

Density Zoning

The Comprehensive Plan stresses the importance of avoiding scattered and sprawl development in the rural area. In order to manage rural growth, the county employs a technique known as density zoning which controls the maximum density for residential dwellings in areas zoned for agricultural use.

Prior to density zoning, agricultural district regulations proved ineffective in maintaining a rural environment, particularly on land experiencing development pressure from growing urban centers. For several years the only requirement to build on agriculturally zoned property was for the dwelling to be located on a lot of at least one acre in size. This resulted in a scattering of residential uses which appeared as strip developments along major roads and highways or as multi-lot rural subdivisions. The minimum acreage requirement did little to control growth in agricultural areas of the county.

Changes were made in the agricultural district regulations in an attempt to address these deficiencies, requiring a conditional use for the siting of an individual nonfarm residence and a rezoning for subdivision development. For the first time a review process was required when land use changes were proposed on agriculturally zoned land but this still proved ineffective in controlling the long term land use pattern. Piecemeal and fragmented development continued because the ultimate residential density had not been established.

This prompted further changes that incorporated density zoning into the regulations. This approach accommodates residential uses in the predominately agricultural areas of the county but maintains control over the density in such a manner that premature urban development is avoided.

In Minnehaha County, a density of one dwelling for each quarter-quarter (1/4 1/4) section of land is allowed, provided there are no other dwellings located on the parcel. The minimum lot size is one acre while the balance of the parcel must continue in agricultural use. The transfer of residential building eligibility between quarter-quarter sections is also allowed as long as the parcels are contiguous and under the same ownership. This is accomplished through the conditional use process and is intended to encourage the grouping of building sites on the least productive farmland. There are several advantages to the density zoning concept:

The density approach offers more assurance that farming will continue as the dominate land use in agriculturally zoned areas.

Land use conflicts between residences and farming activities are reduced due to the lower density.

A farmer is allowed to convert less productive farmland to residential use as long as the overall density is not exceeded.

A lower density of population that initially attracted residents to the rural area is better preserved through density zoning.

There is less potential that population densities will exceed the existing level of services, thereby avoiding costly public expenditures.

Density zoning is considered to be a more practical approach to growth management than "large lot zoning". Although the latter approach also controls density by increasing the minimum lot size, there are several disadvantages to this method.

Large lot zoning represents a form of exclusionary zoning. The larger the lot size, the less opportunity there is for people to live in the country due to economic considerations since land costs escalate in direct proportion to the acreage requirement.

A considerable amount of farmland is needlessly removed from production.

Experience has shown that people have difficulty maintaining a large number of acres and appearance becomes a problem. Abandoned vehicles and junk on the larger properties are frequent problems.

Ideally, density zoning ensures that no more than 16 dwellings will occupy any one section of land. In practice, however, a greater number of dwellings can be expected due to the existence of previously described lots and parcels. These properties are known as lots of record and each such parcel qualifies as a building site under the zoning regulations. This will ultimately push residential densities to higher levels in some areas of the county.