

COMMUNITY PROFILE: AU GRES



The Sustainable Small Harbors project received funding from Michigan Sea Grant, Michigan Department of Natural Resources – Waterways Program, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality – Office of the Great Lakes, and Michigan State Housing Development Authority to engage stakeholders in waterfront communities around Michigan. In 2015-2016, through public workshops and design charrettes, the project team helped community leaders assess challenges and opportunities related to the economic and environmental sustainability of their waterfronts. This community profile captures the insights and future visions developed through that process. For more information, see: sustainablesmallharbors.org.



Community Basics

Waterfront: Au Gres River
(approximately 3 miles upshore
from Saginaw Bay on Lake Huron)

County: Arenac

Area: 2.33 square miles

Population: 899 in 2010
(-13.5 percent change from
2000 to 2010)

Median Household Income:
\$25,104

Median Age: 49.8

Source: U.S. Census, 2010; 2010-2014 American
Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

COMMUNITY INVENTORY

The City of Au Gres is located alongside the Au Gres River, approximately two miles upstream from the outlet to Saginaw Bay in Lake Huron. The water entering Saginaw Bay drains 15 percent of Michigan's total land area from all or parts of 22 counties — the largest watershed in the state. The riverfront community is accessible by US-23 and features several shops, restaurants, wineries and pubs, disc golf and golf courses, and a riverfront campground. Special events in the community include the Au Gres Car Show and Cruise, Walleye Tournaments, Arts and Crafts Show, Memorial Day Parade, Downtown Parade of Lights and Tree Lighting, 4th of July Fireworks Festival, and the Summer Concert Series. A ferry is available to carry tourists to Charity Island in Saginaw Bay.

French explorers referred to the area as having “gritty stone,” hence the name Au Gres — translated from French as “of sandstone.” The city lies atop what was once a glacial lake, which left behind a geologic feature consisting of clay and shallow layers of sand over clay. In early years, Au Gres was considered a logging community; however, as that industry faded, a new focus for natural resources tourism now provides economic activity. The city has been known in the past to unofficially be “The Perch Capital” and is also a highly regarded portal to Saginaw Bay's walleye fishery and duck and deer hunting. The Au Gres River bears a heavy sediment load and influences channel depth; the channel was dredged in 2014 with funding assistance from the State of Michigan.

The City of Au Gres has experienced both population growth and

population decline in the last 20 years, reaching a high of 1,028 people in 2000 before returning to pre-1990s levels in 2010 with a population hovering around 889 people. The city is influenced by seasonal residency, with roughly 20 percent of the available housing seasonally occupied on an annual basis.

Source: City of Au Gres, Pure Michigan

PLANNING DOCUMENTS

- Au Gres Master Plan — Update 2010
- City of Au Gres Tax Increment Finance Authority: Development and Tax Increment Financing Plan (amended 2015)
- USACE Point Lookout Harbor Fact Sheet (2015)
- Arenac County Blue Water Trail Development Plan (August 2014)
- Bay County Saginaw Bay Blue Water Trail Development Plan (2015)

WATERFRONT INVENTORY

Point Lookout Harbor: Point Lookout Harbor is located on the west shore of Lake Huron at the entrance to Saginaw Bay, on the Au Gres River (about 17 miles northeast of the mouth of the Saginaw River). The project features more than 7,800 feet of breakwaters and approximately three miles of maintained Federal channel. This site serves as an important Harbor of Refuge and supports charter fishing and recreational navigation interests. The Point Lookout pier and channel lights provide navigational aids in locating the mouth of the Au Gres River.

Source: [USACE, 2016](#)

MDNR Au Gres Boating Access Site: The Au Gres Boat Launch is one of the largest, most popular boat access sites to Lake Huron. Facilities include four boat ramps which can launch eight boats at one time, restrooms, and a pier along the Au Gres River and Saginaw Bay. The pier is used by walkers and joggers and has views of Saginaw Bay. Fishing occurs off the boat ramps and along the pier.

Source: [Pure Michigan](#)

Au Gres Mooring Facility: Located 1.4 miles up the Au Gres River, the marina facilities at Au Gres Mooring Facility (aka Au Gres State Harbor) are closed. Until further notice, Au Gres shall be a harbor-of-refuge without any amenities or on-site staff. 30 slips are non-reservable and are free on a first-come, first-serve basis. MDNR is in the process of transferring ownership of the property to the City



Figure 1: Point Lookout Harbor. Source: USACE

of Au Gres. This site is a focal point for the sustainable harbors visioning effort.

Source: [USACE, 2015](#)

Harbortown: A private marina with approximately 76 slips is stationed directly across from the downtown Au Gres Mooring Facility. Slips are typically sold in conjunction with a condominium.

Au Gres Yacht Club: A membership-based club which includes more than 300 slips, condominiums, homesites, clubhouse, boat storage and a marine store. All slips at the Au Gres Yacht Club have been sold as condominium slips. Slip rentals for seasonal and overnight are available. The slips range in size from 28' to 50'. The clubhouse is located at the end of the channel connecting the Au Gres River with Saginaw Bay. A fuel dock and marine store are in operation adjacent to the club house, which includes a restaurant, pool and hosts activities during the boating season.

City of Au Gres Riverfront Campground: Michigan's best kept secret has 111 sites featuring riverfront, full hook up, off river sites,

Dredging and Federal Infrastructure

- Project depth is 12 feet in the entrance channel in Lake Huron, 10 feet in the inner harbor channel, and 6 feet at the upstream end of the project.
- Approximately 3 miles of maintained Federal channel.
- More than 7,800 feet of breakwaters.
- Dredged material is placed in an upland placement site, which is provided by the State of Michigan as needed.
- Requires periodic maintenance dredging of approximately 20,000 cubic yards on a 5-to 6-year cycle; the harbor was last dredged in 2014 with funds provided by the State of Michigan under a contributed funds agreement with USACE.

Source: [USACE, 2015](#)

and two cabins for rent. Located along the Au Gres River, campers and non campers can easily access the river for silent watersport use. There is a beautiful shower house, fish cleaning station, playground, and pedestrian walking bridge for easy access to Downtown Au Gres.

Point Au Gres Marina and Campground: Located x miles south of the Au Gres River channel inlet, the 10 acre campground provides 76 boat slips and a boat ramp. The site provides 75 campsites and cabin rentals with plans for installation of a fuel dock.

Inland Marine, Inc.: A full-service dealership, providing sales and service, located along the Au Gres River. Provides promotion for dry-dock storage at a "sister company," Northport Marine, which is located 2 miles north on US-23.

VISIONING AND PLANNING

ASSETS AND VISION

In an early phase of the engagement process, the community self-identified the following assets and visions for the future:



Figure 2: Assets (left) and weaknesses or barriers (right) reported by the community, where larger text size indicates a higher frequency of mentions.
Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

COLLABORATORS

To draw upon community expertise, the following technical meetings were convened:

- Planning Commission;
- Historical Society;
- Parks and Recreation, Arenac County Parks Commission and Arenac County Blue Water Trail.

To facilitate implementation support, the following initial state and regional partners were identified:

- Michigan Department of Transportation;
- Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe;
- Regional Prosperity Initiative field staff;
- Michigan Sea Grant staff; and
- Michigan State University Extension staff.

Full Charrette Report

For additional information on the three alternatives the community evaluated and the development of the “preferred alternative,” please see the full charrette report, [available for download on the website](#).

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE: “AU GRES 2035”

“Au Gres 2035” represents a shared future vision of the community based on the charrette design process. Both the breakwater improvements and city park improvements were incorporated because they received positive feedback.



Figure 3: Preferred Alternative for City Park and Downtown. Features mini-cabins in City Park, visitor information and observation tower, band shell and city green, beach, waterfront restaurants, fishing docks, kayak/board rental, day docks and water taxi landing. US-23 is envisioned as a boulevard. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors



Figure 4: Au Gres Design Focus Areas. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

For the Au Gres City Park and Campground focus area, improvements were suggested for the northern portion of the site: addition of a second playground, improved shoreline access by softening the edge of the river with stone, and updated shoreline access featuring installation of stone and steps rather than sheet piling. Mini-cabins were added in the design to introduce another option for accommodations at the campground.

The downtown, US-23, and mooring facility focus area design features a band shell with a city green leading down to a beach area. The beach would be separated from the water by fishing docks that step down to the water's edge. The current mooring facility frontage would be converted for kayak/paddleboard rental and day docks with a water taxi landing.

The current mooring docks and concrete walkways would be replaced with a wooden boardwalk and docks. Adjacent to the docks are the beach and splash pad. The lighting and signage used in downtown were continued into the park and along the boardwalk running between the beach and new docks. Across the river from the Au Gres Mooring Facility, an existing building would be repurposed as a waterfront restaurant.

This design also includes redevelopment that will be highly visible from US-23, intended to capture the interest of those passing through Au Gres: an information and observation tower, waterfront restaurant(s), fishing docks,



Figure 5: Mooring facility redevelopment design. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors



Figure 6: Au Gres Mooring Facility design. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

and a boulevard layout for a section of US-23.

As proposed, the Visitor Information Center and Lookout Tower would also feature a rock climbing wall on one

side. Looking farther into the park, the beach area and city green for the band shell would be visible. US-23 would be reduced to one lane in each direction with parallel parking along the sides and a boulevard center.



Figure 7: Current view and artistic rendering of the view from US-23. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

The breakwater and boat launch focus area design increases recreational opportunities at the site by including a boardwalk, playground, pavilion, pocket beach, kayak launch, and fishing platforms. The proposed boardwalk would provide bird observation, walking opportunities, and controlled access to wetland habitat. This design includes adding a pocket beach in the area protected from erosional waves.

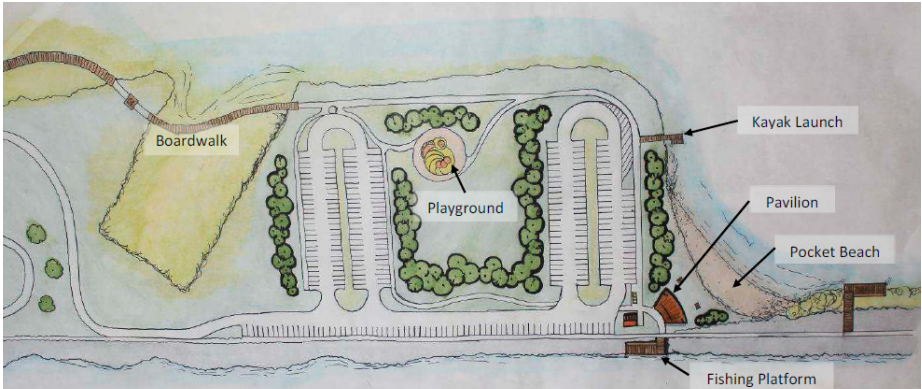


Figure 8: Point Lookout design. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors



Figure 9: Artistic rendering of the view of the pocket beach. The beach area is located in a protected corner which is currently overgrown with invasive phragmites. This area has shallow water and sandy soils and also hosts a proposed kayak launch. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors



Figure 10: The design also provided improved fishing access along the breakwater. Handicap-accessible platforms extend over the water to improve accessibility to the water's edge. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

**BOULEVARD DESIGN
US-23 STREET SECTION**
(Example section near Au Gres Mooring Park)

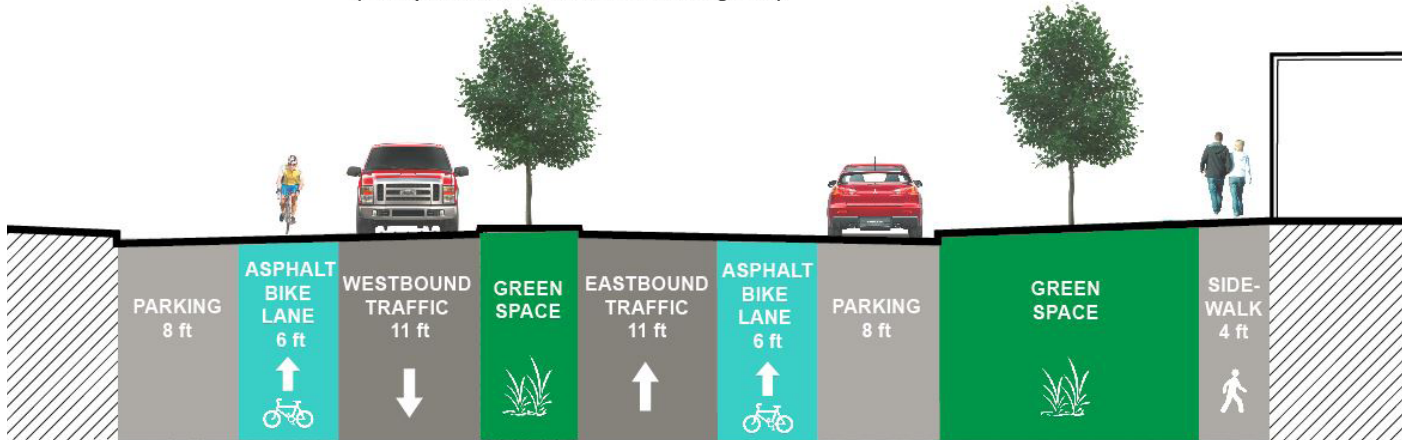


Figure 11: Redesign of US-23. The proposed complete streets/boulevard layout features only one lane of traffic in each direction, crosswalks that increase safety for crossing pedestrians, reduced paved area to reduce stormwater runoff, and bike lanes that connect with regional trails. The overall width of the roadway is not changed, and the design allows for safer pedestrian crossing. Source: Sustainable Small Harbors

CONNECTIVITY

Connectivity is a key feature for a sustainable community; connections via car, bike, walking, and boating are all important within Au Gres. Connections already exist between the city and the boat launch for pedestrians and vehicular traffic. Linking existing bike paths with regional trails and designated biking trails would enhance a popular recreational opportunity within the community. Specifically, trails could link to the Tawas bike path with connection to the statewide Iron Belle trail, running from Iron Mountain to Belle Isle.

The Au Gres River provides a connection opportunity for kayaking and shallow draft boats. The section of river from the mouth to Au Gres City Park should be marked and marketed as an extension of the Arenac Blue Water Trail and Saginaw Bay Blue Water Trail initiatives. The City Park currently rents kayaks and has a kayak launch. Additional rental opportunities and incorporation of launches or stopping points along the river, which is predominated by private property, would increase accessibility.

At the center of the city, US-23 is the main connection to other communities but is a barrier for pedestrians between the north and south sides of the road. New crosswalk locations and boulevard changes to US-23 could improve pedestrian safety and opportunities. Increased and more consistent signage in Au Gres will help define the city for those passing through. Many assets in the community currently go unnoticed by drivers along US-23 given the overall lack of wayfinding signage on US-23.

VALUE CAPTURE – INITIAL EFFORTS

As a part of the engagement process, the team encouraged the community to consider ways to increase tourism in Au Gres, namely by engaging in placemaking efforts and exploring new uses for the mooring facility. Marketing the birding, walleye, perch, restaurant, and accommodations offerings will be important in bringing new visitors to Au Gres. Value capture can occur through existing taxes and consideration of waterfront-specific financing options including marine investment funds or water resources tax increment financing. The team

outlined opportunities to incorporate the overall design vision into existing planning documents and provided an overview of potential funding sources.

ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

Au Gres offers plentiful outdoor recreation opportunities, thanks to the area's natural beauty and excellent perch and walleye fishery. Located 2 hours from Detroit, Au Gres is readily accessible via state and interstate highways. The community is poised to capture a greater revenue stream from tourist activity, particularly aquatic and land-based recreational users.

The final charrette design for Au Gres includes a variety of new or improved amenities along US-23 and within the city. Amenities such as a boardwalk, kayak launch, band shell, rock-climbing wall, and fishing platforms would draw residents and visitors toward downtown and the waterfront. In addition, the design proposes constructing 28 miniature cabins for additional on-site lodging. Renting at \$80 per night with 80 percent occupancy for 100 days per year, the cabins could generate \$179,200 in annual revenue.

IMPLEMENTATION

USE OF DESIGN AND VISIONING

PRODUCTS. The City of Au Gres City Manager reports having used the final presentation slides and materials in talking points to various groups, including Huron Pines, a non-profit organization dedicated to community development, conservation, water quality, habitat, and river restoration. The idea of marketing Au Gres as a “silent watersport-friendly” location and the complete streets/boulevard concepts have already gained support and may be the pieces that gain the most support moving forward.

INITIAL IMPACTS. Au Gres has been awarded a \$50,000 grant from the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe for proposed improvements at the mooring facility property — the central focus of the charrette. The project reportedly had a significant influence in Au Gres being selected to receive the grant. The funds will be made available to the city when the ownership transfer from the state to the city is complete. Initial ideas for use of the funding include improvements to the restroom facilities, which have been closed for several years.

As facilitated by project partners, city staff have been in contact with the local Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) transportation service center representative to gain information on advancing the complete streets vision.

The city completed a revision of their master plan just prior to this engagement process, so proposed revisions will be incorporated in the next revision.

CHALLENGES. City staff will need to remain committed to the complete streets/boulevard vision due to a projected multi-year process for pitching the vision to the Department of Transportation. Similarly, participants report wanting to: “make sure the visions do not lose steam. Keeping people’s interest piqued is a huge piece when a lot of the initial work is done behind the scenes and can’t be visually seen.”

PRIORITIZATION AND FUNDING. City leadership have not yet settled on the selection or prioritization of design elements from the “Au Gres 2035” vision due to delays in the ownership transfer of the marina.

MOMENTUM. During the community engagement process, a “young professionals” group was pitched on site. The group is reportedly still fledgling, but there are plans to engage with the group more in the future as the city crafts the next steps of the process. The group may engage with the Au Gres Chamber of Commerce to highlight and market attractions in the area.