activity on the lake.



Participants of the Commerce/Port forum shared a wide variety of ideas concerning current and future commercial port activity on Muskegon Lake. These ideas include needed infrastructure improvements to service a multimodal logistics hub, as well as training and education for port related jobs. Participants also noted a need for additional collaboration from local leaders; the establishment of a governance structure; and an increased level of public relations, marketing, and communication efforts for the port. The establishment of a water taxi on the lake was another idea. Forum participants also stated the need to support existing port facilities while encouraging future commercial port activities towards the east end of Muskegon Lake.

Residential – The definition of residential includes single family homes, multi-family, condominiums, apartments, mobile homes, rentals, senior living and all types of residential homes.

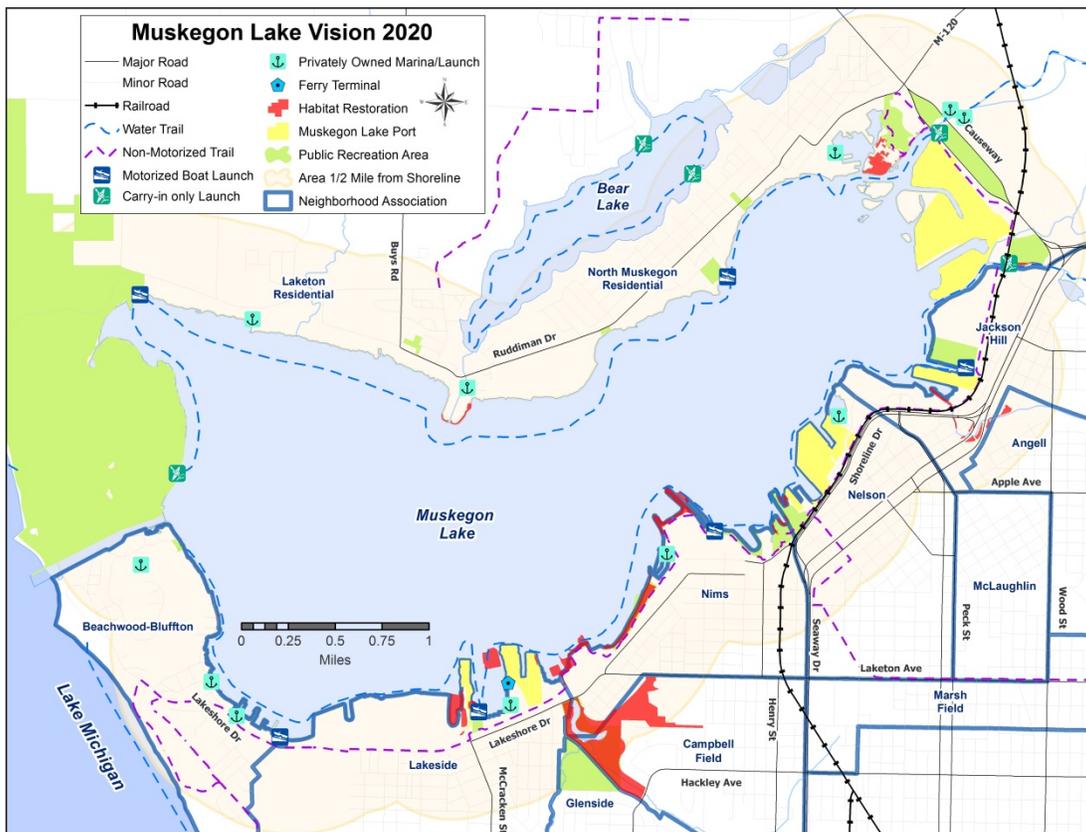
Muskegon Lake is boarded by the City of Muskegon on the south side, the City of North Muskegon on the north side, and Laketon Township on the north/west side. The portion in the City of Muskegon is unique in that there are several neighborhood associations that meet regularly with city officials and provide input for those areas to city government. The City of North Muskegon and Laketon Township are not set up in this way, but do have several neighborhoods within their jurisdictions, as well as some of the more highly valued properties around the lake. Zoning in these areas is quite different as well, with primarily the entire north portion of the lake being dedicated to residential and light commercial. On the south side there is more of a mix of residential, commercial, and industrial uses. Several areas in the City of Muskegon have been converted from brownfields to residential uses.

Comments and reactions collected during this forum reflected an overall positive attitude towards Muskegon Lake’s diverse and wide mix of housing and residential options. A majority of the participants felt that there are options for a wide range of income levels near the lake, but the variety may be somewhat limited. It was also the strong opinion of participants that the residential areas are crucial to the aesthetic value of the area surrounding Muskegon Lake, within the mixed uses such as light commercial and recreation adding to this value.

Identified “Needs” or “Opportunities” to improve residential areas around Muskegon Lake:

- Sappi property renovation
- Code enforcement needs to be followed
- Trails and bike paths
- Preservation of existing homes and buildings
- More public access (not just boat launches)
- Public boating access downtown

A Sustainable Way Forward – The visioning process brought together community stakeholders of diverse interests and gathered input from the public sector, private sector, and interested citizens. As noted at the forums, Muskegon Lake is an extremely treasured asset to the community. Forum participants greatly value the resources of the lake, demonstrating tremendous pride in its future potential and a strong sense of responsibility towards its protection. The assets of Muskegon Lake are well established and intersect regularly as citizens, visitors, and businesses interact with Muskegon Lake. The following map provides a visual reference of Muskegon Lake assets to illustrate their intersection and geographic orientation.



The citizens of Muskegon County take great pride in Muskegon Lake and its rich history as an economic engine for the community. They remember the environmental degradation that occurred which led to the lake's designation as a Great Lakes Area of Concern. They have also witnessed the incredible transformation of the lake and surrounding community over the past thirty years as cleanup efforts and new development projects have taken place.

During the four public forums, participants shared their passion and love for Muskegon Lake, as well as their desire for it to reach its full potential as a regional economic catalyst. To realize that potential, the community must work together on future development efforts and market/promote the assets of Muskegon Lake. However, understandably, there is great concern that future development related to Muskegon Lake occurs in a sustainable manner. Maintaining the environmental integrity of Muskegon Lake well into the future was a main theme shared by attendees of all four forums.

Utilizing Muskegon Lake as a recreational draw was another common theme discussed in the forums. Public access to the lake was a priority for many attendees. Participants noted the need for additional opportunities to interact with Muskegon Lake through scenic viewing (such as additional restaurants overlooking the lake), lakefront parcels, fishing piers, boat launches, transient boat slips, and even a water taxi to transport people to various locations around the lake.

Participants realized the economic importance of Muskegon Lake and are interested in the potential for future commercial port development. However, some concerns were raised as to the location and type of such development. Some participants showed a desire for commercial port development to be concentrated along the eastern portion of the lake, while others wanted to make sure that existing commercial port facilities are supported in their current location. Overall, many attendees supported additional commercial port development on Muskegon Lake as long as it: (1) is conducted sustainably; (2) does not detract from the aesthetic beauty of the shoreline; and (3) is not a nuisance. Ninety-eight percent of participants at the Commerce/Port forum agreed or strongly agreed that waterfront industrial and commercial development on Muskegon Lake positively affects the West Michigan economy.

Forum participants generally held a positive attitude toward the residential assets around Muskegon Lake and the value they add to the community. Attendees expressed a desire to see blighted properties remediated and revealed a need to increase the number and variety of housing opportunities. Maintaining public access to Muskegon Lake and scenic viewsheds were also priorities.

Due to the relationships between Muskegon Lake's many assets, any future development, whether Natural Resources, Recreation, Commercial Port or Residential, must consider all other uses to maintain the sustainability of Muskegon Lake. Citizens, community leaders, elected officials, and the private sector must all work together to bring this vision to a reality.

Common Themes and Perceptions

- Increased Promotion of Recreational Opportunities
- Additional Recreational Activities
- More Public Access
- Improve Signage and Wayfinding
- Protect/Improve Scenic Beauty and Lake "Views"
- Cleanup of Blighted Properties
- Continued Habitat Restoration, Softening of Shoreline, and Environmental Stewardship
- Increased Housing Options
- Better Communication
- Increased Cooperation and Collaboration

