

Town of Washburn Comprehensive Plan 2025-2045

An Introduction

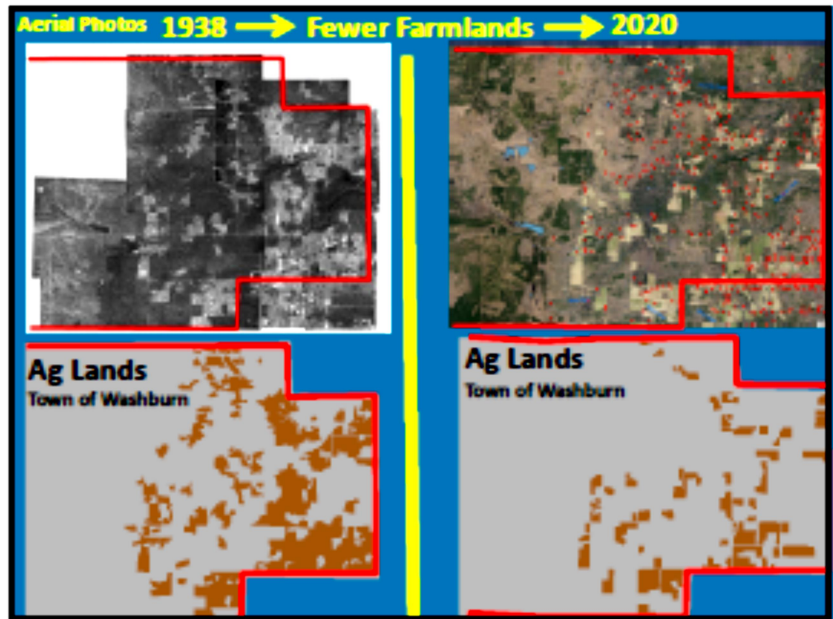
March 6, 2025

Washburn Town Plan Commission

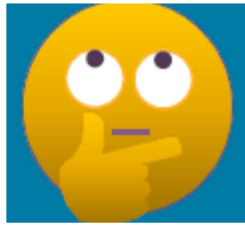
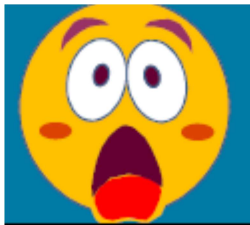
The Plan Commission presented the following slide presentation to introduce community members to the updated comprehensive plan.

Why Plan?

We don't always notice, but change is constant. For example, our town has fewer farms and less than half of the farmland it once had. These aerial photos show the dramatic change between 1938 and 2020. Many of us live in forests that once were farms.



When changes occur, we either can... React or Anticipate the changes



If we anticipate coming changes, we can plan our response to best serve the needs and interests of the town. The State of Wisconsin rewards towns that plan properly by requiring county ordinances and maps to be consistent with the town's plan (Wisconsin Smart Growth

Law §66.1001 *Wisconsin Statutes*). The town plan is not a zoning map or code. Rather is a set of recommendations about how to deal with expected changes. Our existing plan has guided our town's response to proposed businesses and home site development

The Plan Commission began reviewing updated population and housing data and projections three years ago but decided to wait until the county updated its plan so that we could use that information in updating our plan. We also learned ways to improve our planning process by being a part of the County's planning process.

Community Engagement

A year ago the Town called for a volunteer Task Force to help with the work. Others weighed in at our meetings. Some of them will present information tonight. Dozens of community members contributed to this process. The town contracted with consultants at the Northwest Regional Planning Commission to gather background data and to produce maps for the town to review.

Our work reflects the interests we heard from community members. Through the town website and the town Facebook page, we asked community members to show us “what they love about our town” and what we can’t lose. What we saw affirmed the same concerns we received twenty years ago when we prepared the previous plan: People value the “rural character” of farms, forests, natural habitats, and back roads.

Town Plan Commission

Cyndi Belanger, Kim Bro, Jim Park, Tim Schwenzfeier, Caroline Twombly

Town Planning Task Force

Terri Bahe, Tom Cogger, Phil Kraus, Charmaine Swan, Dennis Weibel

Prepared Background Data & Maps

Northwest Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission consultants Emily Nelson, Clem Larson

Attended Planning Meetings

Bob & Cheryl Drevlow, Ryan Padrutt, Alexandra Prediger, Scottie Sandstrom, Matt Tetzner, Seth Vasser

Submitted Suggestions, Photos & Comments

A dozen or more community members

Selected Photo Challenge Submissions



Plan Topics

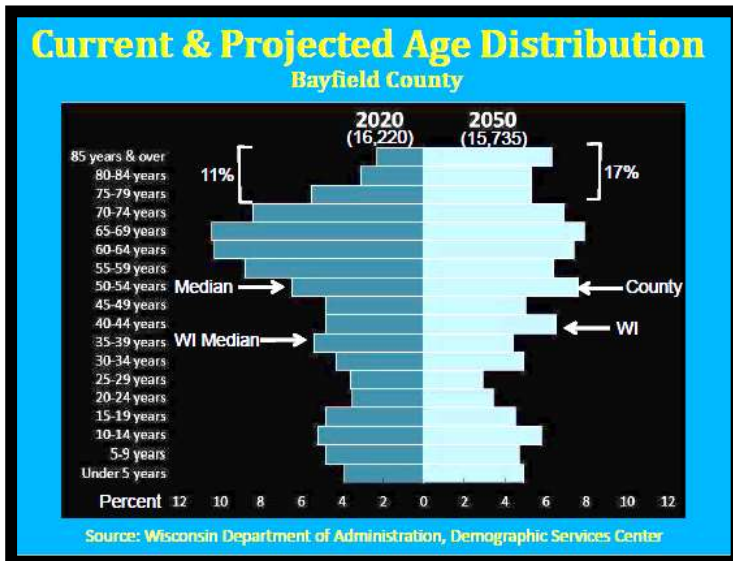
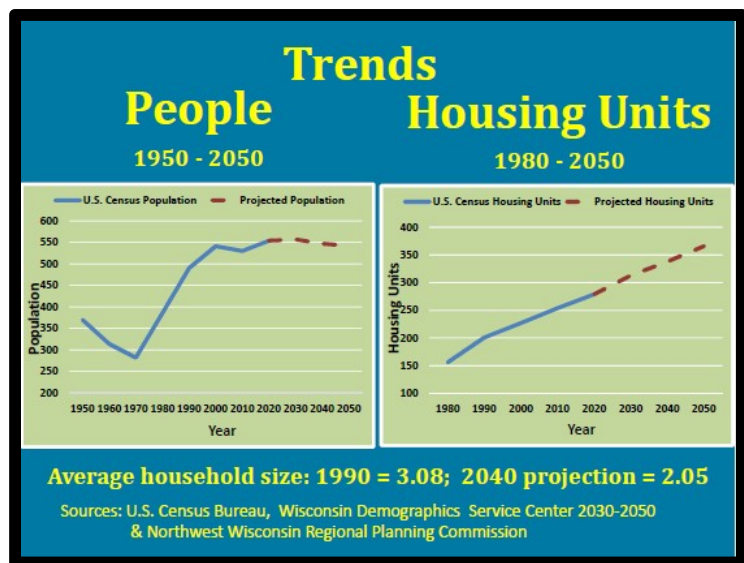
The planning team evaluated a comprehensive suite of community characteristics.

- Population characteristics & projections
- Housing characteristics & projections
- Utilities
- Community facilities & services
- Intergovernmental programs
- Transportation systems
- Economic development
- Agricultural resources
- Natural resources
- Cultural resources
- Land use patterns

Population & Housing Trends

Here are some data that we reviewed.

Our population is plateauing, at the same time that people want more housing units. Why are people building houses if there aren't more people? There is not more seasonal housing. Rather, we are seeing a continuing trend of smaller households. The average house in 2040 will have only about two occupants. People may be more isolated in the future.



We also reviewed the county's projected age structure. The median age is expected to remain the same, but look at the proportion of residents who are expected to be 75 and older: one sixth of the town's population in 2050 versus about one tenth in 2020. How do we accommodate elderly residents who want to age in place?

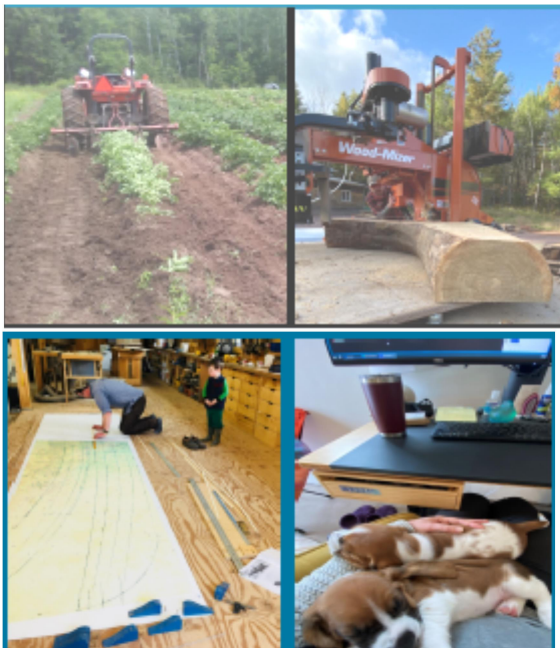
Transportation

For the health of our residents, we should make our town roads safer, not just for cars and ATVs, but also for people on foot and on bikes. Our road network is valuable not only for motorized transport but also as a way for residents to stay active outdoors. Because the lack of road shoulders poses a safety challenge, we need to encourage drivers to “share the road” safely. Because road construction and maintenance accounts for half of the town’s expenses, we must be judicious when adding improvements that increase

annual maintenance costs. In general, the primary thoroughfares should be paved, and back roads should be gravel. Investment decisions should be based on sound data and long-term cost analyses (traffic data and annualized cost of construction and maintenance). All this information should go into the town’s 5-year Road Plan when seeking grants for improvements.



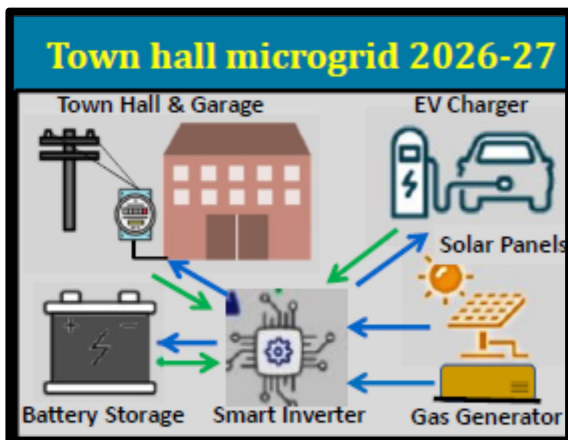
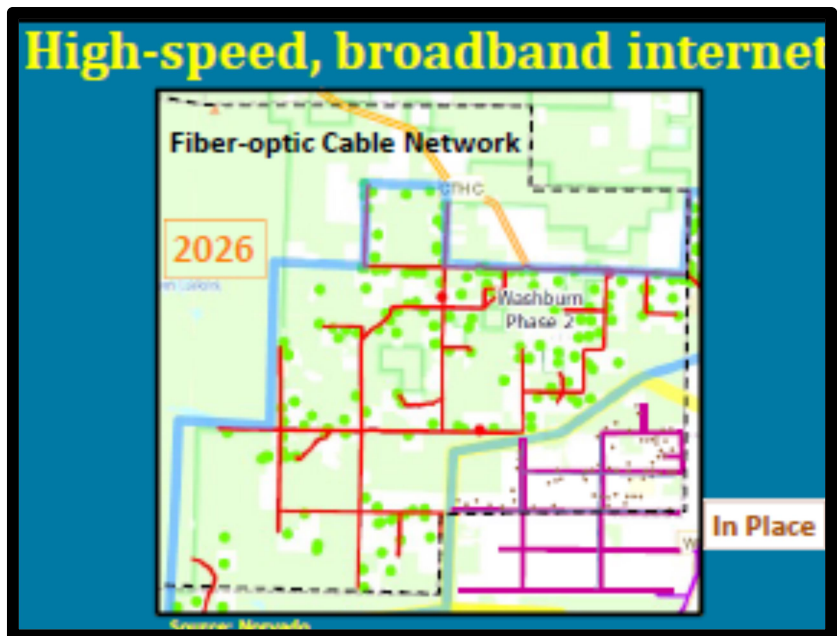
Economic Development



Because most of the town consists of forest lands and agricultural lands, our first goal in economic development is to support farming and forestry-related enterprises. We look to nearby cities as more appropriate locations for retail, commercial establishments and industrial enterprises. The town also encourages residents to have home-based businesses like this boat-building business or home construction businesses. We increasingly have new residents who work remotely from home where they can “work where they love” without needing costly commutes that take them away from the natural surroundings, family and pets they seek in the off hours.

Utilities

The Town Board partnered with Bayfield Wireless for wireless internet and with Norvado to extend a network of fiber-optic cable throughout the occupied area of town. This expansion of high-speed internet is as significant to the town as Rural Electrification was in the 1940s. It enables not only working remotely, but also improved access to educational resources and to health services.



It's not just the availability of high-speed internet that is transforming conditions in our town. The increased use of renewable energy and new ways to store energy are changing the electrical grid. Our town is part of that change. Electricity is no longer a one-way flow from fossil-fueled power plants to consumers. Rather, we have a complex system with multiple points of generation and storage. Our town hall and garage will be part of a county-wide demonstration of microgrid systems. We are adding solar panels, battery storage, and an EV charging station to the town hall site. This pilot project will show area

residents the pros and cons of the current technology. Sometime in the more distant future, we may see renewable energy and battery systems in our town's road maintenance equipment.

Community Facilities

We have an agreement with the Washburn Fire Department for fire and ambulance services. These services, which account for 7% of the town's expenses, are a necessity. The more remote a residence is from the city, the longer it takes to respond to a tragedy. We want to be sure that first responders can readily get in and out of people's property.





Another hazard our town has to manage in cooperation with the Town of Bayview and the City of Washburn is the closed landfill on South Maple Hill Road. This past year we had to add clay to the landfill cap to eliminate standing water on the cap. Standing water increases the flow of toxic chemicals from the waste to groundwater. For the sake of nearby drinking water wells, we cannot ever ignore the need to maintain the clay cover over the waste and to monitor groundwater.

Agricultural Resources

Farms are an important part of the “rural character” that our residents value, but farming is a risky business. As local residents, we and our neighbors should do more to buy local produce and to support local producers. Farm properties tend to be lost after an owner dies, and, in settling the estate, the family subdivides the property into smaller parcels. At that point, the farm operation may be lost forever. Can this trend be altered?



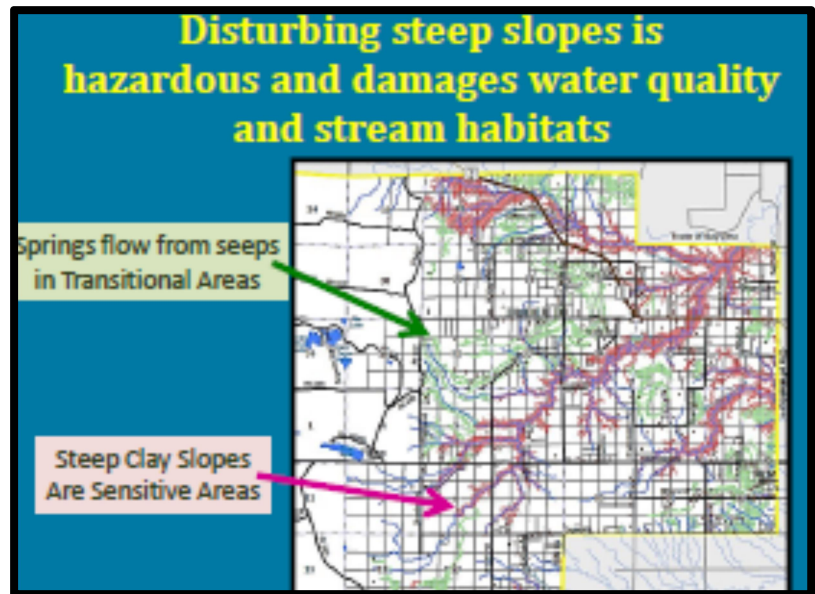
Natural Resources

The farm and forest soils of our town are products of many, past glacial advances and retreats, most recently between 30,000 to 10,000 year ago. The very sandy barrens formed from outwash



streams flowing off the glaciers. Clayey soils formed from lake sediment, and beach sands were deposited on the margins of various glacial lakes. These glacial deposits contribute to both the continuously flowing, high-quality trout streams that are a great recreational attraction and the highly erodible bluffs and ravines on either side of the streams. These bluffs may be dozens of feet high and are very susceptible to any development that disturbs natural vegetation or surface water runoff patterns.

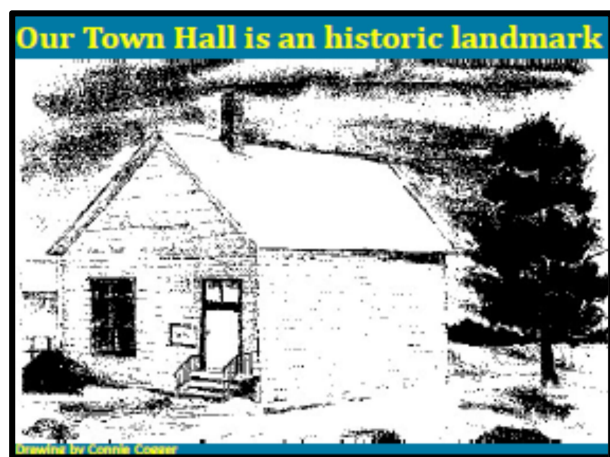
The former sandy beaches, listed as “Transitional Areas,” often are sources of seeps that feed headwater tributaries. To protect stream habitat from soil erosion, it is best to avoid disturbing and fragmenting the natural forest vegetation in the “Sensitive Areas” marked in red and in “Transitional Areas,” marked in green on this map. These deep ravines and floodplains also provide a natural corridor between the National Forest in the upland and Lake Superior to the east. These river corridors provide important habitats for many species of fish, birds, mammals and plants.



The night sky is another natural resource that easily can be overlooked. People from urban areas stand in awe of the views of stars and northern lights in our backyard. We can discourage community members from installing glaring lights that disrupt their neighbors’ view of the night sky.

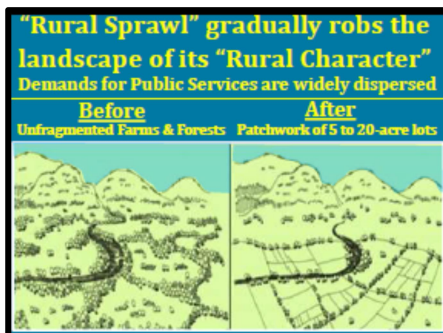
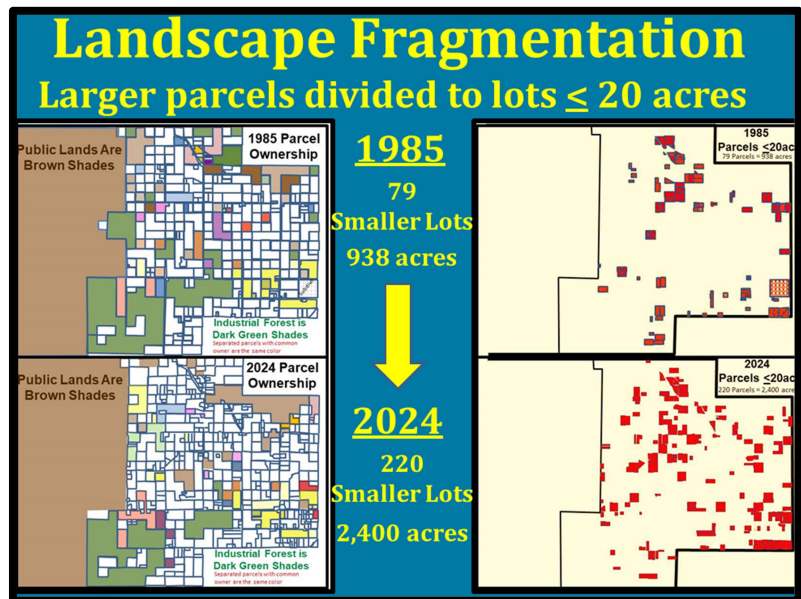
Cultural Resources

We also recommend preserving and promoting our town’s historic resources. This town hall is our principal landmark. It is important for us to retain the character of this former one-room schoolhouse. We can teach our residents about how significant it and other schoolhouses were in the lives of those who established homesteads in the cut-over lands here. The updated comprehensive plan now includes a map of 21 sites of historical significance. The map and accompanying information in the plan offer an initial step toward providing a self-guided tour that could be downloaded from the town’s webpage.



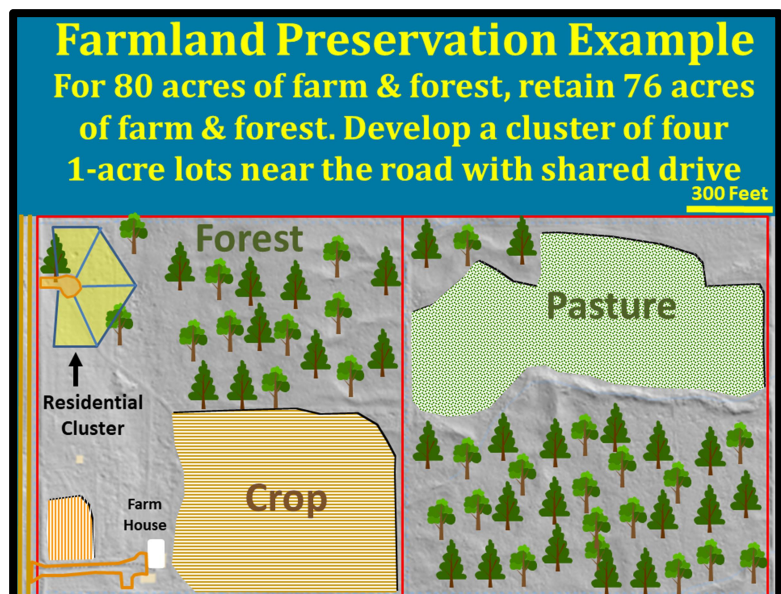
Land Use Patterns

Changes in our town's landscape tend to be gradual. An owner sells a friend 5, 10 or 20 acres. Parents divide their property among their kids, or kids who live out-of-town ask a realtor to sell their folks' property after the parents pass away. Our 2007 plan called for concentrating new development near paved roads on the east side of town, but the town has no tools to implement that goal. Fragmentation gradually is increasing. When we compared a 1985 plat book with today's plat map, we saw that fragmentation has more than doubled since then. More acres of more small parcels.



Some call the 5-acre minimum lot size the bane of rural America. Rural towns gradually become like oversized subdivisions, but with spread out housing, many driveways, no sewers, separate private wells, and little natural habitat. Overall, the landscape is degraded, and there is less open space. What can rural communities do to retain "rural character"? What have other communities in Wisconsin done to retain their farms and forests?

In an attempt to slow the rapid loss of prime farmland, Wisconsin passed a Farmland Preservation Law in 1977. The law provided an option for a zoning code that allows potential development of up to 5% of a large lot with up to 4 non-farm residences arranged in a residential cluster. The remaining 95% of the land remains as farm and forest. If our town could encourage landowners and the county to participate in this system, the town could accommodate new housing without fragmenting the remaining farms and forests. The sketch here is




an example of two adjacent 40-acre parcels having forests, a hayfield, and cropland. The land owner would have an opportunity to sell residential lots that share a driveway and potentially other services and are close to the town road. The owners of the non-farm residences would have assurance that the remainder of the open space around them will remain.

It was with this approach in mind that we propose retaining the larger parcels of farms and forests for most of the east 27 sections of town. We recommend limiting new 5-acre lots to the far east side of town near paved roads that are more easily accessible to emergency services. We recommend taking steps to assure that the current industrial forest land at the headwaters of trout streams remains as forest and is not sold off for development.

Implementation

Implementation Chapter



For each Element:

- **Goals**
- **Objectives**
- **Action steps**
- **Timeline**
- **Whose job?**

All the action steps in the updated plan are in the “Implementation” chapter tables. It is like a long-term “To Do” list for the Town Board and the Plan Commission, but many of the action items require appointing volunteer groups to do a lot of the day-to-day work. Our view is that, if town members think an idea is work pursuing, then they should help to make it happen. The Town Plan Commission and the volunteer Task Force think the plan has good ideas for the town to consider.

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