

Section 3

Open Space System Policy Framework

A. The Context for Open Space Resources

Open space comes in different forms of ownership, function and management. Open space can be publicly or privately owned. Lakes and rivers, state forests and wildlife management areas, city and county parks, and playgrounds are all examples of publicly owned and managed open space. Example types of privately owned open space resources include: forestland, cropland, pastures, wetlands, and residential yards (my backyard).

In addition, there are privately owned lands that provide commercial recreational opportunities such as golf courses, shooting ranges, and hunting preserves, or timber production lands. These are referred to as “Semi-Public Privately Owned Open Space”. Privately owned open space can be made available to the public through commercial enterprises such as resorts, golf courses, or hunting preserves. Private open space can also be limited to a small group of people such as a homeowners association or limited to those owning the land.

Todd County is blessed with a wealth of open space. With almost ninety-eight (98) percent of the land in the County being privately owned, most of the high quality open space areas in the County, with the exception of the lakes and state managed wildlife lands, is privately owned.

While much of the County remains rural in character, land development pressures are encroaching the County from at least three directions – St. Cloud to the southeast, Brainerd to northeast and Alexandria to the west. Over the last few years, the economic effects from each of these regional centers has become more pronounced in Todd County from rapidly rising land values to the availability of a wider range of services and goods.

More detailed information on open space resources in the County is summarized in Volume 1 of this Plan and in the Todd County Community-Based Comprehensive Plan.

For the purposes of this Plan, the County’s policy framework for open space will focus on privately owned lands. The Parks and Trails elements, discussed later in Sections 4 and 5, will address the planning and management of publicly owned recreational open space resources in conjunction with public facilities and semi-public privately owned sites.

B. Open Space Goals, Objectives and Actions

The following goals, objectives and action items outline the County’s policy framework regarding open space resources:

Goal 1 – Existing Open Space Resources. Protect and enhance the existing open spaces that we already have in Todd County.

Objective A – Family Lands Preservation. Develop and implement a program to help protect and maintain the sustained ownership of open space and natural resources in the County by families and individuals.

Actions:

1. Education Program. Develop a detailed education program for landowners and local officials on the benefits of protecting open spaces in Todd County and the opportunities for funding through the various public and private programs. Periodically make presentations to groups in the County (annual township association meetings, County Board annual strategic planning meeting, city clerks association, lake associations, youth and schools, sporting clubs, county fair, etc.)
2. Local Organizations and Agency Help. Work with individuals, local groups and organizations from within the County to work together to find ways to protect and enhance open space on private lands. These local groups should contact the appropriate state and federal agencies and conservation organizations such as the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Board of Water and Soil Resources, Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, etc. for technical and financial resources they can provide to landowners and the County as needed.
3. Local Matching Funding. Explore optional sources for building local matching funds for the LCMR and/or other state and federal grant processes – donations, gifts, civic organizations, minimal per parcel assessment (\$1.00), pro rated contributions by local governmental units, etc.
4. LCMR Application. Prepare and submit the LCMR grant application in the year 2006.
5. Lobbying Initiative. Work with the agriculture community, townships, the Drumlin Hills Coalition and other organizations to lobby legislative and executive branch support for the Todd County LCMR project.
6. Program Development. Develop a detailed work program to guide the use of funds for the program for protecting family lands in the County.

Objective B – Farmlands Protection. Advocate and support the protection of agricultural open space areas in the County.

Actions:

1. Agricultural Land Preservation Model. Prepare public relations materials that explain the results of the model. Present the findings of the study to various organizations in the County. Distribute the informational materials to all township officials and interested parties.
2. Township Land Use Plans. Work with townships in the County on a voluntary basis to help them develop their land use plans. Encourage all townships to work with landowners to specifically identify areas where large tracts of lands should be preserved for agricultural uses.
3. Update the County Comprehensive Plan. Amend the County Land Use Plan and policies to reflect and compliment the township land use plans.
4. Zoning Ordinance Update. Revise and amend the County’s zoning ordinance and zoning map to implement the land use policies established by the townships with the landowners and the County. Explore the creation of several agricultural zoning districts to provide more flexibility in land use management. Work with townships to establish the standards for these districts.
5. Rural Residential Development. Where rural residential development is proposed in areas with significant agricultural activities, require the recording of documents that notify the buyer of existing agricultural operations.

Objective C – Natural Lands Protection. Advocate and support the protection of natural and recreation open space areas in the County.

Actions:

1. Natural Resource Protection Modeling Map. Develop a map that establishes and ranks land for natural resource protection (based on a scale such as a high, medium, low for example) for all areas of the County.
2. Critical Habitat Areas. Develop a map that establishes and ranks the locations of critical habitat sites for all areas of the County. Also identify and rank important habitat corridors.
3. Zoning Ordinance Update. Explore the creation of forestland and other natural resource, conservation or recreation based zoning districts to provide more flexibility in land use management. Work with townships to establish the standards for these districts.
4. Township Forestry Management Plans. Work with townships, landowners, the MN DNR Division of Forestry, and the Minnesota Forest Resources Council (MFRC) to develop forest management plans at the township level where appropriate. Work with the MN DNR and the MFRC West Central Landscape Committee to support the development of these plans and their implementation.
5. Forest Stewardship Plans. Work with landowner groups, consulting foresters, MN DNR and the MFRC West Central Landscape Committee to promote the preparation and implementation of plans developed through the Forest Stewardship program to

- help landowners better manage forest resources on privately owned lands. Periodically update the Forest Management Inventory Map in the Comprehensive Plan.
6. Conservation Easements. Work with landowners, townships and conservation agencies to develop a logical and fair approach to using limited conservation easements.

Objective D – Incentives. Support the use of incentive programs through organizations such as the Todd County SWCD, NRCS, FSA, MN DNR and the Minnesota Board of Water and Soils Resources (BWSR) that help protect and maintain natural resources and open spaces on private lands.

Actions:

1. Cost Share Programs. Support efforts by agencies such as the Todd County SWCD, NRCS, FSA, MN DNR and BWSR that promote and encourage the use of cost share programs to help landowners protect and conserve land and water resources that support recreation opportunities.
2. Property Tax Programs. Support the use of existing property tax programs that encourage the protection of natural resources and open spaces in the County such as the Sustainable Forest Incentives Act, Green Acres, and the Native Prairie Tax Exemption programs. Work with townships, County Assessor, County Board and state agencies to ensure that the use of these programs does not negatively impact local units of government. Research and explore the development of new property tax programs and/or make recommendations to the legislature and Governor on revisions to existing property tax programs.
3. Volunteer Program. Work with county and state agencies to promote volunteer opportunities to help landowners enhance recreation on private lands and protect natural resources.
4. Land Owner Recognition. Recognize landowners in the County that are successful in enhancing recreational opportunities on their lands while at the same time protect and conserve natural resources and promote land use compatibility.

Goal 2 – Support Private Recreation. Promote the safe and harmonious development of private recreational opportunities on private lands, consistent with local land use planning policies and requirements.

Objective A – Public Awareness/Education. Support the distribution of educational materials and training to help increase public awareness about the benefits and impacts of recreational activities on private lands, open space and natural resources. Through education, encourage compatible activities within neighborhoods in the County and the protection of private property rights and natural resources.

Actions:

1. Coordinate with Education Providers. Periodically meet with education providers from organizations such as the University of Minnesota Extension Service and Tourism Center, trail riding clubs and other organizations to learn about and coordinate on the delivery of existing recreation education programs in Todd County.
2. Recreation Education Program. Support the delivery of education programs on the benefits and impacts of recreation activities to groups in the County such landowner organizations, lake associations, civic and sportsmens clubs, etc.
3. Youth Education Program. Work with education service providers to share information to youth through the schools, 4-H, Boy/Girl Scouts, and other organizations about the benefits and impacts of recreation activities on private property rights, open space and natural resources.
4. ATV Riders Program. Work with the MN DNR, County Sheriff’s Department and local law enforcement agencies to provide training to ATV riders on safe and proper operations of ATVs and their potential impacts of private lands.
5. Recreation and Trail Design for Landowners. Obtain and distribute literature from the University of Minnesota Extension Service that informs landowners of ways to safely and wisely support recreational activities on private lands (i.e. – trail design and construction, tree planting, wildlife management, etc.).
6. Program Recommendations. Review existing education programs on recreation topics. Provide recommendations to the service providers on revising and updating education programs to better meet the public’s needs.

Objective B – Neighborhood Recreation. Support the development of compatible neighborhood recreation opportunities on private open space areas.

1. Neighborhood Activities. Support the development of neighborhood recreational activities (bird watching, nature trails, etc.) that help link neighborhoods together by connecting open spaces and habitat areas. (See Trail Resource Goal 2.)
2. Liability Issues. Support the research of liability issues and appropriate insurance provisions to help neighboring landowner resolve liability issues.

Objective C – Inventory and Mapping. Develop and maintain inventories of unique natural resources in the County and encourage landowners to support the protection, conservation and enjoyment of these features.

Actions:

1. Inventory. Work with resource agencies such as the Todd County SWCD, NRCS, MN DNR and others to inventory and map unique natural resources in the County. Support the protection, conservation and enjoyment of these features by landowners.
2. County Web Site. Periodically update the natural resource maps and information on the County’s web site.

Goal 3 – Public Land Ownership. Coordinate, guide and control the amount of public land ownership in Todd County so as to minimize negative impacts on the local tax base.

Objective A – Public Land Inventory/Evaluation. Request that the State of Minnesota develop an inventory of all public lands in Todd County and evaluate each parcel for sale back to private ownership.

Actions:

1. Area Legislators. Work with legislators in the area to pursue the necessary legislative or administrative action needed to develop a public lands inventory for the County.
2. Collect and Organize Data. Collect and organize maps and data from previous inventories and studies regarding public land ownership.
3. Develop Inventory/Evaluation. Work with and support efforts by the state to prepare the public land inventory and land sale evaluation.

Objective B – Tax Base Impacts/Payments in Lieu of Taxes Study. Develop a study that analyzes the impacts of public land ownership on the local tax base and the amount of payments in lieu of taxes (PILT) for public land ownership in the County.

Actions:

1. Prepare Study. Prepare a study to analyze the impacts of public land ownership on the local tax base and payments made in the County.

Objective C – Public Land Ownership Coordination. Work with the state and federal governments to coordinate the appropriate payments in lieu of taxes for public lands in the County.

Actions:

1. State and Federal Legislators. Meet with the appropriate legislators to review the results from the public land and tax base/PILT studies to determine the appropriate payments for public lands within the County.
2. Public Land Ownership. Work with agencies to maintain the appropriate amounts of public land and corresponding PILT payments in the County.