

Jefferson County Plan Saves Agricultural Land



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In the first year under its new land use plan Jefferson County reduced the rate of conversion of agricultural land by 88% as compared to annual rates over the previous 20 years, according to Bruce Haukom, the county's planning and zoning administrator.

Prior to the new plan, this growing county (pop.74,000) with significant agriculture, located between the cities of Madison and Milwaukee, saw an average of about 400 acres rezoned from agricultural to residential use each year. This conversion of agricultural land was reduced to just 100 acres in the first year under the new plan and revised zoning ordinance.

In addition, prior to the new plan an average of 10 to 20 lots were created each year for 35-acre dwelling sites under the county's agricultural zoning classification, resulting in a conservative estimate of another 400 acres removed annually from agricultural use. The new plan and ordinance limit the creation of dwelling lots in agricultural areas and no longer allow the creation of 35-acre lots for dwelling sites in agricultural areas. In the first year under the new approach approximately another 400 acres of farmland were preserved.

In total, just 100 acres were taken out of agricultural use in the first year under the county's new plan and ordinance, as compared to an annual average of 800 acres in years past – a reduction of 88%.

“What pleases me most about the new plan is that it is really working! We have been able to greatly slow down the loss of farmland, which is so important in this county. We now have a multitude of options for preserving our natural resources and our prime agricultural land. And I'm also pleased that the county and towns have developed a cooperative spirit in sharing responsibility for implementing this plan since both levels of government worked so hard to get it approved,” said County Board Chairperson Wendell Wilson.

The Jefferson County Agricultural Preservation and Land Use Plan's vision statement specifies that the plan will guide growth so as to preserve the county's rural character, agricultural base and natural resources while contributing to a high quality of life and prosperity in the communities. Under the plan, most new growth will be directed to designated urban service areas and rural hamlets, which will reduce scattered rural housing and preserve existing farmland.

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The new plan was prepared under the auspices of the County Board of Supervisors and the direction of the County Planning and Zoning Committee to replace the county's out-dated 1978 plan. The planning process got underway in 1996 with the formation of a 20-person steering committee and the hiring of a planning consultant to guide the planning process. The steering committee's members included representatives and spokespersons for agriculture, economic development, the environment, real estate, transportation and local government. The support and involvement of local government units, citizens and the Jefferson County Towns Association were crucial in preparing a successful plan.

The multi-year planning process involved numerous public workshops, meetings with local officials, a public opinion survey, citizen visioning sessions and a variety of other public involvement techniques. In October 1999 the county plan was approved, and in March 2000 an amended county zoning ordinance took effect.

The plan defines agricultural preservation areas, urban service areas, rural hamlets, and environmental corridors where different policies apply to accomplish the vision and goals of the plan.

Agricultural preservation is at the heart of the new plan and is more strongly emphasized than in the 1978 plan. The plan defines Agricultural Preservation Areas as the rural portions of the county outside of planned Urban Service Areas and designated Rural Hamlets. Major changes from the previous plan in the treatment of agricultural land include:

- Removal of the provision allowing a dwelling on 35 acres in the exclusive agricultural zone.
- Limiting the number of potential lots per rural property, dependent on size and agricultural soil types, to one to three lots per property.
- Limiting rural residential lot size to 2 acres per lot, while allowing larger lots to be created by lot combination.
- Recommending clustering for all rezoned proposed lots.
- Prohibiting dwelling units in the A-1 Exclusive Agricultural District, except for replacement of existing dwellings.

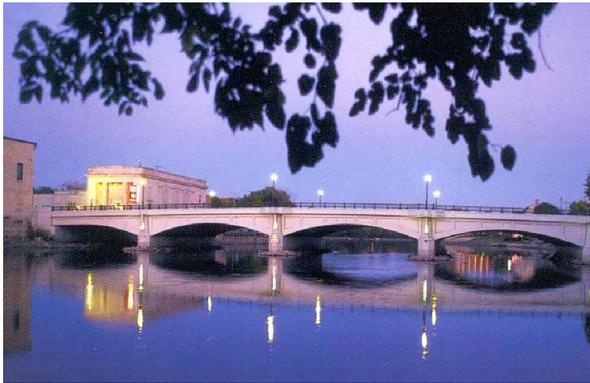
Additionally, a new "zoning tracking system" has been put in place. This system, through GIS mapping, documents the creation and use of all potential building lots ("splits") on rural properties. This system provides a useful way of showing which parcels have been split under the new approach, how many splits remain possible for each parcel, and which parcels may no longer be split. After the first year under the new plan, the tracking system showed that 2,000 acres became off limits for further home development. Since then this number has exceeded 4,000 acres.

Urban Service Areas are delineated around existing cities, villages, sanitary districts and lake management districts where public sanitary service is either offered or planned. New development will be encouraged in these areas to relieve development pressure in rural areas. Incorporated municipalities and neighboring towns are encouraged to enter into boundary agreements to address annexation and development issues within these areas.

Rural Hamlets are areas for residential and business development not served by public sanitary sewers. These hamlets allow growth in towns that will not compromise the county's agricultural base. The plan recommends 10 areas for this classification.

Environmental Corridors are environmentally sensitive areas where land preservation and development standards are applied to protect and provide wildlife habitat. These corridors include parks, conservancy lands, water bodies, wetlands and 100-year floodplains and contiguous woodlands over 10 acres.

Implementation of the Jefferson County plan yielded impressive results in the first year in which the plan and revised zoning ordinance were in effect.



Local officials have been enthusiastic about the impacts of the plan. Ray Kisow, the county board vice chairperson who served as chair of the steering committee, has asserted that, "The new plan and ordinances give local government a lot more control with more growth management tools than the old plan...Previously land owners could put a house in the country on 10 or twenty-acre existing parcels and could create 35-acre parcels without town or county review. Now, the new ordinance requires a formal rezoning from A-1 to A-3 for any proposed rural home so these are major reasons why the plan has worked."

Richard Gimler, Chair of the Jefferson County Towns Association and Chairperson of the Town of Watertown, thinks that "...the plan is working beautifully. The two-acre maximum lot size has really helped save farmland, and removing the ability to put a home on a 35-acre parcel is probably the best thing we did in the plan. As with all plans, it needs some fine turning to make it even more effective."

The county planning and zoning department will monitor the plan on an on-going basis so that the plan and implementation measures may be fine-tuned and kept current. The plan document is available for review at the following Web site: <http://www.co.jefferson.wi.us/zoning/> Further information on the plan may be obtained from Steve Grabow at the University of Wisconsin-Extension, Jefferson County Office (920-674-7296) or from Bruce Haukom at the Jefferson County Zoning Department (920-674-7130).