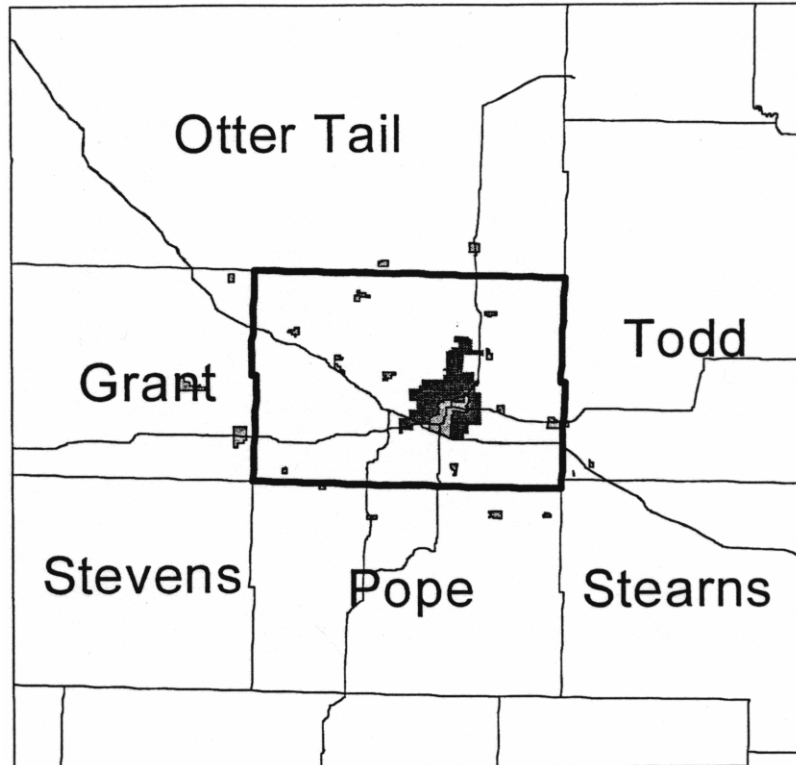


INTRODUCTION



Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose and Scope

This Comprehensive Plan updates the previous Plan which was adopted in 1986, and provides Douglas County leaders and residents with the legal basis and initial tools needed to build a sense of certainty about future land use, environmental quality, resource preservation and utilization, transportation and economic development within the County. The Plan is based on local citizen input, past and future growth trends and the preservation of significant natural and cultural resources. Together these elements form the broad vision, goals, objectives and strategies that local officials and residents will use to make informed land use decisions through the year 2020.

The success of this Plan relies on trust, cooperation and communication among citizens and decision-makers. Citizens have been and must continue to be active participants in the Planning process and help form goals and policies that are based on broad, countywide issues as well as individual concerns. Together a decision-making body that follows through on consensual goals and policies and citizens who maintain an active and broad perspective on land use Planning issues will ensure a successful Plan.

At the heart of this Plan are the goals, policies and strategies that provide a policy framework and articulate a vision for how the County and its residents can respond to and manage change in the County.

The Plan's overall purpose is to guide future growth and development in a manner that responds to the needs of the County, ensures long-term sustainability and is realistic in its assumptions and outcomes. To this end the Plan attempts to minimize land use conflicts by balancing urban and rural growth throughout the County and maintaining environmental quality and economic viability. This requires that land use decisions protect critical natural and cultural resources and balance the preservation of viable agricultural land uses with non-farm rural residential and other more intensive development types.

A set of goals, policies and objectives has been developed that encompasses a broad approach to managing growth and development within the County.

Overall Development

Goal I: Preserve and nurture the current livability of Douglas County.

Policies

- Preserve and protect significant, unique or sensitive natural resources.
- Respect and preserve architectural, archeological and cultural history.
- Accommodate diverse lifestyles.
- Deter premature development in rural areas.
- Preserve the rural landscape as the predominant view in non-urban areas.
- Encourage new development within existing urban service areas.
- Encourage new development to reflect existing architecture, land use patterns and roads.

Objectives

- Evaluate the development of land based upon the incorporation of existing vegetation, scenic vistas and natural recreational opportunities.
- Direct the majority of urban growth to areas near existing communities.
- Locate rural housing development away from recognized agricultural areas and into areas with marginal agricultural soil, and areas adjacent to existing cities where urban services can easily be extended.

Goal II: Manage the impacts of development on the rural lifestyle.

Policies

- Discourage incompatible land uses through effective land use controls.
- Identify appropriate areas for commercial, industrial and non-farm rural residential development.
- Consider the compatibility between agricultural activities and non-farm development in reviewing development proposals.

Objectives

- Evaluate impacts of growth and development on historic and culturally significant places and structures.
- Require rural residential development at densities, which result in the creation of neighborhoods and a sense of place.
- Prime agricultural areas shall not be utilized for non-farm land uses.
- Non-farm land uses will be considered for areas only where they can be served by adequate support facilities, including transportation.
- Locate transportation facilities in a manner that will minimize environmental damage, and reinforce County policies and Planned for the area.
- Density shall be the primary method of regulating residential land use in rural areas.
- Require Planned, staged growth that builds upon existing infrastructure, avoiding “leap-frog” development patterns.
- Condense the majority of new growth to areas adjacent to existing communities where infrastructure will be available.
- Use cluster development to create appealing rural neighborhoods and to offer alternatives to suburban-style development.

The balance of this Plan will focus on more specific policies and strategies for assuring that this County vision is maintained.

The Planning Process

The process of developing a successful Comprehensive Plan for Douglas County included frequent and varying levels of public involvement by those who live, work, shop and do business in the County. The issues and concerns of the citizens were incorporated to create a shared vision for the County. This shared vision provides the foundation on which specifics of the Comprehensive Plan can be formulated. While this endeavor can be difficult on a regional scale, the importance of a shared vision will add significantly to the merit and usefulness of the Plan in the long run.

From the initial stages of the project, Douglas County staff members have focused on making this a meaningful, participatory Planning process. The Comprehensive Plan incorporates public comment that was gathered throughout the Planning process, which began in November 1997. Identification of issues and the formulation of a County vision began in early February 1998 with a County Cluster Group Meeting.

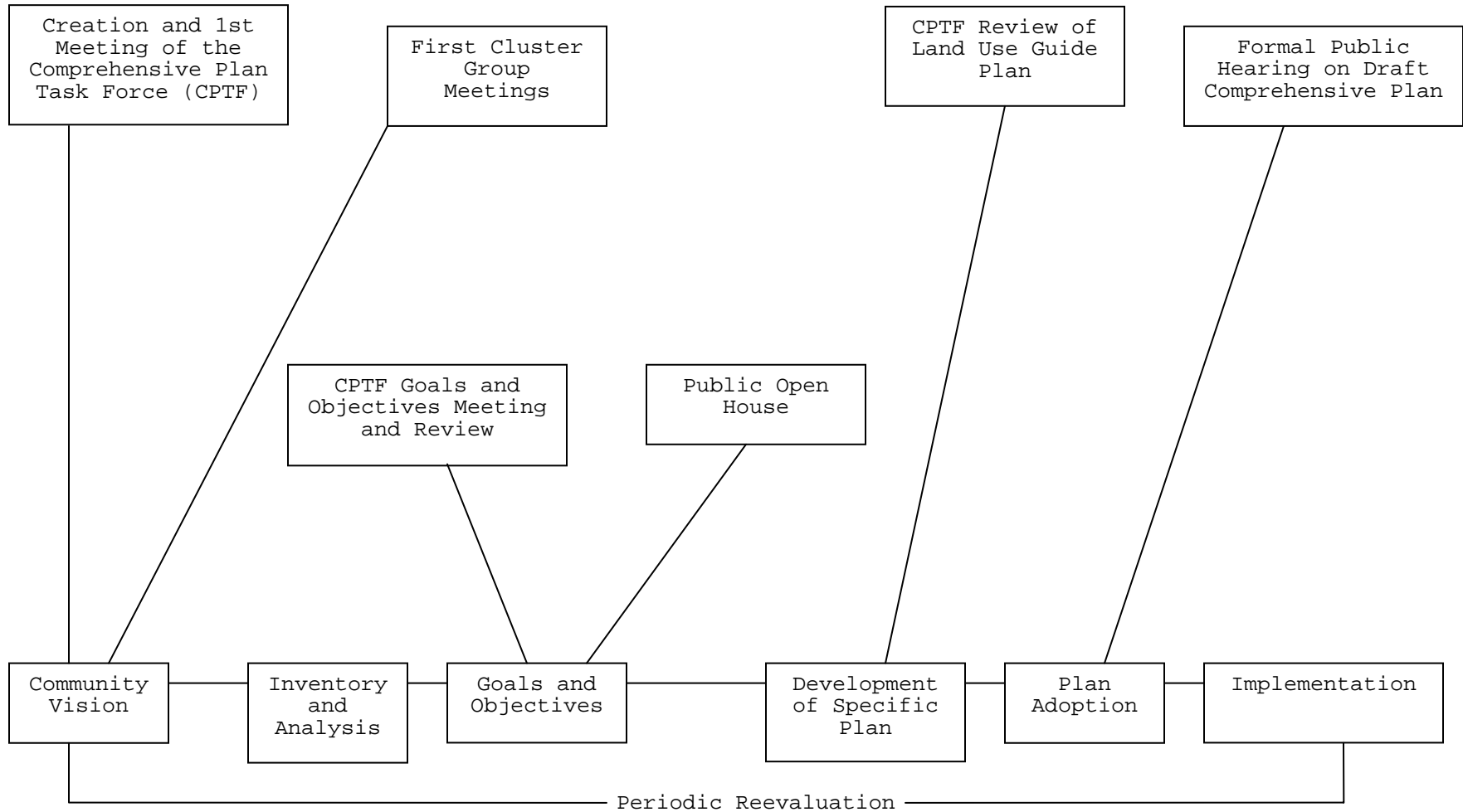
This meeting brought together city and township representatives to formulate and discuss land use issues within the County. Also, at this time the Comprehensive Plan Task Force (CPTF) was created and consisted of a representative cross-section of County citizens and decision-makers. The CPTF met formally two times during the process to lend insight and provide guidance. Meetings were held in conjunction with critical milestones of the process including community visioning and goal formulation. In addition, a public open house was held in July 1998 to incorporate public comments on goals, policies and objectives. In October 1998, a formal public hearing was conducted for review and comment on the Draft Comprehensive Plan.

Figure 1-1 illustrates how each of the above public involvement strategies fits within the larger Planning process. The major components of the Douglas County Comprehensive Planning Process included *community visioning; inventory and analysis; formulation of goals, objectives and strategies; creation of Plan components; and the development of implementation strategies*. Periodic reevaluation of the Plan should occur, as well, every three to five years to ensure that goals and policies are consistent with changes taking place within the County.

Community visioning was undertaken in the preliminary phase of the Comprehensive Plan process to identify pertinent issues and opportunities and to define a policy direction for the Plan. The creation of the CPTF and Cluster Group meetings were instrumental in identifying public issues and were the main involvement strategies of this phase. Information gathered provided the foundation for a shared community vision and formed the building blocks upon which the Comprehensive Plan was constructed. Major issues identified by this process included:

- Protect, preserve and enhance agricultural land uses
- Minimize land use conflicts between agriculture and rural residential
- Maintain a balance between new and expanding feedlot development and residential growth and development
- Ensure that feedlots are appropriately designed, located and meet environmental quality concerns
- Preserve rural character and rural lifestyles
- Protect critical natural resources and balance environmental quality with urban and rural growth

Figure 1-1: Douglas County Comprehensive Planning Process Flow Chart



- Manage urban growth and maintain an urban / rural balance.
- Preserve water quality, especially within the Alexandria urbanizing area.
- Coordinate land use Planning among the county, townships and cities to create more cost effective solutions that ensure the future sustainability of the County.

Inventory and Analysis provided the essential physical and demographic data on which to base informed land use decisions. This process identified existing cultural and natural resources that merit protection and provide opportunities for growth. It also gave the community an opportunity to update the tangible data elements, e.g., street maps, population and demographics, existing land use and economic data that give guidance to the Plan formulation. Evaluation of these elements lends insight into the foundation of resources available to the County as well as those elements that need to be protected or enhanced.

Goals, Policies and Objectives are an outgrowth of the inventory and analysis and visioning process. Taken together, they express the citizens' and elected officials' vision for the future. Goals represent concrete interpretations of the shared values that the County and its citizens have identified as being critical to the quality of life. Policies and objectives give refined direction and methods for achieving the goals and the County's vision. Goals, policies and objectives are at the heart of the Comprehensive Plan because they attempt to articulate results of the participation process. This creates a path or framework to guide elected officials and Planners as they make complex policy decisions on the future of the County. While the creation of goals and policies was undertaken as a separate step in the Planning process, they are incorporated throughout the Plan's text. This acknowledges the importance of goals and policies as defining elements of the Plan and their interrelationship to specific Plan components.

Opportunities for public participation in the formulation of goals, policies and objectives included a public open house and interaction through the CPTF. Goals, policies and objectives were periodically updated throughout the process to reflect the most recent data and public input available.

Creation of Plan components such as land use, transportation, demographics, economics, parks and recreation, natural resources and county facilities Plans, occurred once the goals, policies and objectives had been successfully articulated. This stage relied heavily on public feedback to ensure that Plan development was on the right track and covered the pertinent County information.

In addition to a second set of cluster group meetings with city and township representatives, the general public had the opportunity to comment on the progress and specific aspects of the Plans both in an open house and in official public hearings on the draft.

Implementation consisted of adoption of the Comprehensive Plan and the creation, updating and administration of official controls. The County Board can rely upon the Plan and its policies as complex and changing land use situations arise. As such, continued public involvement and informed guidance will ensure that the Plan remains a strong, representational document. Official controls such as the zoning ordinance, subdivision regulations, water management Plan, on-site septic code, etc., provide the tools that can be used to achieve the desired result.

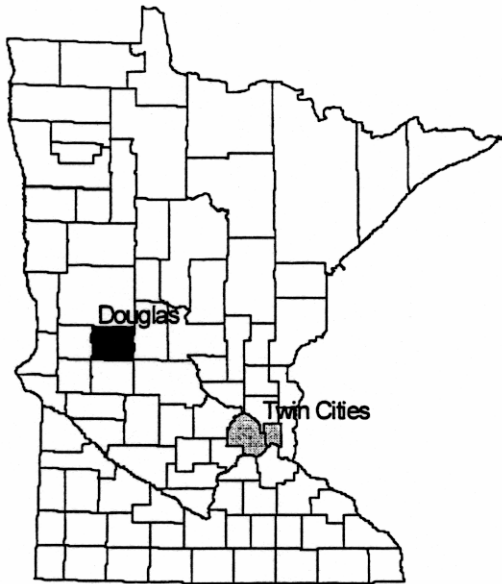
All of the County's efforts were directed at achieving a Comprehensive Plan that reflects the vision and goals of the citizens of Douglas County. In addition to the extensive public meeting process, a County newsletter, *Passages*, was published twice to inform residents of the Plan's progress. Press releases announced all times and places for public meetings, and the County staff worked extensively with residents to ensure that all segments of the population were informed of and involved in Planning-related activities.

Physical Context

Located in west-central Minnesota, Douglas County maintains easy access to Interstate 94 and is approximately 130 miles from the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area (Figure 1-2). The County is characterized by agricultural land uses, rolling topography and numerous lakes and surface waters. Together these physical and cultural elements create an attractive setting for agrarian, recreational and small town lifestyles. Douglas County is approximately 28 miles from east to west and 22 miles north to south. Counties neighboring Douglas include Otter Tail to the north, Todd and Stearns to the east, Pope and Stevens to the south and Grant to the west.

Douglas County contains 20 Townships, 11 incorporated Cities and six unincorporated Villages. The City of Alexandria is the largest city in the County with a 1990 population of 8,029. Over the last decade, the County has experienced an overall rate of growth of approximately 3 percent, increasing from 27,893 people in 1980 to 28,674 people in 1990. The majority of this growth has occurred in the central portion of the County; with Townships on the periphery experiencing population decreases (see detailed discussion in Chapter 2).

Figure 1-2: Regional Context Map of Douglas County



The City of Alexandria and the Townships of Alexandria, Carlos and LaGrande represent the main urban growth area of the County. This area is defined by a rich abundance of lakes and natural resources and creates strong demand for residential uses, tourism and commercial activities. A secondary growth area is located near Osakis and is dominated by commercial and residential land uses. The remainder of the County is dominated by agricultural land uses, lakes and small towns.

Surface water resources include approximately 304 lakes greater than 10 acres and numerous rivers and wetlands, which provide important visual and recreational amenities as well as important environmental resources. In addition, tourism has grown in recent years; taking advantage of this scenic setting and the close proximity to Alexandria, a culturally and historically significant Minnesota City. Tourism is expected to continue to increase and be a valuable asset to the County well into the future.

In the future, Douglas County is expected to grow at a moderate rate and continue to be a popular resort and rural residential destination. Future growth pressure to develop land in and around the Alexandria area will continue. However, the rate and extent of this growth will rely on a number of critical factors, including the ability to provide urban services and the County's resolve to preserve the agricultural economy and sustain a rural or small town lifestyle. This Comprehensive Plan establishes the policies that will influence future growth and change in a manner that best meets the needs and desires of residents, preserves the natural resource base and the agricultural economy, and sustains a preferred way of life.