

Chapter 1

Introduction

Benton County is located in central Minnesota and is part of the rapidly growing St. Cloud Metropolitan Area. Since it was first settled in the late 1850's, Benton County has been primarily an agricultural and rural community, as family farmers found its rich soil suitable for horticultural production, animal pasture land, and dairy operations.

Today the County remains primarily agricultural in its land use, although its southwestern corner is under increasing pressure to accommodate urban development around the Cities of St. Cloud, Sauk Rapids, and Sartell. The economic resources of the county are diverse in terms of income sources from agriculture, industry and retail.

What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is an expression of the county's vision for the future and a strategic map to reach that vision. Comprehensive planning is an important tool for communities to articulate desired land use patterns to ensure a safe, pleasant, and economical environment for residential, agricultural, and commercial activities. A comprehensive plan provides the overall foundation for all land use regulation in the county. In Minnesota, authority for land use planning and regulation is vested primarily in local governments. For cities and townships, the authority to plan is found in Minnesota Statutes Section 462.353. Counties are authorized to plan under Minnesota Statutes Section 394.23. Planning can help:

- Preserve important natural resources, agricultural land, and other open lands.
- Create the opportunity for residents to participate in guiding a community's future.
- Identify issues, stay ahead of trends, and accommodate change.
- Foster sustainable economic development.
- Ensure more efficient and cost-effective infrastructure and public services.
- Provide an opportunity to consider future implications of today's decisions.
- Protect property rights and values.

Why Plan?

We plan for the following reasons:

Understanding the Big Picture

The "comprehensive" nature of the plan requires that all facets and functions of community life be considered. The data collection, analysis, and public engagement that feeds the plan provides a holistic view of county conditions and dynamics. This holistic view allows for future planning and decision making to be based on an informed, factual understanding of the county.

Framework for Local Decision Making

The vision, guiding principles, goals, and policies outlined in this plan provide a basis for decision making and ensure that future actions respond to the desires, priorities, and concerns expressed through the public engagement process.

Guidance for Landowners and Developers

By articulating a vision for future land use, public investment priorities and policies, and development goals, the plan provides guidance, resources, and reassurance to property owners and developers looking to farm, build, or reinvest in the community.

Inform and Engage the Public

The planning process is an avenue for informing community members about the Comprehensive Plan, gaining input on the county vision and priorities, and encouraging broader discussions about community improvement. Just as the public plays a critical role in creating this plan, they are also a key to its successful implementation. Community members play a role as future advocates for the plan, as well as active participants in its implementation.

Mobilize for Action

The plan is intended to be action-oriented, recommending concrete steps and strategies that can be implemented by the County in the immediate future. Many of the strategies recommended in the plan require the cooperation of outside groups, agencies, private businesses, and individuals in the community. The plan provides a basis for future partnership and collaboration.

How to Use this Plan

While intended to guide change, this plan must also remain flexible to respond to changing needs, conditions and emerging trends. County officials must understand that they are responsible for the future of their community, and they must consider carefully the merits of adjustments to the plan. This is a critical step in the planning process; therefore, future decisions need to be evaluated against the vision, goals and policies laid out in this plan (see Chapter 3). Some decisions will align well, while others may not. This could quite possibly lead to changes to the vision or the plan. These proposals will trigger the community planning process, which should engage community members and stakeholders on updates to the plan.

Further guidance is provided in the chapters on how to achieve the Plan's vision and goals. These are discussed through a series of guiding principles. The guiding principles serve as a yardstick to measure the appropriateness and results of future initiatives. The guiding principles are a tool for future decision-making and help to define the character, values, and priorities of Benton County.

Comprehensive Plan vs. Zoning

Comprehensive Plan:

- **Broad in scope**
- **Visionary**
- **Principles and Policy oriented**
- **It's a guiding document**
- **Conceptual and idealistic**
- **Focus is on community or regional scale**
- **Flexible in its interpretation**

Zoning Ordinance:

- **Narrow in scope**
- **More rigid standards**
- **It's the law**
- **Detail oriented, specific**
- **Focus on the district and site level**

So which one rules?

In many instances, State Statutes make direct references linking a zoning ordinance provision to a community's master plan. Case law over the years has proven that a zoning ordinance in sync with a comprehensive plan is a more defendable ordinance than one that is not in sync or is not based on an approved comprehensive plan.

A review of zoning and subdivision ordinances always follows the updated comprehensive plan, resulting in minor or major modifications, depending on the new directions forged by the comprehensive plan.

2040 Comprehensive Plan

The last comprehensive plan was adopted in 2006. Comprehensive plans are typically updated every ten years and reflect a twenty year time horizon. Considering a future over twenty years away forces broadly consideration of issues and opportunities facing Benton County. This Comprehensive Plan looks out to the year 2040. In many ways, this Plan builds on past planning efforts.

This plan contains a series of plan elements and is organized as follows:

- **Chapter 1 - Introduction:** Defines the comprehensive planning process.
- **Chapter 2 - Community Direction:** Sets the stage for the plan by providing an overview of the County's existing conditions and emerging trends.
- **Chapter 3 - Goals and Policies:** Defines the Plan's vision, goals and policies.
- **Chapter 4 - Land Use Plan:** Describes Benton County's desired land use and development patterns, while recognizing the area's natural resources.
- **Chapter 5 - Transportation:** Describes Benton County's transportation system and provides policy direction on how to maintain this system, while accommodating all modes of travel.
- **Chapter 6 - Parks & Trails:** Describes Benton County's park and trail system, and provides a ten year work plan.
- **Chapter 7 - Implementation:** Identifies how the plan will be implemented to achieve the identified goals and policies.

The Planning Process

The Benton County Comprehensive Plan was developed over a year long process (May 2018 – June 2019) undertaken by the Benton County Department of Development and planning consultants from Hoisington Koegler Group, Inc. The planning process consisted of three phases:

- **Discovery Phase:** The discovery phase identified existing conditions and emerging trends that may influence Benton County's future.
- **Exploration Phase:** The exploration phase included ideas on how to update the Comprehensive Plan that reflected the community's issues and concerns, while considering emerging trends.
- **Adoption Phase:** The last phase of the planning process aimed to build consensus on the draft Comprehensive Plan.

Public and stakeholder engagement played a vital part of the comprehensive planning process, ensuring that recommendations in the plan are based on a well-rounded understanding of community needs, values, issues, and opportunities. This planning process employed a number of traditional and contemporary modes of public engagement, and provided a range of opportunities for public input throughout the process. A summary of these activities are discussed in this section.

Online Engagement

An initial step in the updating process was to conduct a community-wide survey using an online engagement tool (i.e., Social PinPoint). The online tool (see image) provided insight into what makes Benton County a great place to live, work and play. Participants were able to take part in conversations and like or dislike a comment that was shared on the "ideas wall." The online tool was promoted through various marketing materials, including flyers that were handed out during the County fair and Amnesty events. County Commissioners and Planning Commissioners promoted the Comprehensive Plan update by distributing business cards that included project contact information and a website link. Online surveys and comment forms were also available during the planning process to garner feedback on draft materials and staff addressed township officials at two Association of Township Officers Meetings.

The "Ideas Wall" attracted over 200 unique visitors, who offered their input on the future of Benton County. Many people used the words "rural," "farming," "townships," "the people," and "parks" to describe Benton County's characteristics.

Figure 1.1. Social Pinpoint "Ideas Wall"

What is your vision for Benton County? Share with us your thoughts by answering the questions below.

Describe the County

What makes us Great?

Challenges

Additional Comments

No big box stores, please

View the discussion

2 months ago

Like Dislike

Support family farms, local & sustainable food

Join the discussion (2)

2 months ago

Like Dislike

Future growth in our school districts, business areas, cities, and rural-urban townships needs to be well thought out and planned for in advance if we want to smoothly transition to our vision for 2040.

View the discussion

2 months ago

Like Dislike

People see Benton County (with its farms, communities, neighborhoods, schools and parks) as a great place to live and raise kids. There are many job opportunities available here and in the nearby tri-county area.

View the discussion

2 months ago

Like Dislike

majority rural, western corridor urban

View the discussion

2 months ago

Like Dislike

rural and urban, river, farms

View the discussion

2 months ago

Like Dislike

economic development

Join the discussion (1)

2 months ago

Like Dislike

combination of rural and some urban areas, farms and woods. Working in the same county I live in is a plus.

Focus Groups

Focus groups served as a sounding board, idea generator and a gauge of community sentiments. Each focus group member served as a "champion" of the process by promoting the public engagement activities and sharing ideas from their interest groups and circles of acquaintances. The focus groups consisted of the following members and met on July 26, 2018 or July 30, 2018, and May 8, 2019:

- Economic Development and Builders Association
- Farm Representatives
- Environmental Representatives
- Township Representatives
- Benton County Public Services
- Benton County Sheriff
- Benton Economic Partnership (April 25, 2019)

In September 2018, the focus group representatives were provided the first draft of the Vision, Goals and Policies chapter and were asked to review and provide comment back to the County.

Township & City Engagement

Many meetings occurred with the townships and cities to better understand their aspirations and concerns (see Table 1.1 & Table 1.2). As part of this effort, Benton County hosted several town hall meetings to fully engage township officials. These meetings occurred on July 18, 2018 and January 16, 2019. Those who chose to participate in the meetings are noted in Table 1.2. In September 2018, all township officials were provided the first draft of the Vision, Goals and Policies chapter and were asked to review and provide comment back to the County. In many respects, a larger part of this process focused on full transparency and collaboration with the townships. The Comprehensive Plan has embraced their desires and aspirations for the future, while addressing their concerns.

Table 1.1. City Meetings

City	Meeting Date	Notes
Foley	July 18, 2018	Meeting with Staff
	December 13, 2018	Meeting with Staff
Rice	December 13, 2018	Meeting with Staff
	February 25, 2019 *	Planning Commission
Royalton	December 13, 2018	Meeting with Staff
Sartell	December 13, 2018	Meeting with Staff

* The City of Rice submitted response regarding their growth areas (see Appendix A); the Comprehensive Plan has addressed these comments accordingly and are reflected in the Land Use Chapter.

Table 1.2. Township Meetings

Township	Meeting Date	Notes
Alberta	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Did Not Attend
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Did Not Attend
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended
Gilmanton	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Did Not Attend
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended
Glendorado	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended
Granite Ledge	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended
Langola	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	December 13, 2018 Town Board Special Session	Representatives Attended
	December 20, 2018 Town Board Meeting	Representatives Attended
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
Mayhew Lake	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended
	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended
Maywood	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended
Minden	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended
St. George	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended
Sauk Rapids	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Did Not Attend
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Did Not Attend
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Did Not Attend
Watab	July 18, 2018 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	January 16, 2019 Listening Session	Representatives Attended
	February 21, 2019 Annual Township Meeting	Representatives Attended

Parks Commission

During the planning process, the Parks Commission was re-established after being inactive for several years. The Parks Commission served as a guiding body in creating the Parks Chapter. The planning consultant met with the Parks Commission on four occasions:

- July 26, 2018
- October 16, 2018
- February 6, 2019
- March 27, 2019
- April 24, 2019

County Board and Planning Commission

Both the County Board and Planning Commission were engaged during project milestones. A summary of these meeting and discussion topics are listed in Table 1.3. Meeting minutes are available on the County's website.

Table 1.3. County Board and Planning Commission Meetings

Meeting Date	Meeting Topic	Topic
May 29, 2018	County Board – Committee of the Whole	Kick-off meeting to discuss the direction of the Land Use Plan
October 30, 2018	County Board and Planning Commission Workshop	Review and discussion pertaining to the draft goals and policies
December 19, 2018	County Board	Project update and discussion pertaining to the growth areas identified in the Land Use Plan
March 14, 2018	Planning Commission	Review and discussion pertaining to the draft plan.
April 8, 2019	County Board – Committee of the Whole	Review and discussion pertaining to the draft plan
May 23, 2019	Planning Commission	Recommendation to adopt the Comprehensive Plan
June 4, 2019	County Board	Adoption of the Comprehensive Plan