

## **AGRICULTURAL TOURISM**

In order to better understand agriculture-related tourism (agri-tourism) in Portage County, the Planning and Zoning, Land and Water Conservation, and Agriculture and Extension Education Committees reached out to the Stevens Point Area Convention and Visitors Bureau (SPACVB) for information. The CVB leads the region's tourism industry and aggressively markets the Portage County as an attractive destination for leisure and business travel in order to create a positive economic impact and, thus, enhance the area's quality of life.

According to SPACVB Executive Director Sara Brish, today less than one percent of the nation's consumers live on farms, with many being four to five generations removed from even knowing anyone that farmed, leaving many (especially children) who do not know how apples grow on trees, or how a gallon of milk gets into the grocer's cooler. From a visitor perspective, things from corn mazes, pick-your-own farms, farmers markets, culinary arts, craft beverage tourism and more provide a wide variety of agri-tourism activities in the County and Central Wisconsin region. In addition, processing facilities and research stations offer another level of activities for people interested in learning more about where their food comes from and the science behind it. In Portage County, the Central Rivers Farmshed, and their Farm Fresh Atlas offer a great resource for people looking to make that connection.

Agri-tourism has been of key interest to the Group Tour market and travel writers, wanting a behind-the-scenes peek from harvesting to processing. *Circle Wisconsin*, an organization that promotes heavily to group tour promoters throughout the Midwest, featured agri-tourism in their 2015 Tour Planner, including several mentions in Central Wisconsin. SPACVB is a member of the WI Ag Tourism Association (WATA), and through that association are listed as the main point of contact for agri-tourism related questions in Portage County. They were immersed in the planning and execution of Wisconsin Farm Technology Days held in Portage County in 2014.

As agri-tourism has increased in importance economically and recreationally over time, Portage County government has attempted to recognize this trend and provide flexibility within its ordinances and regulations to appropriately accommodate these activities. Recent revisions to its County Zoning Ordinance have provided new avenues for tourist rooming houses as well as the creation of a new "event barn" classification to allow for rural-themed venues for receptions, activities, etc.

### **Significant Trends in Agri-Tourism**

1. Traditional venues and activities for agri-tourism (pick-your-own farms, farmers markets, etc.) are increasing in number.
2. New ideas and opportunities for ag-related interaction with the public are rapidly increasing, inspired by shifts in society's age structure and an increasing focus on living a more "local" and "connected" lifestyle.
3. County rules and regulations regarding land use and zoning must be flexible and nimble to understand and allow for agri-tourism opportunities where appropriate.

## **FARMLAND PRESERVATION, AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT TRENDS/PLANS/NEEDS**

Various existing and ongoing discussions, planning processes, and practices address the following issues.

### **POPULATION**

The Issues and Opportunities Chapter of the Portage County Comprehensive Plan (adopted in 2006) contains information on current population and demographic descriptions for both urban (incorporated) and rural (unincorporated) municipalities within the County, as well as population projections. Portage County and its municipalities utilize the State of Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA) population projection numbers as their official projections. When the County Comprehensive Plan was adopted, it identified a future population of 78,952 in 2025.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Portage County was home to 70,019 people in 2010. In 2013, the DOA revised the Portage County projected population downward to 76,865 in 2040 (+6,846), representing an increase of just under 10% for the 30-year period, or roughly 3% per decade. These 2013 projections also identified that the two largest municipalities in the County, City of Stevens Point and Village of Plover, located in the County's central "core", are projected to account for nearly 90% of the new population.

Based on these population projections, development pressure within the rural area should not be excessive. The adopted Comprehensive Plan Issues and Opportunities Chapter also contains the following:

#### Key Vision Ideas for Quality of Life:

- A high quality of life is found in rural Portage County. Maintaining the rural character of Portage County supports our quality of life.
- Rural character is preserved through planned development in agricultural regions.

#### A. Goals

2. Ensure that newly developed areas are compatible with existing uses of land.

#### B. Policies

1. Portage County should implement the recommendations of the Comprehensive Plan to ensure the County remains a desirable place to live and work, to encourage the development of balanced agricultural, residential, commercial, industrial and recreational land use patterns, and to provide areas adequate for future growth.
3. Community development should occur contiguous to and extend outward from areas of existing development, encouraging urban-style development in areas with urban services, or in areas where services can be most efficiently and economically provided.
4. Portage County should establish cooperative land use control procedures in conjunction with incorporated community governments to ensure harmonious development beyond the corporate limits of the communities.
6. The Portage County Planning and Zoning Committee should maintain an active role in assessing County needs, evaluating development, and utilizing the planning process as a means of accomplishing recommendations contained in the Comprehensive Plan.

## HOUSING

The Housing Chapter of the Portage County Comprehensive Plan contains information on various aspects of the housing stock throughout Portage County. When the County Comprehensive Plan was adopted, it identified future households of 35,765 in 2025. Portage County and its municipalities utilize the State of Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA) household projection numbers as their official projections.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Portage County was home to 27,814 households in 2010. In 2013, the DOA released a projection of 31,637 for Portage County in 2040 (4,128 less than previously anticipated for planning purposes). The projected increase of 3,823 households represents an increase of just under 14% for the 30-year period, or roughly 4%+ per decade. These 2013 projections also identified that the two largest municipalities in the County, City of Stevens Point and Village of Plover, located in the County's central "core", are projected to account for 3,076, or 80%, of the new households.

Based on these population projections, development pressure within the rural area should not be excessive. The adopted Comprehensive Plan Housing Chapter also contains the following:

### Key Visions Ideas for Housing:

- Residential growth in rural areas is limited to compact single-family developments, where land is not suitable for agricultural, to ensure that rural landscapes and character are maintained.

### B. Recognizing the Role of Rural Villages in Rural Area Housing

Along with seventeen unincorporated Towns, Portage County also contains six rural Villages as well as several unincorporated nodes (Bancroft, Arnott, Custer, Kellner, Polonia). These Villages, and other places, can help to preserve the rural character of the Towns by accommodating residential development in a smaller lot setting, but still "in the country".

### Section 2.5 County-wide Housing Issues and Conclusions

The following housing issues were derived from input from the local planning processes:

#### 2. How can conflicts between residential development and agricultural uses be mitigated?

- A desired setback for residences, specified at either the Town or County level, could be added as a covenant to the parcel. This needs to be further reviewed. Please see the Agricultural, Natural, Cultural Resources Element of this Plan, as well as the individual Town Comprehensive Plans for further information.

### Section 2.6 Guiding Principle and Preliminary Goals for Housing

#### B. Preliminary Goals:

- Housing development takes into consideration the protection of natural resources and open spaces.

## TRANSPORTATION

The Transportation Chapter of the Portage County Comprehensive Plan contains information on various aspects of the transportation network throughout Portage County, and contains the following:

### Section 3.4 County-Wide Transportation Issues and Conclusions

The following transportation issues were derived with input from the local planning processes:

8. Should consideration be given in the design of roadways to minimize impacts on agriculture?

- Consideration should be given in the design of roadways, especially in consideration of new highways, to minimize impacts on agriculture.

Ongoing transportation planning and construction programs by State of Wisconsin (State/Federal highways), Portage County (County Road network), and local municipal roads are seen as adequate and appropriate to support agriculture and related activities. Please see the Issues/Concerns/Conclusion section below for other agriculture transportation-related information and comments.

### **UTILITIES/COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND SERVICES/COMMUNICATIONS/ENERGY/WASTE MANAGEMENT**

The Utilities and Community Facilities Chapter of the Portage County Comprehensive Plan contains information on all of these topics. That planning effort, as well as the discussions throughout the current Farmland Preservation planning process, did not identify any deficiencies detrimental to agriculture or related activities. The Comprehensive Plan also includes the following:

#### Section 4.3: Rural Vision Statement for Utilities/Community Facilities

A. Rural Area Vision Statement Related to Utilities and Community Facilities: In 2025, Portage County residents enjoy a network of high quality, efficient public facilities. Through cooperation and collaboration, local units of government work together to provide services across municipal boundaries. Sewer and water services are provided within established and planned growth areas that effectively reduce the impacts of sprawl development into the rural portions of the County. An exceptional education system provides opportunities for lifelong learning. Portage County residents value their youth, families, seniors, and disadvantaged, and promote facilities and activities aimed at improving community vitality.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION**

There are several avenues through which environmental preservation is pursued with regard to agriculture.

**The Land and Water Conservation Division** within the Portage County Planning and Zoning Department, is responsible for overseeing the State mandated Land and Water Resource Management Plan (LWRM) for Portage County. Resource preservation and sustainability is the purpose of their administration of Chapter NR 151 Runoff Management, of the Wisconsin Administrative Code. NR 151 contains the following Performance Standards (Type of standard covered):

- Control soil erosion to meet tolerable soil loss (T) calculated by RUSLE 2. (Cropland)
- Construct, maintain, and close manure storage facilities to prevent manure overflows and leaks. (Livestock operations and facilities)
- Divert clean water from feedlots. (Livestock operations and facilities within Water Quality Management Areas)
- Manure Management Prohibitions
  - a. No overflow from manure storage facilities.

- b. No unconfined manure stacks within the Water Quality Management Area.
- c. No direct runoff from feedlots and manure storage facilities.
- d. No unlimited access of livestock to shorelands that prevents maintenance of adequate sod cover. (Livestock operations and facilities)
- Nutrient Management Planning. Control nutrient runoff into waters of the State. (Cropland)

The strategy utilized by Portage County Land and Water Conservation Division (LWCD) staff is to encourage voluntary compliance with these standards through efforts to inform Portage County landowners about the required agricultural performance standards and prohibitions. Both County and Federal staff provide landowners with an overview of the regulatory requirements, as well as available cost sharing programs.

The LWRM work plan for LWCD staff includes the following objectives:

- Assist UW-Extension and the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) to improve groundwater quality and conserve its use.
- Assist in the establishment of an agricultural and economic task force to aid in the development of alternative agricultural industry to reduce groundwater usage and contamination.
- Minimize the impacts of livestock use.
- Reduce wind erosion by increasing protected acreage.
- Information and education: establish and maintain public support for wind erosion control.

LWCD staff also administer the Central Wisconsin Windshed Partnership project, which works with agriculture land owners to install living windbreaks in a 5-county area of Central Wisconsin for soil conservation purposes.

**University of Wisconsin – Extension Agriculture Agent and Community Educators** provide ongoing programming and assistance to the agriculture community on best management practices and approaches to operations to maximize efficiency and productivity.

**Portage County Groundwater Management Plan.** Ongoing update and implementation of this document by Portage County staff and Supervisors advances protection and sustainable use of groundwater quality and quantity, through information gathering, water level monitoring, and education of public officials, residents, and the agriculture community on a variety of topics.

**Land Preservation Fund Committee (PCLPF).** The Land Preservation Fund Committee is a Portage County Committee consisting of both Portage County Board Supervisors and citizen members. This Committee was established in the fall of 2003 to identify and protect natural, cultural, historic, and/or agricultural areas in Portage County. Land can be preserved through donations, conservation easements, or land purchase. The PCLPF Committee reviews applications for funding on a regular basis and sends recommendations to the Portage County Parks Commission for final approval.

The Portage County Comprehensive Plan addresses both agriculture and natural resources, and contains:

Section 5.4 Rural Vision Statement for Agricultural, Natural and Cultural Resources

A. Portage County Rural Area Vision Statement Related to Agriculture. In 2025, the agricultural industry in Portage County is healthy and thriving. Development has been directed away from productive agricultural land, giving farmers, both large and small, ample space and freedom to be productive and efficient. A variety of agricultural commodities are produced for direct sale in local markets and for marketing worldwide. Farmers value the environment with practices that are sustainable, using methods that protect air, soil, and water resources. Agriculture remains an integral part of the Portage County economy, providing enjoyable employment opportunities and livable wages for their employees.

Key Vision Ideas for Agriculture:

- Farms, both large and small, are integral part of the local economy due to their direct link to retailers and consumers, and diversified offering of product.
- Sustainable agriculture exists through sensible regulation and a partnership between farmers, their neighbors, and local units of government.
- The agricultural industry in Portage County is strongly supported and the farm land that it relies on is protected from development.
- Agricultural practices are environmentally sensitive, using practices that protect air, soil, and water resources.

B. Portage County Rural Area Vision Statement Related to Natural Resources. In 2025, Portage County residents share a common bond in their enjoyment of the environment. Nature is precious to the people who live here, and they devote considerable efforts and attention to enjoying, protecting, and enhancing it. From keeping water clean and abundant, to protecting critical ecosystems, residents are dedicated to maintaining their very special part of the world.

Key Vision Ideas for Natural Resources:

- Preservation, protection, and utilization of natural resources contribute to a high quality of life. Citizens understand their role in this effort, which is reflected in their actions and financial support.
- Development occurs in ways that protect the natural resources we enjoy in rural Portage County. We direct growth away from sensitive areas and account for the protection of our air, land, and water resources.
- Regulations are in place to assure that our air quality is assessed and maintained.
- Groundwater and surface water body quality is periodically monitored and assessed, and a set of regulations restricts development in groundwater recharge areas and areas contributing to surface water bodies.
- Public access to our natural resources is promoted.
- Groundwater throughout the County is safe to drink without treatment.
- Water quality in streams is maintained.

## Section 5.5 Agricultural, Natural, and Cultural Resources Issues and Conclusions

### A. Agriculture

1. Agricultural-based industries and businesses are important to the existing and future County economy. At the same time, the County's rural residential population continues to increase, creating an increasing type and number of land use conflicts. How can agriculture be protected from these conflicts?

- When future residential development occurs next to agricultural uses, new residential land owners should be made aware of the agricultural operations that take place and incorporate a buffer between residential and agricultural uses. Please see each individual Town's buffer requirements.
- Educational programs should be developed to inform landowners and town officials of the issues related to agricultural use/non-ag land use conflicts.
- Educational programs should be developed to inform landowners and town officials of the issues related to groundwater protection, particularly regarding nitrate and pesticide levels.

2. Changes in the economics of agriculture have put great pressures on the need to produce income from the sale of land for non-agricultural purposes. To what extent will local municipalities place a value on protection of productive agricultural lands?

In many areas of Portage County, development potential is pressuring the agricultural potential. How will those increased demands for residential use be weighed against the loss of productive farmlands?

### B. Natural Resources

1. The natural resources of Portage County have a high level of value for all who reside or visit here. The expectations for how to use and manage the resources are as diverse as those that wish to enjoy them. Highly restrictive protection is appropriate and essential for our most delicate and "perishable" resources such as groundwater, surface waters, wetlands, flood plains, and certain forested areas. Less restrictive protection may be appropriate for certain areas which offer high natural, aesthetic value, but still can accommodate a low-intensity, low-density form of rural residential development. How can Portage County best approach these two types of resource use?

- Future Land Use designations should include two different approaches for guiding the use of important natural resource areas: Natural Areas – Restricted and Natural Areas – Limited Development.
- The two types of land use classification should be carried through into the Portage County Zoning Ordinance, through the creation of a two-tiered Conservancy zoning approach, paralleling the previously-mentioned land use classifications.
- Careful consideration should be given to what type of activities and/or development densities are allowed in each of these land use categories and zoning districts.

2. Groundwater and surface water quantity and quality are of paramount importance to the high quality of life enjoyed by most Portage County residents. How can these resources be protected and enhanced for future generations?

- Continually evaluate current and potential programs for protecting the County's water resources.

3. Open space (non-agricultural) and forested areas of rural Portage County can have high value for both commercial and wildlife habitat purposes. How should these competing interests be addressed?

- Regulation options for large, contiguous forested areas of Portage County should receive attention similar to that of prime agricultural land.
- Policies need to be developed to maintain and enhance uninterrupted and continuous areas of wildlife habitat.

Work to preserve environmental resources is of major importance to both the Portage County government mission and the greater community in general. The work is ongoing, with continual assessment for results and new opportunities to advance sustainability.

### **ECONOMIC GROWTH/BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT**

The great majority of non-agriculture related industrial and commercial development occurs within the incorporated municipalities of Portage County. It is also typical of the unincorporated Towns, as directed by their adopted Comprehensive Plans, to consider commercial and industrial development on an individual, case-by-case basis. Agri-business is typically tied to locational requirements, geared toward proximity to whatever market or service need is being served.

The Economic Development Chapter of the Portage County Comprehensive Plan describes the general components of the Portage County economy, and includes the following:

#### Key Vision Ideas for Economic Development:

- Economic development centers around promoting and maintaining locally based companies.
- Job creation efforts focus primarily on attraction of job opportunities that provide living wages for families and youth living in Portage County.
- Businesses may be assisted through incentive programs or other similar mechanisms.
- New business development is focused toward existing villages and planned settlement areas and the reuse of vacant lots and buildings.
- Recognize and support the role of agri-business in the economy of our community.
- New manufacturing or industrial growth is directed toward existing or planned business/industrial parks or areas.
- Tourism is an important element in the rural economy.

#### Section 6.9 Economic Development Issues and Conclusions

The following issues were identified during the comprehensive planning process:

2. How can municipalities support regional economic development efforts with limited local funding?

- Work with the Portage County Business Council, University Extension, the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association, and other interested parties to promote rural economic development.

### 3. How can the Portage County Business Council better promote the rural areas of Portage County?

- Work toward establishing procedures for economic development planning, and come up with priorities for economic development in the rural areas. Work toward better promotion of agricultural related businesses.
- Work toward stronger marketing programs for the rural areas of Portage County.
- New business development is focused toward existing villages and planned settlement areas and the reuse of vacant lots and buildings.
- Recognize and support the role of agri-business in the economy of our community.

#### Section 6.10 Guiding Principle and Preliminary Goals for Economic Development

##### B. Economic Development Preliminary Goals:

- Planned development areas are identified and/or established throughout the County.
- Support commerce and tourism throughout the County.
- Identify and preserve productive agricultural land Countywide.

This Farmland Preservation planning process has been undertaken, in part, to help establish the role of the agriculture industry within the greater Portage County economy, and the basic information and connections made during the process will be utilized moving forward to inform the wider economic development planning Portage County is about to undertake. Please see the Issues/Concerns/Conclusion section below for other agriculture-related economic information and comments.

### **ISSUES OR CHALLENGES FACING THE INDUSTRY**

Several issues, challenges and opportunities are compiled here along with some conclusions reached over the course of discussion in the preparation of this Plan.

- **FARM DIVERSITY AND SUCCESSION** - It is important that a mix of many successful farms of different sizes and types be maintained along with opportunities for the establishment and growth of individual farm enterprises. To the extent that farm consolidation continues predominantly among the farms that are already large, middle-sized farms would become fewer and fewer. There is a perspective rooted in past experiences that expansion is the only means by which some farms remain viable and profitable. The trend of consolidation (overall) would eventually be constrained by unavailability of suitable land yet to be consolidated – and reaching that state would not be desirable.
  - Ongoing discovery of innovative entrepreneurial solutions is useful at all scales.
  - In order for *many* farms to remain viable there must be succession in ways that actually foster successful establishment and continued development of small and mid-size farm operations, along with ongoing discovery of viable farm enterprise models by which some farms may find success even without having to expand.

- Local government or community-based institutions could play a supportive role in farm transition to keep farms (such as those with no succession plan) in productive agricultural use. Possibilities include establishing community gardens, a land trust, or a farm enterprise incubator, and sharing information about opportunities.
- As Central Wisconsin is home to existing and emerging direct-to-market farms and related enterprises, these opportunities should be pursued and promoted.
- CAPACITY TO GROW FOOD - Agriculture in Portage County is a prominent industry regionally, and stands out in that it is a major contributor of a variety of vegetables to national and global markets. Yet decisions effecting where agriculture continues here are driven by local and immediate pressures and opportunities. Short of protection, there is risk of land being redeveloped into other uses with little regard to its unique production capacity.
  - Farmland is to be protected. The aim of farmland preservation should be clear.
  - It is not realistic to expect farmers selling land not to seek offers commensurate with the value of land.
  - The public needs to share in the goal of farmland preservation. For this, we need to continue to explore and discover ways to make farmland preservation a winning solution for everyone – current and future farmers as well as the community.
  - County and local governments can support agriculture through laws and regulations that maintain the right to farm, and coordinated investment in infrastructure such as roads designed to allow for reasonable use of appropriate implements of husbandry.
- COMMUNITIES - How can we guide development to protect community assets and uphold opportunities for private investment?
  - The County should encourage Towns and the City/Villages to discuss land use and boundary issues.
  - Local governments should work together to coordinate future development; protect financial interests of all concerned.
  - Support municipalities in recognizing, protecting, and enhancing the land and its key qualities that create public value.
  - Support municipalities in encouraging non-farm development only where it is best suited, and minimizing impacts to agricultural operations.
  - The success of smaller farming operations is often closely tied to the health and vitality of the local economy. It is important that farms and whole communities are able to thrive.
  - A study of the local economic impact of food sourced locally compared to that purchased from national distributors could be useful to institutions considering local purchasing policies and practices.

- To address a common misconception that country living is cheap, we need to educate the public about the costs of development and maintenance and costs of procuring services for a country home relative to costs in a more densely populated area.
- VIABILITY - How can we ensure the viability of working lands?
  - Farmland is priceless and irreplaceable.
  - Design infrastructure, roads, electricity, and communications to keep farms competitive and viable in today's markets.
  - Need to offer farmers better opportunities besides just selling. Redevelopment of farmland for urban purposes can be lucrative for the landowner; it is their right.
  - Education is needed for the public to understand that farmers cannot run at a loss and still provide cheap food. Emphasis must be placed on the total value of food and fiber produced – not just low cost.
  - Farms may form cooperatives or partnerships in order to share resources.
  - Support choice of competitive market outlets to help ensure growers' economic freedom.
  - Protect infrastructure and institutions that enable different types of farm enterprises - large and small, existing operations and new entrants - to remain viable.
  - Support development of road and bridge infrastructure compatible with implements of husbandry; and support development of implements of husbandry that recognize limits of weight and size of transportation systems.
- ACCESS TO LAND - Access to land is an issue for smaller market and newer farms.
  - More established agriculture operations have more stable relationships with lending institutions and are able to expand more easily than someone just starting out. It may be useful to find out what it would take for more lenders to have more confidence in lending to beginning farmers.
- SPATIAL CONSIDERATIONS - Farms are being driven farther from urban areas. For direct market operations, the greater the distance, the more difficult it is to get their products to direct markets.
  - There is a considerable amount of good farmland within City and Village extraterritorial boundaries. The County Plan should encourage the City and Villages to consider other areas for growth, including infilling and redevelopment within their boundaries, and keep farming in close proximity to the urban areas.
- PRODUCTIVE LANDS - Nearly 2,000 acres of farmland have been lost to urban development in the last 20 years. Farming is sometimes pushed to wetlands or rocky areas while some of the most productive farmland is lost to expanding municipalities. The "amount of acres cropped" has remained steady, however the amount of alternative locations are harder to find in the County.

Continued loss of viable farmland would leave farmers with fewer viable options and could put forests, aging tree plantations, wildlife areas, etc., at risk of being cleared and converted to farmland.

- Agriculture and forestry are developed uses, not just “undeveloped land”. They relate to key vision ideas for the future of Portage County.
- It is important to support resistance to foreseeable pressures to further redevelop farmland into different uses.
- Identification and preservation of good sites conducive to agri-processing industries is one means of helping realize the economic potential of the County’s significant vegetable growing resources.
- It remains important to protect farmland and farming activity.
- It is important to strongly discourage redevelopment of irrigated farmland to non-ag residential, non-ag commercial, or non-ag industrial development. More acreage cannot be taken for houses.
- Regulations should be put in place to minimize impacts on highly productive lands in urban fringe and rural areas. This is to maintain farm viability as well as acres cropped.
- Plans for growth should take into account a balanced approach to overall community health and development, including the industry of agriculture. The success of farms is linked to thriving communities as a whole. Growth of incorporated communities should be compact, serviceable, and fiscally responsible.
- City and Villages should minimize their plans for expansion, redirecting growth within their boundaries and not into prime agricultural areas.
- Urban areas should make efforts to grow within their boundaries without expanding into agricultural lands, and make farming a priority. The County should encourage Towns and the City/Villages to discuss land use and boundary issues.
- There may be a need to formulate transition plans for urban areas.
- The accelerated pace of development and conversion seen in the 1990’s will likely not be repeated on as large a scale.
- It is important to support resistance of further nonfarm development of farmland. This requires attention even at times when urbanization is not occurring at a rapid pace.
- Educational programs should be developed to show the relationship of Portage County agriculture to county, region, state, national and international markets.
- Irrigated lands and productive farmland should not be converted to nonagricultural residential, commercial, or industrial development.

- **NEED FOR WATER** - Farms need access to groundwater at the times and amounts required for crop health and success. This is necessary for the agriculture industry to remain a viable part of the Portage County economy. The WIDNR may be limiting the number of well permits moving forward, even for replacement wells. How can we ensure protection of the groundwater resource - over the course of future growth and investments in diverse uses and activities that the resource supports - *while also assuring stakeholders of reasonable use?*
  - Crops need water to survive, and most farmland in Portage County needs irrigation to remain viable for production.
  - It is important to maintain water rights and the ability to farm using the water needed to grow crops.
  - Farmers who irrigate have a large investment in irrigation equipment and must irrigate crops to get maximum production in order to be profitable and to meet the food needs of an expanding population.
  - It appears there has been (Table 9) an increase of irrigation of the smaller direct marketing farms. There has also been an increase of irrigation being used on dairy farms and smaller crop farming operations. Large farming operations have become more stable with regards to irrigation usage.
- **ENERGY** - How can agriculture minimize fossil fuel energy use?
  - Need research to continue development of irrigation and other agricultural practices, machines and infrastructure that utilize less energy.
  - Encourage the agricultural industry to adopt energy efficient irrigation, machines and infrastructure, including conversion of waste to energy, that utilize non-fossil fuel energy sources in light of costs and savings.
  - Consider possible land swapping to consolidate acreage base to minimize road travel.
- **SUSTAINING AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY**
  - To be considered sustainable the agriculture industry must be sound economically, environmentally, and socially.
  - Support ongoing research and education in pursuit of ideal practices, and broader understanding and appreciation about modern practices.
  - Implement Portage County's Land and Water Resources Management Plan and Groundwater Management Plan - including monitoring, and periodic reassessment - consistent with this plan.
- **OTHER LAND USES AND RELATIONSHIPS** - The County's rural residential population is not presently projected to increase dramatically, yet it remains important to determine how best to minimize potential land use conflicts and support the continuation of agricultural activities.

- When future residential development occurs next to agricultural uses, new residential land owners should be made aware of the agricultural operations that take place.
- Educational programs should be developed to inform landowners and town officials of the issues related to ag use/non-ag land use conflicts.
- Educational programs should be developed to inform landowners and town officials of the issues related to groundwater protection, particularly regarding nitrate and pesticide levels as well as groundwater recharge as it relates to groundwater levels and lakes and streams.
- Educational programs should be developed to show relationship of Portage County agriculture to county, region, state, national and international markets.
- It is important to hold down restrictions on farm operations. Most family farms share common interests in protecting resources and maintaining the quality of place, yet the possibility of top-down regulation is a concern. For instance, *EPA setback regulations can complicate fumigating fields near rural residences.*
- VISION IDEAS - Review of visions ideas from the 2006 comprehensive plan produced the following conclusion and suggestions.
  - The existing vision statement and key vision ideas related to agriculture are affirmed.
  - One revision is offered: Agricultural practices are environmentally sensitive, using practices that protect air, soil, water and wildlife resources.
  - One addition is offered: The agriculture industry in Portage County utilizes energy saving practices in infrastructure and in production practices.

## **ANTICIPATED CHANGES IN AGRICULTURE**

People of Portage County's agricultural community have appreciable experience with change and innovation. Many local farm industry innovations were showcased when Portage County hosted Farm Technology Days in 2014. While some advancements may be impossible to predict, it is generally agreed that the ability to innovate and navigate changes in markets and operating environments will remain important.

A few universal market realities create ongoing pressures for innovation in agriculture and other sectors, notably: declining resources (such as tight commodity markets anticipated in agriculture for the next few years); increasing stakeholder expectations (such as more pressure for environmental protections including nitrogen and manure management to protect water quality), and elevated transparency in the present information age.

In recent years high commodity prices have brought more of farms' acreage into production, including some marginally-productive lands. The current outlook on agricultural markets predict low commodity prices in general for the next couple of years. In soft markets, farmers may seek to minimize production

costs by deciding not to raise crops on areas where only modest yields can be expected. Statewide, land use responds to commodity prices, as noted in an [article](#) published in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (Rick Barrett, *Steady rise in Wisconsin farmland values may be ending*, Sept. 01, 2015):

*When corn and soybean prices were high, some farmers bought or leased every acre they could find to plant crops, driving up the land values. Likewise, when dairy prices were high, farmers planted more crops to feed additional cows. Since then, however, commodity prices have fallen, partly in response to weakened global markets.*

The agriculture industry will proceed with attention and care toward not just markets and land values, but all manner of community assets to be preserved and enhanced. As in other local industries, developments in agriculture will be most effective as aligned with the resources and cooperation of communities.

Preserving and pursuing expanded economic opportunity for owners, management, and workers in the agriculture industry may be an ongoing challenge that requires constant discovery of creative solutions to challenges. It is hoped and anticipated that growers and agricultural enterprises in Portage County will remain entrepreneurial throughout the years to come.

### **Land Use Issues Related to Preserving Farmland**

#### Strategies to Increase Housing Density Away From Farmland

The preceding sections of this Plan, particularly the Housing section on page 54 and the Communities, Spatial Considerations, Productive Lands, and Other Land Uses and Relationships sections on pages 62-65, directly discuss strategies to increase housing density and to reduce negative impacts to farmland. As municipalities determine their own land uses, the strategies of the county are generally to encourage incorporated municipalities to consider infill as a first choice for development; to discourage them from expanding outward into locations of large, productive blocks of farm land; and to continue to offer and encourage the use of zoning districts that allow for smaller lot sizes. The county may also recommend that any plans for State and Federal roads aim to minimize impacts to farm land.

#### Land Use Policies to Preserve Farmland

The following section lays out the goals and policy recommendations of farmland preservation.

### **Issues or Challenges in Promoting the Development of Agriculture**

This Farmland Preservation Plan is aimed at aligning the current needs of a prosperous established industry with local strategies for preservation and sustainable development of working lands, and developments that enhance the viability of a breadth of different types of farms in Portage County.

## **GOALS AND POLICIES FOR PRESERVING FARMLAND AND PROMOTING AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT**

The overarching purpose of these goals and policies is to maintain a thriving agricultural industry and conserve the irreplaceable farmland and natural resources that support farming as part of the fabric and rural character of communities throughout Portage County.

### **Statements issued by the Portage County Farmland Preservation Ad-Hoc Steering Committee:**

- Agriculture is a primary driver of the Portage County economy. It is important that the agricultural industry continue to thrive in Portage County, maintaining or growing from its present level of prominence into the foreseeable future.
- Farmers in Portage County take pride in producing the highest quality, safest, healthiest, and most abundant food in the world, and strive to ensure a good value for consumers.
- Agriculture and forestry are “developed” uses.
- Good farmland is an irreplaceable natural resource having long-term value locally, nationally, and internationally. Economic and political factors combined with weather patterns and increasing population can be expected to increase the need for good farmland on a long-term basis.
- This plan supports the preservation of the County’s farmland and protection of lands capable of conversion to good farmland, consistent with other land use policies and plans. It includes recommendations for meeting communities’ growth needs in ways that conserve land for farming and complement the thriving agricultural industry – not to infringe upon, or intensify conflict with existing operations.
- We strongly encourage local, county, and state officials to utilize this document as a guide in setting policy or planning.

### **Agricultural development and farmland preservation goals are:**

**GOAL 1: Preserve agricultural land county-wide.** Preserve farmland in Portage County to ensure its availability. Resist pressure to redevelop farm and forest lands to different uses.

**GOAL 2: Maintain a viable agricultural economy in the County.** Encourage pursuits that allow the agricultural community to remain economically viable and support living wage jobs. Develop a process where the general public shares in the goal of protecting agricultural resources. Maintain infrastructure needed to support a viable agricultural community. Help to ensure affordable access to farmland suitable for a diverse set of viable types of agriculture.

**GOAL 3: Improve relationships between agricultural land uses and nonagricultural uses such as non-farm housing.** Enhance the effectiveness of collaboration among various stakeholders seeking local solutions to conflicts. Promote education and awareness of farm practices and synergy between people of urban and rural residential communities.

**GOAL 4: Ensure that growth of incorporated communities is compact, serviceable, fiscally responsible, and thriving.** Minimize the loss of farmland to expanding municipalities. Encourage orderly, planned urban growth consistent with the efficient use of tax dollars.

**GOAL 5: Maintain the County's natural surface and groundwater supplies at levels compatible with agricultural needs.** Utilize agricultural practices that are environmentally compatible and protect air, soil, water and wildlife resources. Engage stakeholders in protecting water resources in ways that allow for continued agricultural productivity. Coordinate with agencies supporting protection of water resources.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Goal 1: Preserve agricultural land county-wide**

#### **Policy Recommendations**

Focus: Preserve farmland in Portage County to ensure its availability.

- a) Identify existing farmland and potential farmland and encourage agricultural and related uses on these lands.
- b) Recognize, for preservation, farmlands which have previously been identified for exclusive agricultural use through land use planning programs at the Town, Village, and County levels.
- c) Support large, contiguous blocks of farmland as a desirable land use pattern.
- d) Steer non-farm development away from farmland.
- e) Where residential development is allowed, limit it to higher-density, keeping it as compact as possible.

Focus: Resist pressure to redevelop farm and forest lands to different uses.

- f) Utilize land use planning to promote the preservation of farmland.
- g) Discourage the division or redevelopment of farmland for residential, commercial, or industrial purposes.

### **Goal 2: Maintain a viable agricultural economy in the County.**

#### **Policy Recommendations**

Focus: Encourage pursuits that allow the agricultural community to remain economically viable and support living wage jobs.

- a) Support the continuation of a viable diversified agricultural base throughout the County and associated need for irrigation due to sandy soils.
- b) Encourage agri-business and agri-industry which support area farming and provide local jobs.
- c) Allow for the expansion of the agricultural sector and related growth of agri-business and agri-industry.

- d) Recognize the significance of agricultural production and Portage County's contribution to state, national, and international markets through educational programs.
- e) Support the significance of water and irrigation in agricultural production in Portage County for vegetable and other crops, dairy, and livestock.

Focus: Develop a process where the general public shares in the goal of protecting agricultural resources.

- f) Support community initiatives that may help to address community needs and also maintain a viable agricultural economy (e.g. a farm enterprise incubator).
- g) Assist retiring farm owners in establishing a succession plan that keeps the land in agricultural use.
- h) Determine if a strong case could be made to purchase development rights, enabling the landowner to benefit from foreseeable development pressure while keeping land in production.
- i) Educate the public about the costs of farming and the value of food and the importance of supporting the farmers that produce it.
- j) Promote conservation practices in the agricultural community.

Focus: Maintain infrastructure needed to support a viable agricultural community.

- k) Encourage contiguous farms and use of farm roads, designating "farm use" roads.
- l) Support development of roads that can support implements of husbandry, and encourage development of implements of husbandry that recognize limits of the road.
- m) Encourage provision of adequate utility services such as pipelines where safer than alternatives; 3-phase power lines, and competitive buy-back rates and systems allowing for distributed generation of power; and access to high speed internet.
- n) Encourage widespread adoption of energy-efficient irrigation, machines and infrastructure that utilize non-fossil fuel energy sources in light of costs and savings. Support these efforts with relevant research and education.

Focus: Help to ensure affordable access to farmland suitable for a diverse set of viable types of agriculture.

- o) Take stock of the types of parcels available now or in the foreseeable future, including small usable parcels of larger farms
- p) Support farm succession programs for all size operations
- q) Encourage farms to group together and form cooperatives or partnerships in order to share land and other resources

Goal 3: Improve relationships between agricultural land uses and nonagricultural uses such as non-farm housing.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Focus: Enhance the effectiveness of collaboration among various stakeholders seeking local solutions to conflicts.

- a) Routinely monitor and advance implementation of key aspects of this plan.
- b) Sustain attention toward local agricultural issues, opportunities, and advances in the sector - keeping interested community members informed and engaged on an ongoing basis.

Focus: Promote education and awareness of farm practices, and synergy between people of urban and rural residential communities.

- c) Convene meaningful and proactive community conversations, routinely, about what people who live in this agricultural community need and expect.
- d) Discourage non-farm land uses directly adjacent to agricultural lands in general. Adjacent non-farm uses may be accommodated on small non-farmable parcels provided a disclosure or covenant indicating that agricultural activities will continue to take place.
- e) Protect farm operations from the encroachment of incompatible land uses such as housing, and do not enable new housing developments to hamper agricultural production due to nuisance and health related problems, or resulting legal actions.
- f) Utilize appropriate planning procedures within areas of urban expansion to anticipate future development and reduce conflicts arising from adjacent land uses. Do not rely heavily on expansive set-backs that risk forcing the purchase of larger acreages, which consumes more farmland.
- g) Encourage and support use of formal disclosures and covenants as landowners may see fit.
- h) Ensure that newly developed areas are compatible with existing uses of land.

**Goal 4: Ensure that growth of incorporated communities is compact, serviceable, fiscally responsible, and thriving.**

### **Policy Recommendations**

Focus: Minimize the loss of farmland to expanding municipalities.

- a) Assist rural villages in recognizing the advantages of the orderly growth of high-density residential developments within a rural village.
- b) Encourage villages to accommodate commercial, industrial, and residential developments.
- c) Support the efficient extension of appropriate infrastructure into areas identified for planned growth and development.
- d) Identify institutional, recreational, and cultural facilities that are supported primarily by rural villages while being utilized by the community at large.

- e) Encourage the City and Villages to minimize plans for expansion into agricultural areas, and to instead direct growth within their boundaries, as through infill and redevelopment.
- f) Encourage municipalities to keep farming within and in close proximity to urban areas.
- g) Encourage municipalities to take steps to ensure that highly desirable, functional, and developable places are found within their boundaries.

Focus: Encourage orderly, planned urban growth consistent with the efficient use of tax dollars.

- h) Encourage infill of existing urban population centers and planned transition areas, and strongly discourage including farmland among transition areas.
- i) Discourage "leapfrog" development into surrounding agricultural areas.
- j) Allow for public facilities and services in a cost and energy efficient manner, consistent with federal, state, and local public facility plans and the need to protect farmland.
- k) Maintain adequate areas appropriate for residential, commercial, industrial, and infrastructural needs.
- l) Encourage compact development.
- m) Educate the public about the costs of development and maintenance and costs of procuring services for a home in the country as compared to more densely populated areas.

**Goal 5: Maintain the County's natural surface and groundwater supplies at levels compatible with agricultural needs.**

**Policy Recommendations**

Focus: Utilize agricultural practices that are environmentally compatible and protect air, soil, water and wildlife resources.

- a) Encourage landowners to adopt practices that reduce groundwater contamination, and adopt practices that reduce water loss.

Focus: Engage stakeholders in protecting water resources in ways that allow for continued agricultural productivity.

- b) Support efforts to address point and non-point source pollution of surface and groundwater associated with all activities.
- c) Support further study of the entire groundwater aquifer and recharge area, examining the ability of individual wells to reliably meet water demands of various users including specific agricultural activities, and the ability of the resource to also meet environmental needs.
- d) Recognize the potential for groundwater contamination due to agricultural practices and nonfarm activities, and stress the need for continuing education and study.
- e) Protect the quality and quantity of the surface and groundwater resources of Portage County.

- f) Acknowledge the need to sustain an economically viable agricultural industry throughout the dialogue and deliberation about groundwater management in Portage County.
- g) Support the significance of water and irrigation in agricultural production in Portage County for vegetable and other crops, dairy and livestock.
- h) Engage residents, businesses, and industry in sharing in the goal of protecting water resources - pursuing solutions that support all stakeholders' goals.

Focus: Coordinate with agencies supporting protection of water resources

- i) Implement Portage County's Land and Water Resources Management Plan and Groundwater Management Plan - including monitoring, and periodic reassessment - consistent with this plan
- j) Establish resource protection goals consistent with local development priorities

## **IDENTIFYING AND MAPPING FARMLAND PRESERVATION AREAS**

Section 91.10(1), Wisconsin Statutes, states *By January 1, 2016, a county shall adopt a farmland preservation plan that does all of the following:*

*(d) Clearly identifies areas that the county plans to preserve for agricultural use and agriculture-related uses, which may include undeveloped natural resource and open space areas but may not include any area that is planned for nonagricultural development within 15 years after the date on which the plan is adopted.*

*(dm) Describes the rationale used to determine which areas to identify under par. (d).*

*(e) Includes maps that clearly delineate all areas identified under par. (d), so that a reader can easily determine whether a parcel is within an identified area.*

*(f) Clearly correlates the maps under par. (e) with text that describes the types of land uses planned for each area on a map.*

*(g) Identifies programs and other actions that the county and local governmental units within the county may use to preserve the areas identified under par. (d).*

## **PROCESS AND RATIONALE FOR IDENTIFYING FARMLAND PRESERVATION AREAS**

The Portage County Farmland Preservation map(s) were created using the following philosophy and criteria.

The Portage County Farmland Preservation Ad Hoc Steering Committee, composed of citizens and County Supervisors appointed by the County Board to assemble the preliminary Farmland Preservation Plan draft, did not want to create a map that was overly prescriptive when describing lands for preservation. They chose to utilize the following objective and reproducible inputs to identify areas that could benefit from consideration for preservation:

- Productive Agricultural Soils, as described by the Portage County Conservationist, utilizing U.S. Department of Agriculture/Natural Resource Conservation Service soils information;
- Existing Irrigated Farmland, as identified from aerial photography;
- Enterprise Ag (L1) and Intermediate Agriculture (L2) Future Land Use areas, as designated in the County's individual adopted Town Comprehensive Plans and described on pages 15 and 16 above;
- Areas of existing Portage County A1 Exclusive Agricultural District Zoning;
- Areas of existing Portage County Conservancy District Zoning;
- The area included within the Portage County Drainage District.

These criteria were chosen because they indicate areas within the County where natural features, resource characteristics, and formal municipal planning have indicated that the presence of agriculture in moderate to intense levels is acknowledged and encouraged into the foreseeable future. The Portage County Planning and Zoning, Agriculture and Extension Education, and Land and Water Conservation Committees subsequently concurred with the use of these criteria as appropriate as a basis for long-range agriculture resource planning efforts of this type.

#### **PROGRAMS AND OTHER ACTIONS TO PRESERVE FARMLAND**

Portage County believes that farmland preservation efforts consist of three basic parts:

- generating facts, analysis, conclusions, and defining actions to address conclusions to bring proper context and deliberation to the effort;
- objectively mapping areas that may be appropriate for preservation efforts;
- assisting the County's Towns and residents in effectively applying development regulations and programs that assist and contribute to farmland preservation in a way that advances a Town's overall community development goals.

Land use decisions are historically the purview of the individual Towns, and remain so even with this County-level planning.

It is our intent that the preliminary map included with this planning document will serve to comply with the requirements of ss 91.10(1)(d). County Planning and Zoning Department staff will be working with the individual Towns in 2016 to more clearly define where they will apply Exclusive Agricultural District Zoning. Completing this will allow Town-level maps to comply with Farmland Preservation Mapping area coverage requirements (80%) in order to assist residents with being eligible for access to the State of Wisconsin Farmland Preservation Tax Credit Program. Towns are individually responsible for application of any of the County's Zoning Districts; 15 of 17 County Towns are under the jurisdiction of the Portage County Zoning Ordinance, one has no zoning and the other has its own zoning ordinance. Through implementation of the Exclusive Agricultural Zoning phase, the final and subsequently State-approved zoning maps will emerge.

The Farmland Preservation Program is a voluntary State tax credit program. Concerns for preservation go beyond the limitations of tax credit program benefits, however. Portage County, through cooperation with the Towns and their long-range planning and zoning process, will continue to pursue resource protection through application of a variety of zoning districts, as well as Land and Water Conservation programs.

**Maps**