

Natural Resources

Natural Resources and Development Patterns Issue 1

Environment and economics in the region: Our five-county region is defined by its rich and diverse natural resources. Healthy forests and lakes drive regional economic engines like the tourism and forest products industries. Other parts of the region are used primarily for agricultural purposes, providing an opportunity to take advantage of the growing local foods movement and energy-related crop cultivation. This wide range of opportunities, along with an ample supply of clean, fresh water, attracts people to live, work, and recreate in the region. It is imperative to realize that economic development and natural resources are not opposing worlds; in fact, the two are closely related. The region's economic vitality will be directly impacted by the preservation and utilization of the region's land, water, and cultural assets. We must look beyond short-sighted visions leading to sprawl, environmental degradation, and infrastructure maintenance and replacement costs burdening taxpayers with continuing financial obligations. Instead, we can improve our environmental and economic outlook by promoting land use plans addressing and balancing long-term economic and environmental needs.

Natural Resources and Development Patterns Goal A

Natural resources: Achieve balance by creating healthy, livable affordable communities for humans that are also healthy, livable spaces for other plant and animal life.

Natural Resources and Development Patterns Goal B

Water quality. Water quality/lake clarity improves significantly because the region invests in our lakes. The region needs good water quality to maintain lakeshore property values and to attract tourism.

Recommendation 1

Balancing development and natural resources: All development in the region should meet rigorous standards for natural resources protection, not only recognizing the economic value that natural resources provide, but also affirming the innate aesthetic value of a healthy environment. A healthy green infrastructure is just as important to a community as their built infrastructure of roads, sewer and water pipes. Green infrastructure includes a network of wildlife travel corridors, greenways, wetlands, agricultural lands, and unfragmented open spaces.

Action Step A

Natural resource information and development decisions: Guide future development location with the use of scientific data, including, but not limited to, natural resource inventory, land cover, groundwater, and climate projection maps. Local governments should work closely with state agencies, Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) and conservation nonprofits to obtain the best available scientific data in order to make more informed decisions about where and how to grow.

Action Step B

Community planning and development decisions: Communities within the region must respect their vision outlined by local and regional

comprehensive plans. Let those documents, sound scientific data, and a commitment to long-term fiscal and environmental responsibility drive future development and protection plans.

Action Step C

Plan regionally: Communities should collaborate to create a regional comprehensive plan. This plan should promote a shared vision, regional cooperation, and sustainability.

Action Step D

Define and measure regional sustainability: Create a regional definition for "sustainable land use" across jurisdictional boundaries. Adopt the Green Step Cities scorecard to measure progress toward land use sustainability.

Action Step E

Collaborative dialogue: Facilitate a regular, on-going dialogue between community members and leaders about collaboratively defining and achieving sustainable development.

Action Step F

Sustainability in ordinances: Communities should update their land use ordinances to reflect their desire to embrace the principles of sustainability. The “SmartCode”

(www.smartcodecentral.org) is one example of how a community can transition to regulations that foster sustainable land-use.

Action Step G

Sustainability and elected officials:

Communities should make sustainability an election-worthy issue. Voters should support candidates who promise to embrace and implement the Resilient Region Plan for economic and environmental vitality.

Recommendation 2

Shift development patterns: To shift current development patterns away from sprawl and automobile-centric designs, the region should embrace and implement fiscally, socially and environmentally sound land-use decisions. This type of development will provide residents with environmental, economic, social, cultural, and civic benefits that are in agreement with the desires and visions that communities express in their comprehensive plans.

Action Step A

Multi-benefit land use: Provide incentives for transit-oriented development, pedestrian-friendly development, mixed-use development, the inclusion of public green space in all developments, and projects that promote multi-generational and multi-family housing opportunities in all residential zones, especially where we have medical and social services, cultural amenities, retail, and community gathering places.

Action Step B

Sustainable zoning: Communities should look beyond merely dividing municipalities into geographic districts (Euclidean zoning) and consider more creative zoning approaches. This could include using performance-based zoning (also referred to as outcome-based zoning), form-based zoning, and a public values-driven collaborative process. These alternatives will give local governments, landowners, and developers the flexibility they need to work together and maximize the public value of private development.

Action Step C

Incentivize sustainable development: Adopt a land use decision process that incentivizes sustainable development and regional collaboration.

Action Step D

Standard definitions: Communities throughout the region should standardize land use terms and definitions.

Action Step E

Training for land use decision makers: Require and provide quality training for all

planning commission and board of adjustment members. Educating these community leaders will help them better understand their job, limitations, and responsibilities. Additionally, they should be regularly trained on innovations in sustainable development and Best Management Practices (BMPs).

Action Step F

Active citizens: Educate citizens on sustainable development so they can be more active and influential in their community’s land use decisions.

Action Step G

Balance development and community needs:

Communities should promote alternative development options that take into account profitability for the developer as well as tangible public benefits and advanced natural resource protections.

Action Step H

Technology in development: Communities within the region should create a completely on-line, standardized development application process.

Action Step I

Design review teams: Communities with planning and zoning responsibilities should incorporate Design Review Teams (DRTs) to help guide developers toward desirable designs, locations, and densities before major design costs are incurred.

Action Step J

Lighting: Implement stronger regulations on nighttime illumination, especially for commercial and industrial businesses. This will not only

protect the integrity of the night sky, but also promotes energy conservation.

Action Step K

Variances: Allowing landowners to break the established rules of development is known as the variance process. This process should require a quid pro quo policy providing some public benefit for all granted variances.

Action Step L

Conservation design: Communities should highly incentivize conservation design developments as the preferred alternative to traditional, suburban-style, lot-block subdivisions.

Action Step M

Discourage inefficient sprawl: Sprawl is fiscally and environmentally irresponsible. In order to discourage sprawl, communities should incentivize infill, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development opportunities in urban cores.

Recommendation 3

Water quality protection: Healthy lakes, rivers, streams and wetlands contribute to a healthy regional economy, and communities with a clean, abundant supply of fresh water will always attract people to live, work and recreate. In addition, millions of people downstream in St. Cloud and the Twin Cities depend on the Mississippi River for their drinking water. Therefore, this region must protect its surface and subsurface water quality for both its own future viability and for those living outside the region that depend on a stable source of clean drinking water.

Action Step A

Stormwater and wetlands: Require or incentivize the incorporation of stormwater management and wetland protection Best Management Practices (BMPs) into the development process. Such BMPs include, but are not limited to, Low-Impact Development (LID), Minimal Impact Development Standards (MIDS), shoreland and wetland buffers, rain gardens, etc.

Action Step B

Watershed planning: Develop comprehensive watershed management plans throughout the region. These plans must require consistency of county water plans with applicable watershed plans. Direct funding to implement only county water plans that are consistent with applicable watershed plans.

Action Step C

Wellhead protection: Set strict zoning requirements to keep potentially harmful development away from designated wellhead protection zones.

Action Step D

Wastewater and drinking water systems: Explore more affordable options for effective wastewater and drinking water systems. Cluster septic systems, regional wastewater treatment plants, regular cost-effective septic inspection and maintenance, reduced well water quality testing rates, and incentivizing consolidation and infill where there is existing infrastructure should all be considered.

Action Step E

Public beach access: To improve beach access for all, locate and record where current public beaches are in the region. Work to increase equitable access

to the abundance of public waters in the region, which will improve the quality of life for all community members.

Action Step F

Shoreland protection: Meet or exceed the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' recommended minimum shoreland standards throughout the region. Consider adopting the alternative shoreland standards.

Action Step G

Invasive species: Invasive species are infesting our lakes. To protect our region's water resources, focus efforts on working with the state to aggressively contain and limit the further spread of invasive species to lakes which have not yet been infested.

Action Step H

Water education: Keep community members informed by adequately funding and coordinating effective water education programs for the general public.

Action Step I

Enforcement of regulations: Effectively enforce laws, rules, and regulations that protect water quality.

Action Step J

Sustainable water treatment technology: Encourage further research and development (R&D) in sustainable drinking water and wastewater systems. Create flexibility in regulations to allow for cutting-edge water, septic, energy, wastewater, and technology options that may lead to increased sustainability and long-term cost savings for homeowners.