

# INTRODUCTION & COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION

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## WADHAMS TO AVOCA TRAIL



### **ST. CLAIR COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION: MISSION**

The St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) is dedicated to providing positive recreational opportunities for the citizens of St. Clair County and their guests.

The Commission will do so by:

- Preparing a Master Recreation Plan for St. Clair County;
- Advising the County Board of Commissioners on matters related to the implementation of the Master Recreation Plan;
- Working cooperatively with local, state, and national recreational providers; and
- Acquiring, maintaining, and operating quality parks, trails, and recreational facilities.

### **PARC PROFILE**

- The St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) was formed in 1994 as a department within St. Clair County government.
- PARC is not just about parks. PARC is involved with trails, greenways, blueways, and other recreational projects that serve all St. Clair County citizens.
- PARC properties and projects include Goodells County Park, Fort Gratiot County Park, Bridge to Bay Trail, Wadhams to Avoca Trail, Columbus County Park, Woodsong County Park, the Fort Gratiot Light Station, Blue Water River Walk County Park, the Marine City Dredge Cut Access, and the Blueways of St. Clair.
- PARC owns two accessible portable stages, called “Showmobiles,” along with two sets of portable bleachers. These are rented out at a reasonable price to organizations hosting musical, cultural, and community events.
- PARC is currently not involved with campgrounds, golf courses, marinas, boat launches, and other such activities that are adequately provided by the state, local units of government or by private citizens and businesses.

- PARC has ten members who represent all parts of St. Clair County, who possess a diverse skill set, and who serve on seven advisory committees: Acquisitions, Finance, Goodells County Park, Columbus County Park, Fort Gratiot County Park, Fort Gratiot Light Station, and Trails.
- PARC works closely with the St. Clair County Board of Commissioners (BOC), the St. Clair County Administrator/Controller's Office, the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC), the Road Commission, and the Drain Commissioner's Office.
- PARC enjoys a cooperative relationship with the St. Clair County Regional Educational Services Agency (RESA), Michigan State University Extension (MSUE), the St. Clair County 4-H Council and Fair Board, the Farm Museum, Propbusters remote control model airplane club, Earthkeepers, Can-Am BMX bicycle club, mountain biking and road biking organizations, hiking groups, and equestrians.
- PARC interacts with parks and recreation personnel, as well as elected officials, within local townships, cities, and villages.
- PARC interacts with parks and recreation advocates throughout Michigan, especially with officials in neighboring counties and Southeast Michigan.
- PARC activities are funded through a 0.4956 mil tax, which was approved by County voters in 1994 and renewed in 1999, 2004, 2010, and 2016. The margin of passage in 2004 was 68.5%. The margin of renewal in 2010 increased to 71%. In 2016, the renewal passed with nearly 70% approval
- PARC uses 75% of the millage funds for countywide projects. The other 25% is distributed to townships, cities, and villages. Local units of government must demonstrate "maintenance of effort" to assure the funds are used to expand recreation opportunities rather than supplant existing local funding.
- PARC obtains government and foundation grants and donations from businesses, groups, and individuals. PARC helps local units of government obtain grants for local parks and recreation projects.
- The preceding PARC Master Recreation Plan was effective from 2017 through 2021. This updated plan will be submitted to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) in February 2022 to be eligible for continued grant funding.
- This updated Master Recreation Plan is consistent with the goals and objectives for recreation in the St. Clair County Master Plan, adopted by the St. Clair County Board of Commissioners on November 17, 2016.

## **PHILOSOPHY AND FORMAT**

### **Philosophy**

This Master Recreation Plan is an update of the 2017-2021 Master Recreation Plan for the St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission.

This update incorporates the primary philosophies of the original 1997-2001 Master Recreation Plan:

- To offer workable solutions; and

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- To be objective, yet incorporate legitimate subjective views of local residents, County visitors, and appointed and elected government officials.

In addition to those basic philosophies, this Master Recreation Plan update strives to continue PARC’s long-standing tradition of innovation and originality when it comes to County parks and recreation.

## Format

This 2022-2026 Master Recreation Plan update follows the format and content required by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources in *Guidelines for the Development of Community Park, Recreation, Open Space, and Greenway Plans, IC 1924*, revised April 26, 2021. Sections for this Master Recreation Plan update are titled based on the required plan sections as detailed under “Preparing the Plan and Plan Content” in the MDNR Guidelines. The DNR requires all recreation plans to include the following sections:

- Community Description
- Administrative Structure
- Recreation Inventory
- Description of the Planning and Public Input Process
- Goals and Objectives
- Action Program

PARC has made every attempt possible to comply with the MDNR requirements. Moreover, PARC has included additional information beyond the MDNR requirements to better frame the recreational needs and opportunities of St. Clair County citizens.

## JURISDICTION AND FOCUS AREA

This 2022-2026 St. Clair County Master Recreation Plan covers all parks and recreation facilities and programs owned and operated by the St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission, spanning all of St. Clair County and serving all St. Clair County residents. These facilities include:

- Goodells County Park
- Fort Gratiot County Park
- Fort Gratiot Light Station
- Columbus County Park
- Woodsong County Park
- Blue Water River Walk County Park
- North Channel County Park
- Wadhams to Avoca Trail
- Bridge to Bay Trail
- The Blueways of St. Clair (in conjunction with the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission)

The St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) has the responsibility to review and update the Master Recreation Plan every five years and to consider the conditions and trends affecting recreation. A wide variety of planning processes and techniques have been utilized in crafting the plan in years past; however, every update to the plan has been grounded in a desire to document current trends in St. Clair County, to meet the recreational demands and desires of St. Clair County residents, and to set a promising course for recreational opportunities for future generations. With each new rendition of the St. Clair County Master Recreation Plan comes an opportunity to proactively improve the quality of life for St. Clair County’s citizens.



The St. Clair County Master Recreation Plan is intended to have a lasting impact on the community. Relying on a strong foundation of data, research, and public input, it is reflective of a county with significant recreational assets and significant natural resources. While the plan identifies a number of goals and strategies meant to positively influence the overall quality of life in St. Clair County, it is built on a framework that focuses on action strategies that can actually be implemented. The vision, goals, and strategies identified in this plan will require cooperation and collaboration among community leaders and dedicated stakeholders in all sectors of the community.

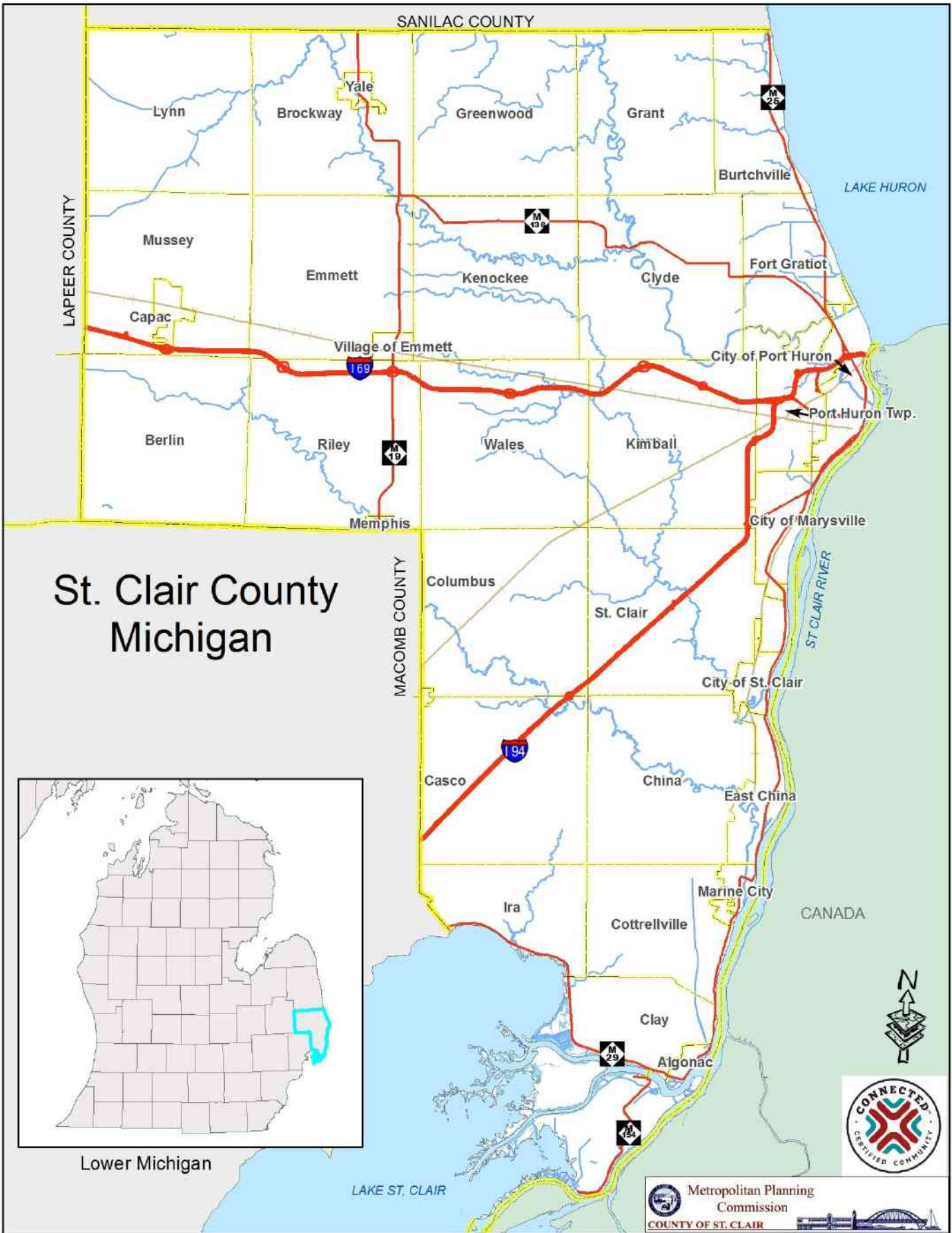
## COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION

### ABOUT ST. CLAIR COUNTY

Located at the base of the thumb area of the lower peninsula of Michigan, St. Clair County is the easternmost of Michigan's 83 counties. It's known as the Blue Water Area because its eastern and southern boundaries are formed by the waters of Lake Huron, the St. Clair River, and Lake St. Clair. The St. Clair River forms a natural boundary separating Michigan from Ontario, Canada. The river flows south from Lake Huron with its mouth under the Blue Water Bridge. It continues south to the City of Algonac and the river's delta which enters Lake St. Clair. It is also one of the heaviest traveled rivers in the world and is part of the world's longest shipping canal, the 2,347 mile St. Lawrence Seaway.

Greatly influenced by Lake Huron, St. Clair County offers a temperate climate which has cold winters, hot summers, and moderate springs and falls. There are 140 miles of shoreline in the county. Within the county, there are a wide-range of land types and uses, from rural agriculture to urban development to expansive and beautiful coastline; there is even an international border. Wetlands are scattered throughout the county, covering approximately 62 square miles, or 8.6% of the county's land area, but are most prevalent along the eastern and southern coastlines and along inland rivers. Local governments are comprised of eight cities, including Port Huron which is the county seat, 23 townships and two villages: Capac and Emmett. Each municipality maintains its own master plan and zoning ordinance. The various jurisdictions within the county, along with many other organizations, have proven to be willing to cooperate with one another for the overall benefit of the region.

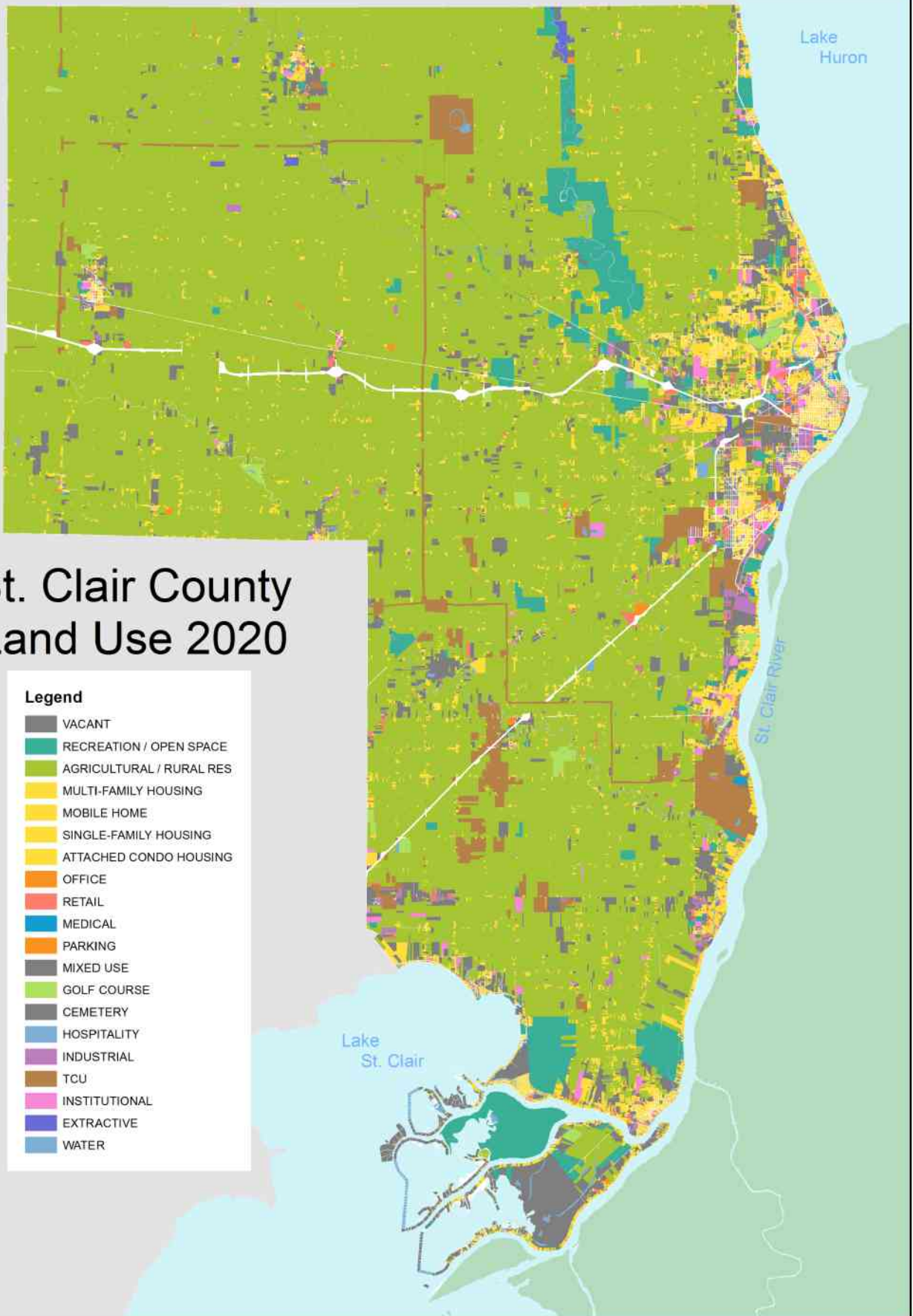
St. Clair County is a major international trade gateway between the United States and Canada for the movement of people and goods across the St. Clair River via the Blue Water Bridges and the international train tunnel. St. Clair County's stunning waterways as well as its diverse annual events makes it a tourist destination all year long. Residents and visitors alike, are attracted to its vast water resources, its scenic landscapes, beautifully maintained parks, miles of trails, neighborly communities, and its mix of traditional downtowns, and unique rural character.



# St. Clair County Land Use 2020

## Legend

- VACANT
- RECREATION / OPEN SPACE
- AGRICULTURAL / RURAL RES
- MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING
- MOBILE HOME
- SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSING
- ATTACHED CONDO HOUSING
- OFFICE
- RETAIL
- MEDICAL
- PARKING
- MIXED USE
- GOLF COURSE
- CEMETERY
- HOSPITALITY
- INDUSTRIAL
- TCU
- INSTITUTIONAL
- EXTRACTIVE
- WATER



**TABLE 1-1: ST. CLAIR COUNTY LAND USE, 2020**

<b>Land Use Category</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Agricultural/Rural Residential	347,411	76.08%
Attached Condo Housing	272	0.06%
Cemetery	447	0.10%
Extractive	594	0.13%
Golf Course	2,133	0.47%
Hospitality	586	0.13%
Industrial	2,880	0.63%
Institutional	3,017	0.66%
Medical	338	0.07%
Mixed Use	711	0.16%
Mobile Home	1,596	0.35%
Multiple-Family Housing	574	0.13%
Office	897	0.20%
Parking	110	0.02%
Recreation/Open Space	19,233	4.21%
Retail	2,112	0.46%
Single-Family Housing	26,504	5.80%
Transportation/Communications/Utilities	15,549	3.41%
Vacant	29,145	6.38%
Water	2,526	0.55%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>456,635</b>	<b>-</b>

Source: Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), 2021

The total area of the county is approximately 836.63 square miles, of which 724.37 square miles is land and 112.26 square miles is water. An agricultural/village pattern of land use exists in the western portion of the county, supporting a rural lifestyle that residents would like to preserve. The predominant land use is agricultural and rural residential, which covers 76% of the land area. This is followed by single-family residential land at 5%, then recreation and open space is the next largest use with 4.21%. This part of St. Clair County offers diversity, a change of view and a change of pace from populated commercial communities that have proliferated along the county's eastern and southern waterfront. See table 1-1.

More intense land uses such as commercial, industrial, institutional and transportation are primarily found in the Port Huron area and to a lesser extent in village areas and in small parcels on major corridors throughout the county.





St. Clair County has 34 units of government including St. Clair County government, 23 townships, eight cities, and two villages. In addition, the County has seven school districts within its borders. From a regional perspective, St. Clair County is the northernmost of seven counties in the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG). SEMCOG conducts planning studies and maintains a comprehensive database that offers detailed demographic information to its member communities. These materials have proven to be an authoritative source for statistical and population-related data that pertains to recreational activities in St. Clair County.

Additionally, St. Clair County is an active partner in the I-69 Thumb Region (Michigan Prosperity Region 6) along with Genesee, Huron, Lapeer, Sanilac, Shiawassee, and Tuscola counties.

## TOPOGRAPHY

Topography refers to the elevations, relief features, or surface conditions of a geographic area. The understanding of topography is critical for a number of reasons. In terms of environmental quality, agriculture, and hydrology, understanding the topography of a region enables the understanding of watershed boundaries, drainage characteristics, water movement, and impacts on water quality.

The land surface of the county is a glacial landform, with characteristic slopes, substrata, soils, and drainage conditions, and as a result of these physical factors, certain vegetation evolved and now exist. According to the United States Geological Survey, St. Clair County is part of the landform called Washtenaw-Maumee Lake Plain. The county consists primarily of clay soils, along with several one to three mile wide end moraines that have been reshaped by water and runoff. Beach ridges and small sand dunes are common on the sand channels, which are visible from Fort Gratiot Township to St. Clair, running parallel to the shoreline.

Elevations throughout the county range from 580 feet to 800 feet above mean sea level. The highest points are in the glaciated area in the western part of the county, along the Black River in the northern part of the county, and along Lake Huron and the northern part of the St. Clair River. The lowest part of the county is in the south in an area known as St. Clair Flats, which is within the Lake St. Clair floodplain.

## WATER RESOURCES

St. Clair County is blessed with water resources. The most noticeable of these are Lake Huron, the St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair, all of which are part of the Great Lakes system. While there are no inland lakes of significant size, St. Clair County has a bounty of inland rivers. These include:

- 149 miles of primary rivers
- 810 miles of tributaries

The St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission recognizes the county’s abundance of inland rivers and streams as recreational opportunities for water trails on which canoeists and kayakers can paddle through miles

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of riparian scenery and silence. In 2009, PARC partnered with the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission to develop *The Blueways of St. Clair*. See [www.BluewaysofStClair.org](http://www.BluewaysofStClair.org) for more information.

### **Lake Huron**

Lake Huron is the largest neighboring watercourse. It creates a 12.5-mile shoreline boundary on the northeast corner of the county and is an integral recreational and economic factor. The cities of Detroit (60 miles south), Flint (75 miles west), and 90 other communities pump 400 million gallons of water per day from Lake Huron. Awareness of the quality of the water from Lake Huron and the Great Lakes has been a concern since the mid-1970s.

### **Lake St. Clair**

Lake St. Clair borders 11.3 miles on the southern corner of St. Clair County and is a recreational haven for boaters, anglers, and sightseers. The largest fleet of pleasure boats on the Great Lakes is on Lake St. Clair, and about one-third of all the fish caught on the Great Lakes are caught there.

The largest remaining marshland in the Great Lakes Basin is located in Clay Township and Canada’s Walpole Island near Lake St. Clair. Environmental concerns abound in this area and are evidenced by beach closings due to bacterial contamination, visible changes in the lake, and changes to lake plants and animal populations.

### **St. Clair River**

The St. Clair River is 34.3 miles long and borders most of the east side of St. Clair County. The St. Clair River extends from Lake Huron in the north to Lake St. Clair at the south, where it has an average flow rate of 182,000 cubic feet per second. The City of Port Huron gets its water from the St. Clair River.

Except for a few drains that flow into Lake Huron or Lake St. Clair, the St. Clair River is the receptor of all drainage basins within St. Clair County and water level fluctuations of two to three feet are common. This fluctuation, along with rapid currents, causes tree mortality, shoreline erosion, and major alterations to the



*PINE RIVER IN ST. CLAIR*

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composition and habitat of marshes and wet prairies. Six locations along the St. Clair River and one location along Lake Huron are monitored monthly to determine water level fluctuations. Water levels are usually lowest in February, then rise through July and decline through the rest of the year.

The St. Clair River's current and the frequent passage of large lake freighters provide for unique sightseeing and tourism opportunities. Shipping has brought infestations of non-indigenous aquatic species that are potentially detrimental to the environmental health of the river. The St. Clair River Binational Public Advisory Council (BPAC) is having noteworthy success in improving the quality of both water and habitat in and along the river.

### **Black River and Mill Creek**

The Black River is the major tributary of the St. Clair River. It flows south from the Minden Bog in Sanilac County and through Port Huron. Along with its major tributary Mill Creek, the Black River drains almost all of the northern and western parts of St. Clair County.

The river's watershed (159,930 acres) is the largest in Southeast Michigan and is primarily a broad, flat plain bounded on three sides by hills ranging from 20 to 100 feet high. The Black River offers limited recreational use due to easily eroded clay soils. Traditionally, the river has afforded high-quality fishing, but fish populations have diminished and become almost nonexistent in recent decades.

### **Pine River**

The Pine River is a tributary of the St. Clair River and is the largest watershed (126,110 acres) fully contained within St. Clair County. It flows through relatively flat land from the central part of the county and through the City of St. Clair.

### **Belle River**

The Belle River is also a tributary of the St. Clair River. With its headwaters in Lapeer County, it begins in the west central part of St. Clair County, passes a short distance through a corner of Macomb County, then continues southeast through Marine City, draining 83,000 acres of relatively flat land.

### **Clinton River**

In addition to these watercourses within St. Clair County, the North Branch of the Clinton River drains 8,600 acres in the southwest part of the county, even though the river does not physically flow through the county.

## **SHORELINE**

St. Clair County has a total of 58 miles of shoreline along Lake Huron, the St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair. Most of this shoreline either has been developed or is not suitable for development. Much of this shoreline, especially along the St. Clair River, has been stabilized with seawalls.

The undeveloped or recreational parts of the shoreline provide places for walking and/or fishing. Most walkways along the river are developed and stabilized.

The Lake Huron shoreline is 12.5 miles, just over a mile of which is accessible through state and municipal parks. The St. Clair River shoreline is 34.3 miles, most of which lacks natural beaches, but is good for scuba diving, boating, waterskiing, fishing, paddling and sailing. A significant amount of the shoreline has local parks and walkways for walking, rollerblading, and biking.

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The 11.3 miles of Lake St. Clair shoreline is densely populated with residential development and limited public access beaches. However, more than 20 public boat ramps and marinas provide boaters with access to Lake St. Clair.

## WETLANDS

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), wetlands are areas where water covers the soil, or is present either at or near the surface of the soil all year or for varying periods of time during the year, including during the growing season. Water saturation largely determines how the soil develops and the types of plant and animal communities living in and on the soil. Wetlands may support both aquatic and terrestrial species.

Wetlands are scattered throughout the county covering approximately 62 square miles, or 8.6% of the county's land area, but are most prevalent along the eastern and southern coastlines and along inland rivers. They are often covered with lowland-hardwoods, lowland-conifers, shrub or scrub growth, or aquatic beds. Wetlands are essential to St. Clair County communities as they help to maintain the delicate balance of the ecosystem. Wetlands serve as sponges, absorbing excess runoff during rain events. As the water infiltrates, it is cleansed using the natural filtration capability of the plants and soils. Wetlands also retain moisture for much of the growing season, endowing nearby plant communities with water and recharging underlying groundwater supplies.

## CLIMATE

The climate of St. Clair County is temperate with cold winters, hot summers, and moderate springs and falls.

- January average low temperature: 18 degrees Fahrenheit
- January average high temperature: 32 degrees Fahrenheit
- July average low temperature: 59 degrees Fahrenheit
- July average high temperature: 81 degrees Fahrenheit
- Average days below 0 degrees: 5
- Average days above 90 degrees: 6
- Annual Precipitation: 121.5 days
- Average annual rainfall: 34 inches
- Average annual snowfall: 35 inches
- Growing season: 170 days

Climate refers to the weather pattern that can be expected in a geographical region, based on the average weather for a month or season in previous years. Weather conditions affect the community's economic base. Variations in average conditions, especially during the summer months, can cause fluctuations in tourism and outdoor recreation activities, upon which the local economy is dependent. Prevailing winds determine lakeshore and sand dune erosion patterns, which impose limitations on development along the Lake Huron shore.

The Great Lakes are a major control factor on the climate for the Midwest; however, St. Clair County is generally affected less by climate because of its southeastern location in the state. The most obvious effect of the lakes on the county is the increased percentage of cloud cover in late fall and early winter, when prevailing westerly winds move cold air across the warmer lake water. In addition, the county's southeastern location within Michigan provides it with five to ten percent more sunshine than those counties at the same latitude on the western side of the state.

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## WILDLIFE

St. Clair County's wetlands, shoals, open waters, rural areas, woodlands and some urban land provide ecosystems that have appropriate soils and food to support a wide variety of plant and animal species. Certain animal species spark the interests of hunters, trappers, and people who enjoy viewing wildlife. Wildlife species in St. Clair County include whitetail deer, cottontail rabbit, fox squirrel, gray squirrel, raccoon, skunk, fox, coyote, beaver, muskrat, badger, opossum, pheasant, quail, ruffed grouse, crow, woodcock, wild turkey, ducks, geese, eagles, crows, swans, and others.

The Great Lakes Basin is also a major flyway for thousands of North American waterfowl and a breeding territory for several hundred species. For this reason, bird watching is a popular recreational activity in St. Clair County. The fact that many bird species are highly visible and easily documented within St. Clair County indicates the county is rich with wildlife habitat, not only for birds but for less noticeable vertebrate, invertebrate and micro-organic species. This is especially true in aquatic places, on publicly-owned land and along the edges of agricultural acreage.

## Fishing

Lake Huron, the St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair are the most popular fishing sites in St. Clair County. Here anglers catch brown trout, lake trout, steelhead, salmon, smelt, walleye, perch, bass, pike, muskellunge, carp, catfish, and panfish. The inland rivers have also been historically good fishing areas and continue to be a source of recreation for many anglers.



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According to Friends of the St. Clair River, the Detroit River, Lake St. Clair, and the St. Clair River support the largest remaining population of free-ranging lake sturgeon. Of the many historically known spawning sites, only two are known to be active, and both are in the St. Clair River. The lake sturgeon is the largest fish and the only sturgeon found in the Great Lakes. Lake sturgeon are bottom feeders, eating a variety of small animals and fish. Geological records indicate that the lake sturgeon we see today are virtually unchanged from fossil lake sturgeon from over 100 million years ago.

### **Threatened and Endangered Species**

Rare plant communities and many threatened or endangered animals can be found in wet, moderately wet, and dry sand prairies of St. Clair County. Originally, such land forms ranged extensively throughout the county but have been supplanted by commercial and residential development. Now, such plants and animals are found primarily on state-owned land.