

Section 5

Conclusions and Findings

The following section provides a summary of the first volume of this Plan. A summary of the major demographic and recreation trends is provided along with a summary assessment.

A. Demographic and Recreation Trends

- **Moderate Growth.** The Minnesota State Demographer has projected continued population growth for Todd County to the year 2030. The County’s population is expected to increase by over 3,500 people or 14.6 percent.
- **Impacts of Regional Centers.** The three regional centers that surround Todd County; St. Cloud, Brainerd and Alexandria; are all projected to grow significantly over the next twenty years. As these markets continue to grow, pressures for development to move towards Todd County will continue. Todd County is an easy commuting distance to these three regional centers.
- **Rural Residential Development.** The rural setting makes the County an attractive place for the commuting population and residents alike to live.
- **Growing Non Farm Population.** The non-farm residents out number farm residents by a 5 to 1 ratio. Conflicts and complaints between farmers and rural residents is a growing and ongoing concern.
- **Shoreland Development.** While the pressures are not as severe as the Brainerd or Alexandria markets, there has been a significant amount of residential development on lakeshores in the County. The larger lakes in the County are experiencing second and third tier development.
- **Rural Recreation.** Over the last ten or so years, there has been a boom in the purchase of rural land in the County for a wide range of private outdoor recreation pursuits from hunting land to hobby farms and even ATV riding. Based on input from citizens in this process, there has been an increase in the number of conflicts.
- **Aging Population.** The median age of people living in the County will continue to increase. The number of “empty nestors” and seniors as well as seasonal residents will continue to grow over the next twenty years.
- **Changing Recreation Demands and Activities.** Much of Todd County is projected to have a very high or high demand for outdoor recreation over the next twenty years. With the aging of the population, more leisure and “quiet” recreation activities such as bird watching are growing in demand. These activities are often in conflict with the growing interest in ATVs and jet skis.
- **Growing Conflicts with Traditional Activities.** Hunting and fishing have long been popular outdoor recreation activities in the County. There has been an increase in the number of conflicts between the more traditional recreation activities such with jet skis, ATVs, along more interest in “quiet” recreation activities such as bird watching.

B. Assessment of Recreation and Open Space Resources in the County

Open Space

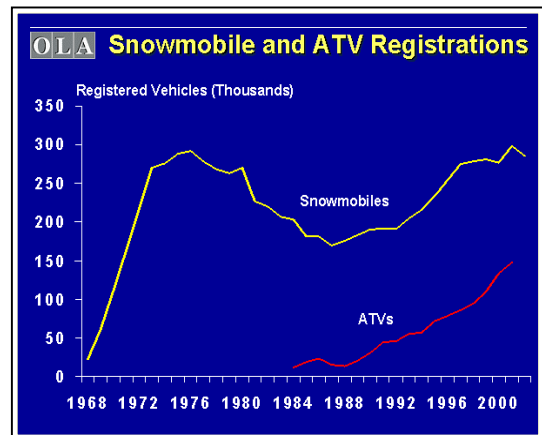
- **Scenic Countryside.** Todd County is blessed with a wealth of open space and natural resource features. The rolling landscapes of cropland, pastures, wetlands and forested areas are very scenic. The geologic landforms in the County – the moraines along the east and southern end, the drumlin fields in the northwest, and the sand plain that bounds the Long Prairie River – create a diverse and picturesque setting.
- **Open Space Protection.** Protecting the open space areas in the County was important to 70 percent of the people surveyed in this planning process.
- **Private Land Ownership.** The vast majority of land in the County is privately owned. Approximately 590,000 acres of the 627,000 acres in the County are in private ownership. Much of the County is owned by generations of families who have tremendous pride and heritage in their land. Most of the unique natural resource features and rural open space treasures are located on privately owned lands. Lakes are the primary publicly owned features in the County.
- **Small Town Character and Economic Transformations.** With the transformation of agriculture and the loss of smaller farms and the supporting agricultural businesses, the small towns in Todd County have been struggling economically for several decades. The communities will likely face a continual uphill battle in the future. Big box retailers are beginning to move into sub-regional economic centers like Sauk Center and Little Falls, which will further strain local retail and service businesses in Todd County.

Trails

- **Todd County Snowmobile Trail System.** With over 450 miles of trails and over 30 years of operation, the Todd Area Snowmobile Association Snowmobile has developed and maintained a successful recreational trail system for residents and visitors to the County. Over 470 private landowners support the trail system by providing access to the property for the seasonal use of snowmobiles. The volunteers, board, staff, and riders are responsible for managing the trail system. The association is a model for other types of recreational systems in the County.
- **The Long Prairie River.** The Long Prairie River is the major water feature in the County. Over one-half of the land in the County drains into the river. Paddling down the river in a canoe is a scenic and unique outdoor experience. The river flows through two major ecosystems as it travels through the County on the way into the Mississippi River near Motley. It has been designated as a canoe water route by the MN DNR. While funding is not currently earmarked for this project, the MN DNR was reported to have budgeted \$250,000 for the Long Prairie River project. Funding is needed to improve access to the river. Many people in the planning process expressed a strong interest in enhancing access to the river for canoeing.
- **Lake Wobegon Trail.** A small group of citizens in the Albany area started the idea of building a regional trail on the old railroad bed that travels westerly through the state to the Dakotas over 15 years ago. Today, the trail is paved from St. Joseph to Sauk Centre with an arm that links to Holdingford. Trails are planned to extend into

Morrison County. The Central Lakes Trail extends from Osakis through Alexandria to Fergus Falls and uses the same railroad corridor. In 2004, Todd County received a TEA-21 grant to construct the 8-mile section through southwestern Todd County. Stearns County is obtaining funding for the remaining 4-mile segment west of Sauk Centre. Increasingly, communities like Osakis and Alexandria are planning and designing community or neighborhood trails that will connect and loop into the regional trail. This regional trail system is becoming one of the finest in the state and the Upper Midwest.

- **ATVs.** The number of ATVs registered in the state is rapidly growing. The numbers of machines and riders is expected to continue to increase in the foreseeable future. Throughout this planning process, citizens and landowners have expressed many concerns about the use of ATVs – on roads, in ditches, across private lands and over public lands. There presently is no public site available for ATVs in the County.



Parks

- **Battle Point Park.** Currently, Battle Point Park is the only park owned by the County. It is located in the southeastern corner of the County on Lake Osakis. The park site covers about 10 acres. Citizens expressed a strong interest in improving the park. County officials are now working with civic groups from Osakis area to design, fund and construct these park improvements.
- **Municipal Parks.** There are 33 municipal (city and township) parks in the County. Most of the parks are small neighborhood or specialty type parks. They tend to have some playground equipment, picnic tables and shelters. The parks are typically small in size covering a few acres of land.
- **School Playgrounds.** The school playgrounds provide for more active recreation activities such as ball fields and game courts. These are use primarily for school team events.
- **State Recreation Sites.** There are 40 public access sites and 38 wildlife management sites (WMA and WPA) in the County. These sites provide facilities for outdoor recreation activities – primarily hunting, boating, and fishing. Bird watching and other passive uses are becoming more popular in the off-hunting season. Some sites may have some additional land area that could be used to support these and other activities such as picnicking and leisure.
- **Merging School Districts.** The declining number of younger people in the County and limited budgets have forced school districts to merge their operations. School districts provide a substantial amount of the active recreational equipment and facilities in the County. Closures of schools may affect recreation opportunities.
- **Neighboring Counties.** Counties around Todd such as Douglas, Wadena, Stearns, and Crow Wing tend to have a more extensive system of county parks.

C. Assessment of Administration and Coordination for Recreation

As described in the three previous pages, Todd County is experiencing some significant changes that will either positively or negatively effect the provision of recreational opportunities in the future. The challenge in providing recreation services is difficult and complex, especially in an era of tight public sector budgets.

In relation to the management of recreation and open space resources, the findings noted below are not uncommon in much of rural Minnesota. Recreation and open space rarely receive enough meaningful and sustained action by local units of government and citizens. Given budget and staffing limitations, these situations are usually the norm.

- **Lack of an Administrative Structure.** Like many counties in rural Minnesota, Todd County does not have an established parks and recreation board. Recently, the County Board created an interim board.
- **Recreation Budget.** Currently, there is not a separate budget or accounting system for recreation as a part of the county budgetary process. Further, there is no permanent or dedicated source of funding.
- **Limited Funding Resources at the County and Municipal Levels.** The current budget situation at the county, city and township levels typically provide only a limited amount of public funds invested towards recreation.
- **No County Recreation Department or Staff.** Currently, the County does not have a parks/recreation staff person assigned to managing the County park or recreation systems. Recreation related services provided by the County, such as the Lake Wobegon Trail or Battle Point Park, are managed by various staff members. The public is not clear on who manages what services. The committee overseeing the development of the Comprehensive Plan discussed creating a staff position for recreation. Other counties in the region have invested in a parks program and/or staff. Some counties use a part time position (combined county parks/forester position) while others like Douglas County have a fulltime director position.
- **No Volunteer Program.** With no parks board or commission or staff, it is difficult to coordinate volunteers.
- **Limited Coordination.** In the past, there have been limited discussions between the County with the cities, townships, school districts, recreation organizations, and other affected groups in relation to recreation and open space management.
- **Cost of Recreation and Land Development.** Members of the CAC expressed concerns about the costs involved with recreation and land development. Examples cited at meetings included the closing of the Weyerhauser Museum and Park in Little Falls and the rapidly increasing building permit fees in Crow Wing County.
- **Limited State Funding for State Recreation Facilities.** Citizens and CAC members raised concerns about the decline in funding at the state level to manage and maintain existing state owned lands including the state parks, forests, and wildlife management areas (WMA).
- **Lack of Cooperation by State Agencies.** Citizens expressed frustrations in working with the MN DNR regarding how state lands were managed. One example was the state's unwillingness to trade a small amount of land in a WMA with an adjoining landowner to improve the overall management of the lands.

- **Eminent Domain Resolution.** In 2003, the County Board adopted a resolution that prevents the use of its eminent domain authorities for recreational purposes. The CAC readily accepted this policy decision by the County Board in its efforts to prepare this Plan.
- **Non Net Gain Policy.** In 2005, the County Board adopted a resolution that instituted a “no net gain” of land owned by the MN DNR or any tax exempt land trust. It also petitioned the MN DNR to complete an inventory of all lands owned in Todd County and evaluate each parcel for possible sale back to private ownership. The policy reflects concerns and frustrations that citizens and landowners in the County have towards the loss of property tax base through the purchase of public lands and the corresponding lack of reimbursement by the state through the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program.
- **Local Control.** The two policy resolutions described above reflect an underlying concern by citizens and landowners in the County over the loss of local control on what goes on in their local community, whether it is in a township or a city. The County does not currently have a clearly policy or process to promote and sustain citizen involvement other than events like the annual township association meeting or major projects like a comprehensive plan which are one time or at best, periodic in nature. Throughout the recreational planning process, citizens expressed deep frustrations on the working relationships or lack thereof that exist in the County. As development pressures evolve and grow, these frustrations have tended to increase.
- **Increased Land Use Conflicts.** As summarized in the demographic and recreation trends, the number of land use conflicts in the rural areas of the County has increased. Enforcement of “out of date” land use ordinances is problematic. This situation is made even more difficult by staff turnover and not enough investments into land use planning by the County, cities and townships. Overall, this approach provides little direction for sorting out the land use conflicts and protecting open space. Discussing ways to protect open space in this contentious environment, which a majority of people surveyed in this process indicated they wanted to see happen, is difficult at best.
- **Park Dedication Requirements.** Minnesota State Statutes provides counties with the authority to require that a portion of any proposed subdivision be dedicated to the public or preserved for public use land area for parks and recreational uses, playgrounds, trails, wetlands, and/or open space. A fee in lieu of the land dedication may also be required. While the statutory requirements are cumbersome for counties to administer, it could provide a new source of revenue and land area for recreation



- and open space opportunities in the County. Although the new state law regarding park dedications is complicated and it does require that counties and townships work together to administer the dedication requirements, it can be a way to improve the intergovernmental working relationships.
- **Outside Funding Sources.** There are numerous funding sources available to counties as well as cities, townships and school districts to support the development of recreation facilities as well as protect open space. For example, this planning process is being funded by the Blandin Foundation, The Conservation Fund (on behalf of the Kodak Company), and the Initiative Foundation. An initial list of funding sources that can be tapped to fund recreation and open space projects in the County is provided in Volume 3, Section 2.
 - **Landowner Workshops.** Two landowner workshops held as part of this planning process proved to be an effective method for sharing information with citizens of the County. Unfortunately, the workshops were not as well attended as hoped. The ongoing education of landowners and local officials is key to providing the appropriate recreational opportunities and protecting open space, given that over 90 percent of the land in the County is privately owned. The landowner workshops provide one model on how to share information that can help landowners and County and other local officials work together to improve the quality of life in Todd County.

The purpose of this section was to provide readers of this Plan with a summary of the key findings and conclusions that the CAC worked through in this recreational planning process. These statements are not meant to serve as the County's official policies but rather they are intended to provide the rationale or basis for the goals, objectives and actions outlined in the following Volume 2, the Strategic Policy Framework.