



DANE COUNTY PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

Standards for Local Town Plans

FEBRUARY 11, 2021

NUMBER 1

P L A N N I N G

This document provides guidance for developing town plans that satisfy the requirements of the [Dane County Farmland Preservation Plan](#), the [State Farmland Preservation Act](#) and the [Dane County Zoning Ordinance](#). These requirements are sometimes overlooked as communities focus on developing comprehensive plans to meet the [State Comprehensive Planning Law](#). This guide is intended to assist communities in developing plans that meet requirements of both farmland preservation and comprehensive planning.

Community planning begins with a public participation process that engages community residents in developing a desired vision for the community's future. The next step is to identify measurable goals and objectives to fulfill the vision, followed by recommended actions and policies to achieve them. Once adopted and implemented, plans guide public and private investment, and provide a basis for zoning changes, conditional use permits (CUPs) or other decisions by local government.

In Dane County, town plans are a critical piece of the local and county land use decision-making process. The Dane County zoning ordinance stipulates that the Zoning and Land Regulation (ZLR) Committee use plans developed by towns and approved by the county board as criteria for zoning recommendations [*Section 10.255(1)(d), Dane County Code of Ordinances*]. In practice, the county uses the Dane County Farmland Preservation Plan as the guiding plan, since it is comprised of town plans adopted by the county board. Many towns have developed, or are now in the process of developing, plans that meet the state comprehensive planning law. Most towns submit their adopted comprehensive plan, in its entirety, for county adoption as amendments to the Dane County Farmland Preservation Plan.

COMMON ISSUES

Because of the recent increase in planning activity, we've had the opportunity to review a large number of plans. As a result, we've identified several recurring issues of concern. Leaving these issues unresolved results in plans that are confusing, contain conflicting policies, and oftentimes do not reflect the town's wishes or intent. Similarly, such plans may also fail to provide clear guidance to the town and county when making zoning decisions, and may fail to meet the goals and standards of the Dane County Farmland Preservation Plan.

These issues also make it more likely that the county decision-making process will move slowly if County Board Supervisors and/or the County Executive have

What's in this Issue?

- **Planning Areas vs. Zoning Districts**
- **Population Projections and Planned Development Areas**
- **Mapping**
- **Implementation program**

questions, concerns or need clarification. Most importantly, having these issues unresolved results in a plan that does not meet a town's needs. Common issues are listed below, followed by a detailed explanation of each. These, together with criteria for format and mapping, constitute Dane County Planning's recommended minimum standards for town plans.

- Plan Format
- Land Use Policy Statements
- Planning Areas vs. Zoning Districts
- Population Projections and Planned Development Areas
- Mapping
- Implementation Program

Plan Format. Town plans consist of three basic elements built upon a foundation of public input – policy statements, mapped areas and an implementation program. We recommend that comprehensive plans be organized by element as defined by the state (issues and opportunities, housing, transportation, utilities and community facilities, agricultural, natural and cultural resources, economic development, intergovernmental cooperation, land use, and implementation). In general, chapter headings and titles should correspond to these nine elements required by state comprehensive planning law. A list of goals, objectives and policy statements should be included with the corresponding element chapter or section.

For many communities, the land use element is the most important element, and is therefore often the largest chapter of the plan. It is essential that the land use chapter identifies and defines planned land use areas, that these areas are shown on the future land use map, and that the plan text includes policy statements directly associated with each mapped planning area. Ultimately, the planned land use areas provide a guide to the future development of the community. Policies of each planning area should be described in great enough detail that a person looking at a location on the map, can go to the corresponding plan text and understand what policies apply.

Similarly, plans should be formatted intuitively so that it is easy to find the policies associated with each land use planning area shown on the land use map. Common errors include:

- Land use planning areas depicted on the map not matching those listed in the text;
- Land use planning areas shown on the map having no policy description in the text, or;
- Policies that are unclear or lacking in detail.

Sometimes critical policies can be overlooked because they are contained in a different part of the plan. The plan should be organized in such a way that all policies that apply to a planning area shown on the future land use map can easily be found in the land use element text.

Land Use Policy statements. Towns will vary in the types of planned land use categories they identify and define and in the policy statements they apply to each category. Many Dane County towns have a long tradition of farming and have adopted plans that prioritize the continued preservation of farmland and rural character by allowing only a modest rate of growth. These towns often identify only one or two planning areas on their planned land use maps (e.g., Agricultural Preservation Areas and Natural Resource Protection Areas). Other towns closer to urbanizing areas may choose to have a wider range of planned land use categories, including rural, suburban, or commercial development areas. Ultimately, each community needs to determine the appropriate range and types of planned land use categories based on the desires of community residents.

To be thorough, and to meet the standards of the Dane County Farmland Preservation Plan, the land use element of the plan must include and/or address the following issues:

1. Areas and policies for agricultural preservation. In towns with exclusive agricultural zoning, policies for Agricultural Preservation Areas must meet the standards of Section 91.77, Wisconsin Statutes. Planned non-farm residential density should be explicitly stated in terms of number of housing units per acre. An example of this is the common "1 house per 35 acres" policy. (See also "Density Policies," below.)
2. Any areas and policies for rural non-farm residential development. If the plan includes a rural development area, or provisions allowing for higher density residential development in a particular

area, the planned residential density should be explicitly stated in terms of acres per housing unit. The density is often expressed, for example, as a minimum parcel size per home (i.e., 1.5 acre minimum parcel size).

3. Any areas and policies for transitional agriculture. Some communities may choose to identify a transitional agriculture area to reflect the anticipated change in character of a particular area from agricultural use to some other use, often residential or commercial. Policies should describe timeframe, review process and criteria for when and how land should be converted from agricultural use. Policies should also clearly describe final planned uses, residential and commercial densities that will be in effect after land is converted from agriculture.
4. Any areas and policies planned for suburban, urban residential or mixed-use development. Planned residential density should be explicitly stated in terms of housing units per acre. Limitations on commercial uses for mixed-use should preferably be referenced to permitted or conditional uses described in the Dane County Zoning Ordinance (Chapter 10, Dane County Code). Policies should also clearly distinguish between publicly sewerred and privately sewerred development.
5. Any areas planned for commercial or industrial use. Limitations on commercial uses should preferably be referenced to permitted or conditional uses described in the Dane County Zoning Ordinance (Chapter 10, Dane County Code).
6. Preservation of natural resources and open space, scenic, historic, cultural, or architectural areas. Policies should specifically reference and describe the relationship between the town plan and the Dane County Parks & Open Space Plan.
7. Any development siting standards and criteria, development design and/or phasing requirements for defined planned land use categories (see Implementation Program, below). Town plans should also include policy statements to address development location, form, and timing. Examples of siting standards and criteria include policies that:
 - Discourage development on productive agricultural soils or sensitive environmental features like floodplain or steep slopes
 - Discourage driveways that bisect farmland
 - Require clustering of lots
 - Define minimum or maximum parcel sizes
 - Encourage conservation subdivision design principles
 - Require development phasing over time
 - Require certain design elements for suburban or commercial developments
8. Density policies governing development in defined agricultural preservation areas. (See also Planning Notes # 3: Guide to Density Policies in Agricultural Preservation Areas.) Density policies should address the following issues:
 - Type of development counted
 - Calculation of density
 - Baseline date
 - Source of information
 - Farm residences before/after town plan
 - Farm residences divided / not divided from original farm
 - Rounding

- Land sales of more than 35 acres / allocation of splits
- Tracking
- Substandard (a.k.a. "non-conforming") A-1EX parcels
- Land sold to public agencies
- Annexation to city or village
- Applicability of siting standards
- Transfers
- Non-buildable lands
- Properties that have exceeded density limits
- Distinction between zoning lots and certified survey maps (CSMs)

Planning Areas vs. Zoning Districts

It is very important to clearly distinguish between "planning areas" and "zoning districts."

As defined in Chapter 10 of the Dane County Code, "**Zoning Districts**" establish legally permitted, conditional and prohibited land uses on a particular piece of land. From time to time, the town and county boards may approve petitions to rezone parcels from one zoning district to another, in order to change the permitted and conditional uses on a parcel. However, the county zoning ordinance contains little or no guidance about whether or not a particular parcel should be rezoned.

"**Planning Areas,**" on the other hand, are defined in local land use or comprehensive plans, and establish standards that guide future land use decisions, including how zoning districts should change over time. Planning area standards remain in place independent of the zoning district of a particular parcel. For example, town residential density policies limit how many times a parcel in an Agricultural Preservation Planning Area may be divided and rezoned from the A-1EX (exclusive agriculture) zoning district to another zoning district, such as Rural Homes or Residential. After a parcel is rezoned and divided from the parent farm, it still remains in an Agricultural Preservation Planning Area, even though it is no longer in the A-1 (exclusive agriculture) zoning district. Consequently, Agricultural Preservation Area density policies still apply. An RH-1 (rural homes)-zoned parcel, created from a larger farm in an Agricultural Preservation planning area, should not be rezoned and re-divided a second time, without using another potential home site, or "split" under the town density policy.

Other planning areas may have different standards. A Rural Development Area might allow a greater number of rezones to permit higher density residential or commercial use, while an Open Space Corridor Area might allow little or no rezones to protect sensitive environmental features. In each case, the decision whether or not to grant a rezone request to allow more intensive use is based on the policies associated with the mapped planning area in the town/county plan.

Population Projections and Planned Development Areas

A very basic part of the planning process is determining the type and amount of planned development areas based on population projections and community input. Planned development areas must be related to population projections, with perhaps some additional allowance for market flexibility. Unfortunately, many plans propose large planned development areas that often bear very little, if any, relationship to projected population growth. It is recommended that communities use population projections provided by the Wisconsin Department of Administration (WDOA). From these projections, a community can estimate how many and what types of residential units would be appropriate in the context of other community objectives. Based on the density of those various residential types, the size of the development area can be determined. To provide enough space for public right-of-way (ROW), and to allow room for the market to work freely, it is normal to increase the area by some factor. We recommend that this flexibility factor should be no more than 2 times the projected amount of necessary area.

So, for example, let's say population projections show that there will be a need for 120 additional housing units. The town plan calls for 80 of these units to be single-family homes at a density of 2 units per acre, and the other 40 to be in multifamily units at a density of 10 units per acre. Based on these assumptions, the single-family planned land use area would need to be 80 acres and the multifamily planned development area would need to be 8 acres in size.

80 SF Housing Units / 2 Units Per Acre = **40 Acres**

40 MF Housing Units /10 Units Per Acre = **4 Acres**

40 Acres + 4 Acres = 44 Acres x 2 (Flexibility Factor) = **88 Acres** of Total Housing Development

Mapping

Town plans should include inventory maps that provide information about geographic features, infrastructure, and existing uses, and a planned land use map that depicts anticipated future land uses. Below is a listing of the maps that should be included in town plans, as well as features that should be shown on the maps.

Map Features: All maps should include the following features:

1. Legible scale
2. Section lines
3. Parcels – include date of source data
4. Major roads – include road names
5. Local roads – include names (depending on scale)
6. Water bodies
7. Current municipal boundaries, including names

Inventory maps: The following inventory maps should be included in a town plan. Maps 1-7 are available from Dane County in the Dane County Map book, which is customized for each town. The county can also provide assistance with map 8.

1. Productive agricultural soils
2. Natural limitations for building site development
3. Floodplains
4. Wetlands and other environmentally sensitive lands
5. Surface water
6. Stream corridors
7. Cell towers and private airports
8. Current land use map. It is important to include existing mineral extraction sites on this map.

Note: the State Comprehensive Planning grant program requires a longer list of maps, please refer to the Wisconsin Department of Administration for current resources and information.

<https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/LocalGovtsGrants/Comprehensive-Planning.aspx>

Planned Land Use Map: The planned or “future” land use map illustrates the location of land use areas in the town and gives geographic meaning to land use policies. It must include:

1. Planned land use areas. Examples include: agricultural preservation, agricultural transition, residential, natural resource protection, commercial, industrial, etc. The planning area names on the map should be exactly the same as those in the plan policy text.

2. Agricultural planning areas to be preserved that are at least 100 acres in size.
3. Environmental, natural resource or open space areas of significance, such as wetlands, steep slopes, wooded areas or prairies

Planned Land Use map may also include:

1. Rural non-farm or transition areas (at least 35 acres), if any desired
2. Urban service areas, if any
3. Mineral extraction areas
4. Overlay areas such as floodplain and environmental corridors
5. Other significant areas, (mixed-use, commercial, recreation), if any.

Format:

1. 11"x17" fold-out map preferred. (8½"x11" is usually too small to depict all features clearly)
2. Digital map can be provided in Adobe .PDF format, but ideally would be provided as GIS data.

Cartography:

1. Use traditional land use colors (yellow for residential, red for commercial, green for open space, etc.)
2. Minimize use of patterns or textures
3. Provide a blown-up version of detailed or complicated areas
4. Include legend, scale and north arrow
5. Include creation and revision dates

Implementation program

If the plans are to have meaning and if they are to reflect a commitment by the community, a program for carrying out or implementing the various objectives of the plan should be spelled out. This implementation program should consist of recommended actions designed to preserve agricultural lands, guide urban growth, and achieve other community goals. These could include:

- A description of land use controls needed to implement the policies.
- Zoning districts and/or specific uses appropriate to each planning area.
- An indication whether the town will pursue "blanket" rezone petitions for planned land uses, or will rezone as petitioned by individual landowners.
- Recommended text amendments to the county zoning ordinance.
- Town subdivision, building permit, historic preservation and driveway regulations.
- Official mapping, where appropriate.
- The plan should note how it is related to any other local or regional plans, including the adopted Dane County Parks & Open Space Plan, Land Use and Transportation Plan, Dane County Water Quality Plan and the Dane County Comprehensive Plan (when completed). If plans differ, the reasons should be explained. Not all town plans would include all the elements noted above. For example, certain very rural towns might not have any rural development or urban service areas or transition areas.
- Public facility program including a description, of the timing, location, use, capacity, and financing procedures for existing and proposed facilities. This program may be applicable only in towns providing extensive public services such as sewer, water, storm sewers, etc.

- Programs to protect areas of special environmental, natural resource or open space, such as dedication requirements or purchase through an acquisition program.
- Preparation of criteria or standards for proposed development of less sensitive or valuable open areas such as wooded areas or slopes.
- Procedures for reviewing development proposals.
- Procedures for periodic review and evaluation of adopted plans in light of changing needs or conditions.
- A statement of intent on how the plan is to be used in making land use decisions when the plan is submitted to the County Board for consideration.
- For those plans structured to follow the nine plan elements as defined by the state, the implementation chapter should refer to the policies contained in the land use chapter.

Planning Notes

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