

TOWN OF GRAND RAPIDS COMPREHENSIVE PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan was developed to comply with Chapter 66.1001 of the Wisconsin Statutes, or what is commonly referred to as the Wisconsin Comprehensive Planning Law. The plan's nine chapters address each of the components that are required under the comprehensive planning law and attempt to relate each component to the others. Goals, objectives and policies were developed in each area and are based on facts and findings in the plan, as well as responses from Grand Rapids residents to a community planning survey. This comprehensive planning process began when the Town adopted a public participation plan to encourage all residents to participate with their ideas and concerns. The next step was the community planning survey. Many of the ideas, concerns and comments that were submitted in that survey are referred to in the plan and reflected in many of the goals, objectives and policies.

1. Demographics

Wisconsin has 1,258 towns. Grand Rapids is the 13th largest unincorporated town; it is larger than 99% of all towns in the State. In the year 2000, Grand Rapids was the 107th largest municipality of the 1,851 towns, villages and cities in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Department of Administration's 2008 estimates of population rank Grand Rapids 117th, still in the top seven percent by population. Although the ranking slipped somewhat during the past eight years, the Town's population is expected to grow from 7,801 in 2000 to 9,448 in 2025, an increase of over 20%. This growth will, obviously, impact the need for housing, streets, police and fire services, garbage collection and more.

Just less than two percent of the Town's population is comprised of minorities, but that figure has continue to grow slowly since 1990. The largest minority groups are of Asian decent, with Blacks, American Indian and Hispanic populations on the increase. Like all of America, Grand Rapids' population is aging. The median age has increased from 27.2 years in 1980 to 38.4 years in 2000. For comparison purposes, the median age in Wood County in 2000 was 38.0 and in Wisconsin, it was 36.0. As the population continues to age, demands for municipal services, social services, types of housing, community facilities and transportation needs will likely change. These changes will affect the way Grand Rapids does business and, along with a currently depressed economy, will impact the types of municipal services that can be provided and how those services will be provided.

Grand Rapids residents are better educated than the general populations of the County or State. Nearly 95% of Town residents, age 25 and older, graduated from high school (Wood County, 85%) and close to 28% have earned a Bachelor's degree or higher (Wood County, 17%). The strength of Mid-State Technical College is evident with over nine percent of Town residents holding a two-year degree (Wood County, 8%, Wisconsin, 7.5%). A result of the higher education is that nearly one-third of workers from Grand Rapids have management positions and the median household income in Grand Rapids (\$62,515 in 2000) is a staggering 50% higher than the Wood County average (\$41,811) and 43% higher than the average in the State (\$43,791).

2. Housing

Grand Rapids has nearly 2,854 housing units (U. S. Census 2000), 40% of which were built in the last 25 years and nearly 22% were built since 1990.¹ Because all housing units use septic systems versus

¹ In December, 2008, there were 3,079 households paying the town garbage disposal fee.

municipal sanitary sewer, 98% are single-family units. There are a few (less than two percent) duplexes, but only a handful of units that are larger because larger units usually need municipal sewer and water.

Only nine percent of Grand Rapids householders lived in the Town prior to 1970. About a quarter of them moved in between 1980 and 1989 and nearly a third moved into the town since 1995. This is typical of a fast growing, primarily commuter, municipality. The fast growth can also explain how a community is pressured and sometimes stressed to provide expanded municipal services, such as adding full-time staff, administrative offices, emergency service vehicles, and road maintenance equipment.

According to the 2000 census, fully half the homes in Grand Rapids were valued at between \$100,000 and \$199,999 and eight percent were valued higher than that. Many homes (42%) were valued at less than \$100,000, providing the Town with a good range of housing values. This fact shows that Grand Rapids has affordable housing and is available to persons of all economic means. The values have certainly changed since 2000 and local real estate data suggests that, in 2007, the average list price of homes for sale was \$153,380, with the average sale being \$149,000. The low sales price on 2007 was \$23,900 and the high was \$410,000. Partly because of the high median household incomes in Grand Rapids, nearly half of all home owners spent less than 15% of the household income for housing. Nearly a quarter of renters, on the other hand, spent 20 - 25% of their income for housing.

There are 116 platted subdivisions in Grand Rapids today, consuming 1,575 acres and having 2,308 building lots. Over half of the subdivisions were created during the suburban movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but a third were created in the 1980s and 1990s as demand in Grand Rapids continued. Because of the downturn in the local economy and slower growing population, only one subdivision has been recorded in the Town since 2000. Certified survey maps (CSMs) are also used to create new building lots. Since 1970, when CSMs were first required when lots of certain a size are created, 394 “reviewable” CSMs have created another 802 building lots in Grand Rapids.

If the population grows as projected, Grand Rapids will need another 933 households by the year 2025. Approximately 1,000 acres of undeveloped land will be required to accommodate the building lots, streets and utility easements for the new housing. The Town’s policies and beliefs are to continue to provide a range of housing choices that meet the needs of persons of all income levels, all age groups and of special needs; promote development of housing through fair and equitable development standards that protect the aesthetics of the community; and assure that land is made available for development and redevelopment of low- and moderate-income housing.

3. Transportation

According to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT), Grand Rapids has 8.5 miles of “urban” collector streets, 4.5 miles of arterials, and 6.0 miles of “rural” collector streets. The function of each category to carry different traffic volumes increases from local streets that serve residential subdivision lots, to collector streets to arterials. Although Grand Rapids residents may not be familiar with the WisDOT terms, they are familiar with traffic volumes at certain times of the day at certain intersections in town and on certain streets. Community planning survey respondents showed their frustration and concern for safety on Grand Rapids streets, citing speeding, visibility, traffic channeling, and traffic control issues. The function of various streets is obvious when studying average daily traffic counts. The Planning Commission knows about the function that certain streets and highways are designed to serve and are aware of traffic issues. To that end, they have pledged to provide safe transportation for various modes of transport throughout the Town. An annual review of the condition of town roads is conducted in conjunction with the budgeting process. An official street map has been adopted and is reviewed regularly to plan for future through streets and major road widening. Finally, the Town is a cooperator with WisDOT and neighboring municipalities for planning of a future

extension of Highway 54 through the Town. The Town's focus in this regard, is to provide a quality highway, while protecting Town property owners and property values. They also cooperate with WisDOT on updating the functional classification of streets and highways in Grand Rapids to access State and Federal funding where possible.

Streets and highways are not the only mode of transportation that is important to a community's growth and vitality. Airports and rail are vital in this fast-paced society. Alexander Field provides a good opportunity for businesses that need to fly into the community or to bring in clients to conduct business and the Central Wisconsin Airport is critical to the area for the much needed commercial passenger and air freight services they provide. Rail service is critical for moving raw materials and finished products for manufacturers. The Canadian National Railroad travels across Canada, through central Wisconsin, and on to New Orleans. Grand Rapids is well served by rail, having a large area designated for future industrial growth located immediately on rail access.

Multi-use trails improve quality of life and provide an alternate means of transportation. There is already a good trail system that extends into the Town and additions to them will make the Town more attractive to businesses and to those who select Grand Rapids to be their home. Public modes of transportation, though limited, serve Town senior citizens and those with physical restrictions who may depend on public transportation for their travel needs. A shared ride taxi company and the Aging & Disability Resource Center of Central Wisconsin provide transportation to qualified individuals in Grand Rapids. The Town's policy is to provide choices of transportation by working with providers and provide an interconnection of transportation systems between municipalities through a number of objectives.

4. Utilities & Community Facilities

As an unincorporated town, Grand Rapids does not provide municipal utilities normally associated with a city or village, specifically sanitary and storm sewers or drinking water. Instead of sanitary sewers, Town residents must provide and maintain their own septic systems. One reason that Grand Rapids has developed as rapidly as it has is because the sandy soils in the south half of the town are very septic system friendly. Lot sizes must be large enough to accommodate the house and garage, the septic system and an area for a replacement septic system to be used if the original system fails. Private wells are also used instead of a municipal water treatment and distribution system. The Wisconsin plumbing code requires that septic tanks be at least 25 feet from the well and septic drain fields must be a minimum of 50 feet from wells. These setbacks are also factors of lot size. Finally, instead of storm sewers, the Town must rely on ditching to handle storm water runoff in some areas. A 66-foot right-of-way is typical for local streets and is usually adequate to accommodate the paved surface, shoulder and ditching, as well as snow storage from winter plowing.

Grand Rapids has a sanitary district that was originally established in 1972 for the purpose of studying and providing sanitary sewer. The cost of providing sanitary sewers to the entire sanitary district was estimated, in 1972, to be \$13 million. In 1986, Grand Rapids collaborated with Wisconsin Rapids and Biron on an area wide sanitary sewer extension plan. Although much of the Town is in the service area boundary, none of the Town has been provided sanitary service as of this time, nor is it likely that such service will be provided in the future without annexing to either of the other two communities.

The community facilities and services that are available to Town residents include the emergency services, parks and recreation trails, library, schools, child care, health care, and telecommunications. Ambulance service is provided under contract with Higgins Ambulance Service. The police department has grown to full time and will be a 24/7 department in the near future. The Wood County Sheriff's Department provides backup when town officers are busy or off duty. The fire department has a full-time Fire Chief and 40 regular fire fighters. The department is well equipped with vehicles and equipment and

has mutual aid agreements with neighboring communities and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Town officials are committed to keeping Grand Rapids a safe place to live.

Although the other community facilities, including parks, library, schools, child care, and health care, are not provided directly by the Town, Grand Rapids residents are nonetheless fortunate that each of these services is available.

5. Agricultural, Natural & Cultural Resources

Grand Rapids is fairly flat, topographically speaking, with elevations above mean sea level ranging from 985 feet to 1,055 feet. Very few areas have soils that are classified as “prime agricultural” lands and, in fact, there is less than one acre that fit that description and only 62.5 acres that are “prime if drained.” The best soils for development of structures with basements lie south of County Road W (Kellner Road) and immediately north and south of Highway 54 from Kingston Road east to 80th Street. The area in between is characterized by high groundwater and is a known groundwater recharge area. It is important for water quality that this area be protected from contamination.

Those who responded to the community planning survey said that the wooded lands play an important role in determining the character of Grand Rapids and they expressed concern that local woodlands and wooded lots be preserved by good planning and development regulations. Likewise, ground and surface water is important to residents. There is a strong recognition that groundwater quality be protected because that is the source of drinking water for every household and business in the Town. Of particular interest is what is seen as an invasion of local drinking water quantity and quality caused by municipal wells owned and operated by Wisconsin Rapids and Biron. Notable change has occurred with the drying up of streams in the Town and residents want to see the recovery of those streams by managing our groundwater resources.

Although the Town has few wetlands, the forests and wooded lots provide a home to an abundant variety of wildlife, including deer, turkeys, rabbits, and more. Although some feel that these creatures are pests, destroying flowers and shrubs, most appreciate the opportunity to share their lands with wild animals. With good development standards, even though another 1,000 acres will be needed to satisfy housing needs through 2025, citizens in Grand Rapids feel strongly that the character of the town can be preserved to make a place for wildlife that is native or has been introduced to Grand Rapids.

6. Economic Development

Economic Development is a huge issue and one that has to be addressed on a regional, statewide, national and global level. Grand Rapids is home to over 50 businesses and 80 home occupations. Over half of the businesses are located along Highway 54. Ten of the Town’s businesses have over 10 employees, four have more than 50 and one – Mid-State Technical College – has over 250 employees. Although the Town has a large area adjacent to the railroad right-of-way designated for manufacturing, most large manufacturers require sanitary sewer and water pressure to meet fire codes.

A lot of commuting occurs between Wood and Portage counties. More commuters come into the county than those who commute out for employment. Of Grand Rapids residents who are age 16 and older, 83% work in Wood County and about 16% work outside the county. Portage County is the most likely location for most jobs for those commuting outside Wood County to work. It was noted from community planning survey results that many Grand Rapids households have one person who works in the greater Wisconsin Rapids area and one that works in the Stevens Point/Plover area. Grand Rapids, then, is a good location for families where workers work in opposite directions.

Wisconsin Rapids has a business park and an industrial park located adjacent to Grand Rapids. A private developer has proposed a 200+ acre business park development along Highway 54. The Biron development would require annexation of several acres of land from Grand Rapids. The point to consider with these industrial and business parks is that there is ample space for larger manufacturers, the size that need the municipal services that Grand Rapids cannot provide. If large businesses would locate in any of those municipal industrial parks, an opportunity would be created for smaller, spin-off businesses to develop in Grand Rapids near the larger industries. In addition, Grand Rapids is in a perfect location to realize additional residential growth.

Grand Rapids has worked closely with a network of economic development organizations. These include the Heart of Wisconsin Business & Economic Alliance, Wood County, the North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, and Centergy. Working together is the right way to generate new economic growth that will benefit all communities in the area through increased tax base and jobs. The Town recognizes that it has many strengths, including high quality municipal services, an abundant and well educated workforce, great location in proximity to four-lane access, lower property taxes than surrounding communities, and a cooperative, supportive and proactive town government, to name a few.

An economic goal of the Town is to retain and expand their existing small businesses and to encourage new small businesses to located along the Highway 54 corridor. Small and medium size manufacturing companies or high tech companies will be encouraged to locate in the “manufacturing” zone. For large manufacturers that need the municipal services mentioned, Grand Rapids officials will work with Biron and Wisconsin Rapids to locate in the industrial and business parks of those communities, parks that happen to be located adjacent to Grand Rapids.

7. Intergovernmental Cooperation

Grand Rapids officials have long recognized the need to work with their neighboring communities to provide cost effective, efficient services and programs to their residents. The Planning Commission has, on several occasions, invited the Planning Commission from Wisconsin Rapids to the table to discuss issues of mutual concern. At one time, a representative from the Grand Rapids Planning Commission attended City Planning Commission meetings to maintain a line of communication, to act as a liaison, and to show good faith to the City that the Town was serious in their efforts. More recently, the Town has been represented at the Wisconsin Rapids Mayor’s morning meetings to share ideas and discuss issues of mutual concern. The future extension of Highway 54 through Grand Rapids has resulted in cooperative participation of Town officials with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, Wood County, the City of Wisconsin Rapids and the Village of Port Edwards. The Town Board has been meeting with Biron officials to discuss shared services to reduce costs for both communities. Unfortunately, the Town’s desire to have meaningful meetings with Wisconsin Rapids and develop a strategy that will help both communities have been unsuccessful at this time. It is the hope of the Grand Rapids Planning Commission that the downturn in the economy will encourage the City to give serious consideration to possible shared services, shared facilities and shared programs.

On-going cooperative efforts have produced successes. The Town is involved in some cooperative manner with the Wood County Sheriff’s Department, the Wood County Communications Department for E-911 services, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for forest fire protection, the Wood County Park & Forestry Department regarding Lake Wazeecha, the Wood County Health Department, the Wood County Planning & Zoning Department for planning assistance and help with private sewage issues, the Wood County Towns Association, the Wisconsin Rapids Public School District, Mid-State Technical College, and more. Town policy is that they are always willing to sit down to discuss issues that will provide Town residents better services more cost effectively.

There are several existing “tools” that encourage (and sometimes force) cooperative efforts. A few of these include this plan and its future land use map, the Wisconsin Plumbing Code that regulates septic systems, the Uniform Dwelling Code (UDC) that regulated construction of residential structures, the Wood County and Town of Grand Rapids Subdivision Ordinances that have provisions for splitting parcels of land, Extraterritorial Plat Review that allows Port Edwards and Wisconsin Rapids an opportunity to review some land splits, Water Quality Management Review that guides sanitary sewer extensions, and annexation laws. There is still room for improvement. Conflicts continue in the areas of annexation, extraterritorial plat review, conflicting land use plans, and a lack of coordinated services.

8. Land Use

Using the Land Based Classification System (a system for categorizing land uses), Agricultural and natural resources-related uses consume most of the land in Grand Rapids. Seventy percent of the land area is in this classification. A distant second place goes to residential activities with 2,148 acres or 18.3%. Other classifications of interest include 59 acres of commercial properties, 185 acres dedicated to industrial uses, and 252 acres classified as social, institutional or infrastructure-related activities.

Each land use is related to all others. For instance, 1,000 acres of land will be needed to accommodate the anticipated growth in population by the year 2025. That land will be used for building lots and associated streets and utility easements. The additional people will also require support businesses (eg. grocery stores, gasoline stations, medical services, etc.). Thus, commercial lands will need to be added, approximately 11 acres to the year 2025. The population will also need jobs. Hence, more land (35 acres) will be needed for industrial and office uses (even though some jobs may be home-based, central offices will be required and manufacturing plants may be required to produce their goods). Each of these will impact what is now undeveloped, thus reducing the amount of agricultural and natural resources-related lands by as much as 1,100 acres or more. If the areas with shallow groundwater (the groundwater recharge area) is to be protected and preserved, Town officials will have to carefully guide development through effective zoning and continued planning.

Land use goals of the Town of Grand Rapids include working with adjacent municipalities regarding boundary issues and cooperative growth management, preservation of the Town’s current landscape and suburban character as requested by citizens in the community planning survey, and recruitment of developers and businesses to reuse vacated buildings.

9. Implementation

Grand Rapids has invested a lot of time and effort on the part of the Planning Commission members and staff to develop this plan. The Town Board will take the next step and adopt the plan as an ordinance as required by the comprehensive planning law. The next step will be a comprehensive review of the Town zoning and subdivision ordinances to assure that those ordinances are consistent with the plan. The official map will also be reviewed and amended if necessary to provide consistency. Other tools that will be used to implement the comprehensive plan include a capital improvement program (CIP), the uniform dwelling code (UDC) and other ordinances that the Town can adopt if necessary to regulate junk vehicles, noise, groundwater protection, and others.

Administration of the comprehensive plan will remain with the Planning Commission and their staff. That commission has certain powers prescribed by Wisconsin laws to perform their planning and zoning duties. They will remain proactive in monitoring the plan, amending it when appropriate or when required by law, and assuring that the land use ordinances remain consistent with the plan goals, objectives and policies. Final oversight of the entire process will continue to be monitored by the elected Town Board of Supervisors.