

# IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

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The underlying themes of this Comprehensive Plan are many and varied. They include:

- 1) Agricultural land preservation
- 2) Environmental protection
- 3) Urban viability and protection of the rural lifestyle
- 4) The need for jobs
- 5) New public servicing models,
- 6) Infrastructure/public facility improvements
- 7) Intergovernmental cooperation

While County government may not have either the authority or the resources to address these unilaterally, the future viability of the County depends on it playing a meaningful role, in conjunction with the Cities and Townships, in achieving desired outcomes. This element of the plan is intended to identify some of the steps needed to achieve those ends.

## **AGRICULTURAL LANDS PRESERVATION**

The Mower County economy is an agricultural economy and, second only to its children, land and water are its most important natural resources. At all costs these must be protected because agriculture will become increasingly important as the world population grows, demanding more from these finite resources.

The following measures should be considered to provide incentives for farmers to continue to farm, to minimize the unnecessary use of agricultural lands for urban development and to encourage sustainable agricultural practices.

### **Incentives**

The 1984 Agricultural Land Preservation Policy Act makes it possible for some farmers to receive property tax credits of \$1.50 per acre per year for agreeing to preserve their farms for long-term agricultural use. In order to receive these credits, farmers are required to place a restrictive covenant on their land, which limits its use to agriculture or forestry for at least eight years. The land must also be zoned for long-term agricultural use.

Removal of the covenant can be initiated by either the owner or the County but termination occurs only after eight years have elapsed after initiation. Individual owners will have to weigh the value of the tax credit against the eight-year exclusive agricultural covenant. This tool is best applied to the large expanses of prime agricultural land that will not be threatened by urban development. It should not be used as a tool to stop responsible urban expansion.

This program is funded by a \$5 fee on mortgages or deeds recorded or registered in the County. The County retains half of the proceeds and forwards the remainder to the Minnesota Conservation Fund, which has a 1992 fund balance of approximately \$2 million. Money from the County fund is used first to cover tax credits. The State fund reimburses the County for any shortfall.

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In the short-term, the program is considered to be viable due to the large State fund balance and few participants. This means the County will have little or no short-term risk in spite of the low mortgage and deed revenue that would be produced by the \$5 fee. In the longer term, the State may have to consider augmenting the fund if the program is widely used. It is for this reason that the program needs very careful consideration, given the vagaries of State politics.

### **Control of Urban Development**

At best, the benefits of urban development in areas that provide only limited public services is short lived. To allow urban development in rural areas as the panacea for tax base enhancement is to take the tax proceeds immediately and push the servicing costs into the future. Even the initial proceeds are diminished appreciably by the immediate services that urban development demands.

The best way to control urban development is to specify where that development will occur as a matter of public policy (the Comprehensive Plan) and then zone the land accordingly. In the case of Mower County, it should zone the urban expansion districts to embrace those areas shown on the Comprehensive Plan as needed for urban expansion. It should continue to update and modify these areas as needed. Small cities, on the other hand, which intend to grow, should prepare development plans, which justify urban expansion. The County should protect these, as well, for future urban development.

### **Sustainable Agriculture**

The County has very little control over the private practice of agriculture though the Federal government does through subsidies. The most the County can hope to do is “encourage” sustainable agricultural practices as a means to protect groundwater resources and conserve prime agricultural soils.

Sustainable agriculture is intended to combine economic profitability with environmental protection by changing from a dependence on chemical inputs to building long-term fertility and soil productivity. Also referred to as regenerative or organic farming, sustainable agriculture consists of crop rotation, fertilizer and manure management, weed control, integrated pest management and conservation tillage.

**Crop Rotation.** Since the introduction of soybeans, many farmers have adopted a simple bean/corn rotation and substituted nitrogen producing chemical fertilizers for legumes in rotations. Limited rotation also increases the need for the use of pesticides. A minimum three-crop rotation could have the potential to substantially reduce or even eliminate chemical fertilizer and pesticide use.

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**Fertilizer and Manure Management.** The over-application of nitrogen fertilizer is the primary cause of groundwater contamination in agricultural communities. Though efforts are being made to optimize nitrogen inputs, management practices, which reduce or delay the conversion of nitrogen fertilizer into easily leached nitrates will save farmers money while protecting groundwater. Less emphasis needs to be placed on maximum yields and more on optimum return on nitrogen inputs. This can be accomplished in any number of ways including going to a three or four year rotation with small grain and alfalfa or clover additions to the soybean/corn rotation, elimination of high loss fall nitrogen applications during the spring and summer. All help to improve the efficiency of crop fertilizer uptake.

Manure has tremendous fertilizer value if managed, stored and applied correctly. It adds both soil-enhancing organic material and micronutrients to the soil. It also represents a good energy conservation practice since commercial fertilizers require large energy inputs to produce. Proper application can also reduce the amount of nitrates reaching the groundwater.

Manure is not as easy to use as commercial fertilizer. Good manure management requires the periodic testing of both the manure and the soil to which it is applied to insure that application rates correspond to the needs of receiving soils. It also requires proper storage techniques to minimize negative environmental impacts and nitrogen losses. It must be stored a safe distance from rivers, creeks, floodplains, sinkholes and wells. And, its nitrogen value can be impaired by weather and improper application and storage. Nonetheless, the use of manure in lieu of commercial fertilizers is important to environmentally sound farming practices.

**Weed Control.** Chemical herbicides may now be used so heavily that it is more costly than the seed itself. It may also be seriously contaminating the drinking water of residents. Alternatives to the use of herbicides that should be considered include: well timed tillage combined with reduced tillage; crop rotation including a small grain rotation; ridge-till rotary hoeing and strip cropping.

**Integrated Pest Management (IPM).** IPM emphasizes cultural and biological methods of control, which create conditions that are unfavorable for pests. Where pesticides destroy the natural enemies of pests, IPM promotes them by creating natural checks and balances. IPM methods include crop rotation, which disrupts the life cycles of insect pests and crop diseases, biological controls and the development of pest resistant crop species.

**Conservation Tillage.** Conservation tillage differs from conventional moldboard tillage in that it retains crop residue on the surface rather than plowing it under. It reduces soil erosion and involves less tillage but its weed control attributes are disputed. Some believe that conservation tillage actually increases the potential for groundwater contamination attributable to the use of herbicides to control weeds. While chisel plowing is currently the most frequently used conservation tillage practice in Minnesota, ridge-till farming is gaining converts elsewhere. With this method of farming, crops are planted on top of an eight to nine inch ridge where the soil is warm and dry and old crop residue collects in the valleys between ridges, slowing the rate of water runoff.

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Sustainable agriculture as a means to reduce chemical inputs, diminish environmental impacts and increase profits cannot be applied overnight. It takes perhaps five years to convert and is best begun with a small acreage.

### **Conservation Programs**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) offers a variety of programs designed to enhance rural conservation. Through passage of the 1990 Food Agriculture Conservation and Trade Act, Congress displayed a continuing commitment to rural conservation by offering landowners monetary incentives for such things as habitat preservation and restoration, reforestation, and agricultural conservation measures.

USDA conservation programs are administered through local Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) offices. Programs include Swampbuster, Sodbuster, the Stewardship Incentive Program, the Wetland Reserve Program and the Conservation Reserve Program, among others. The ASCS will share costs for services, materials and labor incurred for approved conservation projects. All projects must demonstrate aesthetic quality as well as sound conservation practices.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

The County can, if it chooses, exercise significant control in matters of environmental protection. It may exercise its zoning authority to require the establishment of shore impact zones along all streams to serve as a buffer against contamination from surface waters runoff. It can also prohibit the storage of manure and the establishment of new feedlots within shoreland areas. This can be done by amending the current County Shoreland Management Ordinance. Other considerations may include an erosion control permit procedure designed to minimize the siltation of surface waters, a feedlot ordinance, wetland regulations and a wellhead protection ordinance.

The County already has ordinances, which regulate the construction of on-site utilities. These are essential to the protection of the County's ground waters. It might also consider a program that reduces the amount of environmentally harmful additives used for roadway maintenance.

The County may consider the adoption of a tree replacement ordinance. It may elect to play a role in encouraging farmers to employ sustainable agricultural and other practices as means to reduce both urban and rural chemical inputs that have the potential to adversely affect groundwaters. It may wish to develop an ordinance to protect remaining wetlands from destruction. It may also elect to pursue natural system restoration (wetlands, forests, etc.).

Perhaps the most important role the County can play in environmental protection is that of education. It could provide opportunities for County residents to learn about sound environmental and energy conservation practices including public forums, which promote an understanding of environmental issues and ways to correct problems. It might also consider the appointment of a standing environmental protection and energy conservation committee to advise the County Board in all matters related to the environment.

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### **PROTECTION OF URBAN/RURAL VIABILITY**

The County's cities are the centers of its agrarian economy. They offer employment, education, fire protection, commerce and recreation opportunities for all county residents and they, like their rural agricultural counterparts, are a vital part of a balanced and healthy community.

A need for limited growth near the edges of some cities that combine job growth with quality education has been identified through this comprehensive planning process. Here, responsible urban expansion must be accommodated.

Typically, Townships oppose City expansion in hopes of enhancing their own tax bases or because they feel threatened by a City takeover. Frequently, a City will "raid the hen house" without considering the concerns of the Township which leads to a bitter dispute, a dispute that becomes a lose/lose situation.

There will be no significant need for annexation in most of Mower County unless there is a large infusion of jobs. If job growth is significant, Austin, in particular, will need to add to its territory. If there is no such infusion, only limited expansion will be needed. In either case, Cities will need to have some room to grow and it is better to agree on the extent of that expansion potential up front rather than dispute it later.

Austin and other growing cities clearly need land for future urban expansion, and urban expansion areas have been delineated around these cities (as shown on the future land use map). But some of the remaining Cities may warrant expansion as well. It is not the intent of this plan to inhibit responsible growth contiguous to those City boundaries. It is for this reason that the County encourages any City that may anticipate the expansion of its municipal boundaries to prepare a plan which justifies urban expansion and identifies how and where such expansion is intended to be provided and serviced by need public utilities.

With the exception of Austin which has fairly recently completed a Comprehensive Plan update, City plans need not be full-blown comprehensive plans. They need only include population and household projections, total acreage needs, an assessment of the acres currently available within the City, the proposed boundaries of areas to be annexed and the rationale for annexation, the phasing of annexation, public utility system improvements proposed, costs and phasing. If justifiable, the County will establish urban expansion zoning and protect these areas for future City expansion.

Annexation is the tool to be used by Cities to expand their boundaries. They should work closely with their respective Townships to delineate and agree on areas for orderly annexation. Within designated areas, annexation should be allowed to occur in phrased fashion based on growth projections, public utility needs and appropriate timing.

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This entire discussion assumes that urban development should occur within Cities, which are already capable of providing the full-range of urban public services rather than in Townships where such services are deficient and the rural lifestyle could be threatened. Since the land demand for new development is relatively small, no Township need be threatened by limited annexation nor will it be worthwhile to compete with the City for economic development. The Townships' primary goal should be to protect the rural lifestyle by discouraging scattered non-farm development where it could directly conflict with commercial agriculture.

### **PUBLIC SERVICES AND FACILITIES**

The world is changing and the way public services are delivered will necessarily change. It will be essential to reevaluate services at all governmental levels and decide on optimal levels of service and how these can be provided in the most efficient, cost effective and non-duplicative manner possible. In some cases, this may only involve greater cooperation, service sharing, or joint purchasing; in others, total consolidation. In still others, it may involve the total reconfiguration or elimination of services, responsibilities or elected offices. The erosion of financial resource potential will necessitate action. Business cannot go on as usual indefinitely because funding will not be available to continue to finance the status quo.

In order to gain an understanding of the evolving problem, the County should appoint an intergovernmental task force to study public service deliveries and determine at what governmental levels services can best be provided. The task force should consist of County, City, Township and private sector representatives. This study must be sufficiently detailed to allow the task force to formulate recommendations to policy makers on how future services might be configured.

The County might also consider serving as a facilitator for discussions between the County's school districts on how to best provide quality education in the world of dwindling resources and increasing need.

### **FUNDING PUBLIC CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS**

The County Highway Department has formulated a capital improvements program for county roadway improvements but numerous other improvements are currently needed and others will evolve attributable to simple obsolescence. Just because the County has limited financial resources, does not mean that it should avoid the identification of capital improvement needs. Such limitations make it even more important for the County to establish priorities for how it will spend its limited capital improvements dollars.

The County should develop a five year Capital Improvements Program (CIP) and update it annually to reflect ever-changing priorities. Major capital improvement needs (exceeding \$20,000) should be identified by each department head and costs attached. It will then be the responsibility of the County Planning Commission to establish priorities and recommend a plan to the County Board for approval.

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## **INTERGOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION**

The future viability of Mower County will depend on the degree to which the County's governments are willing to cooperate with each other in search of a common vision. A community that recognizes the value and importance of all of its parts is destined to prosper. Discord will doom it to mediocrity.

Numerous issues are raised by this Comprehensive Plan that cannot and will not be resolved by any one unit of government. They will take a strong public/private effort and the pooling of resources, not the least of which is strong public and intergovernmental communications.

A major effort must be made to open doors to communications with all-important business and governmental leaders and the general public. While the Development Corporation of Austin is actively pursuing economic development for Austin and Mower County, much needs to be done to identify and agree on common interests, environmental protection, community image enhancement, retail needs and potential, housing needs, etc.

In order to facilitate open communications, the County and Austin should agree to conduct a series of public forums at which these and other topics can be discussed. The ultimate product of the process should be a "Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" which identifies opportunities and needs, establishes goals and objectives, formulates strategies and assigns responsibilities for implementation. In addition, a permanent intergovernmental cooperation committee should be established to include representatives from the Cities, Townships and County. This group should meet at least once every two months to discuss common issues and needs.

Services that may readily lend themselves to City/County consolidation include environmental health, a joint housing authority, tax assessing, code enforcement and police services.

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

In addition to the major themes of this plan, there are at least two other areas warranting consideration in this implementation plan as follows:

### **Zoning Ordinance Amendments**

There will be a variety of zoning ordinance changes necessitated by the adoption of this Comprehensive Plan to bring the two documents into agreement. These are being done in conjunction with the Comprehensive Plan update and will not be discussed herein.

### **Housing Quality**

The County has no building construction or housing maintenance code upon which to base minimum standards of housing quality. Recent efforts to consider a building code failed due to resident opposition. There was concern that such a code would increase the cost of construction.

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Generally, housing maintenance codes are even more difficult to adopt but there is a need to provide assurances that rental housing is properly maintained to insure resident safety. There is also a need to be able to deal with garbage houses wherever they might be found. These are the minimum needs that should be considered by the County in ordinance form to assure housing quality.