

Stearns County Comprehensive Plan

Chapter 1. Introduction

Stearns County's Comprehensive Plan is intended to provide citizens and prospective citizens of the County with a broad vision of its future, extending through the year 2030. Based on this vision, the plan establishes a policy framework for land use changes, public investments, infrastructure improvements, and intergovernmental cooperation. The plan was developed with substantial participation from County residents, local government officials, state agencies, watershed organizations, and a broad range of other stakeholders.

Regional Setting

Located in central Minnesota, Stearns County is the largest county by area in the southern half of the state (14th in area overall). The total area of the county is 1,394 square miles or 892,160 acres, extending approximately 54 miles east to west and 36 miles north to south. Lakes and wetlands cover about 4% of the land area. The Mississippi River forms the county's eastern border and the Sauk River and its tributaries drain the majority of the county.

Stearns County contains 30 cities and 34 townships. The population was estimated at 141,130 in 2005, and is concentrated on the east end of the county, in the St. Cloud metropolitan area. The metropolitan area spans the Mississippi and encompasses portions of Stearns, Becker and Sherburne counties.

Land use varies from urban/suburban residential in the east to rural towns and agriculture in the west. Because of its central location in the state, Stearns County, and particularly the St. Cloud metropolitan area, is considered a transportation hub, including Interstate 94, State Highways 10, 15 and 23, the St. Cloud Metropolitan Airport, and one of Burlington Northern's switching yards.

Because of the St. Cloud metropolitan area's role as a regional center, the county's population and economy will continue to grow. However, this growth will be concentrated in the eastern half of the county. Rapid growth increases the potential for land use conflicts and the pollution of land and water resources, while it creates new demands upon local schools, roadways, public infrastructure, law enforcement and other services.

Not all areas of the county, however, are experiencing growth pressure. A majority of the townships, especially those in the western half of the county, have experienced population *decreases* since 1990. These areas are facing other challenges to their long-term sustainability, including farm consolidation in response to changing livestock management practices and loss of young people to urban areas with more employment opportunities. Other townships are facing a decline in population due to annexation by area cities.



Introduction



While the County's labor force has grown with its population increases, wage rates continue to lag behind the state average. Although the economy is strong, its job mix is tilted toward the lower end of the pay scale. In 2000, the largest sectors of the economy in terms of earnings were education, health and social services (22.7%), manufacturing (17%) and retail trade (16.1%)

Agriculture, and in particular the dairy industry, is very important to Stearns County's economy. Eighty-four percent of the County's total cash farm receipts are attributable to animal production, with the remainder primarily attributable to corn, hay, oats and soybeans. Stearns County contains more farms than any other Minnesota county, but the numbers are declining. Stearns County has 2,608 farms in 2005, a decline from 3,152 in 2002. Farming was the only industry in the County to experience a net loss in actual numbers of employees between 1985 and 1990. However, total agricultural production has increased, and the indirect impacts of the animal agriculture industry continue to grow – that is, more jobs are being created in ag-related sales, shipping and processing.

The Planning Process

The County's first Comprehensive Plan was adopted in the 1970s, and its most recent Plan was adopted in 1998. That planning effort led to the County's adoption of its first zoning ordinance in 2000 and to a series of agreements with townships as to how the ordinance would be administered. Throughout the past five years, Environmental Services staff have been hosting training sessions and working with the townships to update their individual Comprehensive Plan maps by identifying future commercial, industrial, agricultural and residential areas.

In 2005 the County Board of Commissioners authorized staff to begin the process of updating the Comprehensive Plan to reflect changing conditions and needs. Several goals were established for the planning process: to develop a Plan which:

- Is driven by input from diverse community interests;
- Recognizes the interdependence of a healthy environment, economy and community and allocates resources to encourage sustainability;
- Leads to cost-effective delivery of County services.

The planning process began in Spring 2006 and continued through late 2007. Oversight and input was provided by a Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC), including about 35 members, drawn from a variety of boards, agencies and organizations. Planning Commission members, Public Works and Park staff, townships and cities, the dairy industry, watershed management organizations, and other

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interest groups were represented (see Acknowledgements for a complete list). The CAC met 12 times throughout the process and members also participated in public and township meetings.

Two series of open houses were held to elicit public input, each including three meetings in different locations. The first series, in October 2006, introduced the planning process, presented background information, and asked participants to identify issues of concern to them. Primary concerns were agricultural preservation, growth and development, natural resource protection, and infrastructure, especially transportation. The second series, in Spring 2007, introduced and asked for comments on three alternative growth scenarios, which were then used to develop a Future Land Use Plan.

In order to address the concerns of local government officials and respond to differing conditions and concerns across the county, five “clusters” of townships and cities were defined, as shown in Figure 2.10. Two series of meetings were held within each cluster, in July-August 2006 and in May 2007. The first series focused on existing natural and economic resources, demographic trends, and the townships’ current growth maps. Townships were asked to revise these as needed to respond to the goals of the plan and the pattern of resources. The second series focused on a review of the Policy Areas and land use categories of the draft Land Use Plan. Comments from these meetings were evaluated by the CAC and have been used to revise the Future Land Use Plan.

In October 2007 the Planning Commission held a public input session to review the draft Comprehensive Plan. After further revisions, the Planning Commission recommended the plan for adoption. Two public hearings were held by the County Board of Commissioners in January and February, 2008. The final revised plan was adopted by the Board on March 4, 2008.

