



STERLING HEIGHTS VAN DYKE MIXED-USE CORRIDOR TRANSFORMATION PLAN

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Executive Summary

The Van Dyke Corridor (14 Mile to 18 Mile Roads) in Sterling Heights, Michigan, is a vital commercial and residential artery in one of Metro Detroit's largest suburban communities. As the city continues to grow and evolve, the corridor faces mounting challenges stemming from decades of auto-centric planning. Expansive surface parking lots, disjointed pedestrian networks, limited bicycle and public transit infrastructure, and outdated zoning regulations have all contributed to an environment that discourages non-motorized transportation, limits development potential, and reduces quality of life for residents and visitors alike. Recognizing the strategic importance of the Van Dyke Corridor, the City of Sterling Heights has identified it as a priority for redevelopment. This transformation plan provides a data-driven, community-informed roadmap for converting the corridor into a vibrant, accessible, and economically resilient mixed-use destination.

Currently, the corridor is dominated by low-density, single-use commercial developments. These developments are characterized by deep setbacks, vacant big-box retail stores, and an oversupply of parking that isolates buildings from the street and pedestrians from storefronts. Sidewalks, while present along Van Dyke, are frequently interrupted or too narrow, and connectivity from the corridor to store entrances is often nonexistent. Public transportation access is insufficient, with limited SMART bus stops offering little in terms of rider comfort or visibility. In addition, key economic and housing indicators show that while Sterling Heights remains a strong regional player — boasting over \$7.9 billion in Gross Regional Product and a stable housing market — barriers to equitable access and walkability persist. Strategic investments in infrastructure, zoning reform, and placemaking are required to overcome these challenges.

To address these issues, the transformation plan presents a three-tiered strategy: short-term, mid-term, and long-term recommendations. Short-term strategies (0–2 years) focus on low-cost, high-impact improvements such as temporary public spaces, high-visibility crosswalks, and delineated pedestrian paths. These interventions would improve immediate walkability and user experience, especially in underutilized parking areas. Mid-term strategies (2–5 years) propose more permanent infrastructure changes including the construction of ADA-compliant sidewalks connecting Van Dyke to major store entrances, installation of pedestrian-scale lighting, and enhanced streetscape amenities like benches, bike racks, and planters.

These elements support long-term pedestrian use and catalyze further development. Long-term recommendations (5–10 years) aim to reconfigure land use patterns by incentivizing infill development, reducing parking minimums, and promoting mixed-use redevelopment. By repurposing excess parking and updating restrictive deed covenants, the city can attract investment and increase corridor density.

Each recommendation is grounded in national best practices and successful precedents, such as the Southfield City Centre Trail Project, which improved pedestrian and bicycle access in a similarly auto-dominated suburban environment. Similarly, placemaking strategies modeled after the Minneapolis Tactical Urbanism Kit demonstrate how low-cost interventions can evolve into permanent transformations. The plan also calls for expanding the city's Corridor Improvement Authority boundary and renewing its TIF district to fund improvements equitably across the entire corridor. Education, incentive programs, and grant funding — like Milwaukee's "Depave" green space initiative — are recommended to encourage private property owners to redevelop oversized parking lots into usable public or green space.

Overall, this transformation plan is more than a design proposal; it is a strategic framework for creating a more livable, accessible, and economically vibrant Van Dyke Corridor. By integrating multimodal transportation planning, zoning reform, economic development strategies, and inclusive design, Sterling Heights can establish itself as a forward-thinking city committed to sustainability, equity, and placemaking. Through thoughtful implementation of this plan, the Van Dyke Corridor can become a model for suburban revitalization, connecting people to places and catalyzing growth for decades to come.



Part I: Introduction



1.1 Objectives & Methods

This study evaluates the current land use, transportation infrastructure, and economic conditions of the Van Dyke Corridor to identify opportunities for multimodal accessibility improvements and mixed-use redevelopment.

The key objectives of this report are to:

- Assess the corridor's walkability, transit access, and land use potential.
- Identify barriers to pedestrian-friendly infrastructure and mixed-use development.
- Develop recommendations for zoning modifications, transportation enhancements, and economic development strategies.
- Align findings with the City of Sterling Heights' long-term planning goals to create a more sustainable, connected, and economically vibrant corridor.

This study employs a data-driven research approach, incorporating multiple sources of analysis to provide a clear understanding of the corridor's existing conditions and opportunities for improvement.

The following methods were utilized:

- GIS Mapping & Spatial Analysis – Assessing land use patterns, zoning regulations, and economic activity.
- On-Site Observations & Field Surveys – Documenting pedestrian accessibility, transportation infrastructure, and multimodal conditions.
- Stakeholder Engagement – Meetings with city officials, planners, and local business representatives.
- Public Survey Data – Utilizing survey findings from the City of Sterling Heights Master Plan to understand community perspectives on transit, land use, and development priorities.
- Traffic & Transit Data Analysis – Reviewing SEMCOG traffic reports and SMART bus service data to assess transportation patterns and connectivity gaps.

This methodology ensures that the findings and recommendations in this report are grounded in quantitative data and community input, providing a strategic framework for enhancing the corridor's functionality, economic vitality, and overall urban experience.

1.2 Project Scope & Background

The Van Dyke Corridor (14 Mile to 18 Mile Roads) in Sterling Heights, Michigan, is a critical commercial and residential corridor undergoing transformation. Historically developed with an auto-centric design, the corridor faces challenges such as disconnected pedestrian infrastructure, underutilized land, and zoning constraints that limit mixed-use development. These factors impact economic vibrancy and overall accessibility, prompting the need for strategic redevelopment.

The City of Sterling Heights has identified the corridor as a priority area for urban revitalization and has introduced the Van Dyke Mixed-Use District (VDMUD) overlay to encourage higher-density, pedestrian-friendly land use. This report, prepared in collaboration with Michigan State University's Urban Planning Practicum, provides a comprehensive evaluation of existing conditions and data-driven recommendations to enhance mobility, land use efficiency, and economic sustainability along the corridor.

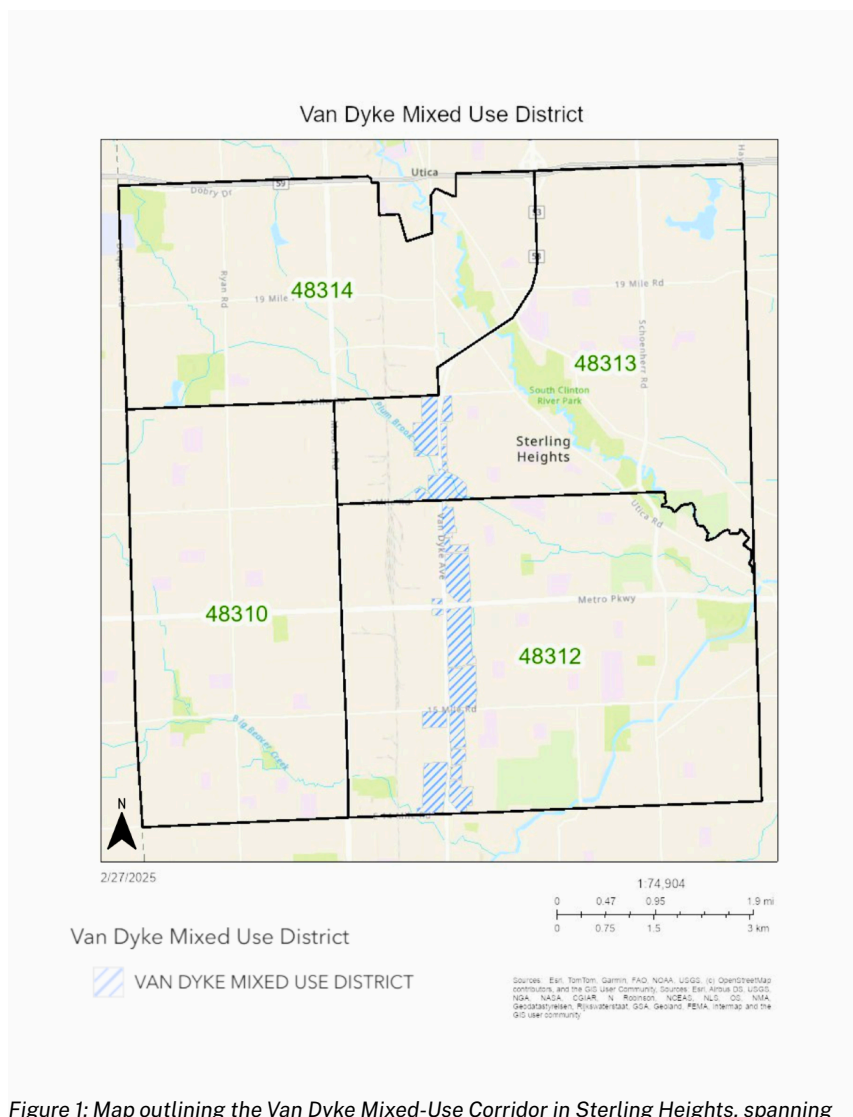


Figure 1: Map outlining the Van Dyke Mixed-Use Corridor in Sterling Heights, spanning from 14 to 18 Mile Roads.

1.3 Land Use & Zoning Context

The corridor is primarily zoned for commercial and light industrial uses, with limited areas designated for residential and mixed-use development. The VDMUD overlay was introduced to encourage:

- Higher-density, mixed-use projects integrating retail, office, and residential spaces.
- Enhanced pedestrian infrastructure to create a safer, more accessible streetscape.
- Infill development that reduces excessive surface parking and increases land use efficiency.

The current zoning still prioritizes vehicle access, resulting in low-density development and disconnected pedestrian infrastructure. The recommendations in this report focus on aligning land use policies with the city's redevelopment vision to transform the corridor into a vibrant, walkable, and economically resilient district.

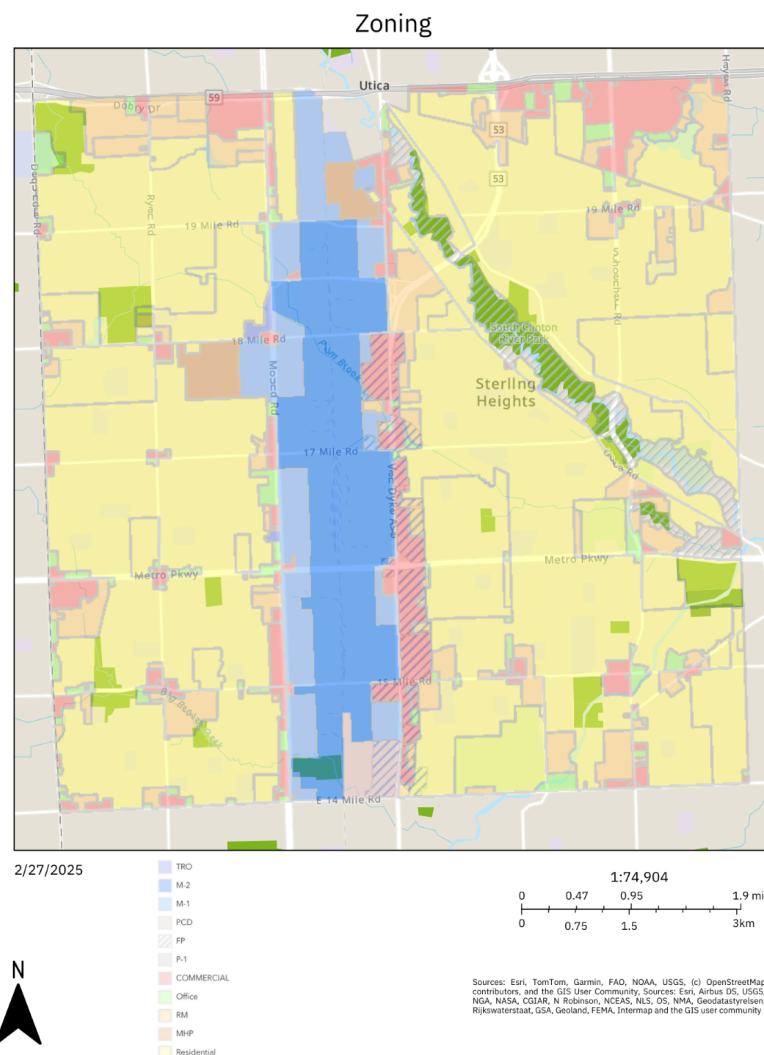


Figure 2: Zoning map of the Van Dyke Corridor, indicating commercial, industrial, and mixed-use zones.

1.4 Socioeconomic Profile

Sterling Heights, Michigan, is a rapidly evolving suburban city with a diverse population and a dynamic economic landscape. Located in Macomb County, 14 miles north of Detroit, the city has long been shaped by its deep ties to the automotive industry and its role as a key economic player in Southeast Michigan. Central to its development is the Van Dyke Corridor, a significant commercial and residential artery stretching from 14 Mile to 18 Mile Road. This corridor serves as a focal point for business activity, infrastructure improvements, and community development within Sterling Heights. With a population of 134,605 and a median age of 40.6 years, Sterling Heights continues to experience steady growth.

The city is home to a racially and ethnically diverse community, with 20% of residents identifying as part of a minority group, contributing to a rich cultural environment. However, despite these strengths, challenges related to housing affordability, workforce sustainability, and infrastructure development remain pressing concerns.

This socio-economic section provides an overview of the city's demographics, economic conditions, housing market, workforce trends, and transportation infrastructure, focusing on the Van Dyke Corridor's role in Sterling Heights' development. By identifying key challenges and opportunities, this profile offers insights into how the city can implement strategic planning initiatives to support sustainable growth, economic diversification, and long-term resilience.

1.4.1 Demographics

Sterling Heights, Michigan, has a population of 134,605 (2023), with projections indicating steady growth through 2027. The city has a median age of 40.6 years, with 22% of residents aged 65 and older, reflecting an aging population that may impact workforce sustainability and community planning. Conversely, 23% of the population is under 18, signaling the need for strong educational and family services.

The city's racial composition includes 77% White, 10% Black or African American, 8% Asian, and 5% identifying as two or more races or other racial backgrounds. The Hispanic or Latino population accounts for approximately 5% of residents, further contributing to the city's multicultural fabric. Not represented in this analysis however is the large population of Chaldean individuals residing in Sterling Heights, as these individuals are classified as White by the United States Census Bureau.

The cultural diversity within Sterling Heights enhances the area's cultural richness but also underscores the importance of inclusive policies in education, workforce development, and community engagement.

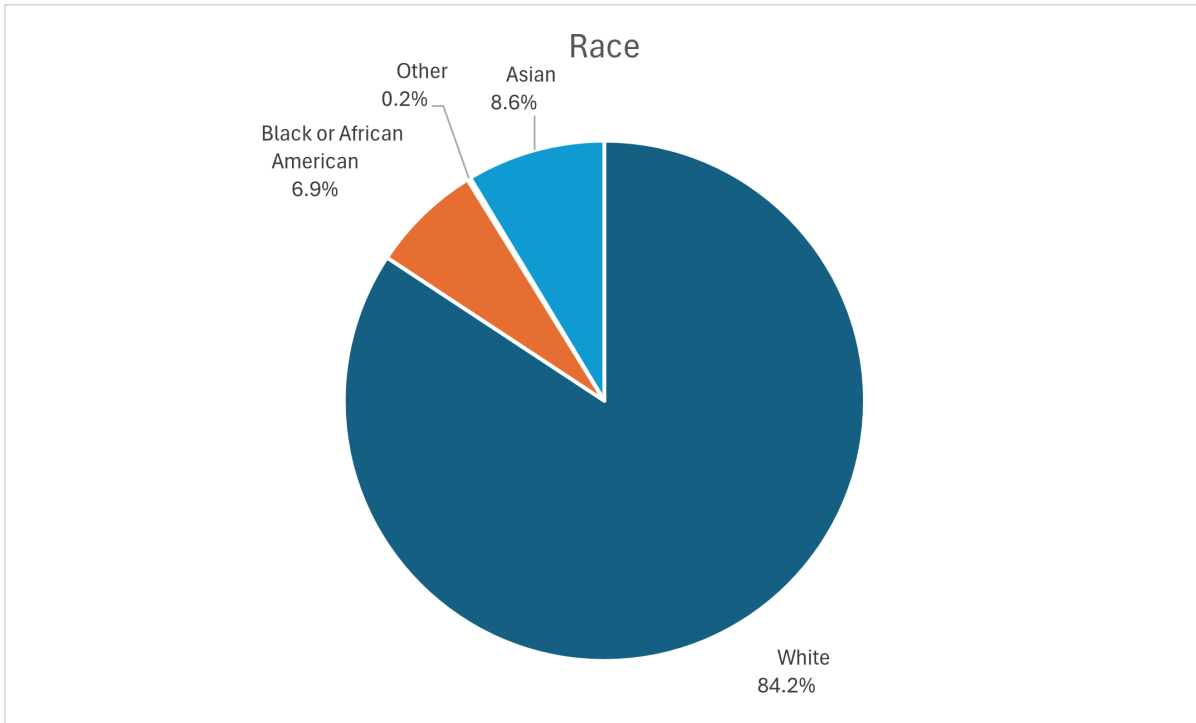


Figure 3: Pie chart displaying racial demographics in Sterling Heights, based on U.S. Census Bureau data.

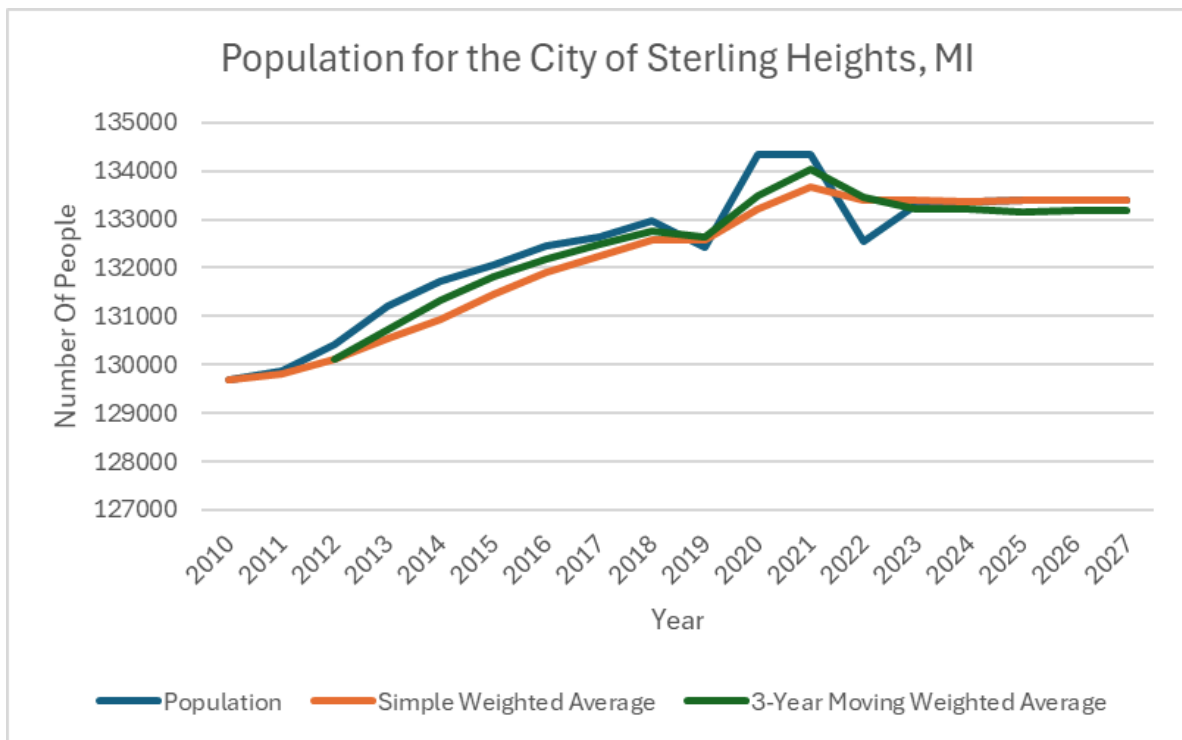


Figure 4: Bar chart illustrating total population trends in Sterling Heights, sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Sterling Heights has a nearly balanced gender distribution, with 48.87% of the population identifying as male and 51.13% as female, reflecting broader demographic trends seen in suburban communities. The city's age distribution highlights a diverse population across various life stages, with the largest age group being 25 to 34 years old (19,746 residents), indicating a strong presence of young professionals and working-age adults. Other significant age groups include 45 to 54 years (18,296 residents) and 65 to 74 years (14,310 residents), showing a substantial middle-aged and senior population. This analysis is based on 2023 population data for Sterling Heights.

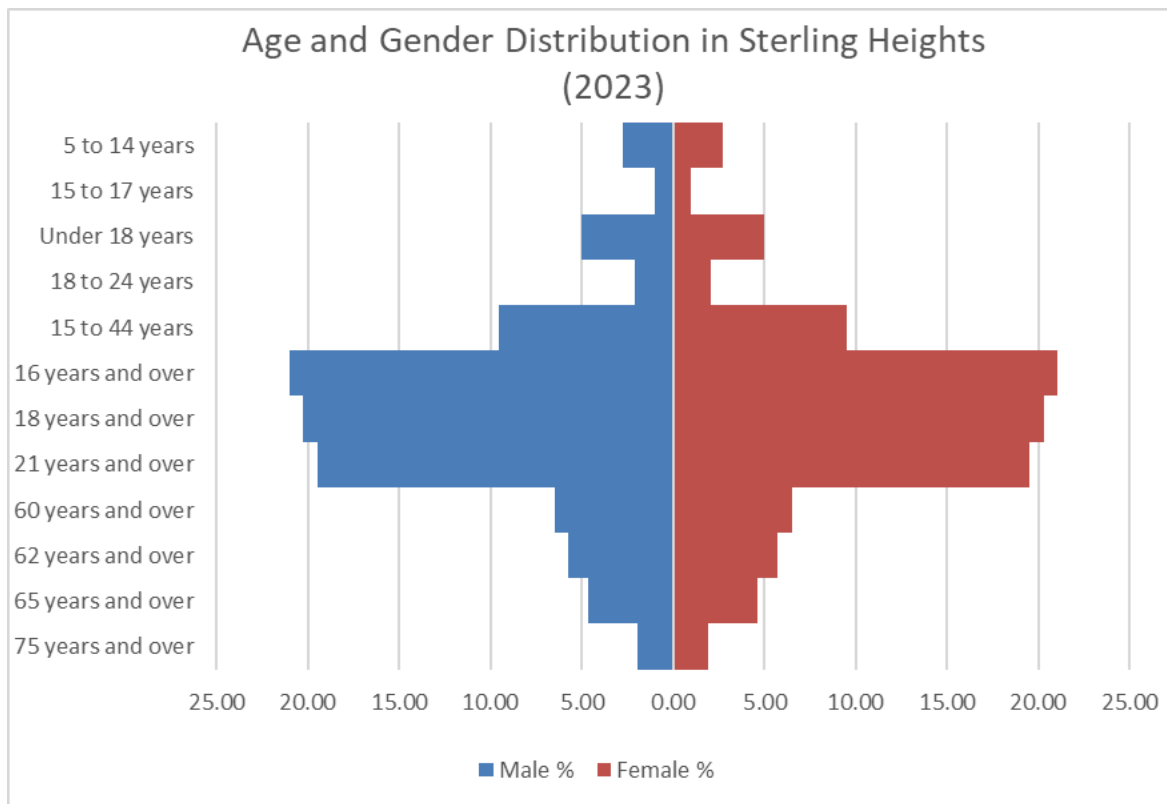


Figure 5: Population pyramid showing age and gender distribution in Sterling Heights, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

1.4.2 Education

Educational attainment in Sterling Heights highlights a relatively well-educated population. Approximately 37.7% of residents aged 25 and over hold an associate degree or higher, aligning closely with state averages. The city's educational landscape reflects a commitment to academic achievement, with high school graduation rates exceeding 90% and a growing number of residents pursuing post-secondary education. However, racial and economic disparities persist, suggesting a need for targeted initiatives to enhance access to higher education for underrepresented groups.

Data from the EMSI report indicates that while Sterling Heights residents have comparable education levels to regional averages, the city must invest in vocational training and technical education programs to align workforce skills with emerging industry needs. By fostering partnerships with local institutions, Sterling Heights can prepare its residents for opportunities in high-demand sectors such as advanced manufacturing and healthcare.

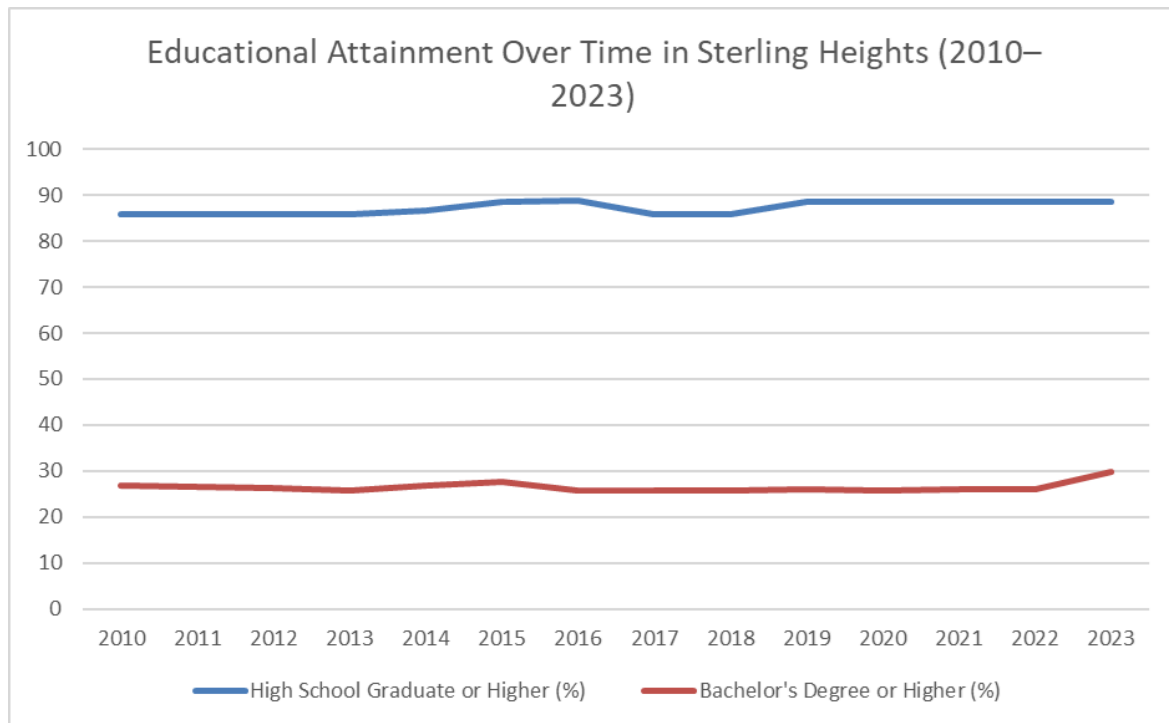


Figure 6: Chart depicting educational attainment levels in Sterling Heights, based on U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

1.4.3 Housing

Despite this stability, affordability remains a concern, as 30% of households are cost-burdened, spending over 30% of their income on housing. Rental costs have also increased, with the median gross rent reaching \$1,215, a 10% rise since 2010, adding financial strain to renters.

Housing diversity remains limited, with 66.3% of units being detached from single-family homes, while multifamily options such as duplexes, townhomes, and apartment buildings make up a smaller share. Vacancy rates have remained relatively low compared to regional and national trends, indicating a tight housing market. Recent planning efforts, including the North Van Dyke Avenue Plan, emphasize increasing the availability of "missing middle" housing — such as duplexes and townhomes — to bridge affordability gaps and expand housing choices. However, progress in implementing these initiatives has been slow, leaving room for further improvements in housing equity and accessibility.

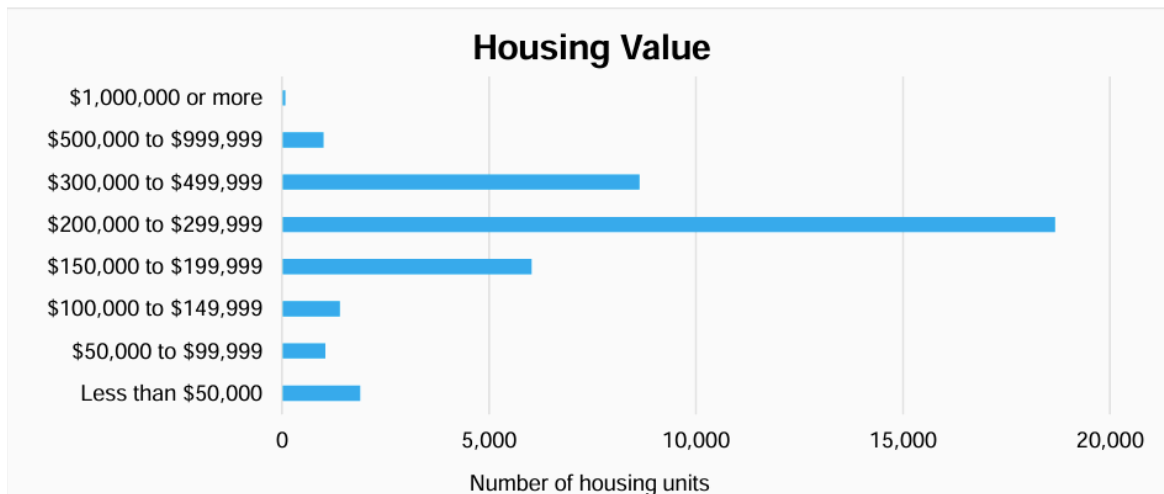


Figure 7: Graph presenting median housing values in Sterling Heights, derived from U.S. Census Bureau data.

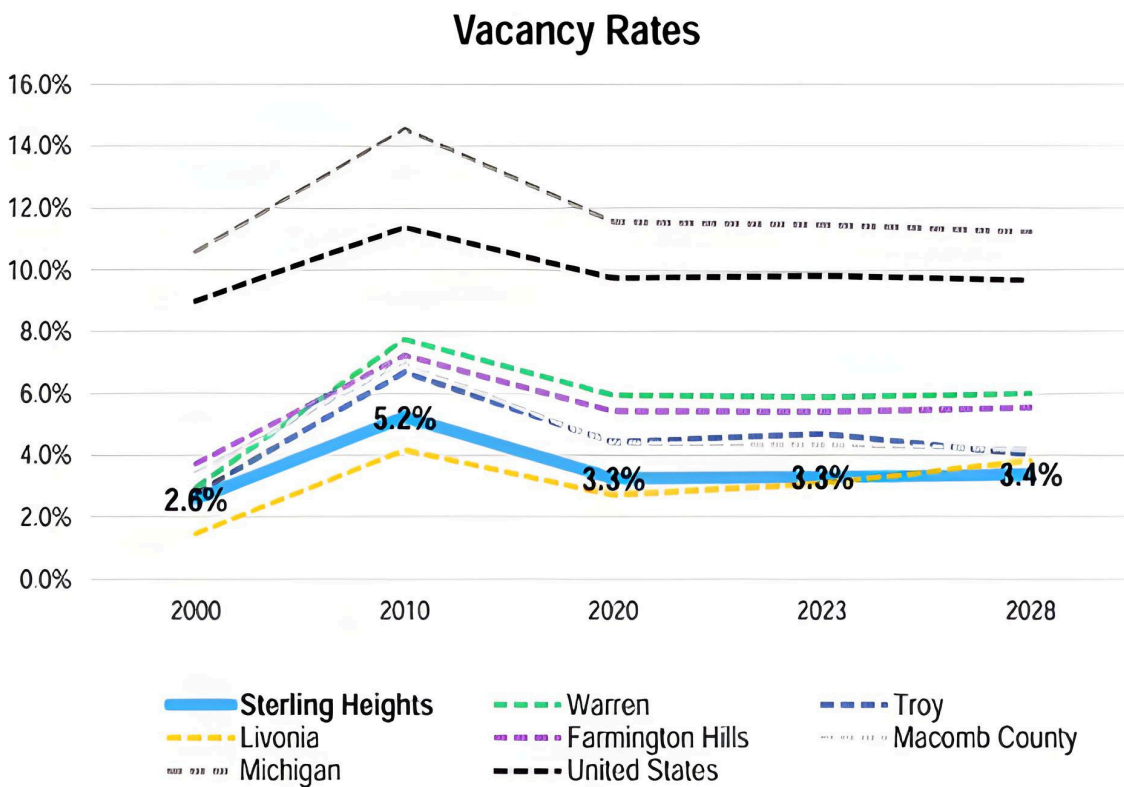


Figure 8: Chart showing vacancy rates by housing type in Sterling Heights, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures.

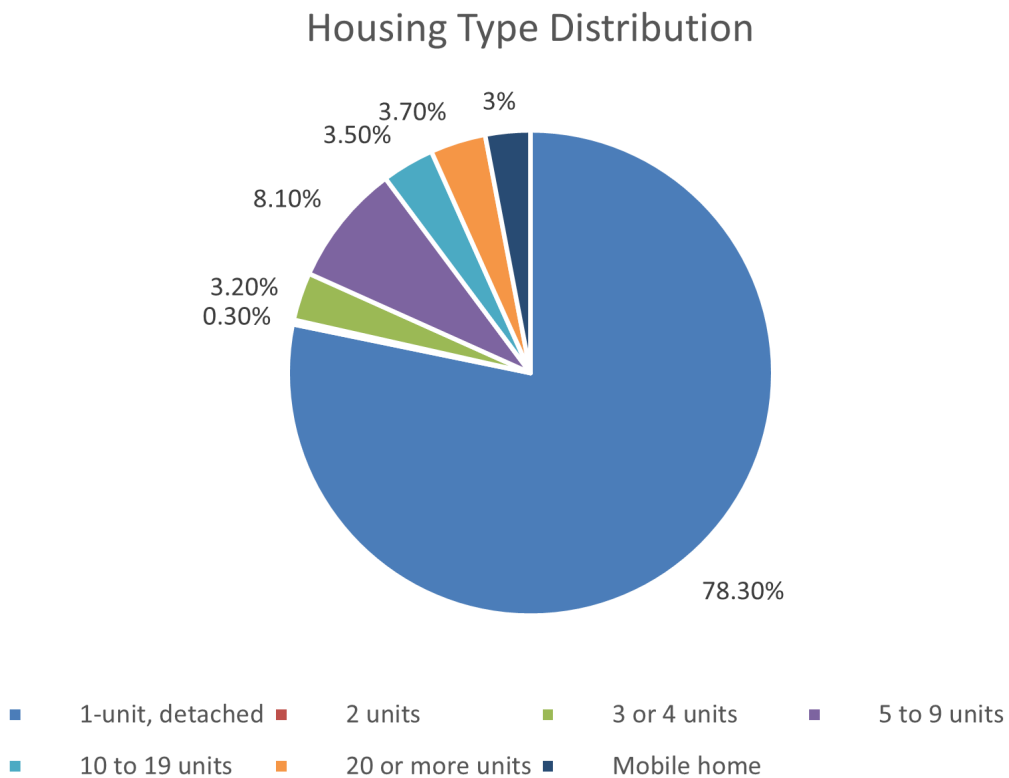


Figure 9: Pie chart illustrating housing distribution by type in Sterling Heights, based on U.S. Census Bureau data.

1.4.4 Economy and Business

Sterling Heights is a major economic hub in Macomb County, generating \$7.9 billion in Gross Regional Product (GRP) and supporting 64,635 jobs. While historically tied to automotive manufacturing, the city has diversified into healthcare, professional services, technology, and logistics, creating a more resilient economy. Manufacturing remains the largest sector (22.11%), with significant investments in electric vehicle (EV) production and advanced manufacturing. Healthcare and education (19.82%) are expanding due to medical office growth and workforce training programs, while retail, hospitality (12.45%), and professional services (9.24%) contribute to economic diversity.

The Van Dyke Corridor, a key economic artery, is undergoing transformation with mixed-use development, transit improvements, and business incentives. Small businesses play a crucial role, with over 5,000 registered businesses — 75% classified as small enterprises. However, economic challenges persist, including an aging manufacturing workforce (25% over 55), retail vacancies, and limited transit access. Addressing these issues through vocational training, business support programs, and adaptive reuse strategies will be critical for sustaining growth.

Looking ahead, Sterling Heights can expand its industrial base through EV production, attract tech and business service firms, and revitalize commercial corridors with walkable, mixed-use developments. Strengthening transportation infrastructure and workforce training programs will ensure continued economic stability. By leveraging its strong industrial foundation while tackling workforce and infrastructure challenges, Sterling Heights can maintain its role as a regional economic leader.

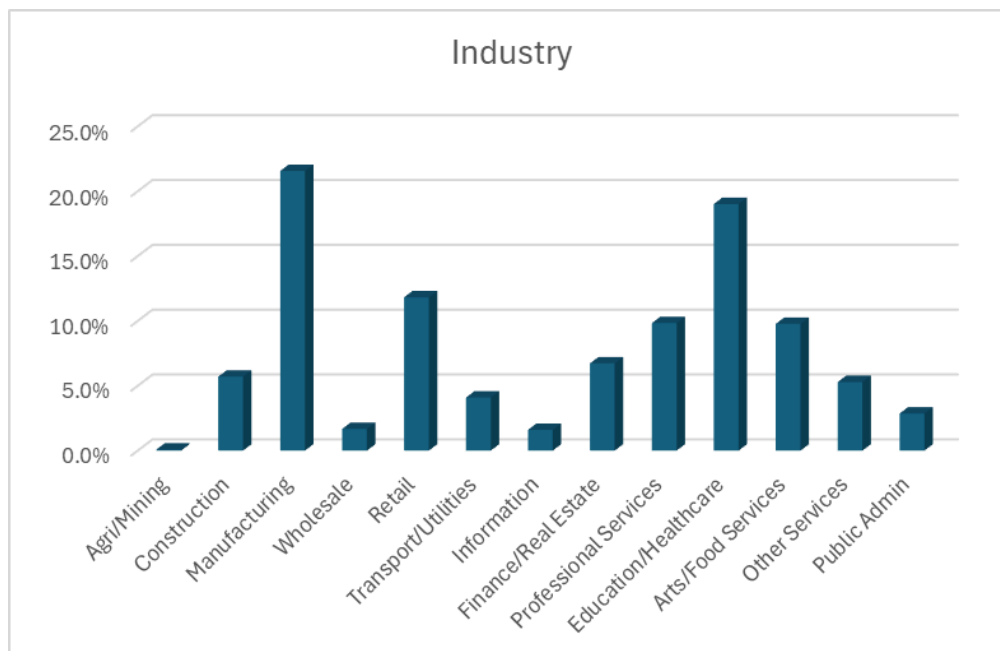


Figure 10: Bar chart representing employment distribution by industry in Sterling Heights, sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau.

1.4.5 Transportation

Sterling Heights' transportation infrastructure plays a crucial role in supporting both local and regional connectivity. The city is well-served by major roadways, including M59 and M53, which provide efficient access to neighboring communities and the Detroit metropolitan area. Most commuters, 74.71 % drive alone to work, while 9.24% carpool, reflecting the city's reliance on personal vehicles. Public transportation remains limited, with only 1.03 % of residents using transit and 0.77 % walking to work. The Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation, SMART, offers bus services, but coverage gaps and infrequent schedules create accessibility challenges for those who rely on public transit.

As commuting patterns evolve, with an increasing number of residents, 13.78 %, working from home, there is an opportunity to reimagine local transit strategies. Expanding bike lanes, pedestrian pathways, and public transit routes could improve accessibility and reduce dependence on single-occupancy vehicles. Investments in sustainable transportation options would align with the city's long-term mobility and environmental goals, fostering a more connected and resilient community.

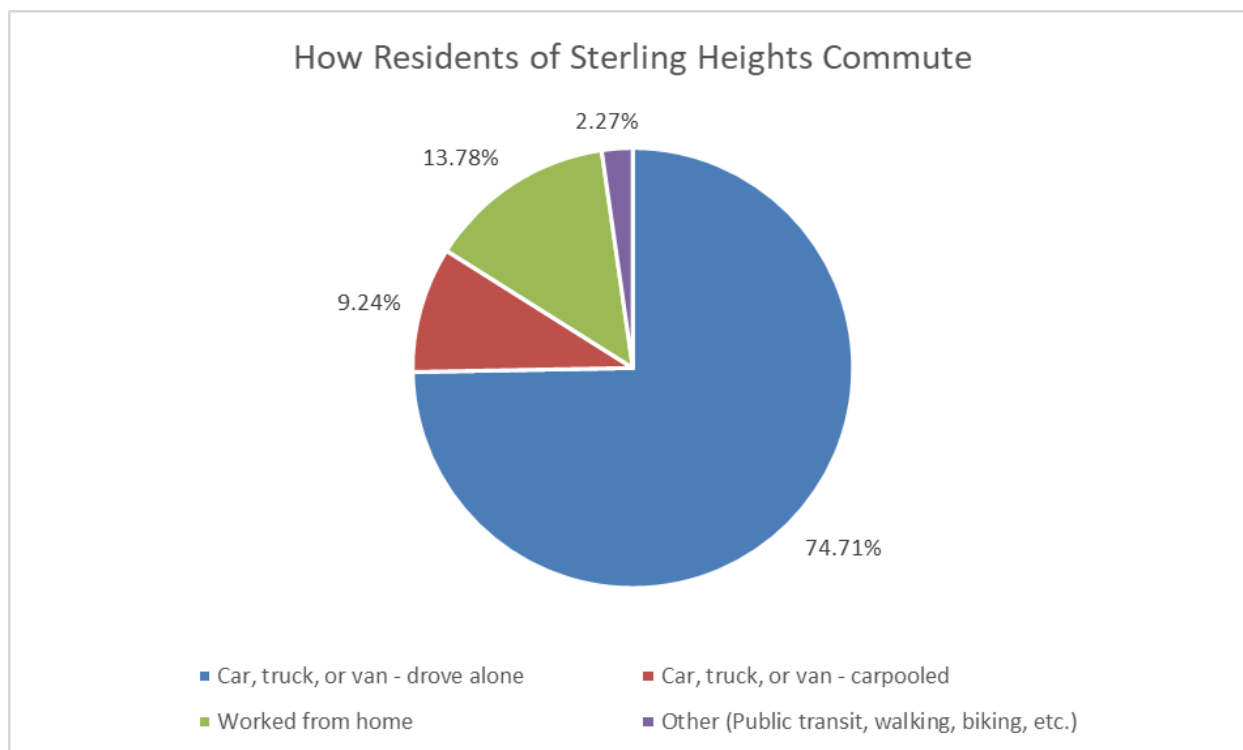


Figure 11: Diagram of commuting patterns among Sterling Heights residents, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

1.4.6 Crime

Sterling Heights is consistently ranked as one of the safest large cities in the state, with crime rates significantly lower than both state and national averages. The city has maintained a strong commitment to public safety through proactive law enforcement and community engagement initiatives. As of the most recent crime data, Sterling Heights records an overall crime rate of approximately 13 crimes per 1,000 residents, which places it among the safer suburban communities in Michigan.

Violent crime remains relatively low in Sterling Heights, with a rate of 1.75 incidents per 1,000 residents, compared to the national average of 4.0 per 1,000 residents. Crimes such as homicide, aggravated assault, and robbery occur at much lower rates than in many other cities of similar size. Residents have a 1 in 572 chance of experiencing violent crime, highlighting the city's strong emphasis on crime prevention and law enforcement presence. Property crimes, including burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft, occur at a rate of 11.03 per 1,000 residents, which is well below the national median of 19.0 per 1,000 residents. With a 1 in 91 chance of being a victim of property crime, Sterling Heights' proactive safety measures continue to contribute to its reputation as a secure place to live and work. For the past six years, Sterling Heights has been recognized as the safest large city in Michigan for municipalities with populations over 100,000 residents. This distinction is supported by FBI crime statistics, which indicate a steady decline in both property and violent crimes over the years. The Sterling Heights Police Department (SHPD) plays a critical role in maintaining safety through community-oriented policing strategies, crime prevention programs, and rapid response times. Neighborhood Watch programs, public safety workshops, and increased surveillance in high-traffic areas have all contributed to reducing crime rates in the city.

Residents of Sterling Heights generally report feeling safe, with 96% of surveyed residents expressing confidence in their neighborhood's security. Among them, 57% feel generally safe with minor concerns, while 39% report feeling very safe with no concerns. Only 4% of residents expressed significant safety concerns, reflecting the city's overall effectiveness in crime reduction and public safety measures. Sterling Heights' commitment to public safety extends beyond law enforcement efforts. Investments in infrastructure, such as improved street lighting, pedestrian-friendly public spaces, and well-maintained roadways, have contributed to a safer urban environment. Additionally, the city's focus on crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) ensures that public spaces are structured in ways that naturally deter criminal activity. As crime rates continue to decline, Sterling Heights remains a model for suburban safety, providing residents and businesses with a secure and thriving community.

Aggravated Assault Reported by Population

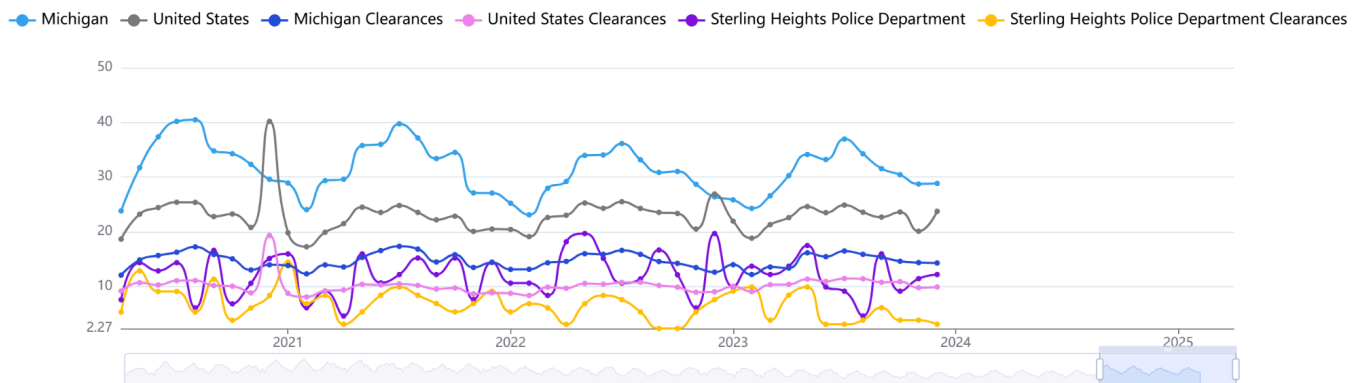


Figure 12: Line Chart of Crime Statistics for Sterling Heights, Michigan and the United States from FBI Crime Data



Part II: Existing Corridor Conditions



2.1 Strengths Weaknesses Threats and Opportunities (S.W.O.T.) Analysis

Strengths

- Strategic location as a critical commercial and residential artery in Sterling Heights
- Well-maintained roadways supporting accessibility
- Strong economic ties to the automotive and manufacturing industries
- Mixed-use zoning allowing for flexible land use and development potential
- Significant support from local government and business stakeholders invested in revitalization

Weaknesses

- Auto-centric design dominated by large parking lots and strip malls
- Limited walkability and pedestrian accessibility
- Gaps in public transit service and inadequate bus stops
- Lack of green and public spaces, making the area less inviting
- Aging infrastructure in some sections, including vacant buildings and retail turnover

Opportunities

- Redevelopment of underutilized properties, including vacant big-box stores and excessive parking lots
- Enhancing multimodal connectivity with better pedestrian infrastructure, bike lanes, and expanded transit options
- Sustainability initiatives like green infrastructure and energy-efficient design
- Economic diversification beyond manufacturing to attract a broader mix of businesses
- Streetscape enhancements and creation of public spaces to improve urban vibrancy

Threats

- Economic uncertainty due to reliance on the manufacturing sector
- Resistance to change from business owners and residents
- Regulatory and zoning challenges that may slow redevelopment efforts
- Funding constraints limiting infrastructure improvements
- Potential traffic congestion and safety concerns if pedestrian activity increases without proper planning

Strengths Weaknesses Threats and Opportunities (S.W.O.T.) Analysis

The SWOT analysis for the Van Dyke Corridor identifies key assets and challenges shaping redevelopment between 14 and 18 Mile Roads. The corridor's strengths include its strategic location, strong economic base in manufacturing and healthcare, and the presence of established commercial anchors like Walmart and Meijer. The Van Dyke Mixed Use District (VDMUD) provides a zoning framework that supports higher-density development. Additionally, the area benefits from solid public safety ratings and general sidewalk connectivity.

Notable weaknesses hinder progress, including an overwhelming reliance on cars and a lack of pedestrian and bike-friendly infrastructure. Vast, underutilized surface parking lots dominate the landscape, separating businesses from sidewalks and deterring walkability. Public transit via SMART buses is limited in coverage and comfort. Current zoning restrictions and outdated deed covenants further limit redevelopment options.

Despite these challenges, the corridor has several opportunities to catalyze transformation. Infill development and adaptive reuse of big-box vacancies can boost density and economic activity. Temporary public spaces, pedestrian-scale lighting, and improved crosswalks can enhance walkability and safety. Funding from local, state, and federal sources could support placemaking, infrastructure upgrades, and small business growth.

Threats to success include continued disinvestment, resistance from private property owners, and worsening traffic congestion. Without intervention, current conditions may limit business appeal and reduce community engagement. Legal barriers such as deed restrictions may stall mixed-use development even in high-potential areas. To overcome these threats, coordinated action, community education, and targeted incentives are essential.

2.2 Existing Conditions Evaluation

This section details the criteria assessed in analyzing existing infrastructure along the Van Dyke corridor in Sterling Heights between 14 and 18 Mile Roads. The criteria detailed below is an analysis of each transportation mode used by individuals along the corridor. This analysis has been conducted based on both qualitative and quantitative methods made via on-site observations and the use of various mapping software.

Multimodal Transportation Analysis

To evaluate the success and quality of transportation networks, as well as the current conditions of the Van Dyke corridor, an analysis was conducted through the lens of New Urbanism principles. New Urbanism is widely regarded as one of the most influential movements of the 21st century. It is an international initiative aimed at transforming the design of built environments to enhance community sustainability, health, and overall well-being. The movement advocates for key principles such as walkability, connectivity, mixed-use development, diverse housing options, increased density, and environmental sustainability. These principles are designed to benefit not only pedestrians but also residents, businesses, developers, and municipalities, fostering a more holistic and inclusive approach to urban development. Thus, New Urbanism principles are the standards with which our analysis of the success of transportation systems along the Van Dyke corridor will be assessed. New Urbanism principles analyzed within the Van Dyke corridor include the walkability, connectivity, design, density, and environmental sustainability of the corridor.

To effectively evaluate the Van Dyke corridor through the lens of New Urbanism, it is essential to examine several key components that contribute to a successful urban environment, including intersections, lighting, landscaping, building design, signage, and parking. According to New Urbanism principles, intersections should prioritize safe, efficient crossings for all modes of transportation, promoting connectivity and reducing congestion. Lighting should enhance safety and visibility while also contributing to the aesthetic and walkable character of the area, encouraging evening activity. Landscaping is guided by the goal of improving environmental sustainability, reducing urban heat islands, and creating inviting public spaces, while building design should focus on mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly structures that activate the street and promote human-scale development. Best practices for signage include clear, intuitive wayfinding that enhances the user experience, and parking strategies should ensure ample, convenient spaces without compromising pedestrian flow or the overall walkability of the corridor.

2.3 Pedestrian Analysis

The sidewalk network along Van Dyke Avenue between 14 and 18 Mile Roads in Sterling Heights is physically in operable condition, with smooth surfaces and minimal obstacles. The path is maintained, and the corridor offers continuous linear pedestrian access. However, there are areas with minor wear, especially near business entrances, and the sidewalk ends abruptly at 18 Mile Road, disrupting continuity. The path is accessible, with enough width for pedestrian use, although narrower sections are found between 14 and 16 Mile Roads. While landscaping and aesthetic elements are present, they are not consistently designed for pedestrian benefit, resulting in an environment that is often utilitarian and disconnected from the surrounding area. Lighting along the corridor, designed for vehicles, does not provide adequate illumination for pedestrians, creating safety concerns, particularly at night. Additionally, building designs along the corridor prioritize automobile accessibility over pedestrian comfort, with large parking lots creating a disconnect between the sidewalk and business entrances.

Figure 13 (Parking Lot at 15 Mile and Van Dyke) visually reinforces this disconnect. The image shows a wide expanse of parking lot with no visible pedestrian pathways connecting the sidewalk to nearby buildings. A man can be seen walking directly through the parking lot, highlighting the lack of designated sidewalks or safe walking routes within the lot itself. This emphasizes the corridor's automobile-oriented design and the resulting hazards and inconvenience for pedestrians.

There is a lack of effective pedestrian signage and inconsistent street buffering, particularly near intersections, which compromises safety. Crosswalks are present at key intersections, but many are not clearly marked or visible enough to ensure pedestrian safety. The absence of crosswalks in certain stretches creates unsafe conditions for pedestrians, particularly in the northern section of the corridor. Improvements in sidewalk maintenance, buffer zones, crosswalk visibility, and the addition of pedestrian-friendly design elements are needed to create a safer, more inviting environment for all pedestrians.



Figure 13: Parking Lot at 15 Mile and Van Dyke. Photo showing lack of direct pedestrian access.

2.3.1 Sidewalks

The surface condition of the sidewalks along the Van Dyke corridor between 14 and 18 Mile Roads is generally good. Sidewalks persist along the corridor on both the eastern and western sides of Van Dyke Avenue. The sidewalks span past 14 Mile Road to connect with Warren's sidewalk network and up to 18 Mile Road where the sidewalk ends. The sidewalks are smooth and well-maintained, with very few obstacles such as uneven and cracked sidewalks. These cracks are generally isolated to where the sidewalk intersects with commercial entrances and exits, particularly between 16 and 18 Mile Roads. These cracks are a result of frequent traffic entering and exiting businesses, which cause minor wear and tears on the sidewalk. However, these issues are not widespread, and much of the sidewalk remains in good condition, making it a comfortable walking path for pedestrians.

Figure 14 (15 Mile and Van Dyke) shows a section of sidewalk with visible cracking, particularly near a curb ramp. The photo highlights how weathering and traffic have caused wear at this location — consistent with the text's note that these minor damages are concentrated near commercial access points. Figure 15 (15 Mile and Van Dyke) displays a longer view of the corridor's sidewalk, illustrating its overall smooth condition and continuity. Figure 16 (14 Mile and Van Dyke) offers another visual of sidewalk conditions, this time in a more open area. While the surface appears intact, the snow-covered surroundings and narrow plowed path suggest limited maintenance during winter months, which can pose accessibility issues. Despite the good overall condition, this photo underscores the seasonal challenges pedestrians may face along this corridor.



Figure 14: Sidewalk Condition at 15 Mile and Van Dyke. Shows weathering near curb ramps.



Figure 15: Smooth Sidewalk at 15 Mile and Van Dyke. View of uninterrupted pedestrian path.



Figure 16: Sidewalk Conditions at 14 Mile and Van Dyke. Snow coverage demonstrates winter maintenance issues.

2.3.2 Connectivity

The Sterling Heights sidewalk network spans the entire length of the corridor, providing a continuous path for pedestrians along Van Dyke Avenue. The sidewalks present within the corridor connect to the wider Sterling Heights sidewalk network, ensuring that pedestrians using the Sterling Heights sidewalk network along Van Dyke Avenue are connected to other areas of the community. This connectivity encourages pedestrian travel; proven to increase the vitality of communities. However, the sidewalk ends to the north of 18 Mile Road on both sides of Van Dyke, creating a gap in pedestrian infrastructure, disconnecting Sterling Heights' Northern Van Dyke corridor from its southern counterpart.

Figure 17 (Sidewalk stub at 18 Mile and Van Dyke) visually captures this abrupt end. The image shows a sidewalk that leads directly into a wide, multi-lane intersection with no continuation on the other side — effectively stranding pedestrians and forcing them into unsafe conditions if they wish to continue north. The sidewalk's sudden termination without a clear alternative path illustrates the very gap in connectivity described in the text, reinforcing the need for infrastructure improvements to ensure seamless and safe pedestrian mobility throughout the corridor.



Figure 17: Sidewalk Stub at 18 Mile and Van Dyke. Abrupt end of pedestrian infrastructure.

(Google maps)

2.3.3 Accessibility

There are no significant obstructions along the sidewalk in this corridor. Unlike other areas where tree roots or other obstacles can cause uneven surfaces, the sidewalk along Van Dyke remains clear of such barriers. This and the flat topography of the corridor contribute to a generally smooth and uninterrupted pathway. This smooth pathway ensures the sidewalk is accessible to all pedestrians, including those who may be in a wheelchair or require other aid to travel. The sidewalk width along the corridor is generally sufficient for all pedestrian activity, with the majority of the path ranging from five to eight feet in width. While some areas, particularly between 14 and 16 Mile Roads, feature narrower sections under five feet, these are not widespread. The width of the sidewalk generally increases as one travels northward. Overall, the sidewalk width provides ample room for pedestrians to travel comfortably, although the narrower sections can occasionally feel tight when encountering multiple users, especially those with mobility aids. The corridor's sidewalk network, pertaining to width and condition, is suitable for all pedestrians.

Figure 18 (16 Mile and Van Dyke) illustrates one of these narrower sections. The sidewalk, while smooth and maintained, is flanked closely by a utility pole and a curb, restricting usable width and potentially creating difficulty for users in wheelchairs or those with strollers. It exemplifies the occasional pinch points noted in the analysis, especially where infrastructure competes for space. Figure 19 (15 Mile and Van Dyke) shows a longer stretch of sidewalk during winter, highlighting a common seasonal accessibility challenge: snow and ice accumulation. Although the path is somewhat cleared, the narrow passage created by remaining snowbanks may limit access for users with mobility devices and reduce overall comfort and safety. This image reinforces the need for consistent winter maintenance to ensure year-round accessibility along the corridor.



Figure 18: Narrow Sidewalk at 16 Mile and Van Dyke.



Figure 19: Winter Conditions at 15 Mile and Van Dyke. Snowbanks limiting accessibility.

2.3.4 Path Aesthetics

The southern part of the Van Dyke Corridor in Sterling Heights incorporates aesthetic elements aimed at improving the pedestrian experience, but their application is inconsistent throughout the area. While landscaping, trees, and vegetation are present, they are primarily located on private properties or within roadway medians, rather than along pedestrian pathways where they would provide the most benefit. Pedestrian-friendly landscaping is limited between 14 Mile and 18 Mile Roads, with only a few areas offering enhancements. For example, between 15 Mile and 16 Mile Roads, ornamental trees add visual appeal and create a more inviting environment for pedestrians. However, other sections lack decorative features, giving the streetscape a utilitarian feel with minimal greenery or design elements. Wide, open sidewalks without landscaping contribute to a sense of disconnection from the surrounding environment, making the corridor feel less welcoming for pedestrians. The absence of thoughtful streetscape design in these areas discourages walking and other non-motorized forms of transportation.

Figure 20 (Intersection landscaping at Metropolitan and Van Dyke) illustrates one of the more enhanced sections. While the area is visually appealing — with signage, banners, and regularly spaced trees — the landscaping is set back and located in the median or near commercial properties rather than directly integrated with the sidewalk. This limits its direct benefit to pedestrians, despite its positive contribution to overall corridor appearance. Figure 21 (Landscaping along 15 Mile and Van Dyke) shows a long stretch of green space and tree-lined property adjacent to the roadway. However, this greenery is physically separated from the sidewalk, offering little to enhance the pedestrian experience directly. The image highlights the common disconnect between landscaping and pedestrian infrastructure in the corridor — demonstrating that while green elements exist, their placement fails to create a welcoming or human-scaled environment for walkers.

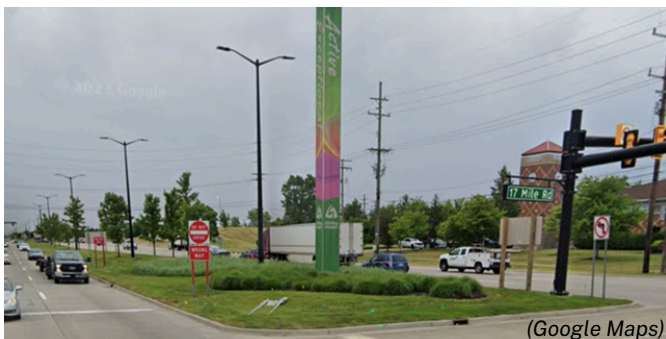


Figure 20: Intersection Landscaping at Metropolitan and Van Dyke. Median greenery example.

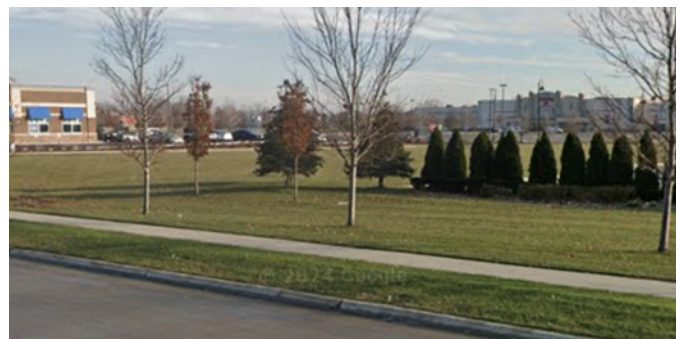


Figure 21: Landscaping along 15 Mile and Van Dyke. Displays decorative green buffer adjacent to road.

2.3.5 Lighting

Lighting along the Van Dyke corridor appears to have been designed primarily for the benefit of vehicles traveling along Van Dyke Avenue. Lighting present in the Southern Van Dyke Corridor is built to the automobile scale. While adequate for vehicular traffic, this type of lights fails to provide sufficient lighting for pedestrians, making the walking environment feel dangerous and less inviting, particularly after dark.

Figure 22 (Median lighting along Van Dyke) demonstrates this automobile-oriented lighting approach. The image shows a tall light fixture positioned in the roadway median, far from the sidewalk. While this placement is effective for illuminating roadways, it leaves pedestrian zones in shadow, reinforcing the lack of attention to walkability in the corridor's design. Figure 23 (East side of Van Dyke) further emphasizes this disconnect. The photo shows a typical section of sidewalk with a large roadway light pole present, but again positioned for vehicle visibility rather than pedestrian needs. There are no pedestrian-scale light fixtures, and the distance between lights is too great to provide continuous illumination, especially after dark or in poor weather conditions. The few pedestrian-scale lights along the corridor are positioned particularly around bus stops and some intersections. These few lights are spaced too far apart to provide consistent illumination of the sidewalks. Limited in number, and the impact of these lights on overall pedestrian safety and comfort is minimal.



Figure 22: Median Lighting along Van Dyke. High mast lights built for vehicle scale visibility.



Figure 23: East Side of Van Dyke Avenue. Limited sidewalk lighting for pedestrians.

2.3.6 Building Design

The design of buildings within the Southern Van Dyke corridor is inconsistent. Much of the corridor is dominated by fast-food restaurants, gas stations, and large shopping centers, which cater primarily to private cars rather than pedestrians. These types of businesses, designed for automobile convenience, leave little room or incentive for people to walk. Buildings are typically set back far from the street, with large parking lots occupying the spaces in front. These vast parking areas (as seen in Figure 25, MJR Movie Theater) create a disconnect between the sidewalk and the front entrance, forcing pedestrians to navigate wide stretches of empty parking lots. This layout not only discourages walking but also isolates the sidewalk from the businesses, reducing the overall sense of place along the corridor.

Throughout the corridor, there's a lack of inviting and pedestrian-friendly spaces. Most buildings have large, flat facades that provide no visual interest or comfort for those on foot. For instance, Figure 24 shows BAE Systems, a modern building that still maintains a considerable setback and prioritizes vehicle access. The corridor features few buildings with small front setbacks, and where this does occur, it is typically on commercial properties that still prioritize vehicle access and parking over pedestrian connectivity. This scattered and automobile-centric development significantly impacts the walkability of the corridor. The absence of inviting, active storefronts and spaces meant for walking creates an environment that fails to encourage foot traffic, which would support local businesses and create more vibrant streetscapes for the benefit of both pedestrians and those traveling via automobiles.



Figure 24: BAE Systems Building Design.

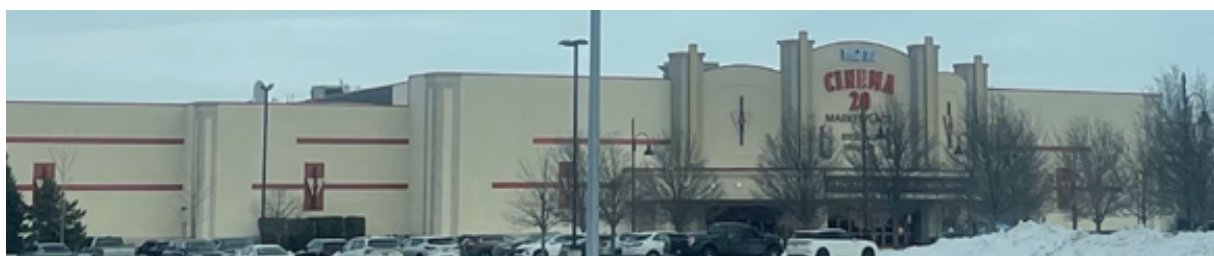


Figure 25: MJR Movie theater Building Design

2.3.7 Signage

A pedestrian feature missing from the South Van Dyke corridor between 14 and 18 Mile Roads is effective pedestrian signage. Most signage along the corridor is aimed at automobile traffic, focusing on traffic regulations, speed limits, and commercial entrances. There are no clear signs to guide pedestrians or cyclists toward key destinations such as parks, bike paths, or recreational areas within the region. Though some signs direct people to nearby businesses, they do not provide directions for pedestrians looking for walking paths or alternative routes but rather for access roads for vehicles. Thus, there is an opportunity to improve signage to highlight pedestrian amenities and promote connectivity to parks, bike lanes, and other public spaces.

Figure 26 (Metro Parkway and Van Dyke) shows signage clustered around business advertising — completely vehicle-oriented. The large retail signs dominate the visual field, but there is no information relevant to pedestrians, such as walking routes, nearby crosswalks, or distances to key destinations. Figure 27 (14 Mile and Van Dyke) reinforces this issue. The signage is large, prominent, and oriented toward drivers with a focus on business listings. There's no inclusion of wayfinding for those traveling on foot or by bike. The wide setbacks and open grass areas also suggest a disconnect between signage and the pedestrian path, which remains unacknowledged in the design.

Figure 28 (Metro Parkway and Van Dyke) displays standard street signs indicating major road names. These are functional for drivers but lack any pedestrian-scaled or wayfinding signage that could guide users through the corridor safely and intuitively. There's no mention of pedestrian destinations or walking networks. Together, the images underscore the corridor's heavy emphasis on vehicle-centric signage and the need to supplement it with signage that addresses the needs of pedestrians and cyclists, supporting a more inclusive and connected multimodal environment.



Figure 26: Business Signage at Metro Parkway and Van Dyke. Shows vehicle-oriented commercial signs.

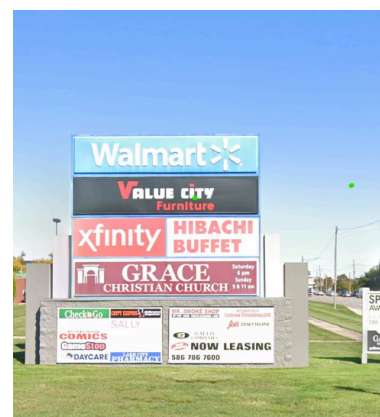


Figure 27: Signage at 14 Mile and Van Dyke. Business listings and no pedestrian navigation.



Figure 28: Street Signs at Metro Parkway and Van Dyke. Road name signage only.

2.3.8 Street Buffering



Figure 29: Narrow Pedestrian Buffer at 15 Mile and Van Dyke. Minimal space between traffic and sidewalk.



Figure 30: Wide Pedestrian Buffer at 14 Mile and Van Dyke. Landscaped space separating sidewalk from road.



Figure 31: Narrow Pedestrian Buffer at 15 Mile and Van Dyke. Minimal space between traffic and sidewalk.

The Van Dyke corridor between 14 and 18 Miles in Sterling Heights, Michigan presents a mix of conditions in relation to pedestrian and automobile separation. Adequate buffers between pedestrians and vehicular traffic are crucial for safety, and pedestrian presumption of safety. Within the Van Dyke corridor between 14 to 18 Mile, there are both areas in which there are positive examples of this principle existing, and areas in which buffering can be improved.

The width of the pedestrian buffer zone varies significantly along the Van Dyke corridor. In some areas, the buffer zones are relatively narrow or nonexistent, often only a few feet wide. For example, in blocks near intersections and densely developed commercial areas, the buffer zone often narrows to as little as 3–4 feet. In these areas, pedestrians are much closer to traffic, reducing their safety and comfort. This can be seen in Figure 29, where the limited buffer space results in minimal separation from the roadway. Conversely, in less densely developed sections, the buffer zones tend to be wider, consisting of areas upwards of eight feet in width. In some sections, buffering efforts extend beyond 10 feet. The average width of buffer zones across the corridor is approximately 5–6 feet. This measurement is an estimate of the total space from the sidewalk's edge to the curb. Figure 30 demonstrates a wider, more landscaped buffer, while Figure 31 illustrates another example of relatively limited buffering with minimal tree planting due to space constraints.

Wider buffer zones significantly enhance the pedestrian experience by creating a safer and more comfortable walking environment. These areas offer greater physical and visual separation from traffic, reducing exposure to vehicle noise and improving overall walkability. Additionally, well-designed buffer zones often incorporate trees, rain gardens, and other landscaping features that not only enhance safety but also provide environmental benefits such as improved stormwater management and urban cooling.

However, in sections where buffer zones are narrower, pedestrians are much closer to vehicle traffic, which increases the risk of accidents and makes walking less pleasant, deterring individuals from walking along the corridor. This is particularly true in the southern stretches of the corridor where buffer zones tend to be more inconsistent and narrower, sometimes falling below 4 feet in width.

2.3.9 Crosswalks

Along the majority of the Southern Van Dyke corridor between 14 and 18 Mile roads in Sterling Heights, there are consistent North to South crosswalks at key intersections and business driveways. These crosswalks provide residential connections for pedestrians crossing major roads such as the Mile Roads. However, while crosswalks are present, many of the crossings and business entrances are somewhat dangerous for pedestrians. Established streetlight markers and exists are numerous, and the crosswalks themselves often not marked or visible enough to alert vehicles traveling at high speeds. In high-traffic areas, especially where turning at higher speeds is necessary to enter businesses, pedestrian safety can be compromised as drivers often may not prioritize checking for pedestrians at these crossings.

Currently, there are eight total crosswalks that cross Van Dyke Ave, one being located at each mile road, providing clear pedestrian routes across major intersections. However, it is important to note that only two of those crosswalks are located between 16 and 18 Mile Roads. This results in large stretches of the corridor where pedestrians are left without safe or accessible crossings for significant distances, as depicted in Figure 33, which maps the spacing of these intersections. As a result, pedestrians may face challenges navigating the area, particularly in the northern section of the corridor, where the lack of crosswalks increases the risk of unsafe crossings.

The presence of crosswalks at mile roads is beneficial, but the lack of clear markings and frequent crossing points at business entrances along the corridor creates a potential safety issue for pedestrians. Figure 32 illustrates one such intersection, where limited visibility and infrastructure create challenges for those trying to cross. Increasing the number of clearly marked, safe crossings would enhance the corridor for pedestrians and encourage non-motorized forms of transportation throughout the corridor.



Figure 32: Pedestrian crosswalk across 15 Mile on Van Dyke

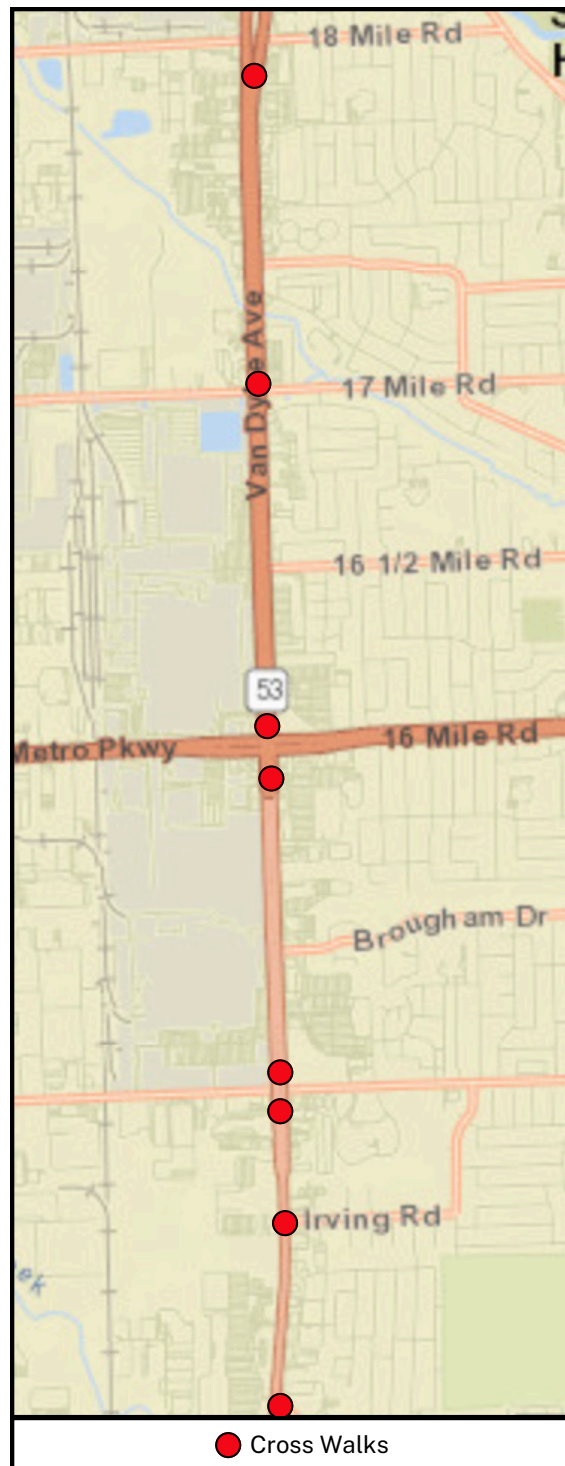


Figure 33: Map of Crosswalk Distribution on Van Dyke Corridor. Shows limited mid-block crossings.

(Sterling Heights GIS portal)

2.4 Bicyclist Analysis

The Southern Van Dyke corridor presents significant challenges for cyclists. The roadway lacks designated bike lanes or shoulders, forcing cyclists to ride in traffic at high speeds, creating a dangerous environment. The roadway is expansive, with speed limits typically set at 45 miles per hour, which is generally too fast for the average cyclist to maintain. This makes for a dangerous environment for both drivers and cyclists, as vehicles must maneuver around cyclists, creating a high risk of accidents. Alternatively, cycling on sidewalks — intended for pedestrians on foot — presents its own risks, as pedestrians also use these spaces. With sidewalks in some sections of the corridor expanding less than five feet, these pathways are too small to safely accommodate both forms of non-motorized transit.

Another barrier to non-motorized transportation is the scarcity of bike parking within the Van Dyke corridor. Businesses cater to automobile access, offering limited bike parking, which further discourages cycling. Upon observation it was noted that less than ten retail locations located between 14 and 18 Mile Roads on Van Dyke Avenue maintained bicycle parking. Figure 34 illustrates an example of ad hoc bike parking, where bicycles are parked informally against a building, lacking any dedicated racks or secure infrastructure. In unison, these factors contribute to an environment that is unsafe for cyclists, ultimately deterring potential bike use in the area.



Figure 34: Improvised Bicycle Parking on the side of a building in the Corridor. No designated racks available.

2.5 Public Transit Analysis

Van Dyke Road serves as a vital north-south gateway connecting the City of Detroit to the rural thumb region. This corridor we are focused on specifically encapsulates 4 miles of suburban travel. The area is serviced by the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation, or SMART, bus system that is active seven days a week with varying times reflecting peak mobility hours. Usage and accessibility are greatly impacted by the sole relationship between cars and the suburban region.

2.5.1 Bus Routes

Figure 35 Shows the main route that runs through this corridor is Route 510, running nearly 20 miles connecting Metro Detroit with northern Macomb County. This route is vital to interconnectivity, while the route is mature, it has lacked continuous improvement over time. This means there is much room for improvement based on recommendations from our client

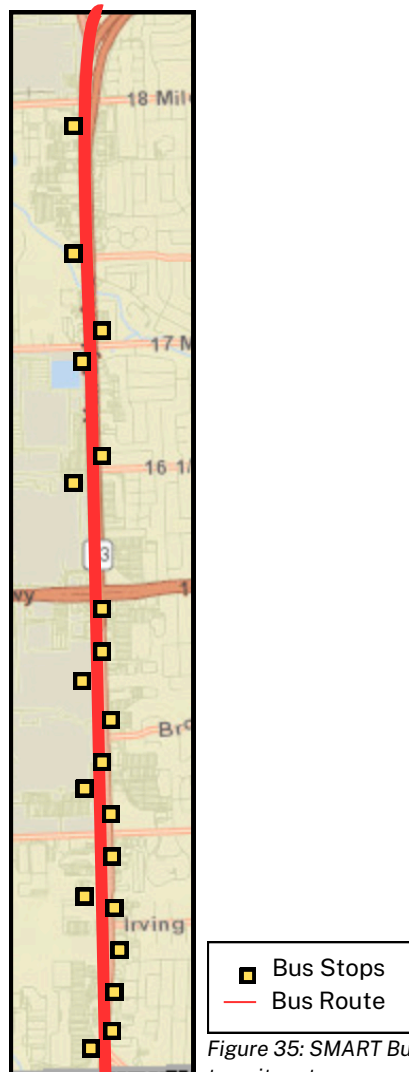


Figure 35: SMART Bus Route 510 Map. Public transit route coverage of the corridor.

2.5.2 Bus Stops

Stops reflect high traffic areas, typically at the intersections of each mile road. Many of these bus stops are made up of just a sign and a four-by-ten-foot sidewalk extremity, offering little protection or comfort. This results in an unsafe and uncomfortable environment for users as they wait alongside the busy road, often exposed to the elements and close to fast-moving traffic. For example, Figure 36 illustrates the minimal infrastructure provided at 16 Mile and Van Dyke, where passengers must wait without any shelter or protection from nearby vehicular traffic. Conversely, Figure 37 at 15 Mile and Van Dyke includes a basic bus shelter, providing at least some protection from weather, though further improvements such as enhanced seating and accessibility could still benefit transit users.



Figure 36: Bus Stop at 16 Mile and Van Dyke. No shelter or seating for riders.



Figure 37: Bus Shelter at 15 Mile and Van Dyke. Provides basic weather protection.

2.5.3 Public Transportation Usage

Based on the data provided by the Transit App, 72% of surveyed riders indicated that the SMART 510 bus arrived on time during their most recent trip, collected from the TRANSIT APP, 43 riders provided feedback on the route's punctuality. When compared to other SMART routes, the 510 bus ranks 23rd out of 50 in on-time performance. These rankings and statistics are based on user-reported data and may not fully align with official SMART transit metrics. This could be based on the car dependency the area has. Shopping and surrounding malls are very unfriendly for pedestrian mobility, lacking proper designations and actual stops are haphazardly located along the corridor.

From individual observation, we found that the buses were arriving relatively on time, with most busses arriving within 5 minutes of their scheduled arrival. We used the TRANSIT APP to gauge live bus times, paired with the applications updated bus times, it uses live rider data to predict the arrival of each bus. Something that we found could be improved with higher rider usage and better overall advertising of the application- similar to Michigan State University's partnership with the TRANSIT APP.

2.6 Private Automobile Analysis

Van Dyke Avenue is a major north-south roadway in the Detroit metropolitan area, owned by the Michigan Department of Transportation. The avenue begins at the Detroit River in downtown Detroit, running north through several communities, including Sterling Heights, eventually extending to the outskirts of the city, reaching the intersection of M-53, Van Dyke Freeway, near the Macomb County line. Along its route, Van Dyke Avenue serves a mix of residential, commercial, and industrial areas, making it an essential corridor for both local and commuter traffic. Traffic counts on Van Dyke Avenue vary, but the roadway typically experiences heavy daily usage, averaging approximately 30,000 -60,000 vehicles passing through key sections. This high volume of traffic, along with the presence of multiple intersections and traffic lights, can contribute to congestion, especially during peak travel times.

2.6.1 Road Conditions

Van Dyke Avenue within the southern portion of the Van Dyke corridor features generally smooth road conditions, with minor cracking that has been effectively patched. The expansive roadway consists of three northbound and three southbound lanes, with medians beginning south of 15 Mile Road, providing a clear separation between northbound and southbound traffic. Figure 38 shows the typical condition of the northbound lanes, illustrating the smooth surface and well-maintained pavement. The twelve traffic lights on both the northbound and southbound sections of the avenue work in unison with the median to slow traffic and enhance the safety of the corridor. Overall, the road provides drivers a smooth ride, though occasional delays may occur due to heavy traffic.



Figure 38: Northbound Van Dyke Road Surface. Smooth pavement and clearly marked lanes.

2.6.2 Traffic Flow

Van Dyke Avenue between 14 Mile and 18 Mile in Sterling Heights serves as a busy thoroughfare, with significant traffic flow due to its accessibility to residential, commercial, and industrial areas. The road is frequently used by commuters and local drivers, as well as those traveling to nearby shopping centers and businesses. The volume of traffic and the traffic lights contribute to occasional delays, particularly during rush hour. Overall, the road is an essential route for daily travel but can experience congestion at times due to the high number of vehicles and intersections.

2.6.3 Vehicle Ownership

Sterling Heights, Michigan, particularly along the Van Dyke corridor, has a high rate of vehicle ownership across its major ZIP codes. In ZIP codes 48310, 48312, and 48313, over 92% of households own at least one vehicle. Specifically, 95.1% of households in 48310, 94.8% in 48312, and 92.3% in 48313 reports having at least one vehicle, highlighting a strong reliance on personal transportation in this area. Additionally, a significant portion of households own multiple vehicles. In ZIP code 48313, 63.2% of households have two or more vehicles, followed by 62.9% in 48310 and 57.6% in 48312. These high rates of multi-vehicle ownership suggest that public transit options may struggle to attract ridership, as most residents depend on private transportation.

Given these trends, efforts to improve transit accessibility should focus on enhancing convenience and reliability. Implementing express bus routes, expanding bus stops, and integrating more public advertising could improve the usage. An investment in pedestrian and cycling infrastructure along the Van Dyke corridor could provide alternative transportation choices and reduce reliance on personal vehicles.

2.6.4 Parking Conditions

The Van Dyke Corridor in Sterling Heights is heavily car-dependent, with large surface parking lots dominating the commercial landscape. Upon analysis, it has been noted that parking availability throughout the corridor varies significantly; parking lots over three acres tend to experience high vacancy rates, while smaller parking areas — typically those associated with food service — maintain lower vacancy rates during peak hours of business at each individual establishment. This is illustrated in Figure 39, which shows a large, underutilized parking lot at 16 Mile and Van Dyke.

The primary development pattern within the designated district consists of big-box and strip-style commercial buildings set back from the road, surrounded by vast expanses of asphalt. These parking lots are often underutilized or inefficiently designed, limiting opportunities for higher-density development. Pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure is minimal surrounding such parking areas, with few crosswalks, benches, or bike parking areas. The nature of development within the corridor has resulted in fragmented, isolated lots rather than a cohesive, walkable environment. As seen in Figure 40, the extensive asphalt areas around commercial buildings further reinforce this pattern. As a result, the corridor prioritizes vehicle access over the pedestrian experience, reinforcing its dependence on cars rather than fostering a more integrated, accessible urban environment.



Figure 39: Focus Area 1 Parking lot at 16 Mile and Van Dyke. Underutilized and Vast space with few parked cars.



Figure 40: Focus Area 2 Parking Lot 15 Mile and Van Dyke. Oversized Parking lot shows development pattern around MJR Theater.

2.7 Focus Areas

Following an analysis of various elements along the Van Dyke corridor between 14 Mile and 18 Mile Roads, three key areas were identified as significantly detracting from the pedestrian experience. These areas were selected due to their design, which prioritizes vehicular traffic at the expense of pedestrian accessibility and safety. Given ongoing planning initiatives for the Van Dyke corridor emphasize enhancing walkability and promoting non-motorized transportation, these locations have been recognized as obstacles to achieving these objectives. Thus, these three areas have been designated as priority areas for intervention to improve pedestrian connectivity and overall corridor accessibility



2.7.1

Focus Area 1

The first focus area consists of two large parking lots located at the intersection of 16-Mile Road and Van Dyke Avenue. Both lots are zoned C-3 (Business Commercial) and serve major big-box retailers – Meijer and Home Depot. Each lot contains approximately 1,100 parking spaces, reflecting conventional suburban development pattern where expansive surface dominates the site. While these lots provide ample parking for customers, they are largely underutilized outside of peak shopping hours.

The Home Depot parking lot is shared with an adjacent strip mall that houses approximately ten businesses, creating a more traditional retail cluster compared to the standalone Meijer store. In front of both lots, a series of fast-food restaurants and small commercial businesses line the corridor that separate the big box stores from direct access to the street. While these lots add commercial diversity, they also create barriers to pedestrian activity.

The street conditions along 16-Mile Road and Van Dyke Avenue reflect a high-traffic commercial corridor built primarily for vehicle access. Both roads are wide, multi-lane thoroughfares with heavy traffic flow, including frequent turning movements into and out of the parking lots. Signalized intersections and designated turn lanes help regulate traffic, but pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure is limited. Crosswalks exist at major intersections, but the large parking lots and commercial setbacks make walkability a challenge, as most visitors must navigate across expansive pavement to reach businesses. Landscaping and green space are minimal, with the streetscape dominated by wide driveways, traffic signals, and signage catering to motorists.

Focus Area 1



Figure 42: Aerial View of Focus Area 1. Located at 16 Mile and Van Dyke intersection.

(Apple Maps)

2.7.2

Focus Area 2

The second area of focus is situated at the northeastern corner of 15 Mile Road and Van Dyke Avenue. This location is characterized by an expansive parking lot servicing two vacant big-box stores and the Sterling Heights MJR movie theater. The complex located within the focus area also includes a service drive, providing access to ten retail locations.

The area is zoned C-3, General Business District, and is overlaid with the Van Dyke Mixed Use District, allowing for a mix of commercial, residential, and retail developments. The parking lot spans approximately 21 acres and includes a total of 2,137 parking spaces. Parking requirements per zoning ordinance specify that the MJR theater requires 730 spaces, while the vacant box stores would require 588 spaces, if operational, leaving an excess of 819 parking spaces, per Sterling Heights' zoning ordinance. Additionally, through monitoring parking volumes at this location, it has been discovered that the immense parking infrastructure at the site is chronically underused. Throughout a typical week, only a quarter of the parking in this lot is used to service the three large developments adjacent to the lot. This surplus indicates potential opportunities for reconfiguring parking infrastructure to better serve pedestrians and businesses, as well as the residents and visitors of Sterling Heights. The two large box stores to the north of the focus area remain vacant, further highlighting a need for redevelopment efforts.

The parking lot exhibits signs of wear, including pavement degradation and an absence of pedestrian infrastructure. The lack of sidewalks within the parking lot creates hazardous conditions for pedestrians. The absence of designated bike parking further discourages non-motorized transportation, contributing to the reliance on vehicles throughout the corridor.

Given the Van Dyke Mixed Use District overlay encompasses this area, introducing a mix of residential and commercial developments could help reduce the reliance on surface parking and build density within the district. With a reevaluation of parking needs, the excess 819 spaces provide an opportunity to enhance pedestrian accessibility through sidewalks, crosswalks, and designated bike lanes to improve overall safety and connectivity along the Van Dyke corridor.

Focus Area 2

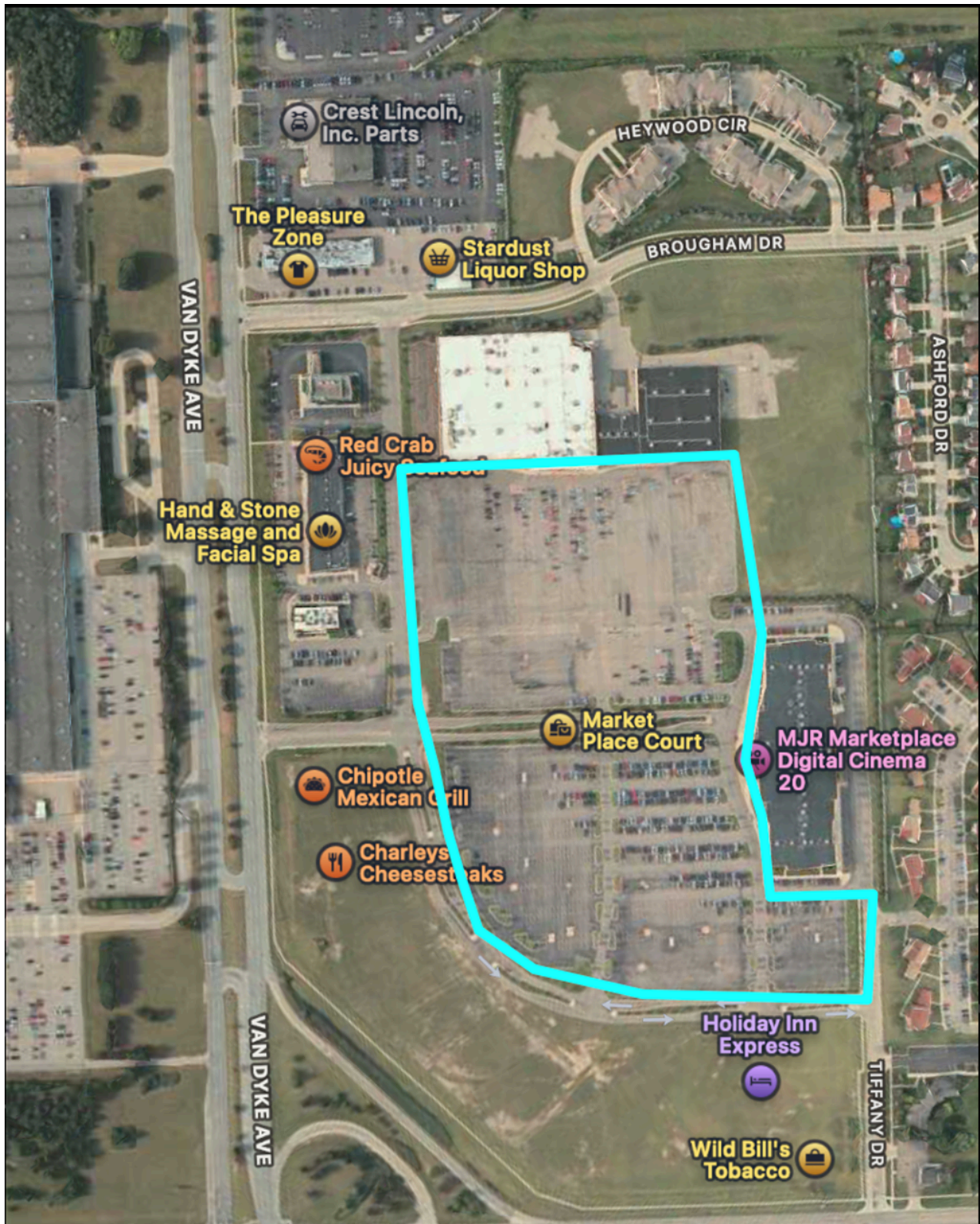


Figure 43: Aerial View of Focus Area 2. Vacant big-box development and MJR parking.

(Apple maps)

2.7.3

Focus Area 3

The third area of focus is located on the northwest side of 14 Mile Road and Van Dyke Avenue, characterized by a large parking lot that serves multiple uses, including Walmart as the primary draw for vehicles, with Grace Church attracting large numbers of visitors intermittently and a slow-moving strip mall. This area is zoned under the Planned Center District (PCD), with a mixed-use overlay that allows for redevelopment and future infill. The parking lot spans approximately 3,750 spaces, just over 25 acres. However, much of this parking infrastructure remains underutilized outside of peak shopping or service times. Walmart draws a steady number of vehicles yet fails to achieve desirable coverage. The intermittent usage of Grace Church also contributes to fluctuating vehicle demand, the lot remains empty outside of peak attendance hours. Despite the size and capacity of the lot, there is a noticeable lack of pedestrian infrastructure to encourage foot traffic, discouraging a short visit to the small businesses located in the adjacent strip mall and the auxiliary restraints.

Currently, the area is lacking basic pedestrian amenities such as sidewalks, bike lanes, or bus stops, contributing to a car-dependent environment. The absence of these features makes it difficult for residents and visitors to navigate the area without relying on cars, further emphasizing the need for improvements in mobility. The faux-boulevard makes navigating a simple parking lot a chore. Given the mixed-use overlay, this area presents a unique opportunity to reevaluate the current parking infrastructure and integrate residential, commercial, and recreational spaces, reducing the dependency on vast surface lots. By reconfiguring the parking layout and introducing pedestrian-friendly ratios, incorporating eye level features, the area could better accommodate both vehicular and non-vehicular traffic, fostering a more connected alcove.

One potential approach to redeveloping this area is to add townhomes along the perimeter, creating a more cohesive transition between the commercial space and the surrounding residential areas. These townhomes could serve as a buffer, enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the area while providing a mixed development use. Alternatively, the space could be reimagined as an outdoor mall, with walkways connecting retail, dining, and entertainment options. This outdoor mall could incorporate already underutilized parking space and transition unneeded acreage into green spaces or plazas, providing areas for relaxation and social interaction, and encouraging more foot traffic for the surrounding business.

Focus Area 3



Figure 44: Aerial View of Focus Area 3. Walmart, Grace Church, and strip mall layout.

(Apple Maps)



Part III: Recommendations



3.1 Short -Term Recommendations (0-2 Years)

3.1.1 Temporary Public Spaces

To revitalize underutilized parking lots and create inviting community spaces along the Van Dyke Corridor, temporary public spaces are proposed in the three identified focus areas. These installations would be expected to encourage community gathering, improve the corridor's walkability by providing pedestrian with third-place destinations, and introduce greenery and shade into the car-dominated environment through low-cost, flexible infrastructure. A key aspect of these ideas are founded in a building-block theory; providing implementation steps that conserve funding and allow for scaling.

Within Focus Area 1, located at 16 Mile encompassing a variety of commercial businesses including Home Depot, portions of the large parking lots can be converted into temporary seating plazas. Using painted concrete or wood barriers to define the space, the area could be enhanced with planters and picnic tables. These elements would create a casual, accessible zone where people can eat, rest, or socialize, transforming unused pavement into a vibrant public amenity.

Focus Area 2, located at 15 Mile encompassing the MJR theater, offers a unique opportunity to break up the expanse of the front parking lot by installing temporary islands. These islands would include planters and movable seating, creating small gathering zones that invite interaction before or after a movie. The placement of these elements would also provide a natural form of traffic calming, subtly guiding vehicle flow and improving pedestrian safety.

In Focus Area 3, located at 14 Mile encompassing Walmart and Grace Church, seating areas can be introduced in quieter parts of the parking lot that are not regularly used. With the addition of barriers, shade structures, and furniture, the space would offer a safe and comfortable environment for people to wait, rest, or spend time outdoors. This intervention brings human scale and function to an otherwise utilitarian setting.



Figure 45: Example of Temporary Seating (Pinterest)



Figure 46: Example Of Temporary Seating (tysonsreporter.com)

All three sites could incorporate a set of elements that would be installed to define and activate the spaces. Jersey barriers (painted for visual interest) or modular concrete blocks would outline the seating zones and block off vehicle traffic, costing approximately \$500 to \$1,000 each. Planters, made from wood or recycled plastic, would introduce shade and greenery while serving as soft barriers, ranging from \$500 to \$1,500 each. Movable seating — including picnic tables, benches, and café tables — would offer flexible and durable options for users at a cost of \$300 to \$2,000 each, dependent on material, with the potential addition of shade umbrellas. Additional shade may be provided to users.

To further enhance the visual appeal and functionality of each site, paint, striping, and surface treatments would be applied at a cost of \$2,000 to \$5,000 per site, helping to establish identity through decorative painting, crosswalks, and playful elements. Signage and way finding may be included as well — ranging from \$1,000 to \$3,000 — to provide rule signs, branding, “Slow Zone” warnings, and directionals to nearby transit stops or local participating businesses. The city may opt to partner with local business to subsidize such activity in return for advertising or acknowledgment of community benefit.

The total estimated cost per site falls between \$10,000 and \$30,000, depending on the scale and materials selected. These investments are modeled on successful precedents such as the *Minneapolis Tactical Urbanism Kit*, which used paint and flexible post delineators to convert parking lots into walkable plazas and safe pedestrian routes during temporary events. By drawing from these tested strategies, the Van Dyke Corridor can pilot flexible, low-cost interventions that promote liveliness, safety, and public life.



Figure 47: Painted jersey barriers (Seascoast)



Figure 48: Example Of Temporary Seating (Pinterest)



Figure 49: Movable Planter Barriers (Pinterest)

3.1.2 Install High-Visibility Crosswalks & Temporary Pedestrian Paths

To improve pedestrian safety and mobility along the Van Dyke Corridor, high-visibility crosswalks and temporary pedestrian paths are proposed across three key focus areas. These enhancements aim to better connect parking lots, bus stops, and storefronts, addressing areas where foot traffic already occurs informally. By using low-cost, flexible materials, these interventions can be installed quickly while still making a significant impact on walkability and safety. They also help reduce potential conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles in large, unstructured parking areas. This also allows our client to record which temporary crosswalks see the most pedestrian traffic, giving an idea to where permanent sidewalks may be constructed in the future.

At Focus Area 1, temporary crosswalks and delineated pedestrian paths should be striped from the Van Dyke sidewalk to store entrances. These paths can be marked using paint, flex posts, or bollards to create a safer and more intuitive route for pedestrians. By formalizing the walking patterns that already exist, these improvements can make daily trips more pleasant and accessible. They also signal to drivers that pedestrians are expected and prioritized in these shared spaces.

Focus Area 2 would benefit from the installation of zebra-striped crosswalks across the main driveway entrances and near vacant big-box stores. These highly visible markings enhance safety by alerting drivers to pedestrian crossings and slowing down traffic in key areas. The addition of these crosswalks also helps create a more connected experience for those walking between businesses, parking areas, and public transit. As temporary installations, they can be adjusted as needed and used to test more permanent changes in the future.

In Focus Area 3, a temporary pedestrian path should be created to connect the strip mall edge to the nearby bus stop and Grace Church entrance. This path would serve people who are already walking informally across the parking lot and grassy edges, especially during peak service times or events. By marking this route with painted lines and flex posts, the design both acknowledges and supports the actual behavior of pedestrians. The addition of this infrastructure would also promote accessibility and encourage transit use by making walking a safer and more comfortable option.

Key components of the proposed improvements include zebra or continental striping using thermoplastic paint, which features 12-inch white stripes positioned perpendicular to traffic for maximum visibility. Delineated pathways would be created in parking lots using painted lines, cones, or flex posts to guide pedestrians safely between destinations. ADA-compliant curb ramps would be installed at key locations where temporary paths meet sidewalks, building entrances, or other walkways. These design elements work together to create clear, visible routes that improve the pedestrian experience while maintaining flexibility.

Cost estimates vary depending on the size of the site and materials used. According to Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) guidelines and WesternITE data, crosswalk striping typically costs between \$5,000 and \$7,000 per crosswalk. For temporary pedestrian paths, which may involve both paint and flex post delineators, the cost is estimated at \$3,000 to \$10,000 per site. These figures are informed by the *Minneapolis Tactical Urbanism Kit*, a well-known example that successfully used these techniques to transform parking lots into walkable plazas and pedestrian-friendly zones during events. Such investments offer an affordable, proven model for testing pedestrian improvements in suburban commercial environments.



Figure 50: Temporary Bollards (PWS.com)



Figure 51: ADA Ramp (HandiRamps.com)

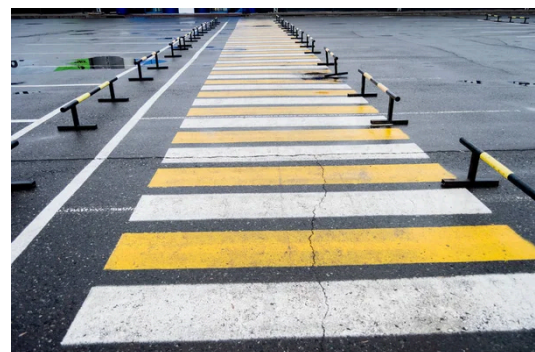


Figure 52: Zebra Crosswalk (Dreamstime.com)

3.2 Mid -Term Recommendations (2-5 Years)

3.2.1 Construct Permanent Sidewalk Connections from Van Dyke to Store Entrances

As a mid-term strategy to support long-term walkability and accessibility along the Van Dyke Corridor, permanent sidewalks should be constructed to directly link Van Dyke Avenue with major store entrances across all focus areas. While short-term pedestrian paths can be tested using paint and bollards, permanent infrastructure is essential for establishing safe, durable, and universally accessible connections. These sidewalks would formalize commonly used pedestrian routes and ensure compliance with ADA standards, while also supporting transit access, reducing pedestrian-vehicle conflicts, and encouraging more foot traffic to local businesses.

In Focus Area 1, a clearly defined concrete sidewalk should connect the public sidewalk along Van Dyke with the entrances to Meijer and Home Depot. This connection would guide pedestrians safely through large parking areas, reduce jaywalking, and improve comfort for people walking or using mobility devices. The route should follow or replace temporary paint markings and flex posts introduced in earlier phases, ensuring continuity with initial improvements.

Focus Area 2 requires a similar approach, with a permanent sidewalk leading from Van Dyke to the MJR Theater entrance. This sidewalk should be aligned with existing pedestrian pathways or informal routes that have already proven effective, and it should be enhanced with curb ramps and visual cues to support safe crossing at driveways. Integrating this walkway into future site redevelopment or parking lot re-striping plans would minimize disruption and optimize use of space.

In Focus Area 3, a permanent sidewalk should connect Van Dyke and Grace Church to the front of the adjacent strip mall. This pathway would improve safety for transit users, churchgoers, and shoppers, especially during peak hours or community events. As with the other focus areas, the route should be well-marked, ADA-compliant, and potentially shaded with trees or adjacent landscaping for added comfort.

Implementation of permanent sidewalks would include poured concrete pathways at a standard width of 5 to 6 feet, with ADA curb ramps at all crossings and path terminations. Where feasible, textured or colored concrete could be used at intersections or key nodes to enhance visibility and reinforce a pedestrian-first environment. Sidewalks should be set back from high-traffic drive aisles when possible and paired with lighting, wayfinding, and landscape elements to create a pleasant, intuitive pedestrian experience.

Cost estimates for permanent sidewalks typically range from \$100 to \$150 per linear foot, depending on site conditions, grading, and the inclusion of curb ramps or drainage. While more expensive than temporary treatments, these improvements offer long-lasting value by supporting accessibility, safety, and multimodal transportation. They also build on the momentum created by earlier tactical urbanism efforts and demonstrate a clear commitment to sustainable, pedestrian-oriented development.

A relevant example of this type of investment is the Southfield City Centre Trail Project in Southfield, Michigan. This initiative involved the construction of permanent, ADA-compliant sidewalks and multi-use trails that connect offices, retail centers, public art installations, and transit stops throughout a heavily car-oriented suburban corridor. The project successfully improved walkability, safety, and aesthetic appeal while encouraging non-motorized transportation. As a model for the Van Dyke Corridor, Southfield's trail shows how sidewalk infrastructure can play a central role in activating suburban commercial areas and creating a more livable public realm.



Figure 53: Sidewalk Through Parking Lot (customconcrete.biz)



Figure 54: Sidewalk Through Parking Lot (creativemarket.com)



Figure 55: Sidewalk Through Parking Lot (alamy.com)

3.2.2 Add Pedestrian-Scale Lighting & Streetscape Enhancements

To enhance safety, comfort, and the overall pedestrian experience along the Van Dyke Corridor, pedestrian-scale lighting and streetscape improvements are proposed in all three focus areas. These additions aim to transform car-oriented commercial sites into more inviting, walkable destinations by improving visibility at night and providing seating, bike storage, and greenery. By layering these elements along key walkways and entrances, each site becomes more functional and welcoming for everyday users. This approach also supports longer-term revitalization goals by encouraging foot traffic and a stronger sense of place.

In Focus Area 1, pedestrian-scale lights should be installed along the designated walkways connecting Van Dyke Avenue to the Home Depot entrance. These lights would improve nighttime visibility for pedestrians and enhance the perception of safety in a typically dim, expansive parking area. The improved lighting would also encourage people to walk rather than drive short distances within the site. Adding visible infrastructure like lighting and streetscape furniture signals that the area is designed with pedestrians in mind, not just cars.

Focus Area 2 would benefit from the installation of four to six pedestrian-scale lights along the walkway from Van Dyke to the MJR Theater entrance. These fixtures would guide moviegoers safely to and from the building, especially in the evening hours. Additional improvements should include benches and bike racks near the theater and adjacent vacant storefronts to encourage gathering, provide resting points, and support active transportation. Bike racks and planters placed near the bus stop and along storefronts would further enhance the experience and promote multimodal access.

In Focus Area 3, pedestrian-scale lighting should be added from Grace Church to the strip mall, following the path of existing informal pedestrian use. This would create a safer, more pleasant route for individuals walking between destinations, particularly during evening services or events. At the bus stop on Van Dyke and the mid-lot walkway, benches and planters should be installed to provide seating, greenery, and visual cues that enhance wayfinding and comfort. These small touches make a big difference in creating a human-scaled, walkable environment.

The core components of these streetscape upgrades include 12- to 14-foot pedestrian-scale LED light poles, spaced at 40- to 60-foot intervals for consistent coverage. Additional furnishings would include benches, bike racks, trash bins, and planters, strategically placed to serve pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users. These items provide critical infrastructure for lingering, resting, and maintaining a clean, welcoming space. The combination of lighting and amenities works together to transform underutilized commercial lots into attractive community spaces.

Cost estimates reflect the investment needed for quality, durable materials. Each pedestrian-scale light pole is estimated at \$17,000 per fixture, which includes installation and power access, according to WesternITE standards. A full streetscape bundle per focus area — including 6 benches, 6 planters, 3 trash bins, and 4 bike racks — would cost approximately \$15,000 to \$25,000, based on figures from the San Francisco MTA Streetscape Cost Estimator. These prices provide a solid planning baseline for implementing meaningful improvements in a phased, budget-conscious manner.

Similar strategies have been successfully applied in comparable communities. The Michigan Street Corridor Plan in Grand Rapids, MI emphasized lighting, furnishings, and shade to activate its suburban commercial corridor and support pedestrian use. Likewise, the Evans Street Corridor Plan in Tecumseh, MI introduced benches, solar lighting, and flower beds at key intersections to create attractive and walkable community nodes. Drawing from these examples, the Van Dyke Corridor can implement streetscape enhancements that support safe movement, promote gathering, and elevate the corridor's overall sense of place.



Figure 56: Planters with Bike Rack (Cyclehoop.com)



Figure 57: Pedestrian Lighting (Pinterest)

3.3 Long-Term Recommendations (5-10 Years)

In the long term, we recommend that the City of Sterling Heights take action on reducing the space dedicated to parking within the corridor. As highlighted previously in this report, the surplus parking within the Van Dyke corridor has contributed to the auto centric character of the area, making it unfriendly to pedestrians. Following the above analysis it is believed that infill development may aid in the corridors transition towards a more walkable district. Prime areas for such infill development have been identified through preliminary analysis and have been referred to throughout this report as “Focus Areas”. These “Focus Areas” are located at the intersections of 14 Mile Road and Van Dyke Avenue, 15 Mile Road and Van Dyke Avenue, and 16 Mile Road and Van Dyke Avenue.

3.3.1 Infill Development Strategies

Infill development desired along the corridor has occurred in various communities throughout the United States such as the Rockville, Maryland redevelopment. Given the proximity to a major city (Washington D.C.) we found that this specific case best represented our ideas for what is desired in Sterling Heights. Similar to our corridor, Rockville faced the challenge of underutilized parking lots that dominated the landscape, creating an auto-centric environment with limited options for pedestrian mobility. The redevelopment of this site successfully integrated mixed-use development, with a combination of residential units, retail, office spaces, and public plazas. This approach maximized the available land. This aligns with the goals presented for the future Van Dyke corridor, by introducing denser residential and commercial spaces in the focus areas, it could spur the transition from a car-dependent passthrough, to a more connected mixed-use destination.

To incentivize infill development of this nature in the identified focus areas we encourage the City of Sterling Heights take a multifaceted approach. Recommended steps towards such change range from encouraging private owners to take advantage of current opportunities offered by the City as well as creation of additional programming to incentivize desired development.

3.3.2 Encouraging Parking Minimum Reductions

Each of the identified focus areas, are located within the currently established Van Dyke Mixed Use District. Thus, each of these properties are eligible to take advantage of the administratively reduced parking minimums available in the district. Upon site analysis, during peak hours a majority of parking within these areas remain vacant. Therefore it is believed that a reduction in parking in these areas would have minimal to no impact on the traffic seen by the businesses these parking lots service. Encouraging private businesses to take advantage of administratively reduced parking minimums would create surplus parking within commercial districts. This surplus parking would enable businesses to parcel off and sell this extra land, providing a financial incentive for private owners to pursue reducing parking minimums. The sale of this extra land likely would bring about infill development, thus building density and boosting walkability within the district.

To encourage these private owners to take advantage of administratively reduced parking requirements it is recommended that the City of Sterling Heights create detailed materials for property owners highlighting the potential benefits of taking this action.

Potential benefits of this action may been seen by the land owners, community members and the municipality its self. However, in this material it may be most fruitful to highlight the potential opportunities that result from taking such action such as the opportunities to expand commercial space, parcel and sell land for additional income and thus potential lower property taxes, and to increase landscaping or green space to improve site drainage and curb appeal.

3.3.3 Reimagining Parking Grants

As several businesses throughout the noted Van Dyke corridor, spanning from 14 to 18 Mile Roads, have a surplus of parking per required by the zoning ordinance it is recommended that the City of Sterling Heights take action to incentivize owners to transform this parking into spaces that better serve the community. Such spaces would include: green spaces, community gardens, recreation areas, and community gathering spaces. Development of this nature would aid in creating a sense of place throughout the corridor making the area more appealing to pedestrians and the general public.

Transforming current parking spaces into community spaces would require the buy in of private owners throughout the area. To encourage commercial land owners to undertake such development endeavors it is believed that education on the potential benefits of such action is required. Educating land owners via a webpage or distribution of literature highlighting the benefits of such action may lead to more favorable outcomes. In such material higher traffic flows to commercial areas, more consumer time spent in commercial areas, increased public perception of businesses due to good will and applicable available resources to aid businesses in such projects, should be included.

Parking lot prior to redevelopment

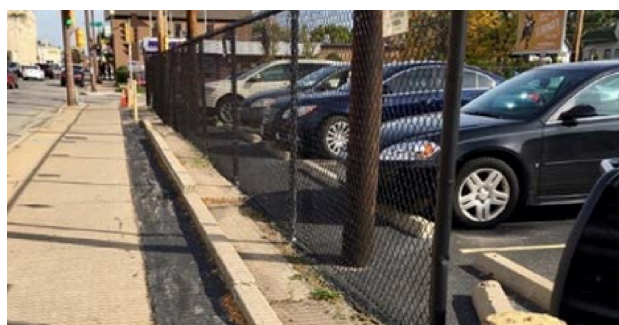


Figure 58: Milwaukee “Depave” grant recipient project

Parking lot post redevelopment



Figure 59: Milwaukee “Depave” grant recipient project

Federal and state funding for such placemaking initiatives and redevelopment is available for such place making initiatives. While this is true some communities’ municipalities such as Milwaukee have taken it upon themselves to create specific additional funding streams to encourage the redevelopment of under used parking spaces. In 2019, the City of Milwaukee dedicated \$250,000 towards the addition of green space into existing parking lots. A portion of this funding was dedicated to providing small grants, ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000, to commercial parking lot owners for the purpose of redeveloping under used parking space into rain gardens, additional landscaping, community gardens, and community green space. Since the implementation of Milwaukee’s several key parking areas within the city have undergone renovation, with support of this funding. One of these projects, showcased in Figure 57 and 58, depicts the nature of development desired within the Van Dyke corridor. Therefore, it is believed that the creation of a similar grant in the City of Sterling Heights would lead to similar behavior. Thus, it is recommended that the City of Sterling Heights partner with its regional and state agencies to obtain funding to create similar placemaking and parking lot repurposing grants.

3.3.4 Expand North Van Dyke Corridor Improvement Authority & TIF Renewal

To support redevelopment efforts and encourage private investment in the Van Dyke Corridor, we recommend that Sterling Heights expand its current Corridor Improvement Authorities boundary to encompass the length of the entire Van Dyke corridor; ranging from the northern most boundary of Sterling Heights at M-59 to the southern most portion of the Van Dyke corridor at 14 Mile Rd. As this district currently maintains its own successful programing to incentivize investment in the area, it is believed that expanding this area will allow for further investment in all sections of the Van Dyke corridor.

Currently the Corridor Improvement Authority (CIA) maintains a variety of objectives that pair with other recommendations found within this report. Such objectives include: improving streetscape amenities, park space improvements, commercial facade upgrades, buisness attraction and retention, as well as a TIF district.

Expanding the CIA, specifically the TIF district, may encourage private owners to conduct improvement projects as increases seen in short term property taxes are guaranteed to be reinvested into the district. The captured tax increment could be allocated toward roadway enhancements, pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, improved lighting, landscaping, and transit connections. Considering the Northern Vandyke CIA TIF will end in the fiscal year of 2026/2027, it is recommended that this TIF be renewed and expanded to encompass the entirety of the Van Dyke corridor along with the adjustment of the CIA's boundary to encompass the entirety of the corridor.

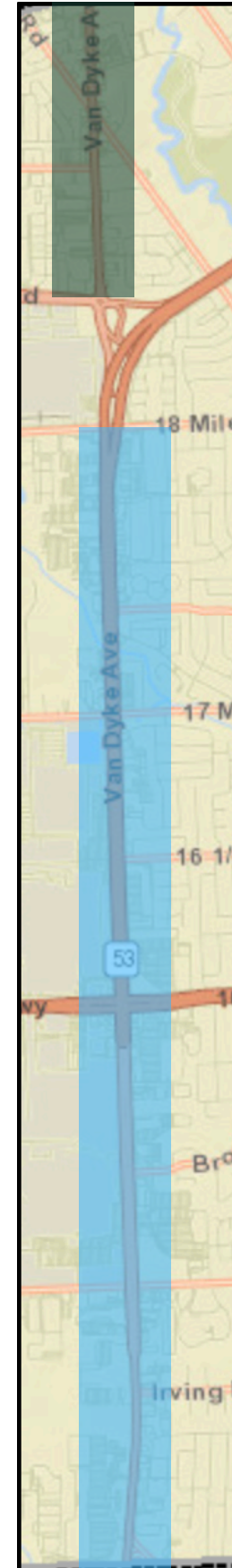
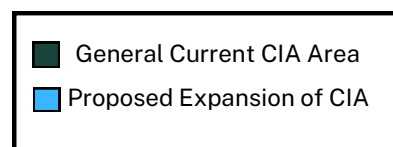


Figure 60- Map of CIA and TIF Area
(Sterling Heights GIS)

3.3.5 Eliminating Restrictive Deed Covenants

While Van Dyke Avenue between 14 and 18 Mile Roads is located within the Van Dyke Mixed Use Zoning District there is a lack of mixed use development located within the corridor. While there are vacant parcels of land suitable for this type of development many of these parcels have restrictions placed on them via the properties deed. Restrictive covenants in the deeds to these properties restrict the nature of development on these properties in such a manner that makes mixed-use development inviable in the eyes of numerous developers. Restrictive covenants on these deeds range from the business that may occupy retail space on properties to the maximum height of structures. These restrictions present various obstacles to constructing mixed-use development creating great barriers to development. Therefore the abolishment of these covenants may make the construction of mixed-use development in these districts more viable for developers.

While legal negotiation fees will inevitably cost the City an estimated \$200,000, it is recommended that the City of Sterling Heights take action in abolishing the restrictions placed on high value properties suitable for mixed-use development. This investment into City infrastructure will allow the city to increase the taxable value of such land upon development. While this action may pose a challenge, as a majority of these undeveloped properties are out-lots of large box stores that have historically placed these restrictions to ensure façade visibility from Van Dyke Avenue, innovative solutions to challenges such as this may allow for the abolishment of these restrictions. It is recommended that to mitigate concerns of reduced traffic to business due to lack of visibility from the street that easements be placed on properties rather than restrictive covenants; allowing for box stores to advertise and maintain signage on developed properties. Solutions such as this allow may make mixed-use development more lucrative and encourage development of this nature while simultaneously allowing for back lot businesses to maintain a street presence.



Figure 61- Parcel Along Van Dyke & 15 Mile maintaining a restrictive covenant



Part IV: Conclusion



4 Conclusion

The Van Dyke Corridor, stretching from 14 Mile to 18 Mile Roads in Sterling Heights, presents a significant opportunity for revitalization through thoughtful planning and strategic investment. As student researchers from Michigan State University's Urban and Regional Planning Program, we have approached this project with a commitment to data-driven analysis, community engagement, and applied planning strategies. Our work has aimed to support the City of Sterling Heights in its mission to create a more walkable, vibrant, and economically resilient corridor. This report reflects our comprehensive efforts to evaluate existing conditions and offer recommendations that are both practical and aspirational.

Throughout our analysis, we identified critical challenges that hinder the corridor's success, including excessive parking, auto-oriented development, vacant or underutilized commercial properties, and weak pedestrian infrastructure. These conditions not only limit mobility options but also constrain economic and social activity. However, we also identified considerable assets, such as large parcels with redevelopment potential, existing commercial anchors, and a growing interest from the City in supporting more sustainable and inclusive growth. With the right interventions, the Van Dyke Corridor can be reimagined as a place where people walk, shop, live, and gather — not just pass through in cars.

Our research focused heavily on three key focus areas: the intersections of Van Dyke with 14 Mile, 15 Mile, and 16 Mile Roads. Each of these areas was selected for its strategic location, excess parking supply, and potential to serve as a catalyst for broader corridor-wide change. These sites also represent a range of redevelopment challenges, from vacant big-box stores and disconnected pedestrian infrastructure to outdated land use patterns. By concentrating our recommendations within these zones, we offer the City a phased, targeted approach to corridor transformation that can build momentum and encourage community support.

In the short term, we recommend improvements that are quick to implement and have immediate impact. These include repainting and adding crosswalks, enhancing pedestrian-scale lighting, and improving wayfinding signage throughout the focus areas. Pop-up markets, food truck zones, and other tactical urbanism tools can be introduced in excess parking areas, particularly in the 15 Mile and 16 Mile focus areas, to begin activating these spaces. These actions are relatively low-cost but send a strong signal that the corridor is evolving and that pedestrian comfort and community engagement are being prioritized. They also help create visible success stories that can build trust among residents, businesses, and developers.

Moving into the mid-term, our recommendations center on deeper structural improvements, including reconfiguring oversized parking lots and introducing more meaningful pedestrian and bike infrastructure. At the 16 Mile focus area, for example, internal walkways and shared-use paths can be added to break up the Meijer and Home Depot parking fields. Similarly, the 15 Mile area should pilot façade improvement grants and public plaza concepts to create a more inviting, walkable environment. Working in partnership with MDOT, the City should implement mid-block crossings, pedestrian refuge islands, and improved intersection designs, particularly in areas with long blocks and heavy foot traffic. These projects not only enhance accessibility but also establish a strong framework for more intensive redevelopment.

Our long-term vision for the corridor involves transforming it into a true mixed-use district through zoning reform, redevelopment incentives, and the reduction of excessive parking requirements. Focus areas like the vacant strip at 15 Mile or the oversized lot near Grace Church at 14 Mile can be gradually redeveloped into residential, commercial, and civic spaces. Introducing townhomes, mid-rise apartments, or mixed-use buildings with ground-floor retail will bring needed density and vitality to the corridor. Tools such as Tax Increment Financing (TIF), redevelopment grants, and the removal of restrictive deed covenants will help unlock these opportunities and make redevelopment financially viable for the city and private sector alike.

Our recommendations are grounded in best practices and inspired by successful suburban redevelopment case studies, particularly the Enfield Mall Redevelopment in Connecticut. Like Enfield, Sterling Heights has the opportunity to transform outdated commercial spaces into lively, mixed-use districts through incremental change and public-private collaboration. By prioritizing walkability, flexible land use, and community-focused design, the city can position the Van Dyke Corridor as a regional leader in suburban reinvention. While the transformation will take time, the phased approach laid out in this report ensures that each step contributes meaningfully toward the long-term vision.

As student researchers, we approached this project with a desire to apply academic knowledge to a real-world planning challenge. Through our fieldwork, mapping, data analysis, and collaboration with the City of Sterling Heights, we gained insight into both the complexity and promise of corridor revitalization. We are proud of the solutions we developed and believe they reflect the core values of good planning: equity, sustainability, accessibility, and economic opportunity. This project has deepened our understanding of urban systems and the role planners play in shaping more livable communities.

We sincerely thank the City of Sterling Heights for the opportunity to contribute to this important effort. The Van Dyke Corridor has great potential to become a more connected, inclusive, and economically dynamic space. We are confident that the recommendations in this report — if implemented with care, flexibility, and community engagement — will set the foundation for a more vibrant future. Sterling Heights has already taken a crucial first step by prioritizing this corridor. Now, with a clear vision and sustained action, the city can ensure that Van Dyke is not just a corridor — but a place to make home.

5 Appendix

Appendix A: Figures and Images

Figure 1: Map of Van Dyke Mixed-Use Corridor (14 Mile to 18 Mile Roads)

Figure 2: Zoning Map

Figure 3: Sterling Heights Racial Demographics Pie Chart

Figure 4: Population Trends Bar Chart

Figure 5: Population Pyramid (Age and Gender Distribution)

Figure 6: Educational Attainment Chart

Figure 7: Median Housing Values Graph

Figure 8: Vacancy Rates by Housing Type Chart

Figure 9: Housing Distribution by Type Pie Chart

Figure 10: Employment Distribution by Industry Bar Chart

Figure 11: Commuting Patterns Diagram

Figure 12: Crime Statistics Line Chart

Figure 13–16: Sidewalk Conditions and Connectivity

Figure 17–18: Accessibility Issues

Figure 19–21: Path Aesthetics and Landscaping

Figure 22–23: Corridor Lighting

Figure 24–25: Building Design

Figure 26–28: Corridor Signage

Figure 29–31: Street Buffering Conditions

Figure 32–33: Crosswalk Locations and Safety

Figure 34: Bicycle Parking Conditions

Figure 35–37: Public Transit Conditions (Bus Stops and Routes)

Figure 38–44: Automobile and Parking Conditions, Focus Area Overviews

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