

CHAPTER 2: PLANNING PROCESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Marathon County facilitated a comprehensive public engagement effort to create this Plan. The Marathon County Environmental Resources Committee (ERC) provided leadership to engage the public to ensure that programs are valued, understood, and supported by citizens and customers. Key stakeholders provided direction on plan content and vision for agriculture.

Numerous opportunities for public engagement during the planning process were offered citizens. These included multiple small group meetings at town halls, citizen and business surveys, and open houses.

During the process, staff from the Conservation, Planning, and Zoning Department assisted communities with the development of local farmland preservation area maps and comprehensive planning support.

Based upon feedback and surveys, the ERC made final recommendations to the County Board for adoption. Summaries of the results of these meetings and surveys can be found in Appendix B: Community Engagement.



The process to create this Plan was divided into two parts:

- **Part A:** Educating local leaders and partners on new working land policy opportunities; evaluating past program activities, defining indicators of success, developing specific County farmland preservation strategies to support community and economic development initiatives, and community engagement to obtain the citizen perspective and value of policy.
- **Part B:** Establishment of policy direction based upon information gathered in Part A. Part B culminated with State Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) certification of the Plan on November 5, 2013 and County Board adoption of this Plan on January 21, 2014.

Vision Statement and Goals

Marathon County agriculture will be diverse, sustainable, and profitable now and in the future. Through shared responsibility and stewardship of resources and community engagement/cooperation, we will enjoy a sufficient and sustainable supply of ground water, high quality water resources, and productive soil. Agriculture will be supported by adequate economic and structural infrastructure; access to technological advances in equipment, communication, and waste management; access to local, domestic, and international markets, ample land supply, and a balanced mix of land uses.

A fundamental purpose of the Farmland Preservation Plan is to guide and manage growth and development in a manner that will preserve the rural character; protect the agricultural base and natural resources; and contribute to the safety, health, and prosperity of the communities. The Plan also recognizes the importance of fairness toward individual property owners and individual units of government.

General goals (refer to strategic plan objectives)

- Users of the land will be good stewards of the land
- Programs must fairly and equitably support a diverse and profitable agriculture
- Protect a sufficient and sustainable ground water quantity
- Protect and improve good ground and surface water quality
- Support small farms and/or family farms
- Respect a balanced mixed land use
- Preserve the rural character and aesthetic quality of Marathon County
- Participation of all county communities to achieve the goals of the county's strategic plan
- Provide educational outreach on topics such as farmland preservation zoning and AEAs

Agricultural preservation

- Minimize nonagricultural development on prime agricultural soils
- Maintain the integrity of agricultural economic clusters

Housing and Development

- Design and locate rural housing to minimize adverse impacts on agriculture
- Encourage higher-density residential development in non-farmland preservation areas
- Encourage nonagricultural industries to locate in areas where public utilities will be available

Regional Food Distribution and Networks

- Support food distribution systems to access the local food initiatives of the community
- Provide education and technical support to small scale producers and direct marketers

Marathon County Farmland Preservation Survey

The purpose of the farmland preservation survey is to help Marathon County understand the citizen's perspective on the issues, trends, and proposed recommendations for strategies of farmland preservation and addressing agricultural issues in the County. County officials identified two populations to survey: agricultural stakeholders and the general public.

In May 2013, the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Wisconsin – River Falls mailed surveys to a random sample of 1,149 Marathon County households (40% response rate) and to 745 agricultural stakeholders (45% response rate).

Questions asked agricultural stakeholders only: A majority of respondents prioritized voluntary programs to keep land in agriculture high or very high and half prioritized financial incentives for farmland preservation high or very high. About four in ten prioritized regulations to keep land in agriculture high or very high. Respondents had mixed opinions about the priority of cost share programs for conservation practices and policies to attract/expand agricultural service providers, agricultural processing businesses, and agricultural supply retailers.

A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that parcel fragmentation and the cost of farmland are negatively impacting farming in the County. About half agreed or strongly agreed with the need to increase the availability of direct farm marketing locations/facilities. Nearly half of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they could find productive farmland to rent or buy. Nearly half disagreed or strongly disagreed that finding land for manure spreading is difficult.

Questions asked of both agricultural stakeholders and the general public: Half of respondents gave high or very high priority ratings to increasing accessibility to locally grown food and programs supporting agricultural economic development. Half or more of respondents said increasing agricultural regulations and increasing non-agricultural regulations is a low or very low priority. Neither group of respondents favors reducing the current level of regulations either on agricultural operations or non-agricultural activities.

Half of the respondents favor or strongly favor using farmland preservation zoning. The largest portion of respondents favored creating Agricultural Enterprise Areas. More than 7 in 10 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that rural development should be concentrated in or near areas already developed. Similarly, over 7 in 10 agreed or strongly agreed that if development does occur in areas away from existing development, it should be directed to non-agricultural areas. Six in ten respondents prefer a cluster subdivision design over traditional design for rural subdivisions. Respondents had mixed opinions about the importance of increasing the capacity of roads to support large machinery equipment and about enforcing regulations on large machinery and equipment on roads. Of those respondents who rated increasing the capacity of roads high or very high priority, the overwhelming majority (67%) favored paying for increasing capacity through user fees.

Figure 1. Survey respondents' prioritization of five policy concerns. Note: the relative size of the lettering indicates the relative importance of the concerns.



The surveys revealed that there are few differences between the opinions of agricultural stakeholders and the general public. A complete summary of the survey process and results is included in Appendix B.