

WILKIN COUNTY, MINNESOTA COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE PLAN: 2025-2034

INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

This Comprehensive Plan: 2025-2034 (the “Plan”) fulfills the requirements of discretionary comprehensive planning by counties in Greater Minnesota under Minnesota Statute § 394.231. The Plan will serve as the guide for the Wilkin County Planning Commission and Wilkin County Board to enact appropriate land use controls and plan for future development and growth. The Plan will also serve as a basis for future zoning decisions by the County. The intent is to continue to protect farm land and sensitive environmental areas and to cluster commercial, industrial, and residential development in close proximity to cities.

Wilkin County’s goal in adopting this Plan and related zoning ordinances will be to maintain the existing rural character and agricultural based economy and community. The County will protect current agricultural uses by limiting non-farm housing to one home per quarter section. The County will maintain existing commercial and industrial districts in close proximity to urban areas and protect and promote those activities. Existing homes and lots of record will remain and be allowed to continue with their current uses. The County will adopt additional controls to avoid harmful development and uses.

GENERAL CONDITIONS

Land. Wilkin County is located on the western edge of Minnesota, bordering North Dakota. Wilkin County encompasses 751 square miles (472,001 acres). Wilkin County includes twenty-two (22) townships and eight (8) cities. Wilkin County, since its organization in 1858, has remained primarily agricultural and undeveloped.

Population. Breckenridge, located in the west-central part of the County, is the County seat with the largest population of 3,430 (2020); it is located across the border from Wahpeton, ND that has a population of approximately 8,000. Population growth over the last forty years within Wilkin County has slowly declined. The census figures in 1970 there were 9,389 residents, in 1980 there were 8,454 residents, in 1990 there were 7,516 residents, in 2000 there were 7,138 residents, in 2010 population figure there were 6,576 residents and in the latest 2020 population figure there were 6,306 residents. It is anticipated that population growth will remain flat for the foreseeable future.

Economy. The major land use in Wilkin County is cropland (92%). The economy of Wilkin County centers on agricultural production and related business. In 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau reported 173 private non-farm businesses in the County.

PUBLIC WATERS AND WETLANDS

Public Waters. The Otter Tail River and the Bois de Sioux River join in Breckenridge to form the Red River of the North. The Otter Tail River reaches Breckenridge after flowing 240 miles from Clearwater County, 40 miles southwest of Bemidji. The Bois de Sioux River has a drainage basin that includes portions of Traverse, Grant, Wilkin, Stevens, Big Stone and Otter Tail counties, and consists of about 1,412 square miles. Major tributaries in Minnesota are the Mustinka River and the Rabbit River. Tributaries in North and South Dakota contribute drainage from an additional 549 square miles. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources prepared an inventory of public waters and wetlands within Wilkin County dated January 15, 1985, which is available at https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/waters/watermgmt_section/pwi/maps.html.

Wetlands. Wilkin County is a “less than 50% area” for pre-settlement wetland acres as provided in Minnesota Rule 8420.0117. As required by Minnesota Statute § 394.23, this Plan includes goals and objectives for protecting open space and the environment. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources prepared a Biological Survey of Wilkin County in 1998, which is available at <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/eco/mbs/maps.html>.

COMPREHENSIVE WATER MANAGEMENT PLANNING

Wilkin County is a part of comprehensive watershed management plans for both the Buffalo-Red Watershed and the Bois-de-Sioux Watershed. The plans were last updated 2020 and 2021 respectively. The purpose of utilizing one plan for each water shed is to align local water planning purpose and procedures within watershed boundaries to create a systematic, watershed-wide, science-based approach to watershed management; to acknowledge and build off existing local government structure, water plan services, and local capacity; to incorporate and make use of data and information, including watershed restoration and protection strategies, to solicit input and engage experts from agencies, citizens, and stakeholder groups that would focus on implementation of prioritized and targeted actions capable of achieving measurable progress and serve as a substitute for a comprehensive plan, local water management plan or watershed management plan.

OTHER PLANS AND STUDIES

The United States Department of Agriculture has prepared a soil survey of Wilkin County, the document can be accessed at <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/>. The soil survey provides agricultural information to assist farmers in maximizing crop production. It also provides information on the appropriateness of certain land uses based on the soil, which assists planners, developers, and elected officials in making sound land use decisions.

ZONING ORDINANCE AND MAP

In accordance with the 10-year plan review cycle, the Wilkin County Planning Commission conducted a review of the Plan in 2024 and presented recommendations to the Wilkin County Board of Commissioners for incorporation into the 2025-2034 planning document. The plan will serve as a complement to the Wilkin County Land Use Ordinance and as a guide for the Wilkin County Planning Commission and Wilkin County Board to enact appropriate land use controls and plan for future zoning decisions. The eight overarching purposes of the Zoning Ordinance are:

1. Protecting the public health, safety, morals, comfort, convenience and general welfare;
2. Protecting and preserving economically viable agricultural land;
3. Promoting orderly development of the residential, commercial, industrial, recreational and public areas;
4. Conserving the natural and scenic beauty and attractiveness of the County;
5. Conserving and developing natural resources in the County;
6. Providing for the compatibility of different land uses and the most appropriate use of land throughout the County; and
7. Minimizing environmental pollution.
8. Encourage responsible development of renewable energy solutions.

The Zoning Ordinance establishes four zoning districts (agricultural, residential, commercial-industrial, and airport). The Ordinance also establishes overlay districts for floodplain and shoreland. The Ordinance imposes performance standards on a variety of uses that may be inconsistent with agriculture, and controls sewage and wastewater treatment outside of municipal boundaries within the County.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Agriculture is the predominant land use in Wilkin County and preserving such agricultural dominance is the basis for limited development options within the agricultural zoning district and clustering of residential and commercial-industrial development around cities.

This Plan will serve as the County's guide in determining the appropriate future uses of properties within its jurisdiction. The Plan is not intended to be read in a vacuum. Instead, it should be considered together with the various plans and studies incorporated by reference, and consistent with the County's Zoning Ordinance. The Plan will also serve

as the basis of any land development ordinances the County will promulgate to implement or regulate future development and any decisions made under such ordinances, with special attention given to agricultural considerations.

The following goals and objectives provide a series of considerations which can be used to guide decision-making processes. Furthermore, the objectives are not absolute directions for the County Board, Planning Commission, or County staff. Instead, objectives are guides to assist in decision making and goal achievement. The goals and objectives should be considered and utilized collectively.

Goal 1 Minimizing the fragmentation and development of agricultural, forest, wildlife, and open space lands, including consideration of appropriate minimum lot sizes.

Objectives:

- A. Cluster non-agricultural zoning districts around cities and existing transportation and utility corridors.
- B. Encourage any new residential subdivision to annex into a city as part of the platting process to ensure the provision of municipal services such as sewer and water, police and fire protection, and other amenities associated with urban areas.
- C. Maintain restrictive limitations on non-farm housing and a density of one non-farm home per quarter section.

Goal 2 Minimizing further development in sensitive shoreland areas.

Objectives:

- A. Enforce the shoreland provisions of the Zoning Ordinance to ensure that setbacks and lot sizes are adequate.
- B. Enforce the wastewater provisions of the Zoning Ordinance to ensure that wastewater treatment systems do not jeopardize water quality.
- C. Enforce the floodplain provisions of the Zoning Ordinance to minimize impacts resulting from the periodic inundation from flood waters.

Goal 3 Minimizing development near wildlife management areas, scientific and natural areas, and nature centers.

Objectives:

- A. Establish additional setbacks and land use controls for use located in close proximity to environmentally sensitive areas.
- B. Environmentally sensitive areas shall be given protection consideration when any future development is proposed in close proximity to such areas.

Goal 4 Identification of areas of preference for higher density, including consideration of existing and necessary water and wastewater services, infrastructure, other services, and to the extent feasible, encouraging full development of areas previously zoned for non-agricultural uses.

Objectives:

A. Encourage the location of non-agricultural development adjacent to existing development.

B. Regulations should be formulated to foster growth along existing transportation and utility corridors rather than the creation or extension new roads and utilities.

Goal 5 Encouraging development close to places of employment, shopping centers, schools, mass transit, and other public and private service centers.

Objectives:

A. Commercial and industrial development that exists primarily along transportation corridors will be encouraged to expand, provided their needs can be adequately serviced by private infrastructure.

B. Encourage regular intra-county discussions among cities, school districts, economic development entities, and business organizations.

Goal 6 Identification of areas where other developments are appropriate.

Objectives:

A. The Planning Commission should biennially review the zoning map and consider recent developments, infrastructure improvements and land use changes that may foster growth and change to municipal boundaries.

B. The Zoning Administrator should biennially consult with cities and economic development authorities within the County to stay abreast of development activity with the County and report those consultations to the Planning Commission.

C. Monitor the County for lands that no longer serve a productive agricultural purpose.

Goal 7 Protecting open space and the environment.

Objectives:

- A. Encourage the protection of native landscapes.

- B. Foster the investigation of new agricultural practices and emerging technology that minimize impacts to the environment.

Goal 8 Encourage responsible development of renewable energy solutions.

Objectives:

- A. Establish adequate setbacks and land use controls for the placement of renewable energy systems.

- B. The Zoning Administrator should biennially review the Land Use Ordinance to assess any needed changes based on continued development and/or changes in industry standards.