

# Briefing for Plan Commission/Task Force Meeting on August 5, 2024

Kim Bro, chair

Washburn Town Plan Commission

## Postcard Mailing

At our first meeting, we discussed sending a postcard to all town residents to encourage them to stay informed and potentially involved in our work. The town board approved doing this, and we aimed for sending it in late August or early September. Now we need to prepare the postcard.

## A Headwaters Community?

Do we think of the Town of Washburn as a "headwaters community?" Tom Cogger made an important contribution to our current comprehensive plan: the general soils map. It made the complexities of typical soils maps comprehensible to people like property owners and public officials. A simplified soils map provides a clear picture of why the Bayfield Peninsula has among the greatest concentrations of high quality trout streams in all of Wisconsin. Much of stream protection work focuses on "riparian" land management: assuring sound management of the areas adjacent to the water. The general soils map shows the importance of a "whole watershed" approach that encompasses the steep ravines that feed the streams and the "transitional" soils where seeps from the sand-over-clay soils feed the headwaters.

I took the information (see attached LkSupTribStreams\_BayfieldCnty2009\_05.pdf) to the county and other towns as they developed their comprehensive plans to encourage protecting the headwaters. We have seen increased awareness with "Lake Superior: Not For Sale" signs on roadsides, but communities have taken very few steps to assure the long-term health of headwater areas. The national and county forest lands largely protect the sources of groundwater recharge, but much of the transitional soil and steep ravine soil areas are privately owned. This document makes a case for protecting the headwaters.

## Habitat Fragmentation

There is a curious disconnect between the zoning district map and the actual land use in our town and other towns: many of lands listed as "agricultural" on the zoning map are covered with second-growth forest. This is a legacy of policies from the late 1800s that called for logging forestlands in order to provide farmlands for homesteaders. Much of the "Cut-Over" was poorly suited for farming, and by the 1920s approximately a quarter of the land in Bayfield County was tax delinquent. Many of these tax delinquent lands became national and county forests, and Civilian Conservation Corps workers planted trees to restore the forests.

On private lands, many of the properties that once were small farms have become second-growth forests. The increase of forest lands has resulted in major improvements in the health of streams by slowing the flow of runoff on clayey soils and by reducing the peak stream flows that undercut steep ravine slopes. Much of this change in use is haphazard. Some whole 40-acre farmsteads are now whole forest. Others have been divided into small parcels. The town's current comprehensive plan called for focusing new residential development closer to Highway 13, closer to existing, paved roads and services. The idea was that, with the high cost of paving roads, supporting school bus routes, and providing emergency services, concentrating smaller residential parcels closer to highways would be safer, less costly, and more efficient.

The haphazard fragmentation of larger parcels to smaller parcels is continuing. I tried to measure the change by comparing the current ownership with that shown in a 1985 plant book that my dad had (WashTnFragmentation1985\_2024.pdf). The creation of small parcels on private lands does not reflect

the transportation, natural resource, agriculture, and community service policies of our plan. I tallied the change in the number of parcels of 20 acres or less (WashTnOwnerChg1985\_2024.pdf). The number of small parcels grew from 5% to 12% of the private land in the town. I did not count larger parcels that have been divided but remain under a common owner.

Fragmentation also affects the health of the forest (p.7\_18 of the plan). The more disturbance there is within a forest, the more opportunities there are for introduction of invasive species and for disruption of "habitat corridors." I attached an excerpt from a report on forest management in our area (LkSupClayPlainForestExrpt.pdf). This document also calls for management practices that slow the flow of runoff. We can look at the general soils map (p.7\_31A) in the current plan as we discuss natural resources policies.

### **The Future of Agriculture**

The Tetzner family recently divided the ownership of lands that previously were owned by Phil Tetzner, and the family continues to manage Tetzner Dairy as it was prior to Phil's death. It is not uncommon, when an estate is settled, for successor owners to consider subdividing the property in order to increase the opportunity to find buyers. In cases of current agricultural lands, such fragmentation of farms can limit their likelihood of remaining in agricultural use. Right now, any private land in the town can be divided into 4.5-acre parcels. Such fragmentation can happen at any time and without any public notice. Policy 7.1.c. in our current plan discourages the conversion of prime farmland to non-agricultural use, but we have no implementation steps to make such a policy effective. What should we propose?

### **Transportation**

The largest part of the town budget is dedicated to transportation (roads), but we have made little progress in implementing the policies in the plan. Because of the ever increasing costs of maintaining paved roads, the plan calls for minimizing new development on unpaved roads so that they will remain unpaved and less costly to maintain. Are there existing paved roads that might be better transitioned to unpaved roads? In our previous discussion of community services, we talked about how to encourage more non-motorized mobility/recreation in the town. That discussion also applies to transportation policies.