



MINDY SAUNDERS/staff photographer

Southfield City Hall today. Twenty-five years ago, the city founders who sat in the small frame building that was the first city hall never imagined that the course they began would lead this far this fast.

25 years of Southfield growth; the city surpassed all expectations

AT AGE 25, Southfield is a success. It's a working partnership of houses and highrises, shopping centers and skyscrapers. That's demographic success.

For all it offers, Southfield operates at a profit. That's bottom-line success.

Tracing the city's development is almost a study in displacement. The original forests were displaced by pastures, which were in turn displaced by homes, stores and office buildings.

But perhaps the first step in Southfield's development was displacement of the original residents — Indians.

For almost 200 years after the first European colonists arrived in America, Indians roamed Michigan with very few visits from white men. As the inevitable trickle of settlers started homesteading the area, "manifest destiny" took hold. The Indians' days were numbered.

According to historian Vickie Goldbaum, author of "Southfield: Yesterday and Today," the first Indian treaty was signed in 1807.

It limited the Indians to a total of four square miles in Township One North, Range 10 East: the surveyed area that was to become Southfield Township.

In 1827 a new treaty with the Potawatomi Tribe took the remaining lands away from the Indians, and the trickle of settlers became a flood.

John Daniels was the first land purchaser in 1818. He was followed by other farmers and merchants, most of whom originally came from New York state.

Until 1830 the township had been included with Bloomfield Township, but on July 12 the area became a separate township named Oscewa. That name wasn't too popular with the residents, however, and two weeks later the township was renamed Southfield. Goldbaum says it is thought the name comes from the township's location as the "south fields" of Bloomfield.

SOUTHFIELD WAS MOSTLY a rural farming community until the early part of the century. One of the area's first great organizational steps was consolidation of Southfield schools in 1947. History of the consolidation is also detailed in Goldbaum's book.

Prior to 1947 there were up to 12 school districts in Southfield Township. There was no high school — students attended high schools in Birmingham, Redford, West Bloomfield, Royal Oak, Ferndale, Berkley and Detroit on a tuition basis.

Consolidation was no small effort. The movement began in earnest in 1942, and a school reorganization plan was not approved by the Oakland County Board of Education until 1944.

What followed were years of petition drives, court injunctions, stalled elections and campaigns for and against the issue. Even after the consolidation was approved by voters, its constitutionality was challenged in the Michigan Supreme Court.

Construction on Southfield High School didn't start until 1950.

But today, there are two high schools, four middle schools and 16 elementary schools and six colleges in Southfield.

IN THE EARLY PART of the century, Southfield was changing in other ways.

The township had always been crisscrossed with traveling routes; Indian trails at first, which later became wagon routes and auto roads. A few roads became highways that eventually played an extremely important part of the area's development.

One such thoroughfare was Northwestern Highway. In the 1930s and 1940s increasing numbers of workers were using it to commute from Southfield to downtown or downriver jobs. Hudson-Weber Realty recognized

the trend, and started a development to take advantage of it.

On Oct. 8, 1950 Hudson-Weber announced plans for the \$20 million Northland Center development, the first suburban shopping mall in the country.

Six days later a petition was filed to incorporate an area in the southeast portion of the township which included the Northland property. The petition failed at the polls, but the idea for a city had been established.

In December, 1950 two more petitions were presented in court in Pontiac. One was for incorporation of Lathrup Village, the other for incorporation of the whole township.

Although the township incorporation attempt failed, the one for Lathrup Village didn't. Lathrup adopted its charter in December 1953.

Beverly Hills voted to incorporate as a village in 1957. The boundaries of the township were shrinking; now there were several incorporated communities, including Franklin Village which had existed since the early 1830s.

Meanwhile, business and commerce was expanding. After Northland opened in 1954, other large companies began moving to the area.

The Bendix Corporation opened offices and a research center in 1955. Standard Oil and Reynolds Aluminum announced plans for other facilities.

EIGHT MILE AND Telegraph corridors were booming with industrial, commercial, light manufacturing and even residential activity. About the only activity not attracted to the area was heavy industry — there simply was no available rail, water or air transportation network.

Southfield was outgrowing its rural township roots.

Plans for a city of Southfield hadn't died with the first incorporation vote.

While a lucrative tax base continued to grow, a group of civic-minded individuals continued to lobby for a city charter.

On their third try they succeeded. On April 28, 1958 Gov. G. Mennen Williams approved the charter for the new city of Southfield.

The biggest concern of the new city council was how Southfield could grow. Although the city was predominantly residential, the influx of business was becoming greater each year as companies grouped along developing highway arteries.

Elected officials in the city's early years not only saw the importance of a diversified tax base, but also how it could be effectively planned.

Zoning was their most important tool. City fathers knew it could make or break the community. They knew business growth was vital, but it couldn't work if it was at the expense of homeowners.

Southfield's elected officials looked at zoning with two things in mind: haphazard development could be avoided with an overall plan, but specific land uses should be flexible.

What they had in mind was a "neighborhood" zoning concept. Don Gross, current Planning and Economic Development director, says the basic philosophy was to encourage a partnership of commercial and residential growth in most areas. Business and industry would be located separately, near transportation networks.

WITH A MASTER PLAN, Southfield officials could look ahead far enough to account for future demands on utilities and city services. But at the same time, they avoided scribed-in-stone zoning of individual parcels.

"Rather than face a lot of individual

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