

Mason County Strategic Planning Summary

A cross-sector group of business, education, civic, and nonprofit leaders in Mason County came together to assess the region's assets, challenges, and future opportunities. While the county enjoys exceptional quality of life, rich natural assets, and a collaborative culture, it also faces persistent challenges in infrastructure, housing affordability, and regional coordination. The session emphasized the importance of building on existing strengths—particularly in education and recreation—while confronting the structural barriers that limit equitable growth and economic resilience.

Strengths: Collaborative Spirit, Educational Assets, and Quality of Life

Mason County's landscape is marked by abundant natural resources, access to the lakeshore, and a thriving culture of placemaking. Community members highlighted unique features such as the sculpture trail, performing arts events, historical sites, and the region's recreational infrastructure. These amenities, paired with a philanthropic spirit and deep community pride, create an attractive environment for residents and visitors alike.

Education emerged as a standout strength. The county is home to a robust K–12 system, West Shore Community College, and the Mason County Promise, all of which contribute to a strong talent pipeline. Local educational service districts and high-quality school systems support career readiness, even in more remote parts of the county. Participants noted that this breadth of educational support rivals larger, more urban communities.

Importantly, Mason County offers a diverse economy relative to other lakeshore tourism hubs. Year-round employment is available across manufacturing, education, healthcare, and agriculture. Stakeholders also noted the community's natural inclination toward collaboration, describing cross-sector efforts as easier to launch and sustain than in many neighboring counties. A high level of civic engagement, efficient partnerships, and cultural events further reinforce the county's positive momentum.

Weaknesses: Housing Shortages, Infrastructure Gaps, and Regional Fragmentation

Despite these strengths, Mason County faces significant barriers to equitable growth. Housing emerged as a core concern—not only the overall shortage of units, but the lack of affordable, workforce-oriented options for first-time families, retirees, and lower-wage

workers. Relatedly, wages are not keeping pace with the cost of living, and income disparities remain high.

Infrastructure limitations also constrain development. Broadband access remains inconsistent, particularly in more rural areas, and both water/sewer capacity and transportation networks require significant investment. Limited public transportation options reduce access to employment and services.

Aging demographics pose a long-term challenge, as does the lack of diversity in age, skillsets, and race. Stakeholders voiced concerns about the imbalance between Ludington and other parts of the county, with divisions between east and west Mason County affecting collaboration, school systems, and economic cohesion.

Economic development is further hampered by limited tech industry presence, underdeveloped career pathways for youth, and a lack of consistent stakeholder communication. While collaboration is possible, participants noted that efforts are often slowed by jurisdictional boundaries and historic divisions—including those between Mason and Manistee counties. The absence of cohesive long-term planning for parks, recreation, and commercial/industrial expansion was also flagged as a gap.

Opportunities: Sectoral Alignment, Regional Partnerships, and Quality-of-Life Investment

Participants expressed optimism about the county's ability to build on its current momentum. Strategic opportunities include leveraging existing education assets to create more defined and scalable career pathways, particularly in the trades and advanced manufacturing. Leaders called for a selective, sector-based approach to workforce development that focuses on the industries where the region can most competitively excel.

Housing readiness remains a top priority, with local housing initiatives and regional alliances working to address supply constraints. There is also growing energy around supporting entrepreneurship in food and agriculture, as evidenced by the recent pitch competition, and potential collaboration with WMSRDC and other economic development partners.

Several infrastructure-focused opportunities were identified, including broadband expansion, regional trail connectivity, and thoughtful development along the U.S. 10 corridor. The Pere Marquette Township park project was cited as a model for intentional outdoor recreation planning. Enhancing access to recreation was seen not only as a

lifestyle benefit, but as a way to support remote work attraction, boost tourism, and promote long-term resident retention.

Mason County could also benefit from better alignment with neighboring counties to position the broader region as a hub for trades education and rural innovation.

Participants envisioned coordinated branding, legislative advocacy, and inclusive outreach as tools to strengthen the county's identity and expand its influence. With intentional planning and strategic investment, Mason County can chart a path toward sustainable growth that reflects its values and amplifies its existing strengths.