



CLAY TOWNSHIP

MASTER PLAN  
2011

# Clay Township Master Plan

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2011

**DRAFT**

**Prepared by:**

CLAY TOWNSHIP PLANNING COMMISSION

**Adopted by:**

CLAY TOWNSHIP BOARD OF TRUSTEES

**Assisted by:**

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Adopted xxxx xx, 2011

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## ***THE VISION***

“Create a local vacation destination full of recreational opportunities, while protecting the environmental, historical, cultural and residential character of the community.”

## **THE DOCTRINE**

- I. Administrators of this Master Plan must separate themselves from decision-making which is based on the many pressures, both politically and emotionally, applied by self interest groups and individuals.
- II. Administrators of this Master Plan must avoid short-range decisions inconsistent with the long-range strategies herein, which will result in the incremental destruction of the intent of this Plan.
- III. Administrators of this Master Plan are charged with an ethical and professional responsibility for obtaining a strong working knowledge of this policy document. This entails understanding the doctrine, the visions, the strategies, the programs and the overall intent of this Plan.



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## PURPOSE OF THE MASTER PLAN

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The Master Plan is a comprehensive document that will provide policy direction to Clay Township over the next several decades; it is intended to guide the future decision-making process as related to land use and development, as well as overall community quality of life within the Township.

The Master Plan is Clay Township's official policy guide for physical improvement and development. It is comprised of both short and long term programs and policies. Since many factors influence land use development patterns, the plan is comprehensive in scope and coverage. It covers the use of land and buildings, the movement of vehicles and pedestrians through public rights-of-way, and the provision of public facilities such as parks, schools and utilities.

The Master Plan serves as an aid for every day decision making. The goals, programs and policies outlined in the Master Plan guide the Planning Commission and Township Board in their decision making on zoning, subdivision approval, capital improvements, and other matters relating to land use and development. This every day guide provides a stable, long-term instrument for decision-making.

It ensures that individual developments are moving toward the common vision and ensures that public dollars are spent wisely. The Master Plan also provides a basis for refining the zoning ordinance, subdivision regulations and other development codes, all of which aid in the implementation of planning policies adopted as part of this plan.

Finally, the Master Plan can serve as a marketing tool to promote Clay Township as a unique place to live and establish a business. By promoting the community vision, officials can use the plan to attract new families and desirable investment to the community for years to come.

## THE PLANNING PROCESS

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Clay Township last adopted/amended its Master Plan in 2002. This plan served as the blueprint for development in Clay Township until the adoption of this plan. A Master Plan is generally a 20-year document. However, in developing counties like St Clair County, plans are often updated more frequently in order to consider changing conditions within the community and its relationship, economically, socially and environmentally, within the larger regional setting.

It is essential that the Master Planning process be conducted within a public forum, opportunities must be provided for public participation and input if it is to be truly representative of the community as a whole and become a successful document. The support of the community can also facilitate implementation. An approach that has been used successfully when planning for the future of a community involves preceding the planning process with an exercise designed to develop "a vision of the future" for the Township.

### **P.A. 33 of 2008:**

The State of Michigan passed enabling legislation in 2008 which consolidated the three different planning acts. This legislation gives local municipalities, through its designated planning commissions, the authority and responsibility to create a long-range plan for development. This ensures that incremental improvements are in line with the long-range vision for the community.

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## HISTORY OF CLAY TOWNSHIP

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Sometimes understanding the history of a Community helps us to understand the decision-making, growth characteristics, successes, and even failures that created the Community character in Clay today.

We have taken excerpts and edited information from the Algonac-Clay Township Historical Society's award winning "The Chronicle" to provide a brief history of Clay Township. Visit the website [www.achistory.com](http://www.achistory.com) for a plethora of interesting history and facts about the Community. The information below is only a fraction of the information that this group has provided on the website and choosing which information to include in this Master Plan proved extremely difficult.

Clay Township is located at the southern end of St. Clair County. The Community is surrounded on east and south by two of its greatest assets, Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River. To the north and west are the townships of Cottrellville and Ira, respectively. Adding to the beauty, recreation and environmental assets of Clay Township are Harsens Island, Dickinson Island and Russell Island.

Clay is one of the four townships that originally comprised the entire area of St. Clair County. The other townships were Cottrellville, St. Clair, and Desmond (the settlement of Desmond maintained its title until the year 1835, when the Honorable Daniel B. Harrington laid out the plan of a village, which now bears the name Port Huron). The settlement of Clay predates the organization of the county, May 8, 1821. Clay was organized as a township in 1822 under the name of Plainfield and remained so until 1828, when the name was changed to Clay. It was changed because there already was a Plainfield Township in Allegan County. The first supervisor was Harvey Stewart.

The Township of Cottrellville once included all the territory of Clay. In 1828, the residents of Clay voted to separate from Cottrellville. In 1837, Ira Township was formed by taking the western part of Clay Township. By 1840, Clay Township had a population of 387, including Algonac. Algonac was laid out in 1836; but the original plat in the Register of Deeds office, in Port Huron, is undated. Some records give 1843. Algonac was incorporated by the St. Clair County Board of Supervisors in 1867 and by an Act of the Michigan Legislature in 1893.

In 1894, the Rapid Railway System constructed lines out Gratiot Avenue to Mt. Clemens. Later, it extended the line to Port Huron by way of the river communities. The advantages of the southern portion of St. Clair County were realized and summer residents began building permanent homes and cottages along Anchor Bay and the St. Clair River between New Baltimore and Marine City. The line enjoyed great prosperity as a quick means of reaching the water front communities.

This success attracted competition. The Shore Line System built a line from Detroit out Jefferson Avenue through Grosse Pointe to Mt. Clemens in 1900. It then extended the line along the St. Clair River to Port Huron. In 1901, the Shore Line was purchased by the Rapid Railway System. The interurbans carried freight as well as passengers and mail; such as, milk, produce and provided commodities for many businesses along the route. The Detroit and Port Huron Shore Line Railway from Detroit to Port Huron ran through Mt. Clemens, Chesterfield, New Baltimore, Anchorville, Fair Haven, Algonac, Marine City, St. Clair and Marysville. An additional line, called the "Short Cut", was built from Anchorville directly to Marine City. The route that the interurban traveled is identified today by Short Cut Road that goes east out of Anchorville to Marsh Rd., just west of Marine City. However, the interurban tracks went further east to intersect with tracks that traveled along M29 (designated M27 at that time) and the St. Clair River.

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The interurban tracks going to Algonac from the Perch Point Stop traveled along the northern boundary of the St. John's Marsh and turned south and traveled along the eastern boundary of the Marsh and exited at M29. You can see the track bed running north from the present DNR parking lot across from Cheers Restaurant. The tracks turned east as they crossed M29 and ran along the right side of the highway. The interurban right of way is still apparent from Cheers Restaurant to Margaret Jean's Restaurant because of the distance the telephone and electrical poles are set back from the highway. The tracks continued east past the old Chris Craft plant to Michigan St, where the tracks turned north to Marine City.

Today, as we drive along the Dyke Road, through the St. John's Marsh, we find it difficult to imagine the troubles motorists endured before this link between Perch Point and Pearl Beach became a reality. The only route from Algonac to Fair Haven was around Beauvais Creek. The one lane wooden bridge slippery with clay, its timbers groaning and shuttering, threatening to drown itself in the murky waters below whenever a vehicle set wheel upon it. James W. Gilbert, on one of his many trips on the D. U. R. (Interurban) through the northern edge of the marsh, envisioned in 1915 a road which would be built across the marshy river frontage. There were many obstacles to overcome: the questions of right of way, the court injunctions by land owners, and the skepticism of old residents. But the three and one half miles of Dyke Road became a reality. Today the "impossible project" is a memorial to "Jim" Gilbert, the man who would not give up. The final section of the road from Pearl Beach to Algonac was dedicated in 1924. This road connection opened the area for more growth.

The most well known development in the area is The Colony because of the gate house and the simulated lighthouse that housed the tower that provided the water system for the subdivision. The development was created by the Will St. John & Co. of Detroit and the plat was approved by Clay Township and signed by the Clerk, D. A. Pontius, on March 4, 1926. The land area was created by dredging canals on each side of the platted property. The canals were approximately (75) feet wide and (6) feet deep. It originally was designed as a private gated community comprised of (179) lots, all of which have river and/or canal accessibility. Colony Drive is a dead-end street approximately 1-3/4 miles long. Mr. St. John owned all of the Pointe Tremble Prairie, which subsequently was named the St. John's Marsh.

Included with the The Colony development was an eighteen hole golf course named The Colony Golf Club that was located in the marsh on the east side of the road a little over one mile north of the entrance to The Colony subdivision. The original plans for the golf course included platted lots surrounding the course; the platted lots did not materialize. The course was built by dredging canals around the designated area and using the dirt to form a dyke. Then the water was pumped out of the enclosed area. The course was open to play in the 1930's and it was played by many famous people, including the great golfers Walter Hagen and Gene Sarazen. During World War II, the course rough was plowed and sugar beets and corn were grown there. The course was opened again a year or two after the war and then the course was abandoned. In later years, the clubhouse burned and the golf course returned to its natural state, a marshland. Until the 1970's the chimney and a part of a wall of the club house was still visible from the highway; however, now that's gone. Much of the dykes around the course are still visible at lower water levels. The entrance to the golf course still exists. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources erected a monument designating the "St John's Marsh Wildlife Area" at the driveway entrance. Two other major developments were formed by dredging canals and using the dirt for fill.

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The St. John Drive development was platted and approved by the Township and signed by the Clerk, Neal P. Merrill, on August 20, 1935. There originally were (78) lots and the street is about one mile long. It was named the Roy T. Gilbert Supervisor's Plat St. Johns Drive.

The Anchor Bay Drive development was created by Will and Luella St. John and Frank Wallace. The plat was approved by the Township and signed by the Clerk, D. A. Pontius, on June 23, 1921. There are (408) lots and the street is a little over two miles long.

There were smaller developments in the area, such as the Avers Subdivision in Pearl Beach which was approved on November 13, 1917. There are (16) lots in the development. The Ventura Beach development that was approved on January 30, 1920 was created by Frank G. and Isabella Baxter and Howard G. and Mabelle Witherspoon.

Along with shipping and shipbuilding industries, there were three salt mines that operated in Algonac and Clay Township. The Algonac Salt Company and a salt company operated by Mark Moore and Charles DeBeau, both located on Pointe du Chene, and the Walton Salt Association operated by Albert Miller located in Pearl Beach, just east of the current Sassy Marina. They were short lived businesses, with the Walton company lasting the longest, 20 years.

## HARSENS ISLAND AND THE FLATS

The Harsens Island, St. Clair Flats, Algonac and Mainland Clay Township area is considered one of the largest fresh water deltas in the world. This delta also extends into Canada to the southeast. It is a unique area in that it is comprised of several major waterways. The St. Clair River, the North, South, Middle and Sni Bora Channels. There are numerous smaller channels, cuts, bays and water highways called the Big and Little Muscamoot, Goose, Baltimore, Fisher, Maybury, etc., and natural and dredged canals and ditches. Some waterways are navigable and some are not. The largest islands in the American portion of this delta are Harsens Island and Dickinson Island (formerly known as Laughton, then Stromness). There are several strings of small islands that extend from the large islands. This area is known as the St. Clair Flats. For years the delta has been called the Venice of America.

Early missionaries and explorers called the lower St. Clair River area The Great Green Meadows. The land through which the river flows is level, so level that a traveler wrote over 100 years ago, "another barrel of water would overflow the fields."

An unusual natural feature is that the delta was formed by the St. Clair River. One would think that the silt would be deposited by Lake St. Clair, since the river is its outlet. However, geological investigation proves that the deposit of fine sand and clay is derived by the action of waves on the shores of Lake Huron and river tributaries and from the St. Clair River itself, instead of Lake St. Clair, as would be expected.

The earliest industry on the delta, the Harsens Island, St. Clair Flats area, was fur trading between the French and Indians. As early as 1615 Frenchmen had come to the shores of the St. Clair River, then known as the River Huron, to trade for the fine furs trapped by the Indian tribes.

Harsens Island later became British territory. The dividing line ran along the North Channel, but a later survey moved the line to the South Channel and gave it to the United States. This area has been under the control of France, Great Britain and the United States.



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Harsens Island , the largest island on the delta, was named after Jacob Harsen, a gunsmith, who arrived there about 1778. He purchased the island from the Indians. Isaac Gravereat, Harsen's son in law, came with him. Gravereat died shortly after arriving, leaving his wife and four children with Harsen's family of 5 sons, Bernard, James, Francis, William and Jacob II and 2 daughters, Mary and Sarah. These families were the first white settlers between Detroit and Mackinac.

A survey of the island was made after the deaths of Bernard and Mrs. Gravereat. The survey divided the island into five parts, approximately 640 acres each, a part for each of Jacob Harsen's surviving children. The four parts were sold off in various acreage sizes through the years including parts of the homestead acreage. The balance of Harsens Island was shown as Unimproved Marsh and Low Prairie.

Harvey Stewart was the pioneer of the family of Stewarts who settled on the island early in the 1800s. Mary Gravereat was Stewart's second wife. He managed a distillery at that time. It was one of the first distilleries in Michigan, and at one time during the War of 1812 served as a British fort. The families living on the island moved to Detroit for a period during the War of 1812, but returned after a short time. The whiskey produced at the distillery was used for trade with the Indians who brought furs and wild meat to Stewart's settlement. Stewart was also Clay Township's first supervisor, serving from 1828 to 1833 and again in 1842.

In 1818, Aura P. Stewart persuaded John K. Smith to teach at the first school on the island, which was the first school in St. Clair County. While there were only three families on the island, pupils from across the channel brought enrollment to twelve. In addition to the Harsens and Stewarts, the principal families in the area were the Chartiers, Minnies, Basneys and the Hills. Very likely, the Chartier, Shorkey and Basney families are descendants.

During this era, the North Channel was the main shipping channel, because it had the water depth for the ships of that time. There was a problem with a sand bar out in the bay at the outlet of the North Channel. The ships upon arriving at the bar would have to drop anchor. There were smaller boats that would be used to unload some of the cargo to reduce the ship's draft. The ships would then continue past the bar to deeper water with the smaller boats following. Upon reaching the deeper water, the cargo would be reloaded onto the ships and they would proceed. That is how Anchor Bay got its name.

From 1821 to the end of the century, the area was primarily used for agriculture on the higher, drier lands of Harsens and Dickinson Islands. However, there were periods when other enterprises contributed to the area. Beginning in 1840 and continuing until the Civil War, shipbuilding was a prominent activity on Harsens Island. The schooner Island City was built there in 1859, as well as a number of other ships, including several of the Newberry Fleet based in Detroit. Also, prior to construction of the St. Clair Flats Ship Canal along the South Channel in 1856, many people were employed to transfer cargo across the bar to and from ships anchored in Anchor Bay, as previously described.

Dredging of the 6000 foot long ship canal on the South Channel initially took place in 1856, and the channel was widened and further deepened in 1857, 1872 and 1886. This opened the door to the resort era in the area by allowing steam ferries to service the route between Detroit and Port Huron. A number of resort hotels quickly developed along the South Channel, including the famous Joe Bedore's Hotel. At first, the White Star Steamship Line served the area, making no less than 13 stops in The Flats itself. Round trip fare between Detroit and Port Huron was 50 cents. The most famous steamship on this route was the Tashmoo, which was fondly referred to as the Glass Hack. From her launching in 1899 until the end of her service in 1936, the Tashmoo was the undisputed queen of the St. Clair Flats run.

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The resort era overlapped the Prohibition era, and the island became very popular because of being on the Canadian border. Nearly everyone in the area was a Rumrunner of sorts in those days. It was almost impossible to catch anyone in the marsh and canals because there were so many places to hide. A combination of events brought the Island's resort area to an end. The sinking of the Tashmoo, the end of prohibition, the automobile and the succession of costly hotel fires were among them. The only hotel surviving today is the Idle Hour, now a private club, the Idle Hour Yacht Club. In addition, The Old Club, organized in 1872 as the private Lake St. Clair Fishing and Shooting Club, is still in existence.

In 1921, a few men who had a vision of the future, ventured to lease a large acreage of marsh below Harsens Island for right of way for a road. Nearly one hundred acres were given to the County so the State could build this road which was a necessity. In March 1926, a group of residents met and formed the Green Drive Committee. The first committee consisted of Jules W. Bern, Chairman, Wm. H. Green, Jr., Louis W. Lindeman, Otto Helm, Wm. J. Windisch, Secretary, Jas. Clay, Wm Beyster and Jas. Bell. It was the efforts of these individuals and those who followed on the committee that resulted in the existence of Green Drive.

## RUSSELL ISLAND

Russell Island is located between Algonac and Walpole Island and separates the St. Clair River into the North and South Channels. The south side of the Island is separated from Harsens Island by a narrow channel called the Indian Cut, which runs between the North and South Channels. Russell Island is actually (3) islands, comprised of approximately (200) acres, divided by canals and cuts and connected by wooden bridges. It is a private island with more than (100) cottages; there is no public land on the island. The only access to the Island is by private boat or the passenger ferry "Islander", presently owned and operated by Bud Breitmeyer. However, for many years, in the early part of the century, passenger steamships such as the Tashmoo, Wauketa and the Owana made regular stops at Russell Island during the summers. The "Islander" docks next to the Walpole Island ferry at the U. S. Customs and Immigration dock in the Algonac city park

The first person to attempt to settle on Russell Island was Christian Frederick Denke, a Moravian missionary from Nazareth Hall, PA. He came in the spring of 1802 to establish a mission for the Chippewas with the permission of Chief Nangi who was camping on Pointe du Chene. Denke was staying with the Harsen family while he was building a cabin on Russell Island. Denke finished the cabin on Russell Island and continued to work with the Chippewas. He translated Bible passages and hymns into the Chippewa language, by candlelight, at a hand-hewn table. However, the Chippewa's were more hungry for food than for the word of God and Denke's small crop of potatoes and tobacco did not last long. They eventually became hostile toward Denke because they blamed him for the government's action prohibiting liquor sales to the Indians. He then abandoned the mission on Russell Island in March 1803.

Lewis I. Brakeman and his wife Candace are known to have settled there shortly after the War of 1812. It appears that Brakeman's right to the land north of Canoe Cut was recognized under an agreement with the Harsens who owned and occupied the private claims on the upper part of Harsens Island. \*\* This property was later called Indian Island.

A portion of the Island came into the ownership of Ernestus Corning. In 1855, he and his wife Harriet conveyed ownership to Samuel Russell.

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Samuel Russell owned Russell Island from 1855 to 1858. Mr. Russell was one of the most prominent men in the county and held many positions of trust. He was a man in politics, and was connected by ties of kinship with one of the oldest and most cultured families in the State. He was Custom House Officer in 1856, Clay Township Justice of the Peace in 1861, Sheriff of St. Clair County in 1865 and 1866 and was Clay Township Supervisor in 1862, 1869, 1871, 1875 and 1876. Mr. Russell died at Algonac, December 31, 1879. The Island was named after this prominent pioneer.

About 1905, Algonac businessmen put up \$1,700, obtained through voluntary subscription and taxes, in order to secure control of Russell Island from the Detroit, Belle Isle. & Windsor Ferry Co., to create a summer resort.

They constructed Camp Algonac, a tent city also called White City, on Russell Island. Excursions ran from Pittsburgh, PA, Cincinnati, OH, Terre Haute, IN and other inland cities. The passengers arrived in Detroit by train, took the steam boats to Algonac and were ferried to the Island in naphtha launches to the dock at Camp Algonac. An advertisement boasted "In All The World, No trip Like This." The Island was described as the "Gem Of The Great Lakes." The camp was approximately (187) acres, in the center of which was a beautifully shaded oak grove of (43) acres with walks, swings and rustic seats. There was a constant moving panorama of steam ships passing the island averaging one every four minutes. Twelve to twenty huge freighters at one time passing up and down the South Channel was a common sight. The population of the Island sometimes numbered 2,000 at a time.

The original plat of the island was revised in 1920 to provide additional drainage through the construction of a longitudinal canal commencing at the upper end of the Island on the North Channel. In 1927, the lower island was made habitable by a canal paralleling the South Channel and intersecting the Canoe Cut at right angles.

The Russell Island Property Owners Association represents the local interests of the Islanders, maintains the Association playgrounds and docks, subsidizes the passenger ferry. The only transportation to get about the Island is by bicycle, powered golf cart or by foot. Once each spring and fall, an auto caravan is scheduled and Champions Ferry makes a special trip to enable cottagers to transport the kind of articles and equipment which require a car. In the winter cottagers cross to Harsens Island, leave their cars at the Grand Pointe Cut and walk up the shore and cross Indian Cut. Despite the fact that there comes a time when the spring thaw and an ice jammed river make the Island inaccessible, there is a firm determination on the part of most Islanders against joining Harsens and Russell Island by a road. Cottagers are quite willing to sacrifice the obvious convenience of driving to their back doors for the privilege of being far from the multitude of problems which seem to invariably accompany the automobile.