



Vilas County Zoning and Planning

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A County's Vision

The Vilas County Comprehensive Plan was completed and adopted on November 10, 2009. The Zoning Committee worked in partnership with the Land Use Planning Committee, North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, each of the fourteen Vilas County Towns; the County Mapping Department, Corporation Counsel, and many Vilas County citizens. Literally thousands of people were involved with the process: helping with issue identification and development, responding to community surveys, and attending over one hundred local level meetings, public information meetings, and public hearings.

By Vilas County initiating a lead role in planning, the County is being pro-active to the idea that even though things change, County-level coordination and local-level cooperation can achieve sound long-range planning goals through integrated implementation that protects the environment, better serves the community, and treats landowners in a fair and equitable manner.

“We now have a tool in place to help guide the future growth and changes that will be occurring in Vilas County,” stated Dawn Schmidt, Vilas County Zoning Administrator, “and that tool is the Comprehensive Plan.”

The Vilas County Comprehensive Land Use Plan is an advisory document consisting of nine chapters: 1) Background & Demographics; 2) Natural Resources; 3) Housing; 4) Utilities & Community Facilities; 5) Transportation; 6) Economic Development; 7) Land Use; 8) Intergovernmental Procedures; 9) Implementation. It provides guidance for future development, rezoning, and land division decisions. The Vilas County Comprehensive Plan is used in conjunction with local government comprehensive plan recommendations to achieve the goals outlined in each chapter. “The residents of Vilas County, in cooperation with their governmental units, will share in the benefits as well as the responsibilities to

preserve and expand their opportunities, now and into the future, shaped by the vision of the Comprehensive Plan”, stated Schmidt.

As stated in the Plan, this cooperative effort actually started in 1997 when the Vilas County Board of Supervisors adopted Resolution 1997-63 to “support the development of a Comprehensive Land Use Plan for Vilas County in cooperation with the local Towns and the City of Eagle River.” The resolution also authorized applying for state grant funding to offset the costs of the Land Use Plan and Ordinance development, allocating financial resources in the 1998 budget to start development of the plan.

Vilas County’s land use process began in 1998, along with a Lakes Classification and Shoreland Management program. The Shoreland Zoning Ordinance was revised to establish dimensional standards for development on waterfront properties, but the issue of compatible land uses was not addressed. While zoning regulations have been in effect since the 1940s, a land use plan was needed to assess current use decisions against the market forces for both on and off water properties.

In 1999, the Governor signed into law Wisconsin Act 9 the Budget Bill. This law contained substantial revisions to the existing planning related statutes and established the current Comprehensive Planning Law (§66.1001 WI Stats.). The law requires a definition of a plan that shows demographic (population) trends, natural resources, housing, transportation, economic development, and land uses. In addition, it requires consistency between the local plan and implementation tools of official mapping, subdivision and zoning ordinances, and requires public participation. Most important, it maintains that the process be locally driven so all local units of government decide their own future.

Effective and efficient land use administration needs to be championed by both County and local officials. Vilas County will refer to their Comprehensive Land Use Plan and to the locally adopted plans to find guidance for future development, rezoning, and land division decisions. Landowners are free to develop their property, but the development will fit within the guidelines written and understood to be in the best interest of the larger community and all involved. Edward McMahon, a land use planner, attorney and vice president of The Conservation Fund, puts it this way: “Zoning is really about balance. At its best, zoning can help strike the elusive balance between quality of life and economic vitality.”

A copy of the complete plan can be obtained from the Vilas County Zoning and Planning Office. Please contact our office if you have any questions or for more information - we are located in the Vilas County Courthouse - our hours of operation are Monday – Friday, 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. We can also be contacted by phone at (715) 479-3620, email at zoning@co.vilas.wi.us, or by mail at 330 Court Street, Eagle River, WI 54521.

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