

1 Introduction

Plan Background and Purpose

INTRODUCTION

On July 28, 2004, the Washington County Planning, Conservation, and Parks Committee requested the Planning and Parks Department to study various means of preserving farmland and open space in Washington County. In response to the request, the Farmland and Open Space Study Group was formed, composed of farmers, conservationists, developers, realtors, and local municipal representatives. Their goal was to research and analyze different tools and funding sources that could be used in Washington County for farmland and open space preservation and provide the Washington County Planning, Conservation, and Parks Committee a report to assist in decision-making regarding farmland and open space preservation as recommended in *A Park and Open Space Plan for Washington County: 2020*. The study may also be used as a guide by local municipalities throughout the County.

The Farmland and Open Space Preservation Study Group composed a mission statement to provide a framework for the report. The mission statement is as follows:

“To objectively research, analyze, and develop a variety of tools and techniques for farmland and open space preservation accommodating projected growth in Washington County.”

The Farmland and Open Space Preservation Tools Report provides detailed information about the tools that can be used to preserve farmland and open space, and potential funding sources. This report does not make recommendations about which tools should be applied to preserve farmland and open space in Washington County.

The Farmland and Open Space Preservation Tools Report was developed in response to:

- Development pressures in Washington County and its local governments to convert farmland into subdivision developments.
- Local municipalities’ request for current information on ways to preserve farmland.
- Recommendations outlined in *A Park and Open Space Plan for Washington County: 2020*.
- Requests from agencies detailing strategies on how land can be developed while still preserving the natural resources of the area.

BACKGROUND

Washington County is experiencing record population growth. The resident population of Washington County increased 93.6 percent, from 63,834 in 1970 to 123,587 in 2004¹, creating development pressures, which have resulted in changes in the landscape of Washington County. The population forecast for Washington County is estimated to be 149,500 in 2025 and 157,300 in 2035² resulting in further reduction of the amount of farmland and open space throughout Washington County.



¹ Wisconsin Department of Administration Population Estimates for 2004

² SEWRPC, 2004

On June 19, 2001, Washington County requested that the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) assist the County in the preparation of an updated park and open space plan. *A Park and Open Space Plan for Washington County: 2020*, adopted by the Washington County Board of Supervisors in March 2004, was based upon recent information related to land use, population levels and distribution, anticipated growth and development, natural resources, and park and open space acquisition and development activities within the County. The plan identifies long-term needs for park and open space acquisition and development and other recommendations to satisfy those needs extending to the year 2020. The plan also allows the County to remain eligible to apply for and receive Federal and State aids to support these efforts. The plan is based upon the recommended development pattern set forth in *A Regional Land Use Plan for Southeastern Wisconsin: 2020*. The open space preservation element of the plan contains recommendations for the preservation of primary environmental corridors, secondary environmental corridors, isolated natural resource areas, natural areas and critical species habitat sites, geological and archeological areas, protection of open space lands located within established Department of Natural Resources project boundaries and protection of prime agricultural land.

Specifically, the plan recommends protection of a total of 77,334 acres of open space lands which comprises 28 percent of Washington County. Of these 77,334 acres recommended for protection, 17,758 acres, or about 6 percent of the County, were in public ownership, nonprofit conservation organization ownership, conservation easements, or in compatible private outdoor recreation uses such as golf courses or camps in 2002. Another 16,228 acres, or about 6 percent of the County, are recommended to be acquired by public agencies for natural resource protection, public park or trail use. These acres include open space within planned park sites but not intensive park use areas within parks. It is recommended that the remaining 43,348 acres, or about 16 percent of the County, be protected through the use of a combination of protective zoning and stewardship methods.

Such protective zoning and stewardship methods are briefly described in the plan and include protective zoning districts, overlay districts, conservation subdivisions, density bonus incentives, conservation easements, donations, and purchase/transfer of development rights. Chapter 4 of this Farmland and Open Space Preservation Tools Report expands on these protection methods of farmland and open space preservation.



REPORT FORMAT

The findings of the Farmland and Open Space Preservation Tools Report are set forth in this report. Following the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 details trends and demographics of Washington County, open space and natural resources inventory, and agricultural analysis. Chapter 3 describes the “takings” issue and how it relates to farmland and open space preservation efforts. Chapter 4 provides information on tools that can be considered for farmland and open space preservation. Chapter 5 summarizes recent public

opinion surveys completed in Washington County regarding existing values about farmland and open space preservation. Chapter 6 explains potential financing strategies and funding sources for preservation programs. Chapter 7 describes implementation components to be considered when implementing a preservation program. A summary of the report is presented in Chapter 8.