

Dodge County, WI

2045 Comprehensive Plan Update

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Adopted: February 11, 2026

Our Plan, Our Future!



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Executive Summary

Background

The general purpose of the Comprehensive Plan is to guide and accomplish coordinated, adjusted, harmonious development within Dodge County. The *Dodge County 2045 Comprehensive Plan* positions the county to guide future land development over the next 20 plus years in a way that preserves the rural character of the county, protects natural resources, and preserves agricultural lands, yet targets areas for essential development. The *Dodge County 2045 Comprehensive Plan* was prepared to addresses nine comprehensive planning elements as established by Wisconsin's Comprehensive Planning Law:

1. Issues and Opportunities
2. Population and Housing
3. Transportation
4. Community Facilities and Services
5. Agricultural, Natural, and Cultural Resources
6. Economic Development
7. Intergovernmental Cooperation
8. Land Use
9. Implementation

Since the planning law was established in 1999 (WI Stats 66.1001), this is the county's third major update of its comprehensive plan. According to the statute, communities practicing land use authority must have their comprehensive plans updated at least once every ten years. Adoption of the *2045 Comprehensive Plan* fulfills the county's obligation for the next ten years. However, amendments to a comprehensive plan can occur anytime. Amendments are typically warranted by changing conditions and preferred policies.

Public Participation & Issue Identification

Public participation is key to any long-range planning effort and, through the use of various tools and techniques, the county received a wealth of input on how the next twenty years may play out and how it should position itself to proactively address a variety of issues. Working with the Ad Hoc Comprehensive Plan Update Committee, the Land Resources & Parks Committee, as well as engaging with residents and landowners via an on-line survey, an on-line project hub, and the hosting of two in-person Public Involvement Meetings, a multitude of issues and opportunities were expressed, which help frame topics the plan needs to address.

The top issues identified during the planning process included:

- Affordable/Workforce Housing, including Senior Housing
- Workforce Development / Employee Attraction
- Water Quality of Lakes and Streams
- Flooding and Stormwater Management
- Accommodation of Renewable Energy
- Access to Medical Care (incl. Mental Health Support)
- Access to Child Care
- Coordinated EMS/Fire Services
- Aging Infrastructure (roads) / Capital Improvement Funding
- Access to High-Speed Internet.

The top opportunities identified include:

- Tourism
- Resident Attraction Based on Quality of Life
- Leverage Agricultural Economy
- Leverage Education System
- Improve Work-Related Transportation

The *Dodge County 2045 Comprehensive Plan* sets the stage to successfully address the current issues and opportunities and to achieve the county's vision for the future. The county's vision for the future further clarifies priorities and speaks primarily to the importance of its proactive involvement to control the amounts and density of development to maintain Dodge County as a desirable place to live, work, and visit. This will mainly be accomplished by maintaining the county's current land use management system by which development must conform. This system has served the county well over the past 20 plus years.

Planning from the Outside-In: A Sustainable Approach

Planners have long taken the approach to land use planning that future development would grow out of the established core of developed incorporated communities (cities and villages). Land within the path of development would be consumed for more intensive-type land uses (residential, commercial, industrial). This approach is certainly valid for growing urban communities as they plan their infrastructure and service systems, but it does little to preserve the value of natural resource which both urban and rural residents value. The traditional approach also assumes that land used for undeveloped purposes such as agriculture doesn't hold the same economic value as "developed" land. In addition, many future land use plan maps for cities and villages grossly overestimate the actual land required to accommodate future growth. Often, the intent is to hold back the encroachment of incompatible agricultural use and make it ready for accommodating development if, and when, the time comes.

A better approach to land use planning for rural counties, especially towns, is to “Plan from the Outside-In.” Basically, this approach gives all land equal value and establishes future use based on the strengths of the features of the land. Current or existing land use plays a big part in determining future use. The reason for this is current land use has weathered economic challenges (such as the 2008 recession) and stands a greater chance of carrying that use forward into the future. Changes from the existing land use pattern are considered in certain locations (such as cities, villages, and town sanitary districts) but are driven by how the local town interprets pressure (or market) for that change and what services it may require. Should unique land use opportunities arise, they will most likely be addressed on a case-by-case basis and be weighed against compatibility with existing uses around them, much like a conditional use permit. A recent example is the influx of renewable energy systems in rural areas. Proactive planning by rural communities can help guide their location and impacts.

When working with the rural public, landowners and residents seem to better understand where development shouldn’t occur versus where it should occur. The “Planning from the Outside-In” approach caters to that logic. Since most of the towns within the county are rural by nature and heavily influenced by farming and natural resources, all farmland preservation planning efforts should be used as the baseline to identify areas to be preserved for agricultural use and those where development could be accommodated. Maps within the farmland preservation plan clearly show the location of farmland preservation areas in the county towns. That presents a huge head start to the land use planning process.

The concept of “Planning from the Outside-In” was integrated with the Comprehensive Plan Update to seamlessly ensure areas designated for farmland preservation are consistent between the two maps and documents.

In addition to using farmland preservation planning as a baseline for future agricultural activities, planners can also use other physical land features to preserve and protect areas important to the natural culture of rural communities. Environmentally sensitive and public lands are also included in this approach. The public “value” of these lands continues to increase in importance for numerous reasons. Designating these areas for long-term preservation is embraced by this approach and is therefore not recommended for transition.

The result of “Planning from the Outside-In” can create a Future Land Use Plan Map that:

- Represents a better reality for attaining the projected future land uses.
- Uses an established and adopted criterion for farmland preservation planning as a baseline.
- Elevates agriculture and natural resource features as a future land use type (not just a holding area for future development).

- Accommodates agricultural related business as an economic opportunity.
- Directs development away from areas that may have an impact on natural resources or land use compatibility.
- Focuses future intensive development closer to established communities able to provide necessary infrastructure.
- Makes incorporated communities more accountable for land consumption to accommodate growth.

2045 Comprehensive Plan Summary

Goals, Objectives, Policies & Recommendations

Each element of the comprehensive plan includes a specific set of goals, objectives, policies, and recommendations that the county will use as a guide to future land use, development and preservation decisions over the next 20 years. Goals, objectives, policies and recommendations are defined as follows

- Goals are broad, value-based statements that express general public priorities and preferences about how the county should address issues over the next 20 years and beyond. Goals address key issues, opportunities and problems that affect the county.
- Objectives are more specific than goals and are measurable statements usually attainable through direct action and implementation of plan recommendations. The accomplishment of objectives contributes to the fulfillment of the goal.
- Policies are general rules, principles, strategies or courses of action used to guide decision making and actions as necessary to accomplish goals and objectives. Policies are intended to be used by decision makers on a regular basis.
- Recommendations are specific actions, projects or activities that are intended to achieve a particular plan goal, objective, or policy.

All of the statements contained in the original comprehensive plan were reviewed, discussed, and modified mainly through discussions and deliberations with the Ad Hoc Comprehensive Plan Update Committee. Issues and topics identified through other public engagements were also brought forth to the Ad Hoc Committee for their consideration. The result was a completely overhauled set of updated statements which better reflect the conditions and needs of Dodge County.

Priority Recommendations

In order for plans to be meaningful, they must be implemented, so the *Dodge County 2045 Comprehensive Plan* was developed with implementation in mind. Chapter 9 of the plan contains an Implementation Action Plan intended to jump start the implementation process by addressing the county's most critical needs, which can then help provide focus and progress on meeting its long-term goals.

The updated Comprehensive Plan contains just over 100 individual recommendations and tasks, and it is unlikely that each and every one of them will be accomplished based on the capacity of county staff. Therefore, a process using input from the Ad Hoc Committee, Land Resources & Parks Committee, and key Department Heads helped to narrow down the relative importance and implementation timing of these recommendations into three categories: Short Term (1-2 years), Medium-Term (3-10 years), and Long-Term (11-20 years). The purpose was ultimately to identify those recommendations which would "move the needle" the most, in the shortest amount of time.

Based on this evaluation, a total of 22 "priority recommendations" were identified for implementation over the next two years and are shown in Table 9.1. A secondary set of 14 priority recommendations were established for implementation in the 3 to 10 year timeframe following the first two-year period and can be found in Chapter 9. It is important to note that items within each table are NOT listed in priority order, as this will provide the county flexibility in addressing factors such as timing, budgets, and capacity.

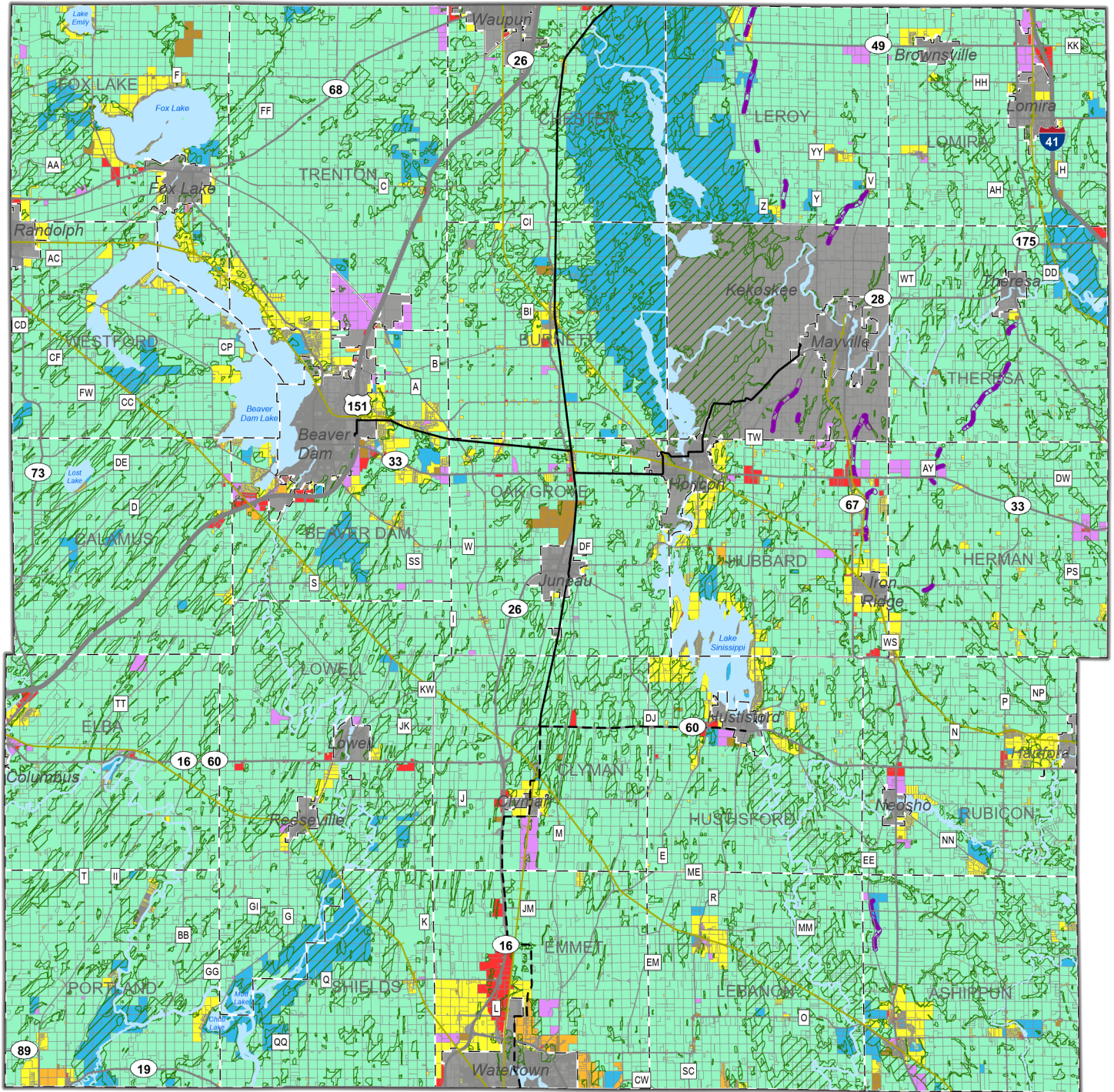
2045 Future Land Use Map

The 2045 Future Land Use Map (see Map 8.2) is the primary component of the comprehensive plan and will be used as a guide for officials when considering future development within the county. The 2045 Future Land Use Map is also long-range in nature and will need to be re-evaluated periodically to ensure it remains consistent with changing trends and conditions.

Pursuant to the "smart growth" comprehensive planning law, Section 66.1001 Wis. Stats., the Land Use element must specify the general location of future land uses by net density or other categories. To address this requirement, land use categories were developed to allow the county and local officials the opportunity and flexibility to promote a desired pattern and density of land use in their communities and throughout the county consistent with county plans and ordinances for those communities under general county zoning jurisdiction, or, consistent with their own local plans and ordinances in the case of those communities NOT under general county zoning jurisdiction. The 2045 Future Land Use Map, therefore, applies specifically to the unincorporated areas of Dodge County and not to the incorporated villages and cities.

Future Land Use

Dodge County, Wisconsin



Legend

Future Land Use*

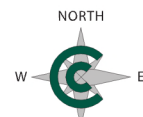
- | | |
|---|--|
| Single Family Residential | Recreation |
| General Residential | Agriculture |
| Commercial | Water |
| Industrial | Conservancy Overlay |
| Cities & Villages | Niagara Escarpment Outcrop with a 300' Buffer |
| Transportation | |
| Utilities & Community Services | |

Recreational Trails

- Existing
 Proposed

Base Layers

- Interstate
 U.S. Highway
 State Highway
 County Highway
 Railroad
 Municipal Boundary



0 1.25 2.5 5 Miles



*Cedar Corporation and Dodge County, 2025.

This map was created with data from Dodge County Land Resources & Parks Department who assumes no liability for the accuracy of this data and any use or misuse of its content is the responsibility of the user. Changes were made by Cedar Corporation under the direction of Dodge County.
Source: Dodge County Land Resources & Parks Department / Map Date: February 11, 2026.

Table 9-1: Implementation Action Plan – Priority Recommendations (1-2 Years)

Plan Element	Recommendation Statement
Issues & Opps	Continue to use the existing development review system which encourages towns, villages and cities to comment on plan amendments, code revisions, and development proposals before the proposals are acted upon, and encourage municipalities to offer the same opportunity to the county.
Housing	Develop educational materials that talk about the benefits of all housing types.
Housing	Continue Dodge County's participation in the Southern Housing Region and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, which provides no interest loans for home improvements for low and moderate income persons.
Housing	Continue the funding and utilization of the Dodge County Community Development Fund to support the construction of local level workforce housing projects.
Economic Dev	Develop a county program to attract childcare providers. For example, consider the provision of facilities, become a licenser for child-care, "bridge" pay gaps and/or provide benefits (e.g., healthcare).
Economic Dev	Develop the "Education Story" for Dodge County and determine market audience for sharing and distributing. a. Leverage the county's proximity/access to higher education (MPTC, UW-Madison, etc.). b. Incorporate comparison with state-level scores for education system.
Economic Dev	Develop and distribute tourism information promoting the county.
Economic Dev	Continue participation and cooperation with the Madison Region Economic Partnership (MadREP) and its successor organization.
Transportation	Leverage local transportation dollars by applying regularly for state road funding opportunities (LRIP, ARIP, etc.)
Transportation	Promote and support the expansion of the Gold Star Memorial Trail.
Transportation	Continue to produce a county Five Year Capital Improvement Plan on an annual basis.
Utilities & CF	Study the re-use of the Henry Dodge Building property for a renewable energy project if the structure is removed.
Utilities & CF	Enhance the county-wide dispatch system with features such as text to 911, sheriff apps, and more focus on citizen interaction.
Utilities & CF	Support eligible cities, villages and sanitary districts who attempt to obtain grants for needed infrastructure expansion and improvements.
Utilities & CF	Utilize the Friends of Dodge County Parks to develop a fundraising strategy to help offset the cost of park improvements.
Utilities & CF	Work with the Friends of Dodge County Parks in communicating parks information to the County Board, the local news media, and to the general public through the Land Resources and Parks Department.
Ag/Nat/Cul	Develop incentives for farmers to leave unplowed and unfertilized buffers along waterways ways and wetlands. Regularly apply for DNR grants for the following uses: a. Shoreland restoration projects. b. Park improvement projects. c. Development of new or existing trails (such as the Gold Star Memorial Trail). d. Other projects that enhance the county's natural resources base.
Ag/Nat/Cul	Assist and support the county's Lake Districts in the implementation of locally created plans, programs, and implementation recommendations regarding water quality improvements
Land Use	Amend the County Land Use Code as needed to implement the Comprehensive Plan.
Land Use	Amend county regulations to allow for creativity in small to medium scale solar energy system siting which encourages placement in/on parking lots, building rooftops, closed landfills, and existing brownfield sites.
Intergov. Cooperation	Host a bi-annual forum in which cities, village, towns, and the county can constructively discuss land use and zoning issues, especially the current issues facing those communities, as well as to improve communication and coordination (i.e., Wis. Stats. 66.023 regarding cooperative boundary agreements, and Wis Stats. 66.30, regarding cooperative inter-governmental agreements).
Implementation	Provide IT advancements to make county government more secure, yet citizen-centric with respect to planning and zoning processes and activities.

The Future Land Use categories are simply designated areas of consistent character, use, and density that share similar goals and objectives for future use, preservation and/or development. The 2045 Future Land Use Map and plan goals, objectives, policies, and recommendations will be used as a general guide to assist county and local officials when making decisions regarding the protection and preservation of the county's agricultural and natural resources and when considering specific development proposals. Decisions and actions to allow specific types of development will be further guided by specific county ordinance and/or Land Use Code provisions established to further define and implement the general goals, objectives, policies, and recommendations of the *2045 Comprehensive Plan*.

The 2045 Future Land Use Map was generated using a significant amount of town-level input and feedback. Each town was provided a current county-level Future Land Use map for its specific community and was asked to review the map and provide input to county staff on any desired changes. The type, amount and distribution of land uses by category as depicted on the 2045 Future Land Use Plan Map are "driven" by the same land use types, amounts, and distribution of land uses contained in the applicable local comprehensive plans. Some of these local level plans are more aggressive in terms of the projected conversion of farmland and, therefore, this "bottom up" plan building process allowed those local units of government the opportunity to have direct input into determining the pattern and density of future development for the county. Noteworthy to the process was the utilization of the Farmland Preservation Plan maps, which clearly identify the areas for long-term agricultural activity. These areas were incorporated into the "Agriculture" future land use category.

For the purposes of describing the future land use map, a set of Future Land Use Categories was developed and includes:

- Conservancy Overlay
- Agriculture
- Recreation
- Single-Family Residential
- General Residential
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Utility & Community Facilities

Overall, the Future Land Use Plan Map recommends protecting the vast majority of the county's landscape for continued agricultural production (see Table 8-3 below) while also allowing for limited amounts of new development (i.e., planning from the outside-in concept). Key implementation tools include utilizing the farmland preservation zoning ordinance, development density management, development site planning, maximum lot sizes, and voluntary land conservation programs.

Table 8-3: 2045 Future Land Use Map Acreages (Unincorporated Dodge County)

Future Land Use Category	Acres	Percent of Total Acres
Single Family Residential	28,214.4	4.86%
General Residential	1,537.7	0.26%
Commercial	3,265.4	0.56%
Industrial	5,313.6	0.92%
Utilities & Community Services	1,900.0	0.33%
Transportation	13,285.1	2.29%
Recreation	39,602.7	6.82%
Agriculture	441,181.2	75.98%
Cities & Villages	40,685.3	7.01%
Water	5,701.2	0.98%
Conservancy Overlay	105,729.4	18.21%
Niagara Escarpment Corridor Overlay	1,366.5	0.24%
Totals (Excludes both Overlay Districts)	580,686.7	100.00%

Source: Dodge County and Cedar Corporation, 2025.

“Participating in this [Ad Hoc] Work Group was a valuable experience. It provided visibility into issues I might not have otherwise encountered and offered an excellent opportunity to network and collaborate on initiatives to strengthen the Dodge County community.”

- Ashley Tracy, Human Resources Manager, John Deere® / Member of the Dodge County Ad Hoc Comprehensive Plan Update Work Group



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