

CLEAR WATER  
TOWNSHIP  
MASTER PLAN

Adopted November 2019

This master plan was approved and adopted by the Clearwater Township Board at its regular meeting on Thursday, November 21, 2019.

Signed by:           *Kathy N. Eldridge*            
Kathy Eldridge  
Clerk of Clearwater Township

# Master Plan Update, 2019 Clearwater Township

## I. Introduction

The Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (Public Act 110 of 2006), section 203(1) calls for the development of a “plan designed to promote the public health, safety, and general welfare,” to wit:

Sec. 203. (1) A zoning ordinance shall be based upon a plan designed to promote the public health, safety, and general welfare, to encourage the use of lands in accordance with their character and adaptability, to limit the improper use of land, to conserve natural resources and energy, to meet the needs of the state's residents for food, fiber, and other natural resources, places of residence, recreation, industry, trade, service, and other uses of land, to ensure that uses of the land shall be situated in appropriate locations and relationships, to avoid the overcrowding of population, to provide adequate light and air, to lessen congestion on the public roads and streets, to reduce hazards to life and property, to facilitate adequate provision for a system of transportation including, subject to subsection (5), public transportation, sewage disposal, safe and adequate water supply, education, recreation, and other public requirements, and to conserve the expenditure of funds for public improvements and services to conform with the most advantageous uses of land, resources, and properties. A zoning ordinance shall be made with reasonable consideration of the character of each district, its peculiar suitability for particular uses, the conservation of property values and natural resources, and the general and appropriate trend and character of land, building, and population development.

That “plan” is the Master Plan for the community, upon which the specifics of the Zoning Ordinance are to be based. Clearwater Township schedules the review and update of its Master Plan, approximately every five years. The most recent update was in 2014.

Clearwater Township recognizes that when people live in community with one another, they mutually agree to accept certain limits on their individual natural rights, so as to be able to live in harmony. Nonetheless, Clearwater Township holds ardently to the principles declared in the Declaration of Independence, and strives to protect the rights of its citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States and its Amendments, as well as by the Constitution of the State of Michigan and its Amendments.

## II. Population Characteristics

It is useful to consider the characteristics of our township’s population. Our total population, per the 2017 American Community Survey 5-year Population Estimate was 2,466. The school age range, which formerly was considered to be 17 or younger, is defined in the 2010 Census as 19 and under. Of our 2,466 population total, 541 are aged 19 years or under, 439 are aged 65 or over, and 1,486 are in the age range of 20 to 64.

Table I. shows the actual population figures, and their percentages of the total, for the last three Censuses, and the 2017 American Community Survey 5-year Estimate.

Table I.  
Selected Population Characteristics of Clearwater Township

	1990 Census	2000 Census	2010 Census	2017 ACS Est.
Total Population	1959	2382	2444	2466
age 17 and under	584 (30%)	583 (24%)	* 583 (24%)	* 541 (22%)
age 18 to 64	1120 (57%)	1501 (63%)	1433 (59%)	1529 (62%)
age 65 and over	255 (13%)	298 (13%)	428 (18%)	439 (18%)
Number of Households	738	944	1013	985
Persons per Household	2.65	2.52	2.41	2.50

\* indicates new age range of 19 and under.

Our population has changed over time, with the combined ranges of 18 to 64 and 65 and over sectors, rising from 1375 to 1968 in the period reflected above (70.2% to 79.8%). The school age range, formerly 17 and under, but now 19 and under, has diminished over the same period from 30% of our population to 22%. Ours is a very stable family-based community, with many highly skilled individuals. The attractive surroundings, especially our beautiful lake and rivers, is luring ever increasing numbers of active retirees into our township, as indicated by the rise in the 65 and over age group.

We desire to attract families with school-aged children to our community, as a foundation for a thriving future population.

## **Land Use Trends**

### ***A. Housing Additions***

In 2016, there were eight new homes built in the township; six in 2017; five in 2018, and in 2019 to-date, there were five.

The current land use zoning is expected to remain in place for several years going forward, with the possibility of some extension to the Commercial-Light-Industry district in the corridor of Rapid City Road

### ***B. Commercial Additions***

We continue to see new businesses coming into our community. Fall of 2012 saw the first franchise business entity in our township. The new Dollar General store is located on the west side of Rapid City Road, just south of Harrison Street, within the Village Commercial Zone. There continues to be a slowly growing variety of small businesses in our village center, and the established businesses are doing well. Growth has been strong in the trades, storage services, and home occupations. The community would benefit from better public communication and development of electronic technical skills. Additionally, the township is working on the process to resurvey and re-plat portions of the village proper (see Objective 5, page 10).

### ***C. Industrial Additions***

There has been no heavy industry in the Township for many years, unless one considers gravel mining and/or hauling in that category. There is no longer a separate Industrial Zone in Clearwater Township. Instead, there is a Commercial-Light-Industry Zone. The absence of municipal water and sewer, and of a rail line or commercial airport, makes the Township a less attractive industrial location than some others in the region. Additionally, the environmentally sensitive land around our lake and rivers is not truly suitable to heavy industry.

### ***D. Agricultural/Timber Resource Uses***

Very few farms remain active in the Township, although there are several active small family gardens. Most of the land is poorly suited to commercial-level cropping. Considerable stands of second growth timber remain in the area, and some are subject to selective cutting. Cutover forest land is mostly allowed to regrow or be converted to residential use.

### ***E. Recreational Land Uses***

In addition to the predominantly residential and modest commercial use of land in the Township, a significant portion (about 22% of the surface area) is set aside for public recreational use, either as a State Forest or as a Nature Conservancy. Nearly 7 sections of State land bordering Lake Skegemog and lower Torch River harbor a sizeable deer herd and a broad collection of small game animals and waterfowl. These sections are extensively hunted, as are some of the heavily wooded upland areas, some of which have seasonal deer camps. Lake Skegemog was for a long time the best fishery in the lower Chain of Lakes with respect to Muskie, Northern Pike, Small-Mouth Bass, and Rock Bass. Skegemog Swamp, with its reptile

population (including the Mississauga rattlesnake) and wetland birds and wildflowers, is popular with hikers and nature observers. A conservancy protects about half of the Skegemog shoreline from future development, and another will protect three hundred acres at “Seven Bridges” (Rickers’ Dam) on Rapid River, long a favorite nature trail area with local residents and visitors. Long stretches of Rapid River waterfront are also zoned “Recreational” to help protect this valuable resource from the risks of high density residential development. Addition of more biking and hiking opportunities, is to be encouraged – perhaps by constructing near roadway trails and using available portions of the abandoned railroad right-of-way.

The preservation of these natural scenic resources has been one of the objectives of the Township since the original Future Use Plan was laid out in 1973. To a degree, the ownership by the State of some of the lands protects against structural development in fragile areas. The protection against water and soil contamination and fire, and the general preservation of the fish and game habitat is, however, largely in the hands of the users and nearby landowners. Because of the explosive increase in “day boaters” over the past decade, the threat to water quality and the fisheries has increased to a much greater extent than the increase in local population. Since much of the Township drains into Lake Skegemog by one route or another, the possibility of contamination by land runoff and percolate adds to the risk.

### **III. Roads and Traffic**

The major improvement in the Township road network in recent history, was the 1995 federally-funded widening of Rapid City Road, which is a County Highway and a Class A Road. In 2012, the Aarwood Road Bridge was replaced; in 2013, Aarwood Road was blacktopped in its entirety. In 2017, Baggs Road was extensively repaired with the cooperation of neighboring Whitewater Township and Grand Traverse County. In 2019, West Plum Valley Road was resurfaced and the resurfacing of Morrison Road was completed. The Township passed a one-mill millage in 2011 for five years to finance the needed repairs to its roads over time. It was renewed for another three years. The community will likely continue to renew this millage as long as the need exists.

### **IV. Schools**

The modernization of the Rapid City elementary school has contributed to the attractiveness of the township for families with younger children. Kalkaska County has begun to recover from the financial difficulties it experienced during the 1990’s. The reinstatement of our school busing program through the sound fiscal efforts of our district school board and superintendent, enhances the appeal of our township as a good place to settle down for young families. These improvements, we believe, will vitalize our school enrollment. Recent enrollment numbers are shown in Table II below. A significant factor in our decreased enrollment numbers during the 1990s, is the change in our grade range, which used to go through sixth grade and now goes only to fifth grade. The low numbers in 2012 are largely attributable to the economic recession of 2007-2009. Current numbers improved as the kindergarten population increased.

Table II

Year	1991	1996	2005	2012	2019
Rapid City Elementary Enrollment	214	150	130	98	108

## V. Fire, Police and Emergency Medical Services

Chief: Paul F. Fabiano - Asst. Chief: Gregory Bradley

The Clearwater Township Fire Department continues to work towards improving the safety and fire protection of the citizens and property owners of Clearwater Township.

### Achievements:

- Upgraded part of the fire department living facilities to accommodate 24 hour ambulance services provided by Kalkaska EMS.
- Installed an air compressor station inside the fire department to fill SCBA tanks used for fire fighting.
- Repaired an existing 8" water well at the fire station improving the refill times and increasing the capacity to 243 GPM.
- Installed a commercial fire gear washer and dryer to enhance fire fighter health & safety.
- Purchased new "Jaws of Life" (battery operated) to enhance the rescue capabilities of the department.
- Installed a new water point / drafting site on the Aarwood Road Bridge.
- All fire apparatus is "paid in full" and solely owned by the Township.

### Going Forward 2018-2022

- Continue to upgrade and maintain the fire department "living facilities" to provide adequate conditions for 24 hour occupancy.
- Continue to work towards lowering the ISO Public Protection Classification within Clearwater Township so that home owner insurance rates will continue to be reduced.
- Recruit and Train at least two (2) new firefighters per year.
- Identify or Install and maintain at least one new water point / drafting site per year.
- Adopt a National Fire Code so that commercial fire inspections may be conducted and enforced.
- Develop and maintain a "Knox Box" program for both commercial and residential occupancies.
- Develop and maintain a commercial occupancy fire inspection / pre-plan program throughout the Township.
- Develop and maintain a fire prevention program for the safety of the citizens of Clearwater Township.
- Review, update, and create standard operating guidelines to improve firefighter response and safety.

- Continue to upgrade / replace aging personal protective equipment, fire, rescue, and medical equipment and apparatus.
- Provide continuing fire and rescue training as required by Federal, State, and Local requirements.
- Maintain and Improve Mutual Aid Contracts with the area departments. Coordinate mutual aid training with area departments.
- Purchase equipment and Train personnel in Ice / Water Rescue to enhance rescue capabilities within the Township.
- Replace existing Tanker Truck with a Tanker/Pumper to enhance our fire fighting capabilities with available manpower.

## **VI. Other Pertinent Trends**

Boat traffic on Torch River and Torch Lake continues to increase. Parking from the DNR launch site on Aarwood Trail spills over into the road on weekends. Boat anchoring on “The Sandbar” at Torch Lake numbers well over 500 on warm weekends and holidays. Water quality and the Torch-River-Skegemog fishery may be at risk. Township citizens frequently patrol the area after weekends, to clean up the trash and recycle the many dumped cans and bottles.

A similar increase in use has occurred in the public swimming accesses on Torch Lake, and parking spills over on to Crystal Beach Road.

The overnight mooring of transient boats offshore from the Township public swimming accesses on Torch Lake has increased.

Recreation opportunities for youngsters have been improved over the last 15 years, because of the redevelopment of the Clearwater Township Athletic Complex, which includes a softball-Little-League field, a regulation baseball field, a soccer field, a measured half-mile multiple-use walking trail, and picnic pavilion. Future plans call for a concession stand and permanent restroom and locker-room facilities. This project demonstrates the township’s commitment to its youth.

Senior lunches and public exercises at the Township Hall continue to be well-attended and much appreciated. The addition of “The Little Red Schoolhouse” has enhanced and expanded the senior programs – including a foot care clinic. The Kalkaska County Library brings the visiting branch to the township on the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month except for holidays.

The appearance of “downtown” Rapid City has become more attractive to visitors and prospective residents through the updated street lights program, including promotional banners and seasonal decorations, enhanced by the efforts of the township residents who have volunteered their time and labor. Local artists have completed an attractive mural on the outside wall of a prominent village center business. At the same time, there are sections of the village that remain blighted in appearance owing to the presence of poorly maintained premises.



## **VII. Future Land Use Plans – The Master Plan “Vision Statement”**

The Goals and Objectives established by prior township Zoning Boards and Planning Commissions (former Zoning Board abolished and current Planning Commission established per the requirements of Public Acts 110 of 2006 and 33 of 2008), have served the township well. In general, we retain and reaffirm the Goals and Objectives of the 1992 Master Plan update, and use them as headings for the sub-sections of our land use plan. Because the population of the township has more than doubled since the original “Comprehensive Plan” was published in 1974, and because a continuation of this trend will bring new pressures and create new opportunities for the township, we must plan afresh for these expected changes. Therefore, we attempt in this update, to provide more specific information to assist members of future Planning Commissions and Township Boards as well as the citizenry of the township.

### ***Objective 1. Protect the unique scenic and natural features of the township, including water quality***

The scenic features of Clearwater Township are, in large part, a reason for the significant increase in both residential and vacation population over recent years. Increases in local employment and business income have resulted from the population increase. It is important, both from the standpoint of quality of life for our residents and visitors, and from the economic benefit that these people bring to our community, that we preserve the woodland, waterland, wetland, and farmland nature of the township. There are lengthy stretches of roadway that present our best features to the public, and that we believe should be faithfully preserved. These include the portion of M-72 that runs through the township, Rapid City Road between the DNR Skegemog Swamp trailhead and Townline Road, and Valley Road between Dundas and Wilhelm Roads. Low density single family homesites, farmsteads, woodland residences and recreation appear to be the best long term uses of the lands that visually adjoin these roadways. Nearby land conservancies and state forests complement these land uses for a combined “North Country outlook” that appeals to residents and would-be residents alike.

The wooded upland of the township, which represents about half of the township’s land mass, is the current target of development (now that the waterways have been almost fully developed). Numerous “country residences” have been settled in the past twenty years, and with a number of large woodland parcels having been recently split into 10 acre lots and sold, this residential development trend can be expected to continue. The original standards of Ordinance #9 (now Ordinance #22 after revision), which required a maximum density of 5 acres per dwelling site in Recreational and Agricultural Districts, have helped preserve the values of these uplands. We believe that this 5 acre minimum should be continued, whether in individual lots or as part of site condominiums or planned unit developments. And, while the wooded upland is likely to be the earlier development target, we also believe that remaining farmland and wooded lowlands should not, in the future, have a density greater than one dwelling per 5 acres, except in areas specifically designated as higher density residential districts for single family dwellings, multiple-family dwellings, or mobile home park use.

The roads adjoining Torch Lake, Torch River, lower Rapid River, and Skegemog Lake have seen extensive residential development since the original Comprehensive Plan was adopted, in many stretches on the land side of the road, in addition to the water side. These areas tend toward fairly shallow static ground water levels, and the ground water has only a short filter distance before it mingles with the surface water of the lakes and streams. Past planners have recognized the attractiveness of these locations and provided for zoning at high residential densities. A continuation of these high densities may place both the ground and nearby surface waters at increased risk of contamination, and current planners see a need to selectively reduce the potential residential density of the nearby (now lightly developed) lands before the potential problem becomes a reality.

In addition to the areas just mentioned, there are other areas in the township where the static water level is close to the surface, where aquifer pressures may produce flowing wells or springs, where there are wetlands, or where the surface soils are impermeable clays. Any of these conditions may present risk of water contamination by automotive waste runoff, lawn chemicals, commercial chemicals, or septic wastes. It will continue to be important for township officials to be aware that these risks are increased in proportion to residential or commercial building density, parking lot use, underground tank use, industrial chemical use, and food waste use. The zoning decisions of the township will need to be even more closely coordinated with the site regulations of the Health Department and the DEQ as the township residential population grows and commercial and light-industry uses increase.

Another potential source of water supply contamination is aging septic fields. For the foreseeable future, there is little likelihood that municipal waste treatment will be affordable in this township, and therefore we will continue to be dependent upon individual on-site sewage disposal systems (septic tanks and distribution fields).

## ***Objective 2. Provide for adequate public open space, access to water, and community services***

Clearwater Township is blessed with an extensive system of Pere Marquette State Forest land (which occupies about 1/6 of the township), the Skegemog Nature Conservancy, the Seven Bridges Conservancy, Freedom Park, Heritage Park, the Birch and Cedar Street parks, two Little League fields, and nine public water access sites on Torch Lake and Torch River. The township does not lack outdoor recreational space, but certain areas (the public water accesses in particular) have individual problems of seasonal over-crowding. It will be important for Planning Commissions to consider the effects of their nearby residential density decisions, and their permitted use decisions relative to campgrounds and motels and other tourist accommodations, on the continued accessibility of the water, especially to township residents.

The township continues to update its fire and emergency medical service equipment, including the recent addition of living quarters for 24/7 EMS. For emergencies on the main roads and near the fire barn, response time can be very short. It will be remembered that some townships that have increased residential or commercial building densities at extended distances from their fire stations have faced the prospect of having to add a fire substation or

employ fulltime personnel at considerable cost. High densities or commercial activities distant from Rapid City should be viewed with caution.

Township meeting facilities have been improved with the remodeling of the Little Red Schoolhouse.

### ***Objective 3. Provide for a range of development types through appropriate land use distribution***

Rapid City, a boom and bust town more than a hundred years ago, has begun a period of regrowth. The Commercial-Light-Industry zoning on the south side of town has permitted the establishment there of a number of service-oriented businesses that benefit the economy. Their establishment has been facilitated by the zoning of un-platted land to depths of 300-450 feet, relatively free of existing residences, and available at reasonable prices. It is foreseen that a small increase in the amount of land devoted to a "Light Industry Park" in an area contiguous with the present zone and separated from village residences could enhance community development. Additional Commercial Zoning along Rapid City Road to the north of town, continues to be a controversial question. The Planning Commission is leaning toward zoning the portion of that road, from Plum Valley Road north to the county line, on the east side of the road to a depth of 500 feet or to the rear lot line, whichever is less, and on the west side of the road to the western edge of the abandoned C&O Railroad right-of-way.

Just as it was necessary to create multiple Commercial zone standards to accommodate the differing conditions inside and outside of the village proper, it will be useful to continue developing multiple zone standards for Residential use. With the already crowded conditions on and near the township's watercourses, our planning foresees the need to slow the increase in residential density there, and multifamily dwellings are therefore inappropriate in those locations. On the other hand, township residents need affordable housing, and certain areas devoted to multifamily dwellings and/or mobile home parks and potentially "tiny houses" are the means under consideration for providing such housing. Further, areas of town houses, condominium communities, or apartments, could be attractive to seniors and retirees and young adults. A community poised for growth will need to revise its historic zoning practices in order to provide accommodations for a broad spectrum of people in larger numbers. It is likely that such revisions will best serve the community if the denser population specifications are focused in the vicinity of Rapid City, where seniors will have easy access to services and children will be near the Rapid City Elementary School.

It has been an important aspect of our zoning ordinances to permit the practice of home occupations, roadside sale of farm goods, harvesting and conversion of forest products, and certain recreational uses of our countryside. We are a community that "lives off our land," and preservation of that tradition has always been a part of our planning. As we enter a new planning cycle, we need to revisit our ordinance to ensure that it permits appropriate entrepreneurial practices in Residential, Agricultural, and Recreational districts alike, while at the same time assuring that the tenets of Objectives #1 and #3 are not infringed.

The Planning Commission has been tasked with reviewing township land use with the objective of creating new commercial zones and combining agricultural and recreational property to be

more flexible in future zoning decisions. Residential and mixed use zones will also be reviewed in the process. New land use recommendations and a draft zoning map will be forthcoming. This review, in conjunction with the closed alleyways resolution, should provide opportunities for commercial and residential development well into the future.

***Objective 4. Provide a safe and suitable transportation network for residents and visitors***

The widening of Rapid City Road has made this major county artery safer and more useful, not only to township residents, but to the many neighboring county residents who travel regularly to Traverse City. This road regularly moves 4,000 vehicles per day, and peak movements near 7,000 have been counted. Township planners and administrators must be continually alert to the effect that their zoning decisions may have on traffic safety, particularly as to the interaction of speed limits and the frequency of vehicle exits and entrances. Crystal Beach Road was resurfaced and its shoulders paved during 1999 to increase pedestrian and vehicular safety while meeting that roadway's heavy traffic load. High residential density is compounded by the usage of that road as a link between the two arms of Antrim County, and the same cautions there are extended to township officials about traffic safety, going forward.

***Objective 5. Restore the village center to fundamental economic health by appropriate replatting.***

The original plats for the Rapid City village center include alleyways and streets that have never been opened. These bits of township land are actually occupied by residents, businesses, and the school, making the current-day reality at odds with the official records, and depriving current property owners of clear title to the land they hold and care for.

In a resolution by the Clearwater Township Planning Commission, dated February 18, 2013, the following rationale for action was presented to the Clearwater Township Board:

The Township ownership of certain and several closed streets and alleyways prohibits the commercial and economic growth of the community; prevents the appreciation of private properties and thus the tax base; and presents a clear obstacle to the transfer of ownership of the properties adjacent thereto. In addition, any future decisions concerning rezoning are impacted, which renders the Master Plan ineffective and impractical at present.

Therefore, in the interests of the community and the taxpaying public, the Planning Commission recommends the Township Board move to divest itself of the closed alleyways and streets indicated on the attached documentation to facilitate the execution of the Township Master Plan.

\* \* \*

**Replatting Update:** The Planning Commission has formed a committee to research and pursue the resolution of transferring ownership of the closed streets and alleyways within the Village of Rapid City. The original petition and court proceedings of 1971 vacated the Township properties located within the original Rankin Plat of 1898. This original administrative process

will be pursued to completion under the requirements of the “Plat Act” (MCL 560) and serve as the model for completion and redrawing of the other five plats included within the Village limits.

\* \* \*

**Summary:** Planning and zoning ordinance updating can provide a framework for protecting the health, safety, and welfare of the community, and promoting orderly growth. Support by the members of the community is imperative to maintaining its attractiveness and growth. Our growth and quality of life depend on, more than anything else, the efforts of the citizens of the township.

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