U.S. 31 CORRIDOR STUDY
ELK RAPIDS TOWNSHIP &
ELK RAPIDS VILLAGE

The Planning Commissions
of Elk Rapids Township & Elk Rapids Village
With Assistance from Don Hamilton
Planning Consultant
January 1995

ELK RAPIDS TOWNSHIP PLANNING COMMISSION

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Maps prepared by R. Clark & Associates, Inc.

Illustrations taken from

Grand Traverse Bay Regional

Development Guidebook

and

"A Study of the U.S. 31 Highway

Corridor Grand Traverse County, Michigan"

by Land Planning & Design Associates,

Illustrations by Vic Nelhiebel

This project was made possible by a grant from Rotary Charities of Traverse City, administered by Antrim County Planning Commission.

INTRODUCTION

Once U.S. 31 Highway passes the Grand Traverse Resort as it runs north toward Elk Rapids, it travels mostly through a rolling countryside of farms and woodlands with occasional views of the Grand Traverse Bay. Recently, though, residential subdivisions have been developing along this route and the continual demand for commercial locations along this busy north/south highway are changing this bucolic character. Convinced this development pressure would continue northward, the planning commissions of the Village and Township of Elk Rapids undertook this study of their portions of the corridor in order to understand and to catalogue its notable features and to provide the basis for planning to sustain the good characteristics and beauty of the corridor and to devise the means to prevent or eliminate the unsightly and undesirable ones.

Long understood by the public at large, the fact that highways are much more than conduits for traffic is finally being acknowledged, albeit reluctantly and slowly, even by traffic engineers and state highway departments. The street is that structure around which almost all urban development takes place, hence its importance in urban places and the care that must be taken in its development and maintenance in preserving rural places as well.

There are seven primary qualities with which to judge and, subsequently, around which to prepare actions involving highways.

They are:

- Scenic
- Historic
- Cultural
- Recreational
- Natural
- Archaeological
- Functional

Each of these was used in this examination.

U.S. 31 CORRIDOR STUDY

FROM TOWNLINE ROAD TO THE VILLAGE LIMITS

LEGEND

⇦ POTENTIAL VIEW

DETAIL SHEET 2
VISUAL SURVEY
ELK RAPIDS TOWNSHIP

ELK RAPIDS VILLAGE LIMITS

ELK RAPIDS TOWNSHIP

ELK LAKE

LAKE MICHIGAN

POTENTIAL VIEW

POTENTIAL VIEW

POTENTIAL VIEW

POTENTIAL VIEW

APPROXIMATE RIDGE LINE

APPROXIMATE RIDGE LINE

28

29

32

33

DETAIL SHEET 1
VISUAL SURVEY
ELK RAPIDS TOWNSHIP

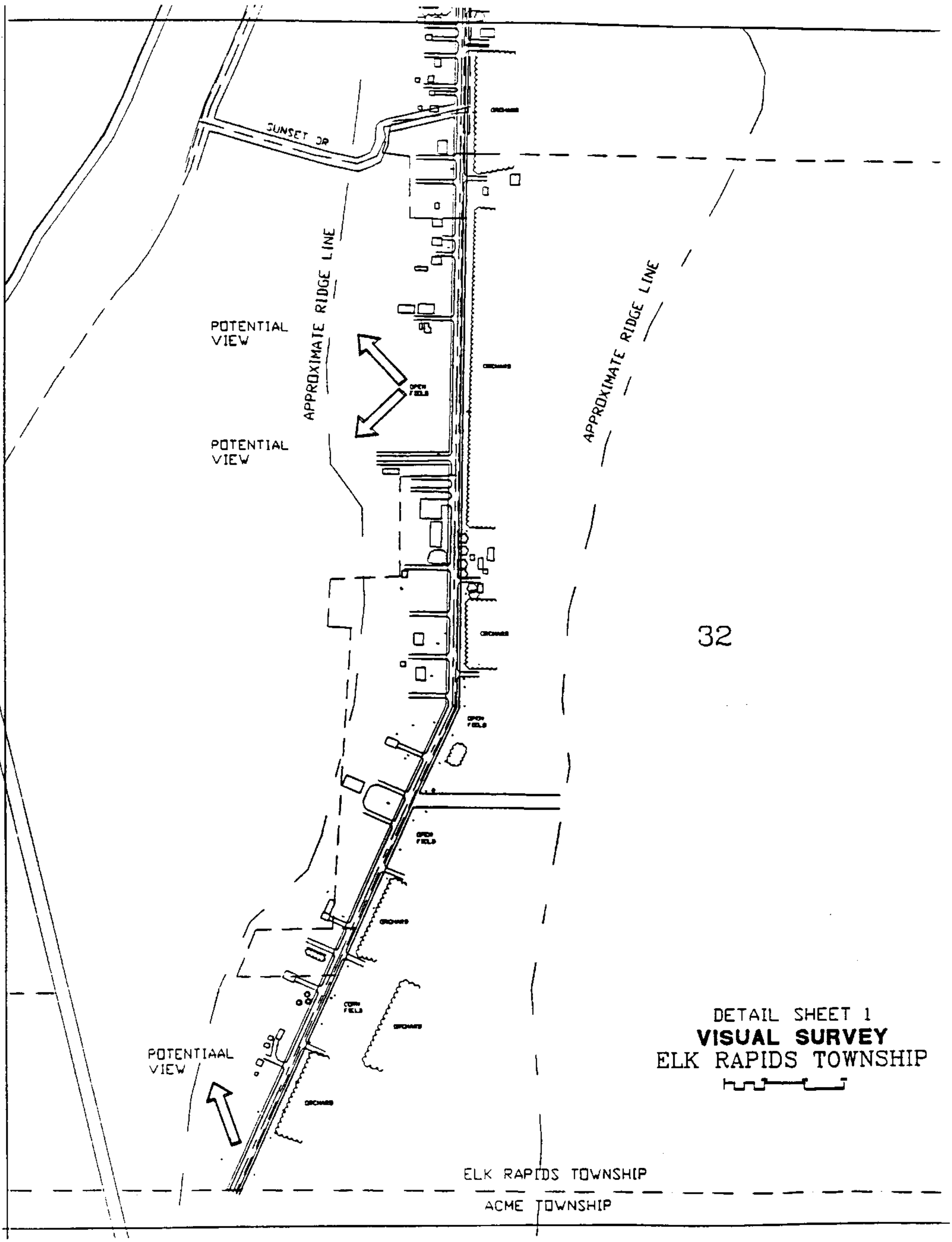
ELK RAPIDS TOWNSHIP

ACME TOWNSHIP

North

VISUAL SURVEY
ELK RAPIDS TOWNSHIP

	BASE MAP DATA		1



32

DETAIL SHEET 1

VISUAL SURVEY

ELK RAPIDS TOWNSHIP

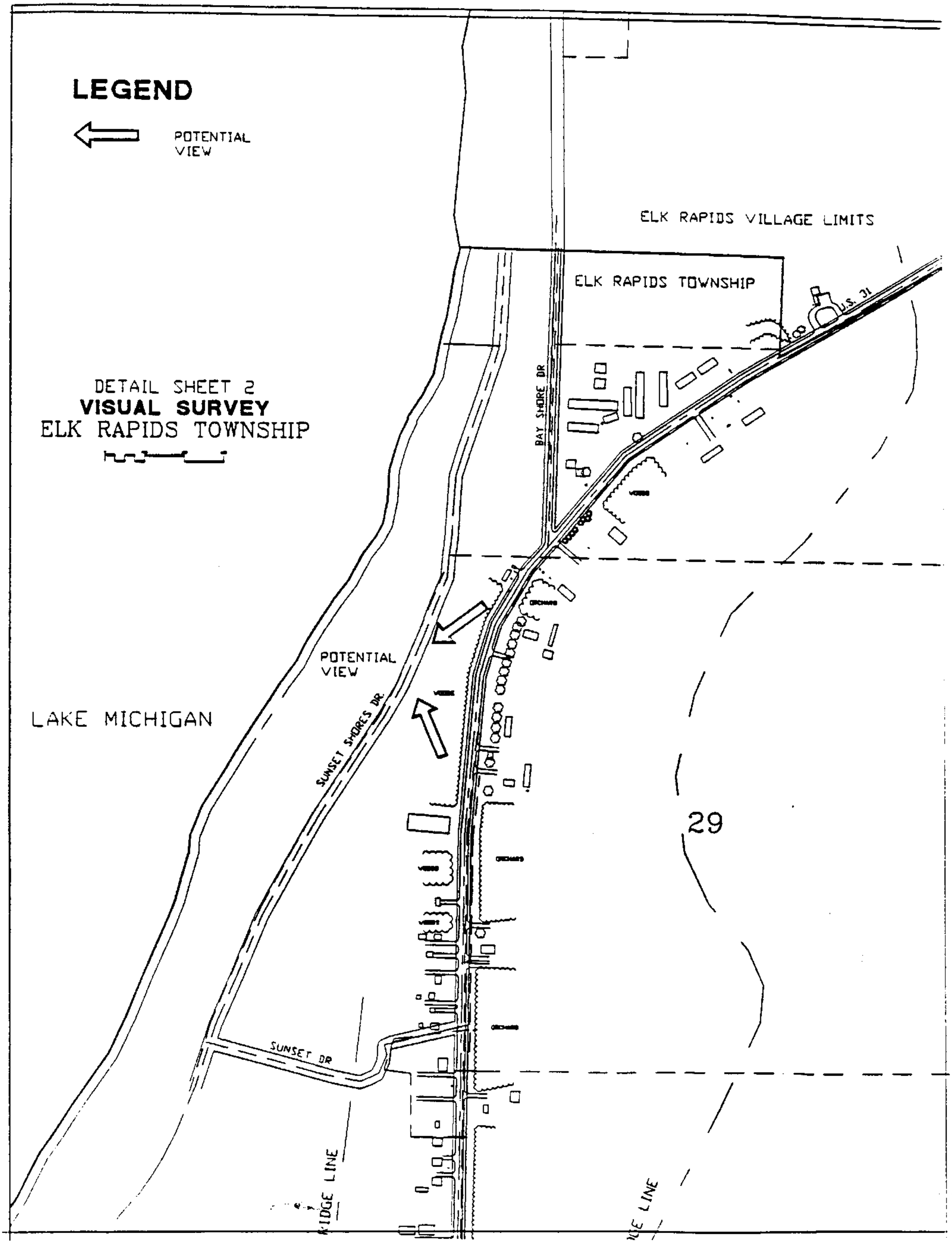
LEGEND

⇦ POTENTIAL VIEW

DETAIL SHEET 2

VISUAL SURVEY

ELK RAPIDS TOWNSHIP



The U.S. 31 Highway as it leaves Acme Township and heads north across Townline Road toward Elk Rapids Village, continues in a landscape somewhat similar to Acme Township but changes to a fairly flat open highway with operating orchards and cropland to the east and occasional mixed residential and commercial uses on the west, with a forested ridgeline beyond that furnishes glimpses of Grand Traverse Bay.

Topography

This section of U.S. 31 is flat with the land generally rising to the east about 35' to a ridge and then to a second ridge farther back about 65' higher. On the west the land is generally flat to a treed ridgeline, where it falls quickly toward lake level.

Physical & Environmental Conditions

Orchards and farmsteads, with an occasional farm market, line the east side of the corridor until Bayshore Drive joins the highway and U.S. 31 curves northeast. Here commercial and industrial buildings begin and continue to the Village line with some woods and fallow fields. On the west side of the road are mostly fallow fields and various structures with large deciduous and conifer trees associated with the buildings and on the ridge line. There is one very steep bank close to the road where it curves northeast at the intersection with Bayshore Drive and there is a small wetland area north of the boat storage buildings. There are no soil erosion or other storm drainage problems evident.

Land Use

The U.S. 31 Highway separates land uses between farms and orchards on the east side and mixed uses -- from residences to restaurants, motels and other commercial uses -- on the west until the junction with Bayshore Drive where commercial uses are then found on both sides. Commercial uses on the west side are generally grouped and there are stretches in the southern section of fallow and vacant land. After the Northwood Village Care Home, where the road nears the bay, a hardwood forest lines the road on the west side to Bayshore Drive.

Traffic

Traffic on this corridor, which connects Traverse City and points south with Petoskey, the Mackinaw Bridge, and northern destinations, is quite heavy and continuous, especially in the

summer months. The Michigan Department of Transportation traffic count for 1993 shows the following average daily vehicle counts:

U.S. 31 at M-72	16,000
At South border Elk Rapids Village	9,300
At Ames Street	10,000
Approximately 1-1/2 Miles North -- Williams Road	6,400
Approximately 3 Miles North -- Sutter Road	5,100
Approximately 3 Miles North -- M-88	4,600

As is evident, traffic begins dispersing at the Grand Traverse Resort and continues to do so until the bridge area in Elk Rapids Village, where traffic is again heavy. Then it rapidly disperses again on U.S. 31 north of the Village.

Safety Considerations

The highway through this section of Elk Rapids Township is in good condition and well maintained. Sight distances at intersections are very good. (Although how the roadside stand just south of the township line in Acme Township is allowed to operate in what appears to be highway right-of-way is a mystery to the commissioners.) The Michigan Department of Transportation requires the construction of entryways off the highway to be paved and curbed and to meet all its standards so new driveways are improving the safety and appearance of the throughway.

One street light, hung over the highway, at the intersection of U.S. 31 and South Bayshore Drive, is the only lighting along this stretch of the highway.

Utilities

Electric, telephone and cable lines run along the east side of the highway, from Townline Road to the Village and lines cross the road to service homes and businesses on the west side of the road. In general, these poles and lines fit the rural landscape well, except at the Traverse Brewery, where newly-installed poles and lines to service the brewery are stark and predominant. In many places, though, the lines have been run behind the treeline, making them almost unnoticeable.

Signs & Billboards

There is a small billboard greeting northbound travelers on U.S. 31 at Townline Road. A second billboard, with a face in both directions, is located just north of the boat storage complex. These signs are well maintained and very visible. Commercial signage along the highway varies greatly in quality and upkeep, but is generally acceptable -- legible yet not obtrusive.

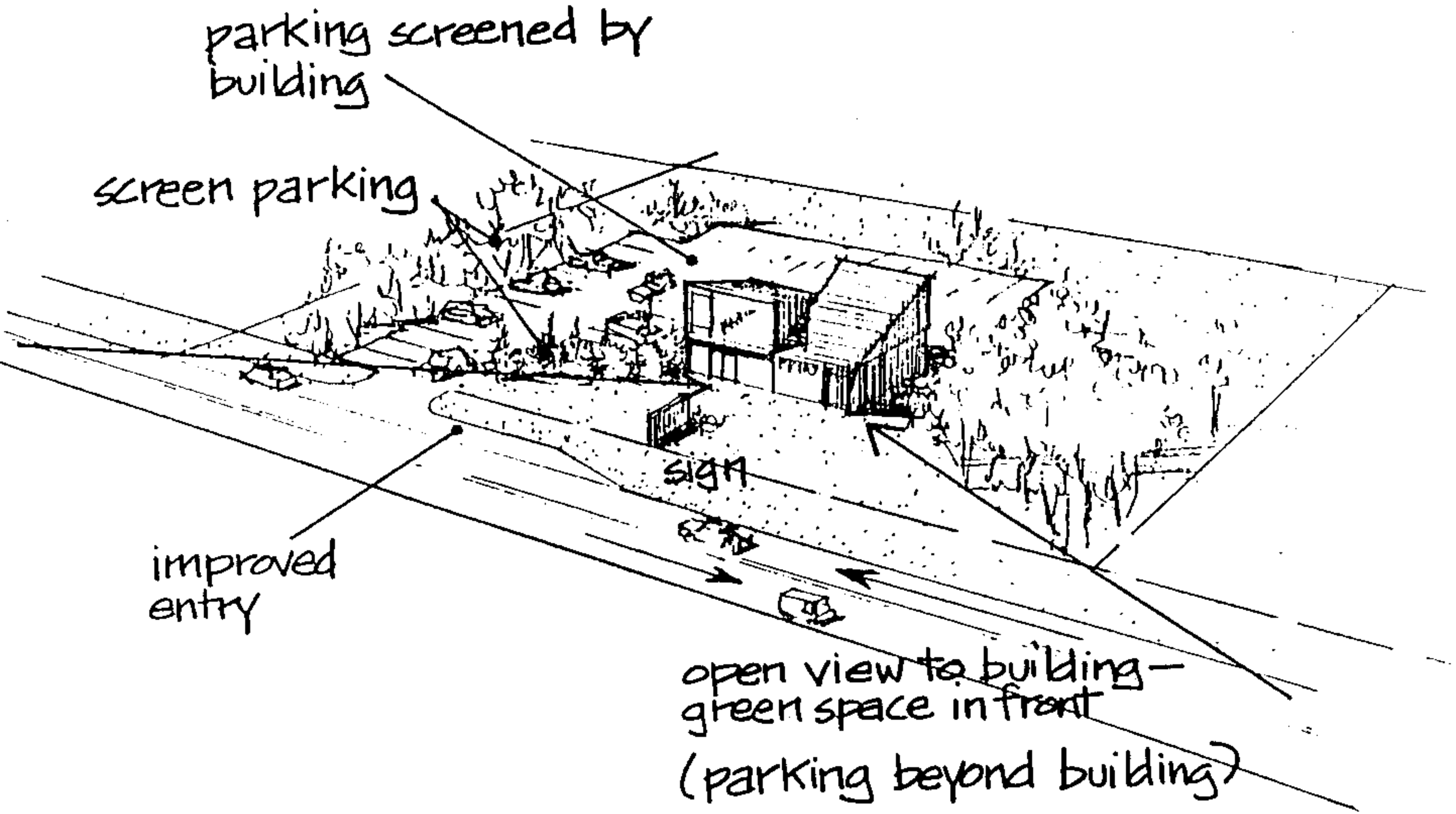
Highway Signage

The standard highway directional and informational signage along the corridor is sufficient and generally in good condition. There appears no need for additional signage except for Township entry signs (also indicating zoning regulations in force).

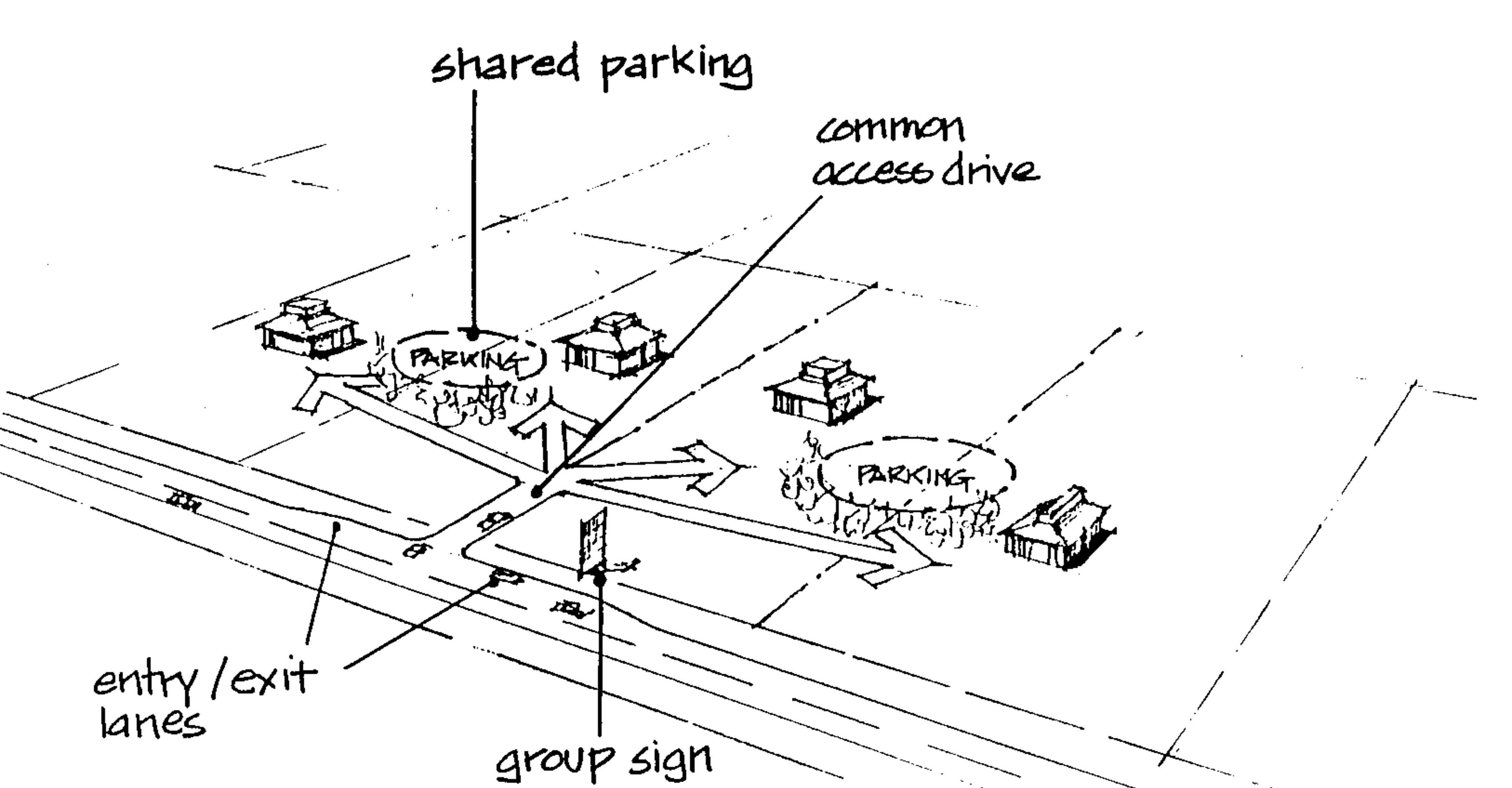
Aesthetics

This corridor varies from the sublime to the tawdry. Bucolic scenery to the east is matched by the forested horizon to the west. Historic farmhouses on the east are matched by neat residences and businesses on the west. Farmsteads on the one side, and homes and businesses on the other are surrounded by large deciduous and conifer trees. Where the commercial and residential buildings are closely grouped and there is sufficient landscaping, these clusters fit the scene very well. There is a diversity of objects for the eye and sufficient contrast not to bore. Barns and farmhouses and many other buildings bear the evidence of time, while still being well-maintained. The road, making two large sweeps before running down into the village, provides ends and beginnings rather than just a long straight vista.

But, occasionally unkempt and ill cared-for areas obtrude upon travelway views. These areas seem unbounded, out of place, and uncomplimentary of the other buildings and landscape. It is these areas that especially need the actions of the Planning Commission and the Township.



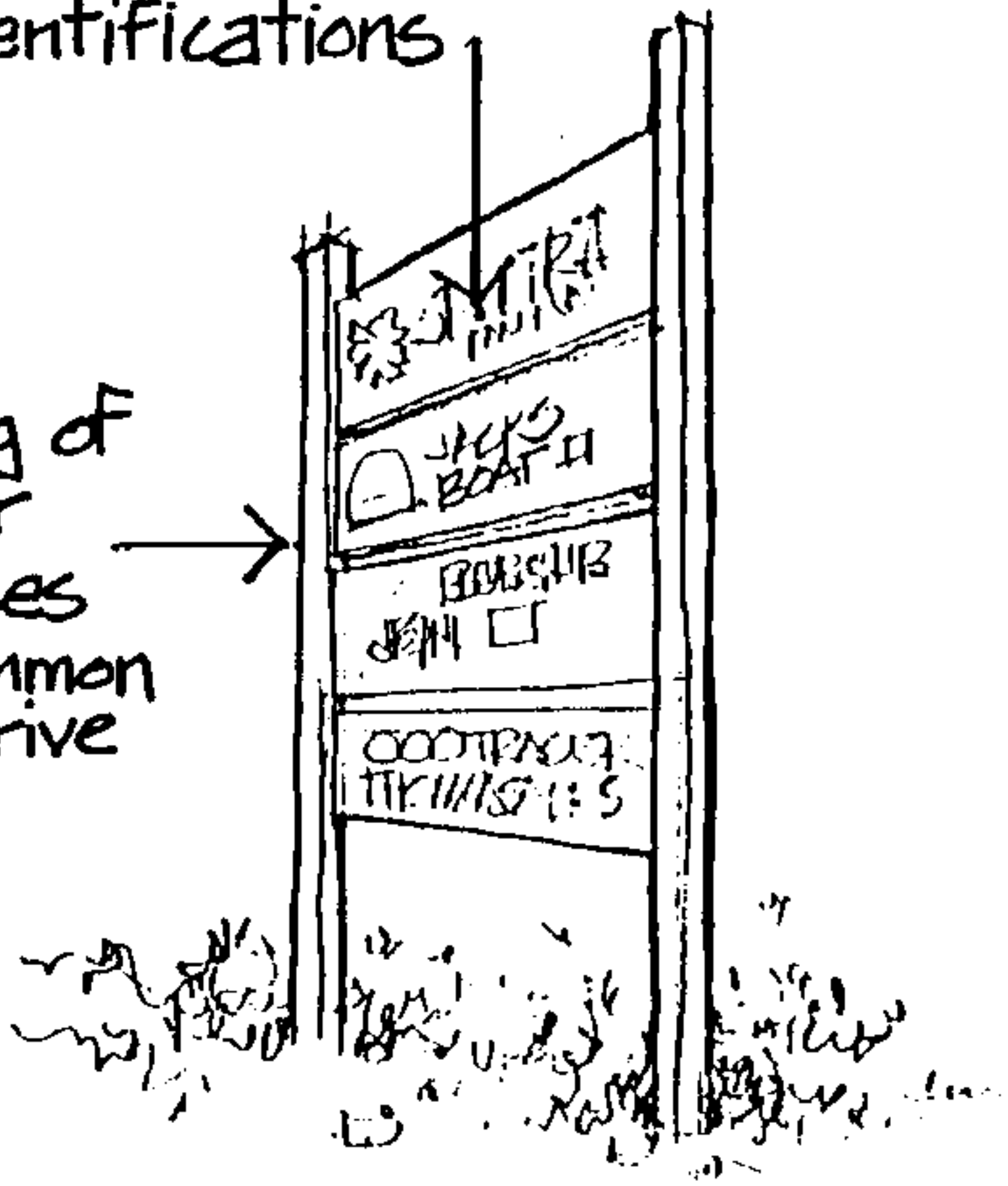
FUTURE COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT



COMMERCIAL - CLUSTER PATTERN

simple / readable identifications

grouping of signs for businesses with common access drive



GROUP SIGN

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Zoning regulations should be promulgated to allow for continued mixed uses along the west side of this corridor. Stringent performance standards and incentives should be included addressing street trees, joint drives and accessways, landscaping to screen parking, building placement and setbacks, landscaping to complement clusters, signage and other details intending to prevent this entryway to the community from deteriorating. These requirements could apply to non-conforming structures at the time of building improvements or changes of uses. Incentives might be given for clustering businesses or other uses, allowing bay views to be created in the undeveloped areas.

2. The Planning Commission should work with the property owners, the Board, the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and any other appropriate entity to attempt to secure the east side of the corridor, at least up to the first ridge, from intensive development by procuring the development rights to these areas.

3. Strategic sites on public property for tree plantings should be identified and the means found to install the number and size necessary to affect significantly the corridor aesthetic. These sites should include undeveloped areas, sites to hide power lines and areas around billboards in particular.

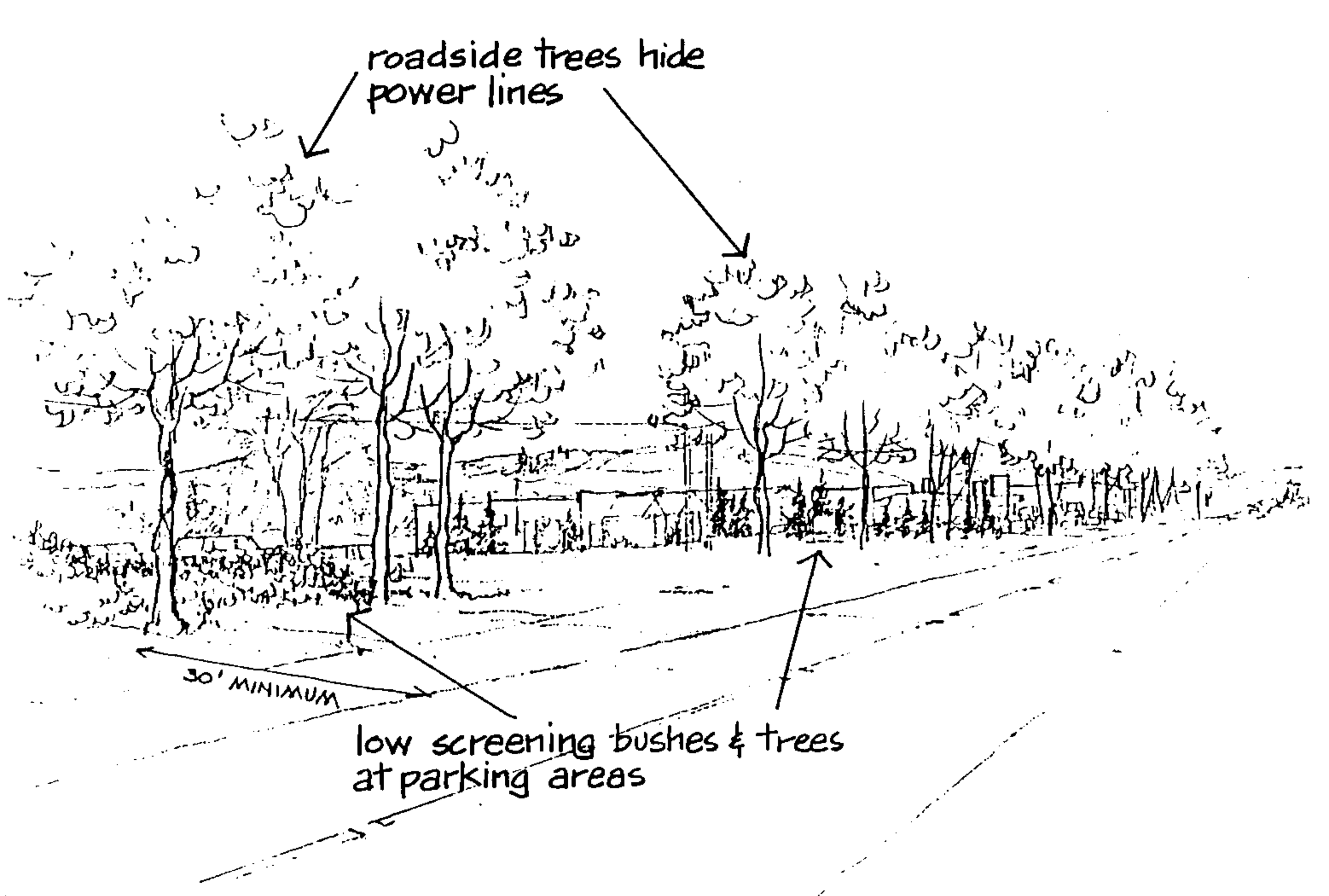
4. A program to encourage private property owners to plant trees should be devised.

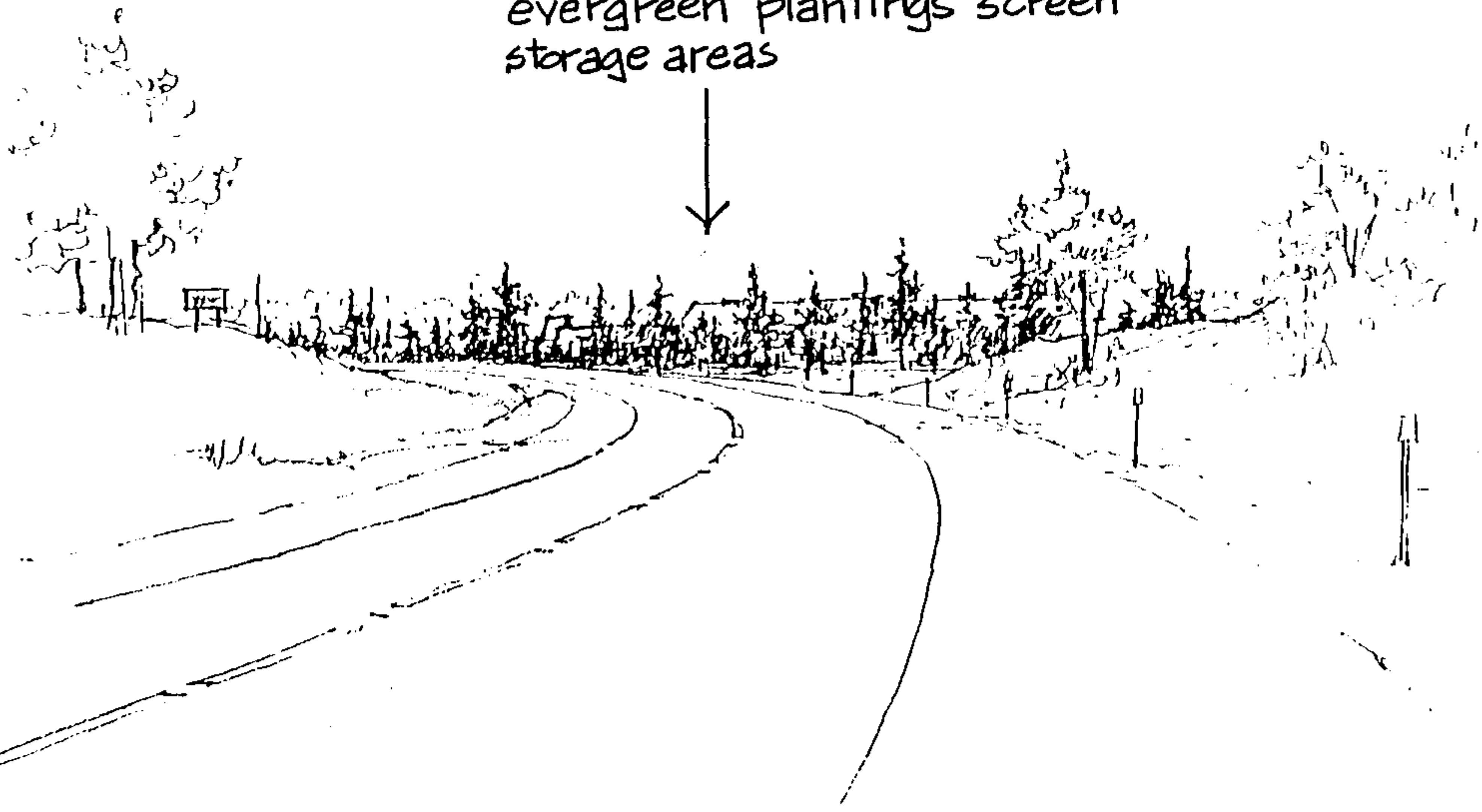
5. Thinning of trees at strategic points along the ridgeline on the west side of the corridor might be encouraged to provide vistas of Grand Traverse Bay.

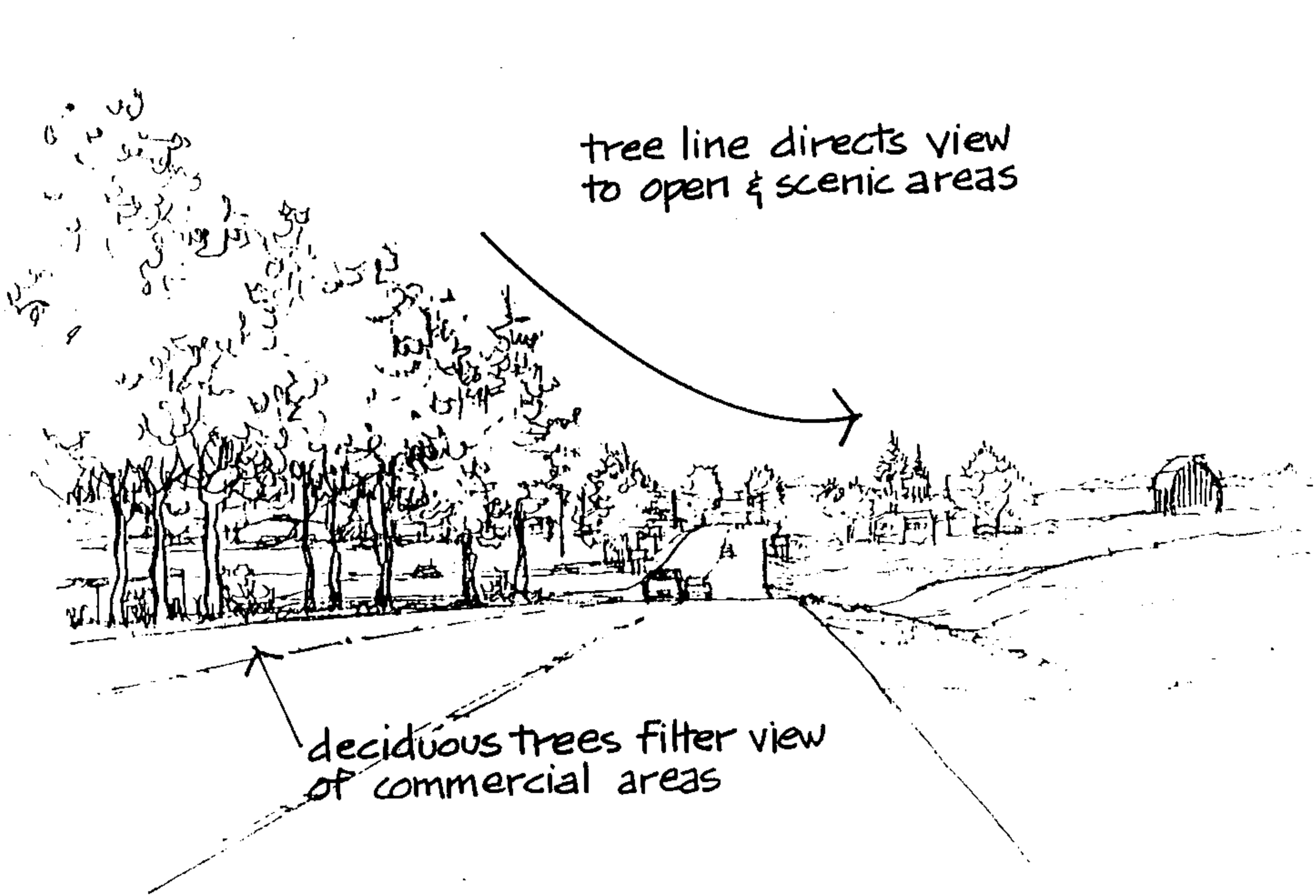
6. An attractive sign could be installed at Townline Road to announce the entry into the Township.

7. Where necessary and appropriate, utility lines might be rerouted further from the road and plantings used to obscure the view of them.

8. Work with the Michigan Department of Transportation to furnish bike paths along the shoulders of the highway to provide safe passage for bicyclists along the corridor.

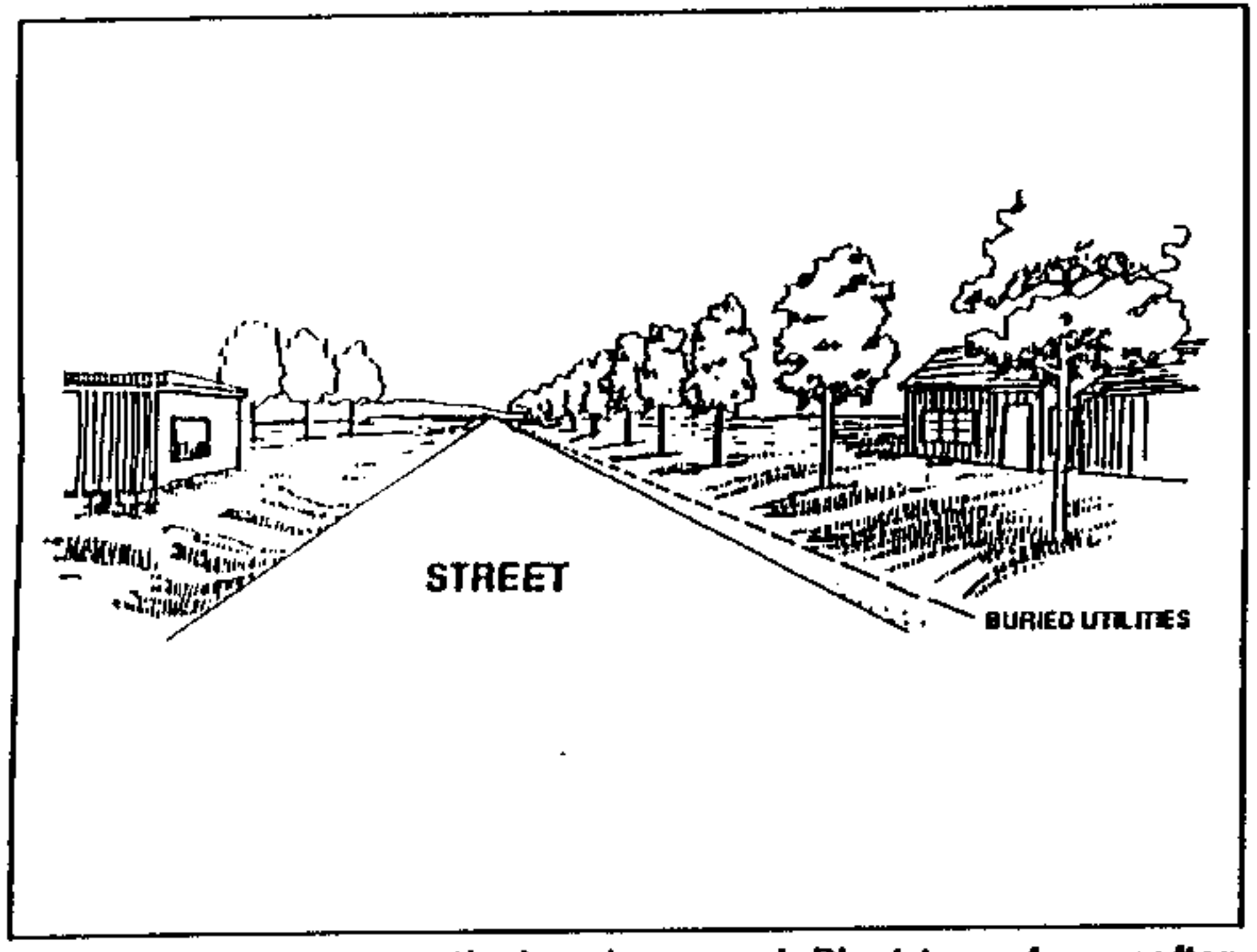

roadside trees hide power lines
30' MINIMUM
low screening bushes & trees at parking areas


evergreen plantings screen
storage areas

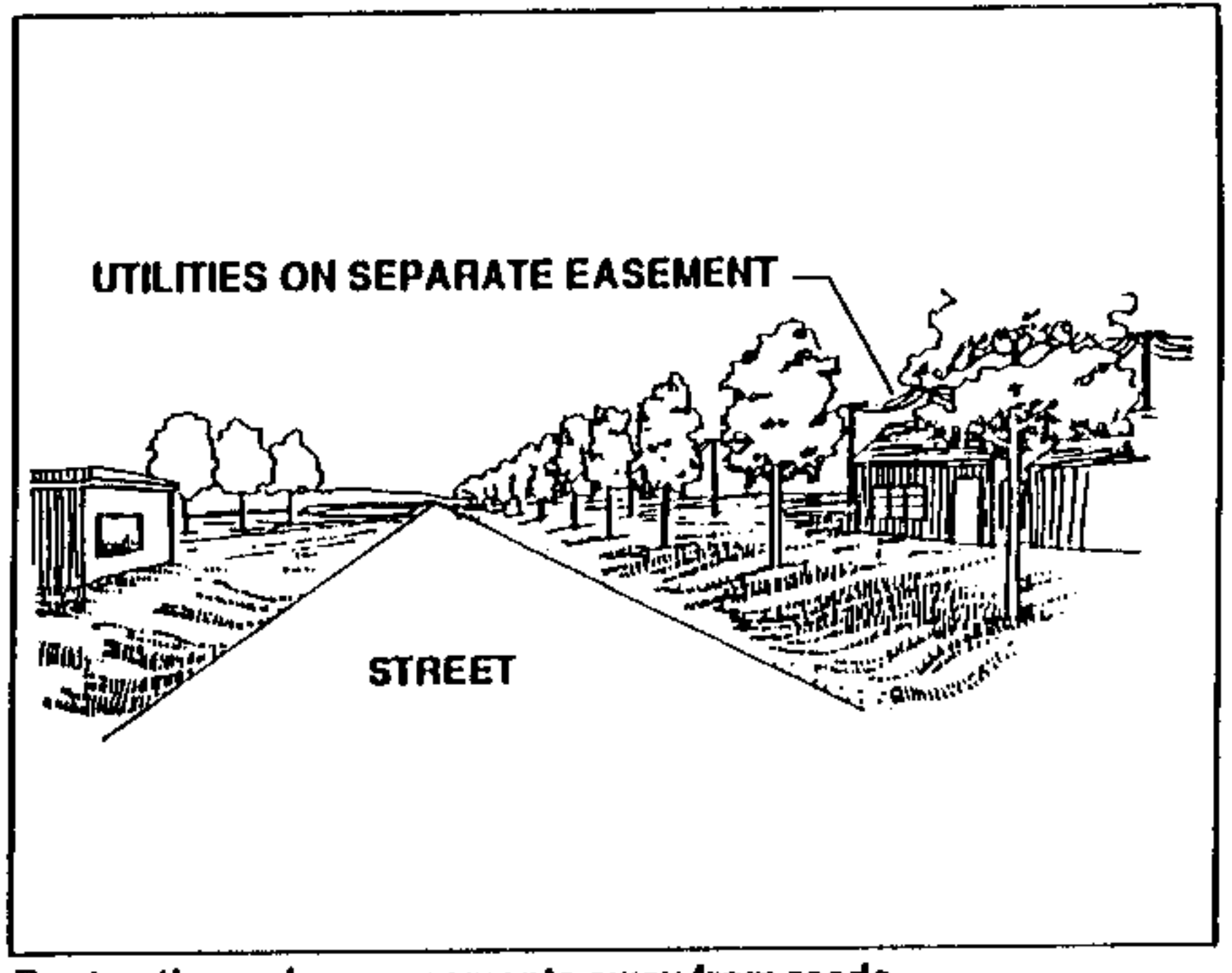

tree line directs view
to open & scenic areas
deciduous trees filter view
of commercial areas

keep view·corridor open
& free of development

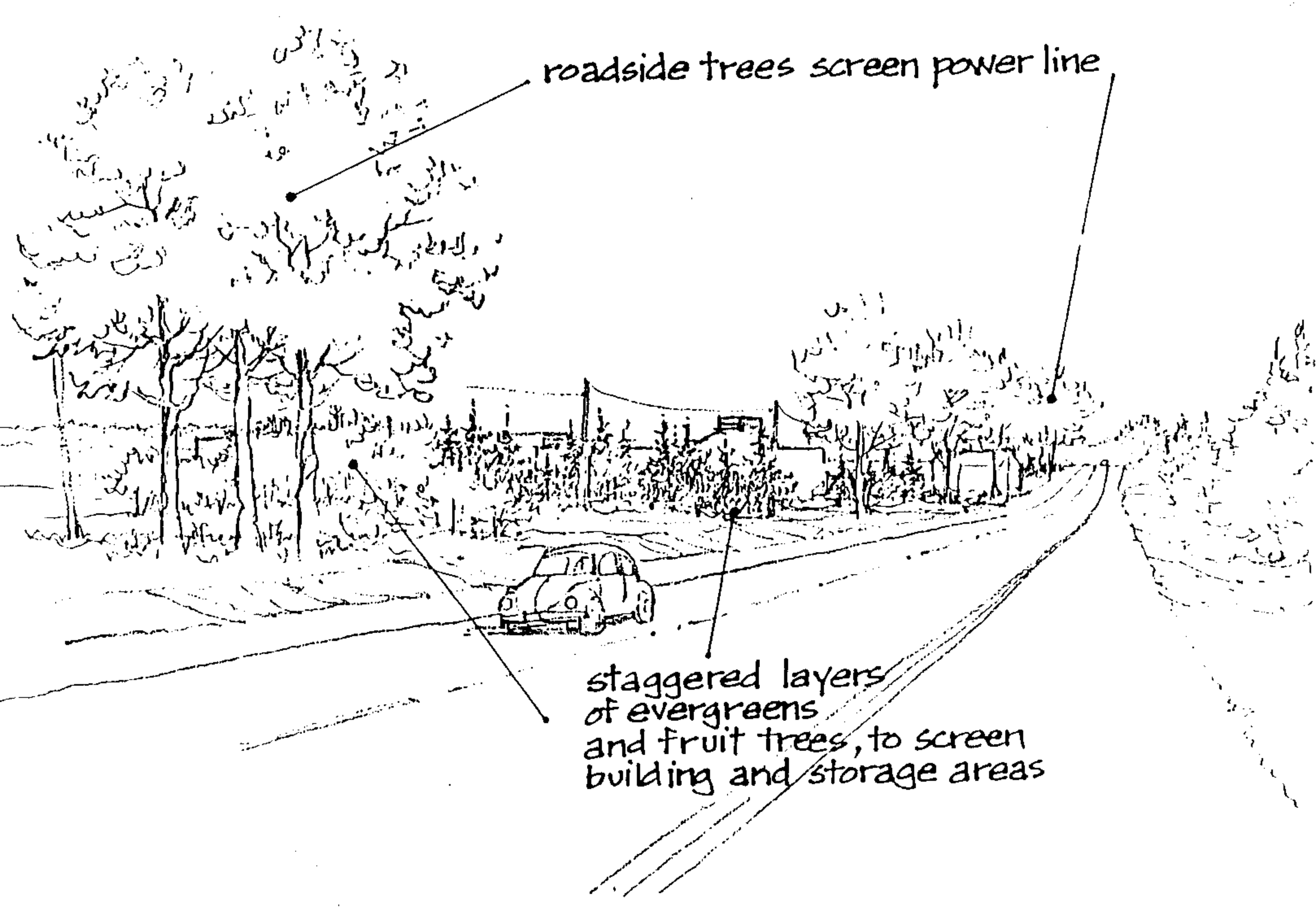
screen future commercial development

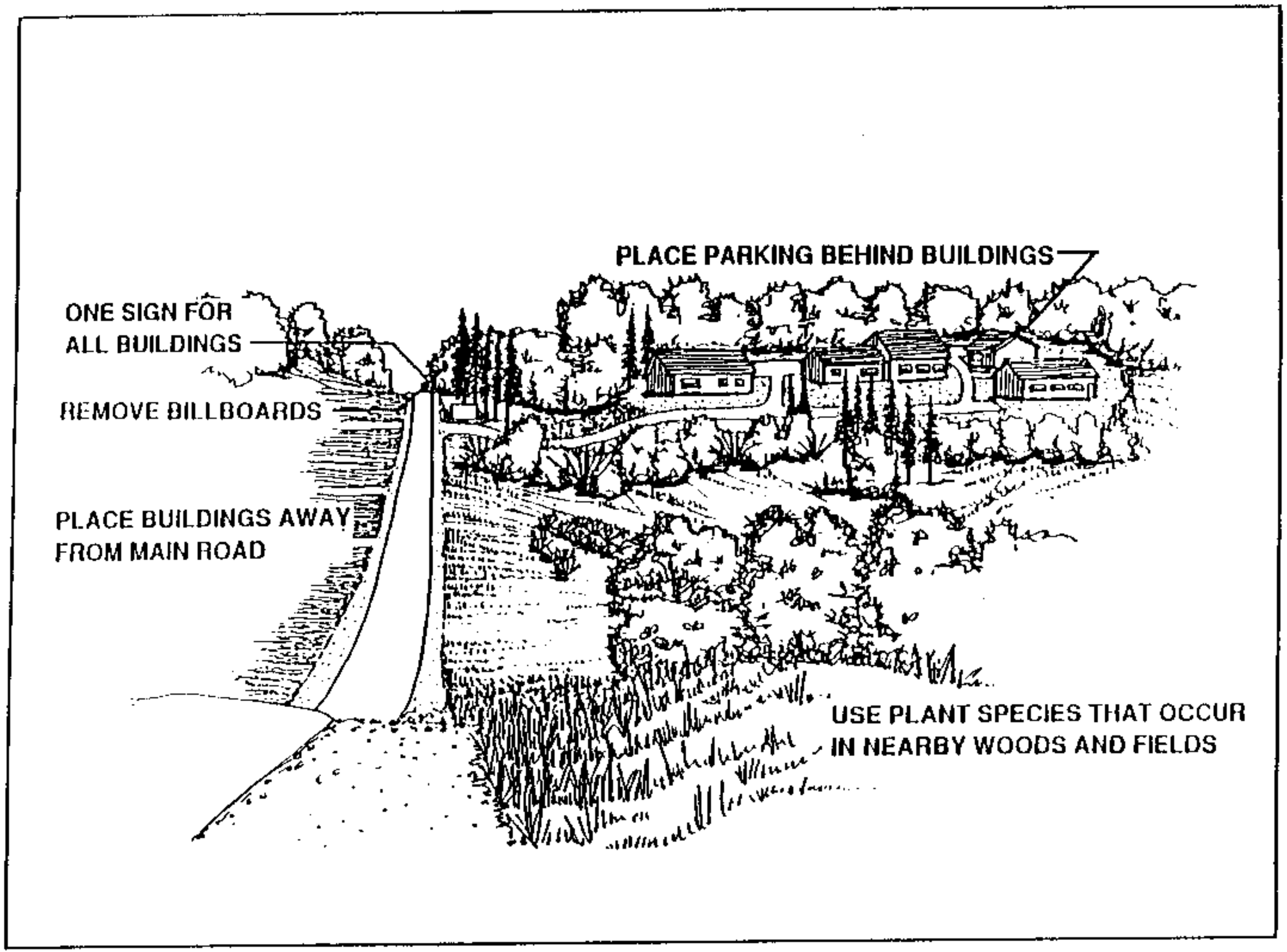


Place all utilities as practical underground. Plant trees for a softer, more natural appearance.



Route others along easements away from roads.


roadside trees screen power line
staggered layers
of evergreens
and fruit trees, to screen
building and storage areas



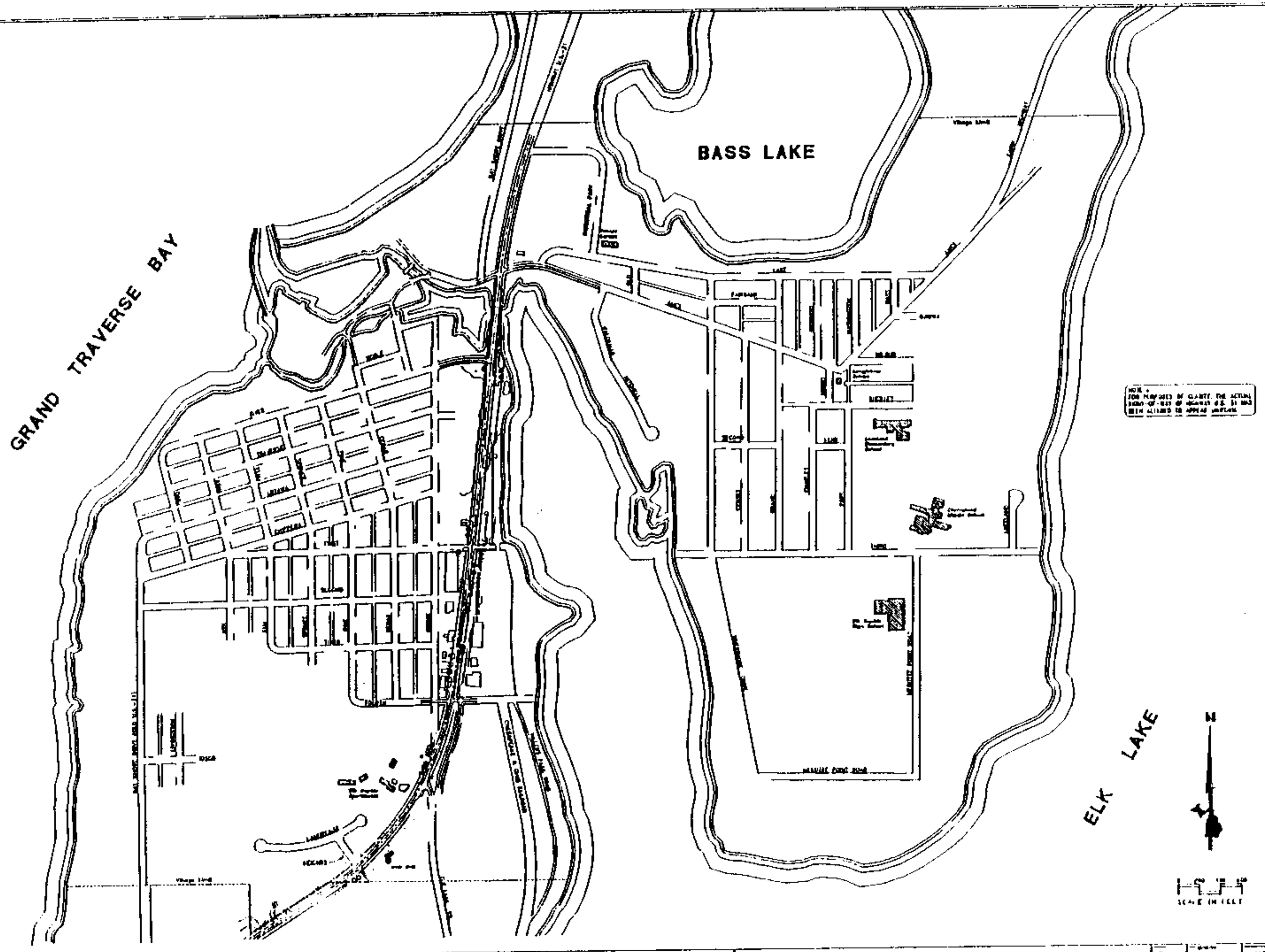
Even better would have been an original design that retained existing vegetation by limiting preconstruction clearing (protect during construction if necessary) or plant with meadow and other naturally occuring species following construction. These approaches retain natural character, and lower construction and maintenance costs.Use plants from a list of naturally occuring species, especially along major corridors (see Appendix).

Relevant to all the recommendations and actions to be taken to create and maintain the U.S. 31 corridor in the best condition possible is the formation of a responsible group. Whether the Planning Commission or some other group assumes the responsibility, there needs must be one group that is vigilant and purposeful in maintaining the corridor. At least part of the group's members should be owners or lessees along the corridor as it is in their interest to see that this corridor is renovated to, and is maintained at, the highest standards possible. Once an action plan is developed and accepted, monitoring becomes fairly simple. The group, armed with the plan, becomes the advocate for the corridor. It can help inform other groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce and other economic development groups, work with the state highway department, seek out funding for needed improvements, and be the corridor's voice to the Township Board.

U.S. 31 CORRIDOR STUDY

VILLAGE SOUTHERN BOUNDARY

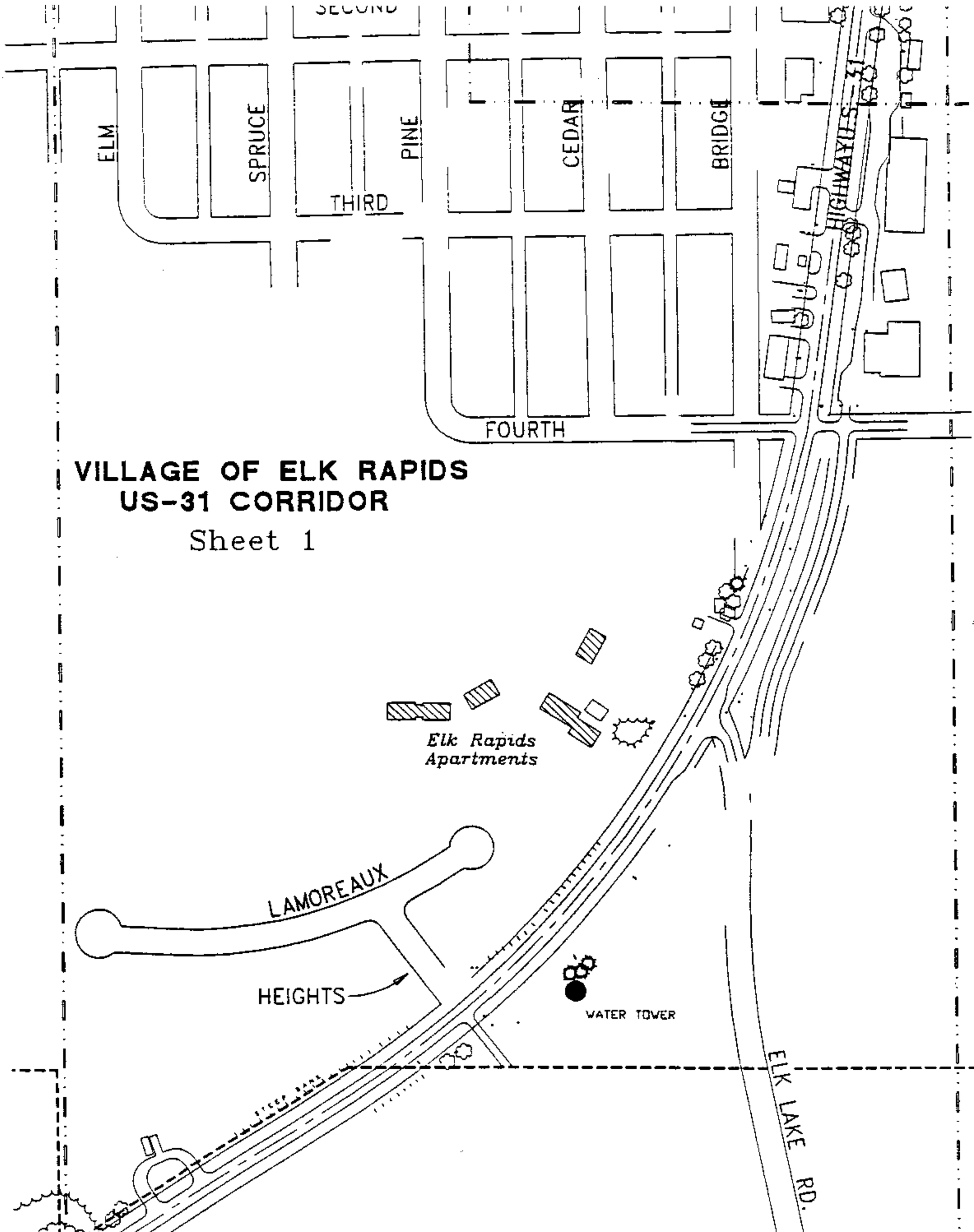
TO AMES STREET INTERSECTION



		BASE MAP DATA VISUAL SURVEY	VILLAGE OF ELK RAPIDS	1

VILLAGE OF ELK RAPIDS
US-31 CORRIDOR

Sheet 1



NOBLE

CEDAR

PINE

VIEW OF CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT

WETLANDS

DISTANT VIEWS OF WATER

VILLAGE OF ELK RAPIDS
US-31 CORRIDOR

Sheet 2

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. 31 highway, as it runs through Elk Rapids Village, is similar to most other highways in the federal system. It has a wide right-of-way, with almost no obstructions within it except where it begins to enter the most densely developed section of the Village. Similar also is the pattern of development along this highway, generally emphasizing commerce rather than any particular aesthetic. This section of U.S. 31, though, is graced by outstanding views of the Elk River, of the Upper and Lower Harbors, of Elk Rapids Village, and of Grand Traverse Bay as the road leaves town toward the north. With minimal improvements, such as street trees and landscaping, the corridor might be greatly improved, not diminishing the roadway's importance for commercial purposes, nor screening the businesses that serve local residents and traveling motorists; but by directing views and enhancing the existing assets of the corridor, it would increase the value of the highway by its contributions to the economic and cultural well-being of the community.

Topography

This section of U.S. 31 is generally flat except at the southern boundary, just south of the water tower, where the road leaves a higher elevation and descends about 15 meters to just above the river level.

Physical & Environmental Conditions

Most of the land along the corridor is developed. The church, apartments, gasoline stations, restaurants, and industrial buildings line the highway, except for a stretch of wetlands that is connected with Spencer Bay and the Elk River along the west edge near the Village entry at River Street. The Rotary Park is sited along the Elk River at the same point on the east side of the highway. As one approaches the Ames Street intersection, the Upper Harbor, with its boardwalk and landscaped areas, the Elk River, and ultimately the bay, are visible to the motorist. There is no evidence of erosion or other storm water damage at any point along this corridor.

Land Use

As indicated by existing structures, this corridor area is dominated by commercial and industrial uses with only a few single-family residences and the apartments. Where Fourth Street meets the highway, a small triangle of land serves as a storm drainage detention area. The Rotary Park with the

Chamber of Commerce Building is located along the river on the east side of the road. The highway and the Elk River effectively divide the Village, separating the older commercial downtown residential areas and the marina from the eastern section, where the school campus, golf course, and many businesses are located.

Traffic

Traffic on this corridor, which connects Traverse City and points south with Petoskey, the Mackinaw Bridge, and further northern destinations, is quite heavy and continuous, especially in the summer months. The Michigan Department of Transportation traffic counts for 1993 show the following average daily vehicle counts:

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Approximately 1-1/2 Miles North -- Williams Road	6,400
Approximately 3 Miles North -- Sutter Road	5,100
Approximately 3 Miles North -- M-88 .	4,600

As is evident, traffic begins dispersing at the Grand Traverse Resort and continues to do so until the bridge area in Elk Rapids Village. Then it rapidly disperses again on U.S. 31 north of the Village. This flow of traffic, as indicated earlier, tends to divide the town into two sections with different development patterns and uses.

Safety Considerations

The Michigan Department of Transportation has the primary responsibility for maintenance of this roadway and keeps it in generally very good condition. Turn lanes exist at the main intersections, deceleration lanes are provided in many places, sight lines are maintained strictly, and the shoulders are paved and well kept. MDOT has required curbed and paved entryways for some years and this has improved demonstrably the safe ingress and egress to businesses along the highway.

Street lighting is provided all the way through the Village on U.S. 31 by light fixtures suspended over the center of the road, with an additional cobrahead fixture at the intersection with River Street.

Utilities

Electric, telephone and cable lines run along and over this highway, and in a few places, especially at the bridge and intersection with Ames Street, are intrusive of views and detract from the general appearance of the corridor.

Signs and Billboards

There are no billboards along this stretch of the highway and the business signage very much appears properly scaled, well-maintained, and unobtrusive. It is readable and neither too large nor garish. The Village sign located on the Chamber of Commerce property, similarly to the one north of town, is too far back and hidden by other road signage to be effective.

Highway Signage

The standard highway directional and informational signage exists along the corridor and is generally new and well-maintained and fairly unobtrusive. In some places, though, there seems to be no standard or regular placement and the signs are a bit of a hodgepodge -- too many, too close, and oddly placed.

Aesthetics

Although certainly not unsightly, this corridor is not especially impressive. It is neither all developed nor all natural. Structures are of different eras and designs, and are set back at varying depths along the roadway. Street trees and landscaping are sporadic and, in general, do not relate to the corridor but to the plots where they are located. And as expressed earlier, the most beautiful area around the intersection of the corridor, where there are views of the harbor, the river, and Grand Traverse Bay, is marred by a profusion of utility poles and lines skyward, and Michigan Department of Transportation guardrails at ground level.

But its positive attributes provide latent opportunities for dramatic improvement. Traveling northward there is a change in grade and a curve in the roadway that, in itself, creates interest, and the road banks as well as the line of industrial buildings after the Village boundary provide definition and direction to the corridor. From the north one departs from a tree-lined corridor of simple natural beauty into vistas of the river and harbor with boats, docks, the Inn, and other buildings within view. After the intersection with Ames, the corridor view narrows back down to the river park and the

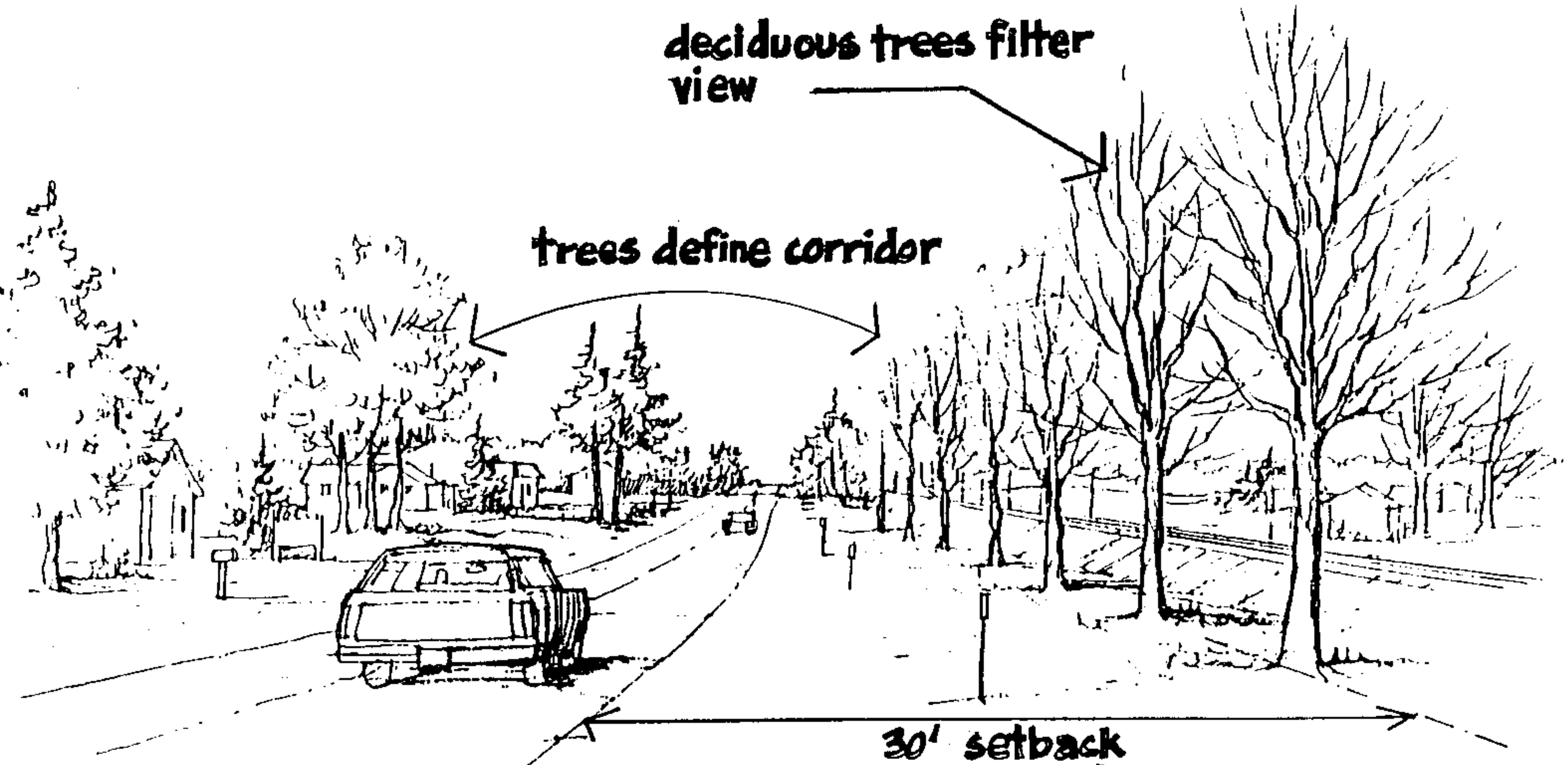
wetlands to the west. (It is these particular transition areas that should receive the most attention.)

This diversity of landscape is neither too busy nor too mundane. The scenery is changing yet not too long-lasting. There is contrast at each change. In sum, the U.S. 31 corridor passing through the Village is a well-proportioned structure wanting to be furnished.

relocate power lines further from roadway

maintain open view to bay - with occasional trees

walkway and bicycle path


deciduous trees filter view
trees define corridor
30' setback

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Those areas identified on the plan without street trees should be planted with trees as large as possible, but at least 2-1/2" cal., at 20' to 30' on center minimum. These trees should be planted in the right-of-way (with MDOT permit) 20' to 30' off the travelway, in as straight a line as possible. Breaks should be made for signage and visibility, especially in sight triangles at intersections. These plantings will unify and frame the corridor, and, at the intersection with Elk Lake Road, will direct vision and traffic along the corridor. Street trees also tend to hide imperfect structures or can be used to complement good ones. Group tree plantings can also be done to hide or enhance particular spots.

2. A setback line based upon existing structures should be established with future parking behind structures, and mandatory screening required. These rules could also be used to encourage existing non-conforming sites to upgrade if structural improvements are made. Zoning regulations allowing high density with minimum clearances between structures in the commercial area would allow appropriate massing of buildings. Also, signage regulations should continue to reinforce appropriate standards.

3. Rerouting or running lines below ground at the intersection of U.S. 31 and Ames Street may be possible, and strategic plantings can aid in diminishing the obtrusiveness of this number of crisscrossing lines.

4. Because the Township and Village have both recently built police, fire, and emergency service buildings on Bridge Street, reexamination of the routing of these vehicles should be done especially where Bridge Street dead ends into Fourth Street and then Fourth Street crosses U.S. 31.

5. Although generally ignored, the wetlands area on the west side of the corridor should be well-kept, and certain indigenous plant species might be introduced to give the area added color or texture -- a wetlands garden.

6. Any unrepaired or unpainted structures along the corridor should be rehabilitated and kept in good repair. Zoning regulations can be created to promote these actions and a fund might be created by the Village to loan necessary monies to anyone unable to perform as required.

7. Unlandscaped areas at the southern entry, especially the hillsides, might be planted to wildflowers or some other mass ground cover. Small group tree plantings might be

added at the Rotary Park, which might enhance the view of the river and blend the buildings better with this landscape.

8. See if the Michigan Department of Transportation will allow a better treatment of the river bridge and guard rails. If not, at least paint them and the metal parts of the bridge (dark green enamel?) and keep this area swept and clean. This is for some the only part of the Village they might see in detail before deciding to stay and visit.

9. At some point more attractive lighting might be indicated to compliment businesses along the highway and to link the corridor better to the lighted downtown areas of the Village. More than half of the poles and lines at the Ames Street intersection are from lights hung in the middle of the road. Fixtures placed at the edges of the right-of-way with underground wiring would eliminate this profusion of wires and poles.

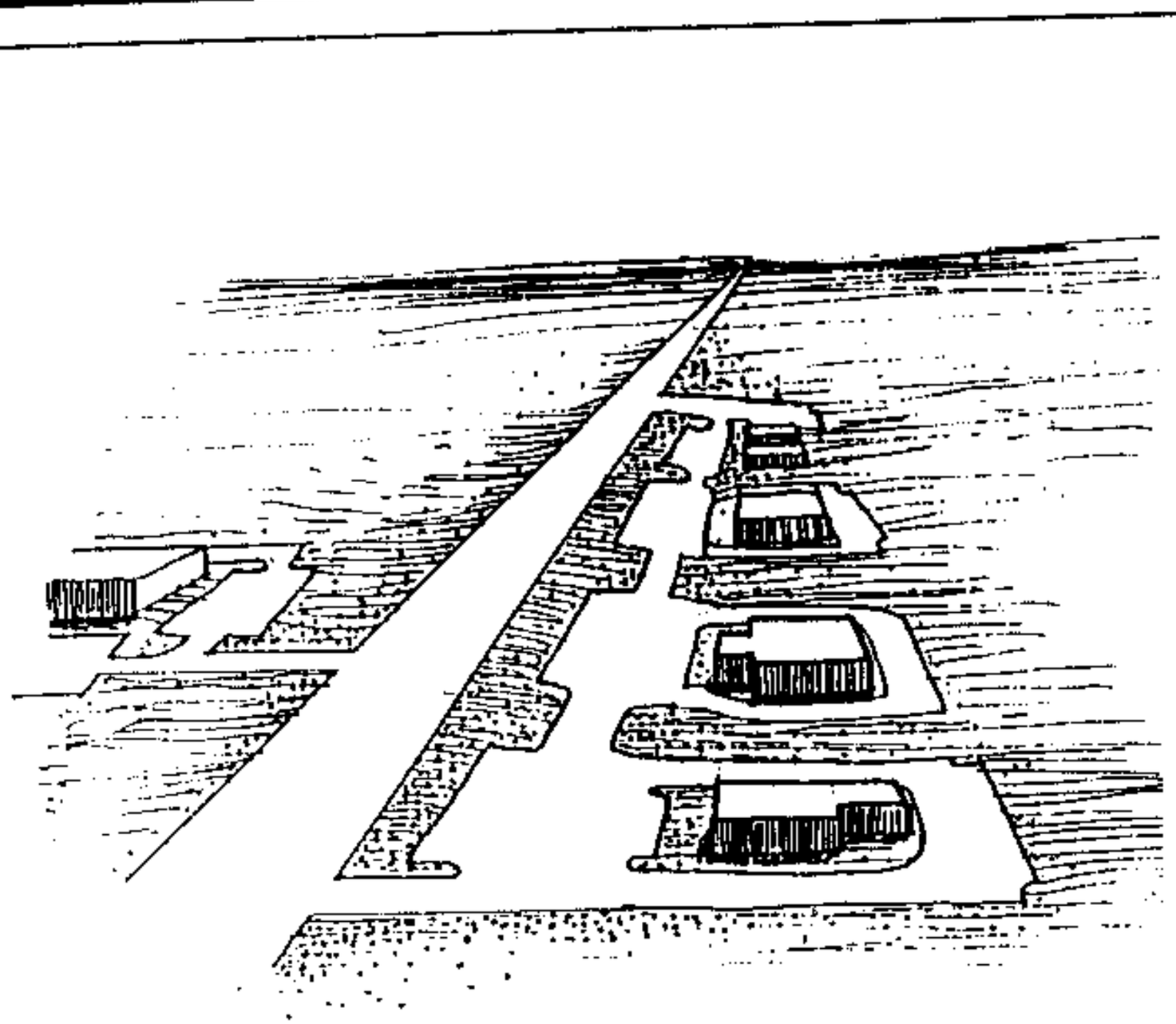
10. The owners of the businesses north of Fourth Street should consider an off-street access drive to facilitate drivers wanting to go from one business to the other (i.e., from the restaurant to the gas station, etc.) without having to pull in and out of U.S. 31 traffic.

11. Establish bicycle pathways and maintain them with signage and separation from car and truck trafficways wherever possible.

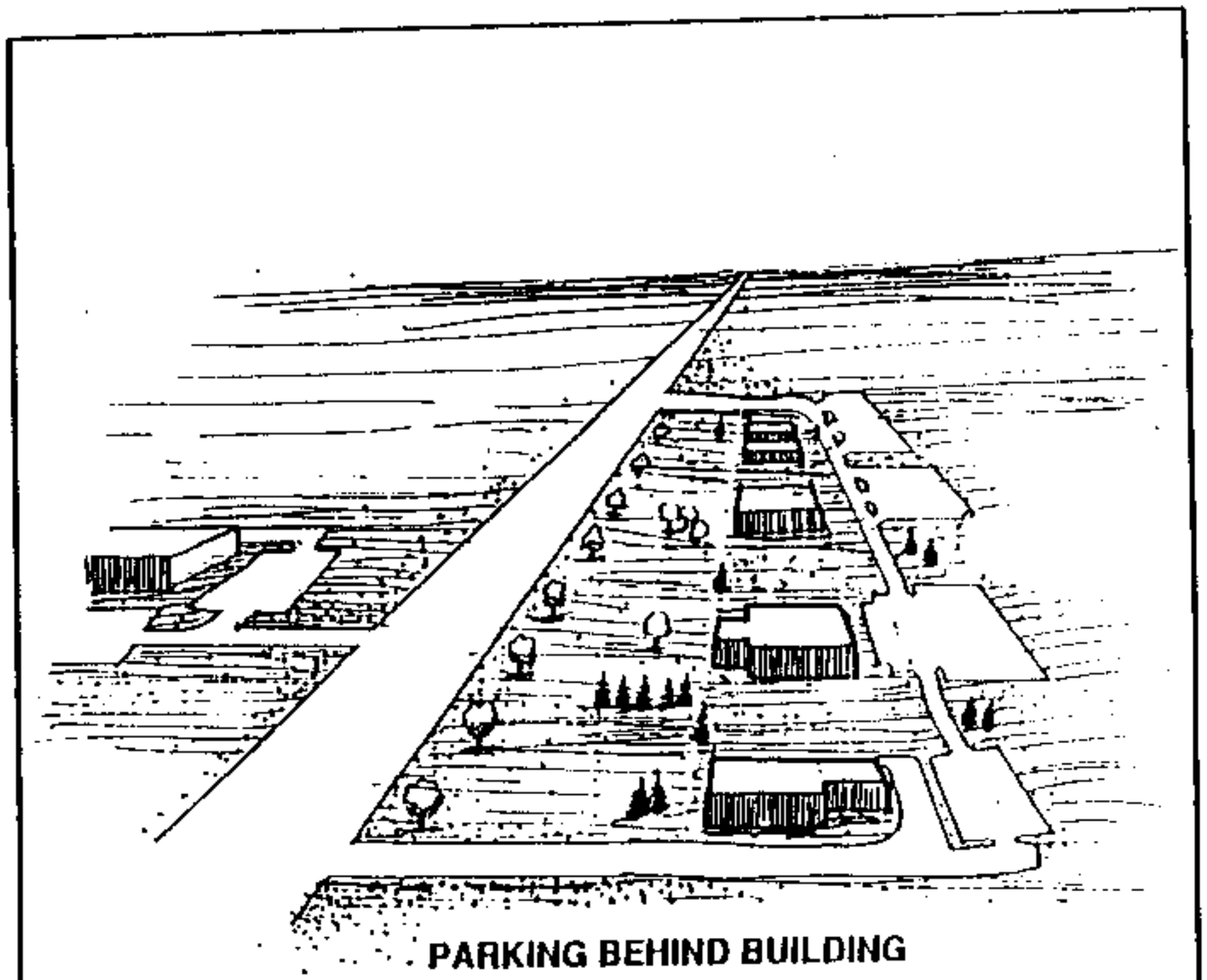
Relevant to all the recommendations and actions necessary to be taken to create and maintain the U.S. 31 corridor in the best condition possible is <u>the formation of a responsible group</u>. Whether the Beautification Commission or the Planning Commission or some other group assumes the responsibility, there needs must be one group that is vigilant and purposeful in maintaining the corridor. At least part of the group's members should be owners or lessees along the corridor. The prime condition of the roadway should be of utmost importance to them and their affairs. Once a plan is accepted and actions are plotted, monitoring becomes fairly simple. The group, armed with the plan, becomes a voice for the corridor amongst many other programs and plans wanting funding.

add interest to view with foreground / roadside trees

protect wetlands by restricting development



SHARED ACCESS DRIVE LIMITS
NUMBER OF TURNING CARS
FROM MAIN ROAD



PARKING BEHIND BUILDING

Frontage roads, rear service drives, alleys and shared driveways are all better design alternatives. They simplify roadside visual character, minimize conflicts and hazards, and increase road carrying capacity. Placing the parking behind the building increases greenspace and makes fewer and smaller signs more practical.

U.S. 31 CORRIDOR STUDY
from
Ames to Winters Road

DESCRIPTION

The U.S. 31 corridor north of its intersection with Ames and Dexter Streets remains primarily undeveloped all the way to the Township border with Milton Township (Winters Road), except for the first 1/2 mile north of the intersection. Here too are the only viewscapes except up and down the corridor. To the north, one can see East Bay in front of the condominium development, and looking south one can view Elk River and the Upper Harbor area. Along the corridor from this area to the Township line, mixed hardwoods and either lowland or upland conifers line the highway. No utility lines or poles are visible except at the intersections with Williams Drive, Winters Road, and at the Elk Rapids Sportsman's Club. The Michigan Department of Transportation has cleared a vast sight triangle on each corner at the intersections and it is fairly unvegetated in front of the Gun Club. All these areas, though, are mown.

Just north of the Ames Street intersection there is considerable development: office, motel and condominium developments on the Bay Shore side, and small industrial and commercial uses to the east. The right-of-way area between U.S. 31 and Bayshore Drive is mown, but otherwise unlandscaped and has both the Elk Rapids Village entry sign, just before the condominium development and after the wooded areas along U.S. 31 end, and the Village directory sign near the intersection with Dexter Street. Without foliage in winter, utility poles obscure and intrude upon the view of the Grand Traverse Bay as one looks from Ames Street north.

This entire roadway is well-maintained and no dangerous areas are evident.

Possible Improvements

The highway department clear-cut areas at intersections (including even wetlands) seem grossly out of proportion and necessity. These areas should be diminished, if possible, and, at a minimum, landscaped, especially at the Township line where a welcoming sign to the Township could be installed. A regulation to prevent any cutting of trees for, say, 100 feet on either side of the right-of-way should be included in the Master Plan and subsequently promulgated in the Zoning Ordinance to maintain this beautiful route through the Township.

At the area of the U.S. 31 Ames Street intersection, the highway Village sign should be removed and the ground-mounted large entry sign should be moved as close to the highway as possible so it is visible to motorists. Trees and other landscaping should be added within the area between the highway and North Bayshore Drive. The entire right-of-way area on the east side of U.S. 31 should be cleaned up, additional trees added, and the grass mown to mirror the manicured area on the west side of the road. This side actually needs the addition of trees and landscaping and lawn maintenance more than the west side, since the industrial uses mostly back up to the highway, not providing a very sightly appearance for the north entry to the Village.

Requirements could be promulgated for new establishments along the corridor to install trees or landscaping similar to the buffers required elsewhere. And the Village could work with current owners to help acquire grants or other means to improve this area at the entry to the Village.

Looking across the intersection, the riverscape is quite beautiful, only marred by an excessive number of utility lines and poles, and the bridge structure itself. Perhaps some of the utility lines could be buried, allowing some of the poles to come down. The design of the bridge over Elk River, not totally without merit, has been destroyed by the addition of guard rails, approaching on each side and across the bridge itself. Although perhaps beyond the power of the Village to effect, the design of the bridge and these guard structures should be considered if this entire entry area to the Village is to be made as aesthetically pleasing as possible.

HISTORIC

- National, state, and local registry programs
- Historic districts
- Local preservation society or "friends of historic site"
- National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), section 106
- Section 23 USC 109
- State Historic Preservation Officers
- Facade easements
- National Heritage Corridors and Areas
- Overlay zones
- State and local regulations
- Management and maintenance guidelines for historic structures and landscapes
- Design standards

CULTURAL

- Special cultural district
- Overlay zones to control land use in prescribed zones
- Special review processes for cultural districts
- Design guidelines

NATURAL

- Conservation easement
- National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA)
- Water - Clean Water Act of 1972
- Rivers - 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act
- Wetlands - Clean Water Act, Section 404
- Flood plains - Flood Emergency Management Act (FEMA)
- Coasts - Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972
- Endangered species - Endangered Species Act of 1973
- State and local programs that protect, promote, or educate about natural resources

- State and local regulations and programs
- Stream valley and local floodplain ordinances
- Resource management plans
- Vegetarian management plans
- Conservation ordinances
- Tree conservation ordinances
- Conservation organizations and advocates

RECREATIONAL

- National Park Service funds for State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation (SCORP) and recreational parkland acquisition
- Planning for parks, recreation and open space at federal, local, and state levels
- US Forest Service Recreation Opportunity Spectrum program
- Recreation clubs, organizations and non-profits

ARCHAEOLOGICAL

- NHPA, Section 106
- Protection through avoidance, data recovery, and monitoring

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