

Updating Your Rural Comprehensive Plan: Strategies to Address Shifting Trends

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PLANNING FOR AN UPDATE?

In the fall of 1999, Wisconsin adopted a comprehensive planning law as a part of the governor's budget bill. The primary intent of the law is to ensure that changes to major land use tools, including zoning, land division, and official mapping ordinances are consistent with an adopted comprehensive plan. The law provides a framework for creating and adopting local comprehensive plans: plans must address nine different topics or "elements," include opportunities for public participation in the creation of the plan, be adopted by ordinance, and be updated at least once every ten years. The specific content and direction of the plan is up to local communities.

At last count, over 1,500 Wisconsin communities had adopted a comprehensive plan. Only 100 communities exercise zoning, land division or official mapping without an adopted a comprehensive plan. Many communities that clearly understand the connection between the comprehensive plan and local land use decision-making. They consult the plan prior to making major infrastructure decisions, granting rezones and subdivision approval, and dealing with boundary issues, among other things.

However, there are many communities that are still grappling with the importance of their plans and trying to adjust to 'rosy' projections that may not have materialized. Clearly, the content, effectiveness and use of local plans varies widely. Nearly 10 years after most communities adopted their first comprehensive plan, now is the perfect time to revisit this issue.

While many early plans focused on meeting the technical requirements of the law, few created a pathway for citizens and local officials to revisit the plan, hone in on issues that truly mattered, and use the plan in local decision-making. For communities embarking on a comprehensive plan update, a few thoughts, ideas and examples follow.

TRENDS TO CONSIDER

Addressing land use change is difficult at best, particularly in rural areas. Towns took different approaches to this task. Some took a firm stand in controlling the amount of development that could occur so that agriculture and rural lifestyles could persist. Others envisioned painting the landscape with scattered, large-lot residential subdivisions and blanketing their rural highways with commercial development. Urban towns went to work planning for masses of sprawling (and often separated) low-density residential, retail and industrial developments. They attempted to capitalize on the – then – good economy, and the many jobs being created within metropolitan regions.

Things have changed of course. In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, businesses and jobs were lost, stable neighborhoods became unstable with foreclosures, and development slowed, if not stopped altogether. Agriculture, on the other hand, survived the recession quite well with strong commodity prices. For the first time in decades, the disparity between the price of land for development and the price of land for farming began to close.

Recent and predicted changes will undoubtedly require new approaches and new strategies to be considered when communities update their plans. From a land use planning perspective, we look to trends derived from demographic and economic shifts, changes in natural systems, legislative directives, and political philosophies, including regionalization. A summary of those trends follows:

Socio-Economic Trends

- **Population projections for many communities have been throttled back.** Household size continues to decline. For some communities, this means an actual decline in population. Many lots within platted subdivisions now lie vacant, with a good number reverted to agricultural use. Also, for the first time in recorded history, there are now more single adults than married adults in the U.S.

- **The Baby Boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964) continues to move into retirement, carrying with it a demanding set of needs.** Although this generation is really very independent, the “Me” generation will still demand services they feel entitled to due to a life of paying taxes. Roads, which they have used all their professional lives, will need to be maintained or improved. Services like police, fire, garbage and utilities may not be sacrificed. Housing and health care must be affordable to meet retirement incomes. Housing style, size, and proximity to services will be of high value for this growing market, though many will continue to live in rural areas. They will also be the most vocal at town hall meetings, as they simply have more time available than other sectors of the population. They value traditional forms of communication.
- **Hispanic and Asian populations will continue to grow as a percentage of the US population.** Many of these cultures are used to living in more dense urban environments. They may have little interest in, or financial ability to live in suburban environments. These cultures have already made an impact on local school districts relative to teacher requirements. Social programs offered by larger municipalities and counties have also responded. It is hard to predict what impact these growing cultures will have on comprehensive planning but their presence as a future component of society and community is undeniable. The perspectives these populations bring should certainly be sought out and integrated during the comprehensive planning process.

Agriculture Trends

Farming was one of the few industries that survived the Great Recession without major issues. Farm commodity prices remained relatively stable and at times spiked due to increased competition between industries like energy and animal feed suppliers. Because of increased competition, some farm crops like corn and soybeans had strong gains during this period. Cash cropping returned in force in some areas due to major market processing investments in infrastructure. Combined with almost stagnant housing construction, much land returned to agricultural management.

- **Wisconsin agriculture will likely stay strong for the foreseeable future.** Competition between different agriculture niches such as vegetable and grain crops and dairy have increased competition for farmland. This has driven up agricultural land prices for purchase and rent. Few agricultural professionals project this trend will change. In fact, population growth in developing countries will likely increase demand for food worldwide.
- **The gap between land values for development and land values for agriculture has closed substantially.** Most planners have never experienced this type of reversal before. This leads to a fundamental planning question: Will rural governmental units like towns reverse some of their prior plans which called for “rural residential” and now designate these lands for agriculture use?
- **Growth in agriculture has resulted in increasing demands on local resources and facilities.** Farm equipment has increased in size and weight, creating pressure on local road systems. Dairies have also grown in size creating concerns over manure management, smells, water quality, and water quantity. While growth in agriculture is generally viewed as a positive economic impact, communities have and will continue to grapple with these side effects.
- **Agriculture of tomorrow will require substantial amounts of land to support invested infrastructure.** The State of Wisconsin has invested significant financial resources in its Working Lands program in an effort to plan for agricultural growth and manage potential barriers. All said, agriculture is here to stay in Wisconsin. Yet it will look very different from the red barn, cow pasture photos of the past. Large tracts of undeveloped farmland will need to be preserved to support the production agriculture industry. Planners need to understand that organic and small scale production agriculture, while preferred by some communities, will only contribute a small, but nonetheless important portion of the overall agricultural economy.

Housing Trends

The clash between non-farm related residential housing and agricultural practices in rural areas has always presented challenges for planners and town leaders to balance. But the future of housing in rural areas is about to meet other challenges as well. Though these trends seem more national, than local, they will likely play a factor in the demand for new housing development within many rural Wisconsin communities.

- **The impact of the “Baby Boomer” generation on the future housing market is about to see an adjustment.** In the coming years, baby boomers will be moving on and will likely want to sell their homes to move closer to services and medical arrangements. It is estimated there will be 1.5 to 2 million homes coming on the market nationwide every year at the end of this decade from senior households selling off. But who will be behind them to buy? The answer is likely not enough buyers for the amount of homes on the market.
- **McMansions are out and smaller is better.** According to data from the American Housing Survey, 80 percent of new homes built from 1989 to 2009 were detached single-family homes. A third of them were larger than 2,500 square feet. Forty percent were built on lots of one-half to 10 acres in size. Roughly three-quarters of new housing demand will come from the people who bought these traditional homes, now empty-nesters wanting to downsize. The trend is simple: smaller family size and more single households will not create demand for large homes on large lots. Many buyers will prefer smaller more reasonably priced homes they can sell in the future.
- **Buyers will increasingly look to alternative housing types.** Some demand for “traditional” subdivision type single family housing will always be evident, particularly among households with children. However, it is projected that about a quarter of buyers will look to alternatives such as condos, rental units and urban townhomes. Historically, demand for this type of housing was very low – near zero percent in some regions. This trend may make exacerbate the situation with baby boomers trying to sell their homes, particularly in rural areas.
- **The cost to build a new home in an already flooded home market will make building less valuable.** To access most homes that hit the market, car travel will be required. Because agricultural land prices are at an all-time high, the cost to develop subdivisions within rural areas will be even more expensive, especially in areas of active farming where the demand for farmland is high.

Transportation Trends

- **Future home buyers are less likely to travel long distances between home and work.** When the internet became readily available, many people envisioned corporations would allow employees to work out of their homes. However, that trend never took serious traction. Most employees are still required to report to a place of work to remain accountable and build chemistry between co-workers. Long commutes mean lost time opportunities and more restrictions on disposable income. This is not an attractive combination to the soon to be employed Millennial generation.
- **The Millennial generation is not as interested in cars as past generations.** National data obtained through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) indicates a growing number of youth are less interested in obtaining a driver’s license. In 2011, the percentage of 16-to-24 year olds with driver’s licenses dipped to another new low. Just over two-thirds of young Americans were licensed to drive in 2011. That’s the lowest percentage since at least 1963. There is lots of speculation about why fewer young people are getting driver’s licenses (and why even those who do seem to be driving less). Theories range from the economy, to the rising cost of gas and vehicle ownership, and the increase in technology.
- **Millennials will impact future transportation investments.** There are now more teenagers and young adults in America than there have been in years. Since 1992, the US has gained more than 7.3 million 16-to-24 year olds (an increase of 22%), but has added only 1.2 million 16-to-24 year old drivers (16.4% of the total). If transportation depends on gas tax to generate revenues and future users will consume less gas, consideration will have to be given to how future improvements will be funded.
- **Increased interest and use of Mass Transit.** Millennials seem to be defying their suburban upbringing by not purchasing a driver’s license and choosing transit instead. According to 2013 survey data provided by *TransitCenter*, transit ridership is at a 50 year high. Rural communities will not be able to provide the luxury of public transit, but if the Millennials seek or choose to use it specifically as their mode of choice, rural communities will have a harder time maintaining or growing their future housing base. The millennial generation appears very attracted to urbanized environments. Most have known no other lifestyle.

Environmental Trends

The environment is changing. While there are skeptics, most folks firmly believe that human impacts on the landscape are having serious impacts. The pressure to utilize resources to meet our society's growing needs will only increase. Proper management of environmental resources, particularly in rural areas, is imperative to the existence of everyone. Natural functions provided by our ecosystems are now more understood than ever. New research and technology, coupled with societal pressure, will continue to alter the regulatory landscape now and into the future.

- **Groundwater is becoming more precious.** Competing uses for groundwater – both business and personal – are stressing the supply and quantity of groundwater in some parts of the state. Other areas are experiencing problems with drinking water quality, including nitrates and e-coli from agricultural sources, naturally occurring arsenic and radium, and pharmaceuticals. The legislative arena has been filled with debate over high capacity wells and the inability of towns to protect their groundwater resources due to the regional nature of these impacts. “Water Wars” are apt to get more frequent and complex as the years progress. Updated comprehensive plans should take a closer look and stronger stand regarding groundwater issues.
- **Surface water quality is increasing in importance.** Tens of millions of dollars are spent every year by both public and private sources to protect water quality in this state. Wisconsin's long history of having a ‘water ethic’ has had its ups and downs. However, it is clear that our residents enjoy and value their water resources. Economic connections to poor water quality have been shown in many areas and the cost to manage and improve water resources is high. New programs are emerging to manage point and non-point source pollution such as WDNR's Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) program. This program will provide funding for rural land management practices that reduce phosphorus inputs to our surface waters. To be successful, rural areas need to accept that they are a major contributor to the problem and will need to be major players to implement solutions.

Regionalization Trends

Ask any planner that used the word “regionalization” in the context of planning in a rural community and they will probably remember the experience well. Once thought of as a term related to the government takeover of rights, regionalization as a solution will grow out of financial necessity. Now, more than ever, communities are realizing they can't provide everything to all people. Financial resources are not there to do so and the social desire to pay for them is not strong enough.

- **Younger populations have little interest in where the boundary of one government ends and the other begins.** Like an animal seeking quality habitat to survive and prosper, future residents will be attracted to areas that provide places to walk, bike, shop, receive medical care, be employed, obtain education or training, and much more. Working collectively across community borders will be paramount to provide the qualities residents and visitors find appealing. In basic terms, cities keep the country, country, and towns create a sense of place for cities. They function as a system and rely on the assets of each other to sustain. The importance of your neighboring cities and villages cannot be understated. Taking advantage of these regional systems and knowing your place within them will help to ensure that your region prospers.
- **Technology allows services to be provided more easily and efficiently across boundaries.** Emergency response has made huge strides in this area. Utility and transportation systems can benefit from similar applications in the future. Private special interest groups and industries have used the same concepts to break down local control barriers; local governments can do the same.
- **Regional cooperation can help you attain future goals.** Most planners will likely agree that the most “visionary” component of the nine required planning elements is Intergovernmental Cooperation. Though there are many examples of cooperation between adjacent units of governments, the concept of multiple governments working together in a regional format holds potential to achieve the greatest benefits. In terms of future impact, the strategies identified in the Intergovernmental Cooperation element hold the most promise.

Community Engagement Trends

In a world dominated by social media, the art of community engagement will need to change, especially if leaders want the opinions of Generation Y and the Millennials to be heard. Existing state rules have not caught up with rapidly growing online and social media tools. A formal public hearing must be held as part of the comprehensive plan adoption process. Paper notification and posting requirements also apply. Going above and beyond these requirements holds the key to effectively engaging citizenry – both young and old.

- **Don't assume that young people do not want to be involved.** Younger generations appear to be less loyal to just one governmental unit and are less likely to be involved in formal planning efforts. However, those that chose to live in rural communities, live there for a reason. They are more likely to engage in public issues and should be given an opportunity to do so.
- **Going beyond the norm to seek public input will be key to developing the future vision for your community.** The typical paper survey or public informational meeting or hearing is no longer sufficient to gauge public support and generate 'ownership' of your plan. Other alternatives are required to catch the attention of younger residents such as Facebook, Twitter and perhaps some on-line/web-based public input tools.
- **Residents are more likely to engage in "conversations about land use."** A charrette is one technique that can help you to portray the heart, soul and character of your community. A charrette is an interactive, engaging and highly visual meeting typically held throughout the course of a day. It can help you develop the basis and content for your plan by identifying current problems and future concerns, and community ideas, solutions and policies to guide future land use decisions and change.

SUMMARY

Taking time to update your plan provides one of the most important opportunities for you to affect change within your community. The planning process allows you to step back, assess current trends, and work towards a future vision developed by your community. This should not be looked at as a meaningless exercise. Local comprehensive plans – individually and collectively – hold the key to addressing many local, regional, and statewide economic, environmental, and social issues that are likely to impose stresses on us in the future.

Leaders of rural communities that believe development trends of the past will resurrect once the impacts of the Great Recession subside, should reconsider. Planners must also be open to how these emerging trends will impact towns and rural communities and the services they provide.

If we learned anything from the Great Recession it is that the economy and our markets drive change. The values and preferences of current and future generations also shape what those markets look like. As part of our collective civic responsibility, we all need to provide manageable solutions and ideas to deal with change. Trends are moving targets of course. As such, comprehensive plans should be realistic in setting a future vision and recommending how we get there. Remember what Yogi Berra once said, "*It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future*".