

Some Background on Updating the Town's Comprehensive Plan

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History

The town adopted its first "Land Use Plan" in 2001. This was the town's first effort at adopting policies regarding land use trends, needs, and policies. The state adopted a "smart growth" law in 1999 that required all municipalities and counties to prepare and adopt, not just "land use plans," but "comprehensive" plans by 2010 and to update them at least every ten years. The concept is that policies regarding future land use should be based on a more comprehensive analysis of the underlying forces, needs, and trends that shape the course of future development.

Beginning in the fall of 2004, the Town of Washburn and the City of Washburn together applied for a grant from the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program to prepare comprehensive plans. We received funding in July 2005, and spent the next two years preparing our plans. The town adopted its plan in 2007 and created a town plan commission. Bayfield County and most of the other towns in the county started a comprehensive planning process late in 2008 and adopted plans early in 2010, just in time to meet the deadline for the state law. Many of the towns adopted "brochure plans" that are less complete in providing the elements required by the state law. They did so by adopting the county's comprehensive plan and then separately adopting a "Future Land Use Plan" that subsequently was incorporated into the county's Future Land Use Plan.

The order for updating comprehensive plans in the 2020s is different. The City of Washburn received a Wisconsin Coastal Management Program grant to update its plan without collaborating with the Town of Washburn and adopted it in February of 2023. The county and the Town of Clover also received Wisconsin Coastal Management Program funding to update their plans. The county adopted its updated plan in November 2023. The City of Bayfield updated its plan in December 2018. One change in the county's plan was getting the towns to agree on the county's definitions of land use categories in the existing and future land use plans.

Little Substantive Implementation

The bane of comprehensive plans is implementation. In the case of the county's 2010 plan, the failure to commit to implementing the county's policies was a selling point. Towns were told that the state requires counties and municipalities to adopt plans, but there is no requirement to implement any of the policies that the county and the towns endorsed. Many of the towns are fearful of the county zoning ordinance and changes to the county zoning district map. Towns were told that adopting a Future Land Use Map did not mean that the towns should take steps to realize the vision it aims to realize. In other words, comprehensive plans are a state requirement, not plans for action. This approach allayed fears of opponents of zoning regulations.

This statement was not entirely true. The county zoning ordinance specifies that one factor in reviewing conditional and special uses is "consistency with the municipality's future land use

map." As a result, some developers requested that towns amend their future land use maps at the same time that the developer requested changes in the county's zoning district map. In any case, for the next 13 years, the county took almost no action to realize a vision for orderly future development. Most decisions about development occur on a case-by-case basis.

The Town of Washburn's current comprehensive plan also suffers from a lack of specific implementation steps. Much effort went into developing good policies, but the implementation plan listed for each policy is listed as "ongoing" rather than as a specific set of actions laid out over a timeline with a budget to support each implementation step. The City of Washburn's update of its comprehensive plan similarly lists "ongoing" for each of the policies in its implementation chapter.

The Washburn Town Plan Commission largely relies on the town's driveway ordinance and persuasion to implement its plan. When a property owner plans to develop and wants to install or extend a driveway, the permit application process allows the commission to discuss such topics as "retaining rural character," "protecting water quality," and avoiding disturbance of sensitive soils and habitats.

Other town policies have no implementation mechanisms. For example, the town calls for focusing rural residential development closer to Highway 13 and away from the national forest in order to preserve larger blocks of forest land and agricultural land. The concept is to control road development and maintenance expenses by emphasizing such investments in more densely developed areas. Preserving larger blocks of forest land is especially important on steep slopes near streams and near ravines that lead to streams. But the largest minimum parcel size for private land is 4.5 acres, which essentially is a rural residential parcel -- too small to qualify for agricultural land preservation requirements or for enrollment in Wisconsin's Managed Forest Program. The town is not involved in the subdivision of lands into 4.5-acre parcels. Owners currently subdivide their property with no consideration of town policies. Several property owners already have created such parcels on unfragmented lands in hopes of developing them in the future. As a result, there is no action to focus future road development and expenses nearer to existing paved roads, and there is not action to protect water quality and prevent fragmentation of sensitive habitats. Fragmentation of private lands is haphazard.

City of Bayfield: A Model for Implementation

When the City of Bayfield updated its [comprehensive plan](https://www.cityofbayfield.com/2019--2029-comprehensive-plan.html) in late 2018 (<https://www.cityofbayfield.com/2019--2029-comprehensive-plan.html>), it recognized that a plan is of little benefit when there is no specific plan to implement. Policies are platitudes that sound good, and implementation is "ongoing" with no commitment of community action to implement them. When the city updated its plan, the primary work was on implementing a vision for the future. The "Implementation" chapter is a compilation of "Action Worksheets" (see PDF) for the objectives listed in each chapter. In particular there is an emphasis on high priority objectives. An example, is a worksheet for developing a unified plan for Bayfield Area Trails (PDF). A key step in updating our town's comprehensive plan would be to prepare action plans for the most important and most needed policies.

The Town of Washburn Is Part of a Larger Network

Not all elements of the needs addressed in our plan occur in our town. For example, our plan recommended that future commercial development should occur in the city's commercial district and not be part of highway strip development extending out County Highway C or on town roads. There are needs for affordable housing and the town supports concentrating such development in undeveloped area of the city nearer to public services. Access to agricultural produce, trout streams, forested campsites, and a soccer field complex are elements that our town provides to people outside of the town. The comprehensive plan should include action steps for critical "Intergovernmental Cooperation" objectives.

Whose Policies? The Community Survey

In 2006 the town distributed a survey to all the private property owners in the town and solicited input on a range of issues. The purpose was to assess the key issues that the plan should address. With a 55% response rate (see PDF) the survey provided a sense of the range of perspectives in the town. The survey helped the committee to recognize that the plan needs to be sensitive to differing perspectives on a range of issues. In updating the comprehensive plan, our new committee needs to consider appropriate ways to engage community members in the planning process. If the range of perspectives reflected in the 2006 survey has not changed substantially, other more targeted processes for soliciting community input may be more useful at this point. We will discuss this topic at our first meeting.