

INTRODUCTION

COUNTY PROFILE

Washburn County is located in the “northwoods” region of northwestern Wisconsin, approximately 40 miles south of Superior, Wisconsin and 75 miles northeast of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The county is bordered by Douglas County on the north, Burnett County on the west, Barron County on the south, and Sawyer County on the east. Washburn County encompasses approximately 545,945 acres or 853 square miles, running 36 miles north to south and 24 miles east to west.

Within Washburn County, there are 21 unincorporated towns, 2 cities and 2 villages. The largest community is the City of Spooner with 2,653 residents. The county seat is the City of Shell Lake.



The northern one-third of Washburn County is located within the Northern Highland geographical province of Wisconsin, a region characterized by generally low relief extending from Minnesota through much of north-central Wisconsin to Wisconsin’s eastern border with the State of Michigan. The southern two-thirds of the county are located within the Central Plains province, a unique landscape east of the Mississippi River, which is characterized by areas of considerable local relief and smooth sandstone plains.

HISTORY

The first white visitors to present day Washburn County arrived in about 1660. These visitors were missionaries and fur-traders traveling the east-west route provided by the Namekagon River. In 1754, the Ojibwa (Chippewa) Indians migrated south from Lake Superior to occupy the region.

Fur trading was the dominant local industry until 1875, when a dam was constructed along the Namekagon River near Stinnett. Following this period, the logging industry became the principal economic activity in the county, and large tracts of virgin white pine were harvested and floated to mills in Saint Croix Falls, Wisconsin and as far south as Saint Louis, Missouri. The introduction of rail transportation into Washburn County in the year 1879 further expanded the logging industry by providing easier access to lumber in areas farther removed from the traditional river routes.



Washburn County Historical Society



Early logging practices were not aimed at sustainability but rather a quick economic return. Impacts to the county's natural resource base were severe and dramatic. The cutover left in the wake of early logging resembled a barren northern desert. Timber waste became fuel for the subsequent slash fires that burned across the county in the late 1800's.

Washburn County received its name from former Wisconsin governor, businessman, and Civil War veteran, Cadwallader C. Washburn, an entrepreneur and speculator involved in business ventures in northern Wisconsin. Prior to 1883, present day Washburn County was part of Burnett County. The county became official on April 7, 1883, following action by the Wisconsin state legislature.

In the wake of the logging boom, agriculture became prevalent in the county. Former forestlands were converted to agricultural use; and by 1935, there were 1,754 farms and 215,000 acres in production. Agricultural productivity was greatly limited by the land, and much of these agricultural lands were eventually returned to forest cover and commercial timber production.

Present day Washburn County is economically diverse and modern. The primary industry within the county is tourism, evident by the number of motels, restaurants, museums, shops, and recreational facilities now present in the county.



Washburn County Historical Society



PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The topography of Washburn County is characterized by gently rolling hills and broad river valleys. Elevation averages 1,000 to 1,200 feet through much of the northwestern portion of Washburn County and between 1,200 and 1,400 feet in the southern and eastern parts of the county. The highest elevation is approximately 1,513 feet, near County Line Lake in the Town of Birchwood, with the lowest elevation of about 911 feet occurring at the Namekagon River outlet.

Natural resources are abundant in Washburn County. Much of the county is forested; and lakes, rivers, streams, and wetlands are common throughout. The abundance of these habitats provides the county with a wealth of wildlife. The county's natural resource base is significant to both the quality of life and to the local economy, which relies heavily on the annual influx of tourists and seasonal residents.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING IN WASHBURN COUNTY

Chapter 66

In October of 1999, Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson signed into law sweeping changes implementing one of the most comprehensive pieces of land use legislation to affect local units of government in Wisconsin (towns, cities, villages, counties, and regional planning commissions). Chapter 66.1001 Wisconsin State Statutes defines the criteria for developing comprehensive plans to deal with local land use issues. This legislation requires comprehensive planning to contain at least nine basic planning elements, each representing a unique aspect of community composition. Under the new requirements, plans must contain specific information related to:

- Issues and Opportunities
- Housing
- Utilities and Community Facilities
- Agricultural, Cultural and Natural Resources
- Economic Development
- Intergovernmental Cooperation
- Land Use
- Transportation
- Implementation

Beginning on January 1, 2010, if a local governmental unit engages in any of the following actions, those actions shall be consistent with that local governmental unit's comprehensive plan: official mapping established or amended under s. 62.23(6); local subdivision regulation under s. 236.45 or 236.46; county zoning ordinances enacted or amended under s. 59.69; city or village zoning ordinances enacted or amended under s. 62.23(7); town zoning ordinances enacted or amended under s. 60.61 or 60.62; and zoning of shorelands or wetlands in shorelands under s. 59.692, 61.351, or 62.231.

WASHBURN COUNTY ZONING

The comprehensive planning process that began in 2000 marks the first countywide planning effort for Washburn County. Only the Cities of Shell Lake and Spooner have developed plans previous to the 2000 project. Land use activity within the county is regulated under the county zoning ordinance, which was adopted by the county board of supervisors in 1968. The initial ordinance was amended and replaced with the current ordinance in 1978. The shoreland section of the county zoning ordinance was amended in October 1998, incorporating a new set of requirements for surface water protection based on the county lakes classification system.

All of the towns in Washburn County are comprehensively zoned, except the Town of Bashaw. Incorporated communities (cities and villages) have statutory authority to develop and enforce their own zoning ordinances.

The purpose of the zoning ordinance is to promote and protect the public health, safety, and general welfare by:

- guiding orderly expansion of growth and development,
- protecting agriculture and environmentally sensitive lands,
- protecting natural beauty and enhancing recreational opportunities,
- preventing pollution, and
- preventing conflicts between different land uses.

PLANNING VS ZONING

Both planning and zoning are important elements in land use management efforts of local government. Zoning is a tool used by local government to carry out the objectives of planning. Planning cannot require that land be used in any particular manner but zoning can. Under zoning, communities are divided into certain areas or 'zones', which accommodate particular

land uses. Each of these zones has specific restrictions or requirements that impact land use activities.

Planning can be characterized as a geographically and functionally comprehensive, **future-oriented** approach to the physical development of a community. Planning gives communities an opportunity to identify concerns, needs, and community desires. This process also incorporates projected future needs and defines the most desirable pattern for a community to develop. The process is based on public involvement and input; thus it reflects the voice of the local residents in determining their own futures. The comprehensive plan provides, in essence, a road map for the future; providing decision-makers with the tools necessary to make informed land use decisions.

The ultimate role of zoning in the planning process is a supporting one. Being one of the many tools available to achieve land use objectives, zoning is unquestionably the most widely used. The future land use regulatory framework for Washburn County will continue to include zoning. Following the planning process, a comprehensive update of the county zoning ordinance will be needed to bring these controls in accord with the needs and desires of Washburn County citizens and landowners as expressed through the planning process.

REASONS TO PLAN

A principal reason for undertaking the comprehensive planning process in Washburn County is to promote orderly and efficient growth. The county population has expanded steadily over the past 40 years. Between 1990 and 2000, the county population grew by 2,264 people or 16.4 percent. Population growth forecasts outlined in the following sections will indicate that increasing population growth trends are likely to continue. It will be necessary to plan for the expected future population, in order to achieve a economical and environmentally responsible growth pattern and to preserve the rural low-density community character valued by county residents.

Another aspect of growth in Washburn County is the increase in the number of housing units in the county. Over the past 30 years, the overall number of housing units in Washburn County has nearly doubled, from 5,736 units in 1970 to 10,814 units recorded in the 2000 census. A major growth factor within the county is an increase in the numbers of seasonal and recreational homes. In 1970, there were 1,794 recreational homes according to the decennial census, slightly over 31 percent of all housing units. By the year 2000, that figure had increased to roughly 3,800.

Increasing residential growth poses a threat to the rural “northwoods” character of Washburn County. Threats to community character include development of pristine shorelines, forest fragmentation, and conversion of agricultural lands to more intense land uses.

Washburn County has a diverse and extensive natural resource base. Found within the county are abundant lakes, extensive river and stream networks, wetlands, forests, and plentiful wildlife. This resource base is of vital significance to the local economy and to the quality of life that

draws people to Washburn County. It will be the challenge of the planning process to preserve and protect these resources for present and future generations.

Comprehensive planning is concerned with much more than land use and natural resources. This process will ultimately assist the county in identifying needs and preparing for expansion of infrastructure and transportation, promoting economic growth, providing housing opportunities, and coordinating services with other units of government. The planning process further recognizes the interconnectedness of each of the nine plan elements outlined on page 4 and will be based upon that premise.

Comprehensive planning also protects private property rights. Good planning protects property values and minimizes the negative impacts of new development. Land use activities on an individual parcel may expose neighboring parcels to negative impacts and may even cause values of adjoining properties to decrease. Planning for future land uses ensures compatibility among uses and protects the interests of individual landowners.

Communities can save money through good planning. Planned, orderly development patterns reduce infrastructure costs to local units of government, which reduces taxes.

PLANNING AUTHORITY

In Wisconsin, state planning laws authorize local governments to develop and adopt comprehensive plans, and state zoning laws enable local governments to develop zoning regulations (ordinances). Towns may regulate land use if the county does not have zoning or if the town petitions the county to develop its own zoning ordinances. The authority of town government to zone land also requires that the town adopt village powers. Within Washburn County, zoning authority resides with the county and the incorporated Cities of Spooner and Shell Lake and the Villages of Birchwood and Minong. With the exception of the Town of Bashaw, which is unzoned, all towns within the county are under county zoning jurisdiction.

WASHBURN COUNTY PLANNING PROCESS

Through a process begun in May 2000 between the Washburn County Zoning Department and representatives from towns, villages, cities, and the county, local representatives discussed the development of a comprehensive plan. This process began the linkage of an intergovernmental coordination effort between units of government in the development of comprehensive plans. As part of the process, the Villages of Minong and Birchwood realized the benefit of simultaneously preparing a comprehensive plan in conjunction with the county. As a result, the two villages have partnered with the county in an effort to maximize the sharing of information; coordination of goals, objectives, and policies; and in land use planning. Throughout the 36-month planning process, a fully integrated effort between all local units of government assisted in the overall development of local comprehensive plans.

SURVEY

The planning process began with the distribution of the *Comprehensive Plan Survey* to all landowners in Washburn County. Tax roll mailing addresses were obtained from Washburn County in the fall of 2001. In January 2002, a total of 13,070 surveys were circulated to Washburn County residents and absentee landowners with 4,640 surveys remitted for an overall response rate of 35.5 percent. Results from the survey can be found in the Appendix A.

ISSUES IDENTIFICATION

In early 2002, the Washburn County Planning Committee engaged in a strategic issues identification analysis. The goal of this process was to identify county concerns, priorities, and future opportunities, which would provide the direction for comprehensive planning. As part of this process, a *SWOT* (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) was used to further identify and recognize community concerns. Local units of government participating in the planning process also conducted strategic issues identification concurrent to the county process. Results of the issues identification and SWOT can be found at the end of this element.

INVENTORY

Background data was collected from various local, county, and state authorities and through resource inventory exercises. This information formed the basis for development of the general plan background narrative and base mapping.

PLANNING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The county planning committee (appointed by the county board chair) began to develop planning goals in the fall of 2002. The committee and citizen participants in this part of the process developed several broad goal statements. The planning goals represent the desired future conditions. Plan objectives were drafted through a series of meetings with committee members and county officials assigned to specific plan elements. The plan objective statements developed by the committee were based on the results of the survey, strategic issues identification process, and background information. The objective statements developed in this process will assist the county in achieving the overall goals and form the basis for designing county policies, actions, and programs.

Local community goals and objectives were developed through a process running parallel to the countywide process. Goals and objectives developed at the local level were integrated into the county planning process. The overall process included a review and analysis of local goals and objectives to ensure consistency with the countywide process. Local plan objectives also assisted in forming the countywide plan by identifying common issues and concerns, which would be most appropriately addressed using a countywide approach.

ACTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

In order to realize the objectives of the comprehensive plan, a series of plan recommendations (actions) were developed by the county planning committee. These recommendations take on several forms, including: development of policies, programs available to achieve plan objectives, and direct action statements. This phase of the planning process also included the development of an action plan.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

Citizen involvement in the planning process was critical to ensure that the plan reflected the desires of the people of Washburn County. A public participation plan adopted by Washburn County outlined the procedures for public participation throughout the process (Appendix B). Opportunities for public involvement in the planning process included:

- ❖ The Community Planning Survey, which provided the public with an opportunity to voice their concerns and address community issues.
- ❖ Open public meetings, with allocated time for questions and answers from the public. Meetings were posted according to Wisconsin law and an earnest attempt to publicize these meetings was made, utilizing local media.
- ❖ Public input and information sessions provided both planning committee members and the public with opportunities to gather detailed background information and have their questions answered by professionals and decision makers.

****Disclaimer-** Data collected and contained in the following document is a compilation of data from various sources (federal, state, county, regional, and municipal sources). Due to the various sources of information, there may be discrepancies in data found throughout the Washburn County Comprehensive Plan.

ISSUES IDENTIFICATION

Housing

- Quality of Housing (need for subsidized)
- “Supply” for single family housing
- Obtaining funding for single family housing
- Availability of affordable housing single & housing
- Availability of elderly housing (grouped: condo & townhouses) – just having a place to live
- Limited rental units
- Rising real estate taxes (appreciation of property)
- Location of single-wide homes
- Requirements on where a home can be placed (ie: zoning)

Transportation

- Maintenance and improvement of local roads
- Environmental impact of building and upgrading roads
- Responsibility of building roads (developer – Town/City/Village/County)
- Public transportation – need for service
- Longer (10 yr – 20 yr) term plan for improvements to roads
- Equipment not in use – could be shared with others
- Signs – consistency in naming or numbering
- Private and local road standards for development
- Safety of local roads/intersection design (local & state)
- Proper grading & design for local conditions (ie. soil/slope/water)
- Lack of accommodation along existing roads for non-motorized traffic
- Illegal use of off-road vehicles (ATV) on local roads
- Need for uniform design standards for driveways
- Location (also use of activity – size/number of take-offs/departures) and siting of private airports in county
- Adequate snow removal on local roads

Utilities & Community Facilities

- Need for future planning of sewer facility around lakes
- Better planning of development for housing or other development where utilities are present
- Placement of future power lines
- No 3-phase & fiber-optics in rural areas of some towns
- Lack of adequate public school facilities
- Siting of community facilities
- Adequate fire protection with county as further development occurs (limited equipment – people resources)

- Maintenance of local parks and recreation facilities
- Lack of park & recreation facilities
- Further protection of drinking water using well head protection districts
- Reliability of electrical service
- Extension of natural gas to all areas of the county (no service in many areas)
- Private (types & longevity & maintenance) & public (capacity) wastewater treatment
- Comm 83
- Location & expansion of landfill facilities & long term care
- Well-head protection

Natural, Agricultural, & Cultural Resources

Natural Resources

- Continue maintaining county forest land & current amount of acreage
- Protect, preserve, and enhance the ecological function of the county's land, air, and water
- Minimize conflicts of expanded uses of county forest
- Sighting of non-metallic mining operations
- Preservation of area shorelands and all water bodies that help protect degradation of water quality
- Protect water from private sewage systems that lead to water pollution
- Define and protect sensitive areas & habitat corridors
- Ability to continue use of county forest lands
- Preserve scenic vistas-viewsheds
- Uniformity between local/county coordination of shoreland zoning issues
- Maintain large tracts of land that can continue to be managed appropriately for forest
- Look at large block forests vs. scattered small forest areas

Agricultural Resources

- Potential farmable land going to hay/scrub (not being agriculturally farmed)
- Presence of corporate farms (Where should they be located)
- Future preservation of farmland
- Future problems for future expansion of farmland due to adjacent lands not being identified/classified for farmland
- Prime agriculture lands staying farmland
- Amount of prime ag land being rezoned to Residential-Agricultural classification
- Animal waste storage and nutrient management
- Concerns of nutrient runoff. Future roles/regulations for runoff making certain they are preserved
- Recognizing property owner rights
- Agricultural land owners being able to sell ag land
- Protect viable ag land from conflicting uses (adjacent uses)
- Provide for transitional lands for hobby farms where ag lands are not fully viable for operation

Cultural Resources

- Better identification of historic sites
- Coordination of organization / services for examining resources
- Don't restrict private property rights
- Preservation of cultural sites
- Preservation of town, village, city, county, and hamlets history

Economic Development

- Where certain types of businesses are allowed to locate
- Direct individuals / businesses to areas where public infrastructure and services are available
- Encourage fiscally responsible economic development of Washburn county and surrounding area (Limit new "green" field infill development)
- Ability to draw industry to Washburn county
- Volume of economic development for services that fit better into certain areas of the county (balance)
- Identify suitable sites & attract appropriate industrial development
- Promotion of "technological" industries
- Develop countywide "Economic Development" organization in the county
- Lack of adequate airport facilities
- Assistance to local businesses to retain and expand businesses
- Development of industrial/commercial properties that tie into "northwoods" character
- Development of home-based tele-commuter within county & upgrade of infrastructure (technology)
- Low paying jobs vs. cost of living
- Having continued quick access to the highway
- Need for downtown redevelopment of commercial retail areas (Eg. Spooner, Shell Lake, Minong, Stone Lake)
- Provide resources for redevelopment of above
- Central location of industrial, commercial land for development
- Capitalizing more on tourism
- Encourage local people to start small businesses and create jobs
- Create ATV system

Intergovernmental Cooperation

- Reduction in number of towns in the county
- Develop more staff sharing possibilities between municipalities
- Utilize county website for disseminating more information
- Recognize affiliated communities within the county – create goal for individual communities for representation at county level
- Little direct contact with some communities other than governmentally
- Transportation to get to and from school.
- More and better cooperation with other jurisdictions

- More joint meetings
- Develop strategies to share power (zoning)
- Continue and expand equipment/service sharing
- Provide better access to citizens for cooperation with higher levels of government
- Continue to support state cost reimbursements from natural disasters
- Incorporation of state and regional transportation plans
- Town competition for tax base
- Explore alternatives for annexation Ex.-boundary agreements

Land Use

- Protection of natural resources
- Maintaining wetlands
- Protection of shorelands
- Sighting of public facilities in areas that are compatible (in planned clusters or corridors)
- Develop plan to explain zoning ordinance
- Preservation of prime agricultural land
- Maintenance of large blocks of forestlands
- Protection of private property rights
- Development of land use mission statement
- Restrictions on land fill growth
- Incentives for clustered development
- Look into options to preserve land
- Provide tax relief as incentive to preserve land
- Explore best land use practices
- Random land development
- Development that encroaches public hunting lands
- Planning for multiple recreational opportunities on public land
- Fragmentation of forestland
- Sustainable economic development
- Identify environmental / habitat corridors
- Identify brownfield sites and plan for their redevelopment
- Incentives for private landowners on land contamination
- ATV / Snowmobile / Jet-skies abuse on land and water
- People from out of the area having more expendable income who purchase large tracts of land

Meeting of Washburn County Comprehensive Plan Thursday April 18 & Thursday May 16, 2002

SWOT (STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, & THREATS) ANALYSIS

Strengths

- Aquatic resources
- Northwoods character
- Strong work ethic
- Good lakes classification system
- Good access to state highway system
- Good checks and balances with conservation & development
- Community-minded folks
- Strong town government
- Abundant clean water supply
- Balance between regulations and property rights
- Abundant natural resources
- Recreation
- Regional government center
- Strong veteran support
- Strong tourist industry
- Strong snowmobile & ATV alliances
- Wild Rivers Trail
- Small town feel
- Proximity to Twin Cities
- Strong county forest system
- Slow-paced lifestyle
- Strong volunteer fire & ambulance crews
- Good economic diversity within county
- Good school systems
- Quality shoreland protection ordinance
- Community civic and religion organizations
- Suitability for private wastewater treatment facilities

Weaknesses

- Under employment & unemployment
- Proximity to Twin Cities
- Government officials too afraid to open their mouths
- School facilities
- Lack of access to public lands
- Aging population base
- Expensive local governments
- Conservatism of town & county government
- Lack of coordination on economic development
- Escalating land values
- Low paying wages / jobs
- Exodus of young people
- Intolerance of youth
- Lack of qualified persons running for office
- People's lack of involvement
- Smart Growth
- Lack of money to support higher wages
- Lack of maintenance of county & town roads
- Development pressure

- No vision for governance in county
- Inability to accept change
- Lack of industry
- Failure to compensate elected officials to stay in office
- No system of cooperation between counties
- Inadequate diversity of funding
- Too many county responsibilities
- Municipality's competition of tax base
- State government on local government
- Lack of shopping facilities

Opportunities

- Smart Growth
- Economic development
- Opening up more county forestlands
- Development of more recreational opportunities
- Define what Washburn County is going to be
- Develop mission statement
- Work across municipal boundaries
- Develop better intergovernmental relationships
- Protect the things that attract people here
- Facilitate development in the right places
- Tie together recreational trails & systems
- Attract higher paying technology-based jobs
- Modernize lands records system (cost saving opp.)
- Comprehensive revision of zoning ordinance

Threats

- Over-development
- Rising taxes
- Lack of industrial & economic development
- Over-regulation of federal, state, and county government
- Lack of technological training & education
- Loss of property rights
- Unplanned sprawling development
- Lack of balance between recreation and natural resources
- Aging population not being replaced by youth
- Loss of control at the local level
- Shifts in revenue
- Non-resident demands
- Lack of enforcement of current laws
- Use-value assessment
- Managed Forest Law (MFL) and the return on it
- Smart Growth-costs too much and it's another level of government