

Executive Summary

This Practicum Project was conducted during the spring semester of 2018 and is a collaboration between the Michigan State University Urban and Regional Planning Program, Fort Gratiot Township, and St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission. The purpose of this project was to outline strategies to enhance and retain the economic viability of the Birchwood Mall, located in Fort Gratiot Township, Michigan. The strategies described in this report provide a framework and vision for the future repurposing of the mall property.

Fort Gratiot Township is located directly north of the City of Port Huron, with the entire eastern boundary of the township bordered by Lake Huron. To gain a better understanding of the demographic, economic, and land use needs of Fort Gratiot Township and the surrounding communities, the Practicum Team collected data from several sources. These included the United States Census Bureau, Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) Business Analyst, and site observations by Practicum team. Local data was also provided by the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

Demographic research included in this report contains a socioeconomic profile, which was used to determine current characteristics of the Fort Gratiot Township population. Socioeconomic data most relevant to the future of the Birchwood Mall includes trends in both population age and housing stock. The median age of the Fort Gratiot Township population has been increasing over the past two decades, rising from 38.9 in 2000 to 45.2 in 2016. Housing information indicates single-family housing is the largest housing type in the township, and the majority of the population consists of homeowners as opposed to renters.

The Retail MarketPlace Profile included in this Report was conducted to identify retail sectors in high demand in the Fort Gratiot Township region. This profile uncovers areas of significant retail leakage, or retail areas where the local population must travel outside of their community to purchase certain goods. Within a 30-minute drive time of the Birchwood Mall, with the highest amounts of leakage reported in the *Furniture and Home Furnishing Stores*, *Specialty Food Stores*, and *Drinking Places-Alcoholic Beverages* markets. This data suggests encouraging tenants in these retail sectors at the Birchwood Mall may generate increases in retail transactions and foot traffic.

Land use data for Fort Gratiot Township was provided to the Practicum Team by the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission. Analysis of this data, combined with observations from several site visits to the property, indicates the Birchwood Mall is located in a heavily commercial corridor. This commercial area is surrounded mainly by single-family residential neighborhoods to the north and west. The existing conditions survey highlighted poor pedestrian and bicycle access to the mall site, and minimal connectivity to surrounding properties.

This report also includes the following: a site assessment detailing the Birchwood Mall and surrounding properties; a review of the current literature on American shopping mall lifecycles; four case analyses of previously repurposed malls; Fort Gratiot Township stakeholder outreach analysis; and an examination of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats faced by the Birchwood Mall.

The recommendations for the potential repurposing of the Birchwood Mall are based primarily on the demographic, economic, and existing conditions data collected by the Practicum Team throughout the duration of the project, as well as case study analysis. In addition, community dialogue and stakeholder outreach was considered when crafting these recommendations. These

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recommendations are proposed in three phases, with each phase being a guide for redevelopment based on short-term (one to three years), mid-term (four to five years), and long-term (six to ten years) goals. These phases each include a series of objectives, with corresponding action items for consideration by Birchwood Mall owners, Fort Gratiot Township, and other relevant stakeholders. Recommendations are as follows:

| Phase | Objectives |
|---|--|
| Phase I: Modernize Mall Appearance and Retail Mix <i>(Estimated timeframe: one to three years)</i> | 1.1: Attract additional retail tenants and entertainment providers |
| | 1.2: Modernize mall appearance |
| Phase II: Addition of Mixed-use Retail, Commercial, and Office Space <i>(Estimated timeframe: four to five years)</i> | 2.1: Addition of mix of affordable, unique, and high-end restaurants and drinking places |
| | 2.2: Addition of office space |
| | 2.3: Develop green and open spaces at various locations on Birchwood Mall property |
| | 2.4: Addition of recreation space |
| Phase III: Development of Lifestyle Center <i>(Estimated timeframe: six to ten years)</i> | 3.1: Addition of second story |
| | 3.2: Improve road and streetscape infrastructure surrounding the Birchwood Mall Property |
| | 3.3: Encourage multi-modal access to Birchwood Mall |

The recommendations presented in this report, together with the data collected, suggest there are many opportunities to repurpose and reimagine the Birchwood Mall property. The mall is located in a stable community, where it benefits from a large population of homeowners and families with access to disposable income. Though the property has experienced an increasing number of vacancies, data shows a demand for certain types of retail shopping experiences is still present in Fort Gratiot Township. Finally, a large body of research exists illustrating how other struggling shopping centers have successfully repurposed and revitalized their properties; proving there is still consumer demand for the in-person, offline shopping experience. The data and recommendations presented in this report detail the steps the Birchwood Mall can take to become a successfully repurposed shopping center.