

Agricultural Preservation

A common misconception is that agricultural land uses are temporary, to continue until such time as the land can be developed for some other purpose. Minnehaha County covers 816 square miles or 522,240 acres. Once the land area for municipalities, existing nonfarm land uses, public right-of-way and unbuildable areas such as flood plains is removed, approximately 680 square miles (435,000 acres) could be considered as developable. This available land supply is capable of supporting an additional population of over one million people situated on one acre lots. Developed at an urban scale, this same land area could accommodate a population in excess of three million, depending on the allowable residential density. Clearly, the vast majority of the county's agricultural land area will not be needed to support the population and economic development projections made by this plan.

Agricultural areas have an identity just as a city and its neighborhoods, an identity focused on open spaces free of competing uses. The rural setting is a high amenity area with wide open spaces and natural beauty, making it a desirable place to live. Farmers use the same area as a source of employment and income. As further rural development occurs, agricultural areas stand to lose their identity to these nonfarm uses. By preventing the over development of rural areas, agricultural identity can be preserved and community identity strengthened.

When sprawl development is allowed to occur, the cost of public services increases, productive farmland is consumed, and the rural lifestyle that attracted many people to the area in the first place is diminished. Sprawl destabilizes agriculture by creating the temptation to "sell out". The eventual sale to a developer reduces incentives for farmers to make long term capital investments. The primary purpose of rural areas is not to accommodate growth. This is a function most appropriate for urban areas. Average densities should be kept low to preserve the county's agricultural base and avoid inflating agricultural property values.

Land consumption is not easily quantifiable at the county level. Municipalities can determine the amount of land that will be needed to accommodate the projected population, designate future growth boundaries based on where utilities can be efficiently extended, and determine the timing for development. At the county level where abundant land is available for development, land use decisions must still be based on a systematic analysis of public infrastructure requirements and costs. It should also be recognized that the conversion of agricultural land to other more intense land uses is permanent and not likely to revert to past usage. Therefore, agricultural land should be viewed as a limited and nonrenewable resource that should be preserved and protected.

The county must guard against future growth patterns which produce sprawl development. The major question is how much of the future population can be placed in the rural area without creating the need for costly public investments and reducing the integrity of agricultural resources. The answer lies in the county's ability to channel the majority of the population into compact and efficient development patterns. This can best be accomplished through a continuation of density zoning standards already in place. Land use restrictions should not be viewed as a limit on growth but as being smart about how growth happens.