

## **2.0 Issues & Opportunities**

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### Introduction

Wisconsin's Comprehensive Planning Law requires that the Issues and Opportunities element provide background information about the community and overall visions to guide future development and redevelopment over a 20-year planning period. *Chapter 3: Community Profile* will present detailed demographic data describing the community in a historical, current, and future context. This chapter describes the various public participation activities that occurred during the development of the plan.

### How Was the Public Involved in Developing the Plan?

The Town of Three Lakes Comprehensive Plan was developed with the active participation of residents, landowners, business owners, and other stakeholders. To gain citizen understanding and support throughout the planning process the public was provided with a variety of opportunities to become involved in the development of the comprehensive plan. The adopted *Public Participation Plan* is provided in Appendix B of this plan. A description of the various planning activities and exercises follows.



Cognitive Mapping Exercise – June 23, 2009

### The Planning Process

The overall process began in May of 2007 when the Three Lakes Town Board of Supervisors initiated a call for citizen volunteers to create a Three Lakes Community Planning Committee. The official name for the committee was later changed by volunteers to Three Lakes Town Action Group, or TAG, to reflect the need for not only long-range planning but also to initiate short-term improvements identified during the planning process. In keeping with State statutory requirements, the Town Board officially chartered TAG as a Town commission in April of 2008. See Appendix A.

Overseen by a five member officer group, the organizational structure of TAG is defined in the TAG By-Laws that were adopted in April of 2008 and which reflect the nine required elements of the statute. TAG has provided overall direction, input and management in the development of the comprehensive plan. TAG has kept the Three Lakes Town Board of Supervisors informed by means of frequent reports at regularly scheduled Town meetings. In addition, TAG has sought first-hand input from the elected town officials in special meetings with the Town Board as well as with other Town commissions and committees.

#### IMPORTANCE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE PLAN

In developing this plan, the Committee recognized the critically important role technology access and services will play in the continued health and growth of the Town of Three Lakes.

Advanced technology capabilities and options are implicit throughout all elements of the Plan. In developing this plan, the Committee appointed a separate Technology Subcommittee with the charge of exploring and proposing the different technology issues and options for the Town over the next twenty years. The resulting goals of that committee's work have been integrated throughout this plan into the statutorily prescribed elements. The technology goals, as with many others, can relate actively to multiple elements. They have been placed in the Plan into what seems to be the primary, "parent" element for each goal

### **FORUMS, SURVEYS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

The planning process has included: a) six facilitated forums for citizens and residents of the community, with care and attention given to the different age and demographic groups; b) an economic development survey distributed to every business in the Town; and c) a residential survey mailed to every household in the Town. These surveys included questions intended to allow residents and business owners to share their assessment of the current situation in the Town and to obtain opinions regarding the Town's future. Information from the surveys has been used throughout the planning process and has provided critical data that, once transformed into information, provided solid direction to TAG. Survey results are included in Appendix C.

TAG also developed a list of Issues & Opportunities confronting the community. These were compiled from a vast amount of research and input at the local as well as country, regional and state levels. Both national and even international trends which could potentially affect a twenty-year plan were considered. Using the well-known and accepted methodology of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (or S.W.O.T.) an analysis of all the input yielded a synthesis of key issues. All of these processes were helpful in establishing a baseline for developing the comprehensive plan.

Wisconsin Statute 66.1001 requires municipalities to adopt written procedures that are designed to foster the widest possible range of public participation and input throughout the planning process. The main goal of the public participation plan was to make all citizens of the community aware of the plan's progress and to offer the public opportunities to make suggestions or comments during the planning process. Throughout the planning process the public was afforded several opportunities to participate directly in the development of the comprehensive plan. The Town of Three Lakes adopted a public participation plan for use in the overall development of the Town of Three Lakes Comprehensive Plan. Refer to Appendix B.

Plenary meetings of the entire TAG committee (held monthly), Officer meetings (held monthly), and Sub-Committee meetings (held at various weekly and monthly intervals) were all conducted in accordance with Wisconsin Open Meeting and Open Records law.

The recommended draft comprehensive plan was distributed to all adjoining and overlapping jurisdictions and others required to receive the plan by statute and made available to the public via paper copy at the Demmer Memorial Library and the Town Office, as well as on the Internet.

A public hearing on the final draft of the comprehensive plan was held prior to adoption by the Town. Appendix F contains documentation on plan adoption by the Town.

The adopted comprehensive plan will now be overseen and implemented by a newly formed seven member Plan Commission. Meetings will be held at least once per month; see the Town of Three Lakes website for more details. Appendix E contains the Plan Commission Ordinance.

### **S.W.O.T. (STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, THREATS) ANALYSIS OVERVIEW**

An examination of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats created by the historical and current contexts serves as a useful backdrop for the overall planning process.

Tourism and visitor patterns have dramatically changed over the past thirty years. The realities of modern travel no longer dictate that visitors must remain for an entire season. Inexpensive fuel and improved Federal and State highways have made the trip from urban areas more attractive. This flexibility slowly transformed Three Lakes from a seasonal residence in which visitors stayed for months into a weekend and family vacation destination with the length of stay measured in days. Automobile travel also spelled the end of trains as a common means of transportation, and passenger railroad service to Three Lakes ceased in 1970. The vintage resorts and housekeeping cottages, once the mainstay of lodging for visitors to the area, have fallen out of favor. Today's travelers want motel and hotel rooms, or private guest homes, with amenities such as central air and heat, cable TV, high speed internet, and swimming pools for a new generation of youth that have never set foot in a lake.

The restrictive zoning decision of two decades ago had the intended effect with respect to commercial and industrial development. There is only one light manufacturing company currently in operation in the Town, no prospects for new tenants, and insufficient commercially zoned land available even if there were interested companies. The price of on-water single-family zoned property has skyrocketed during this same time. Lake lots sell in the range of two to three thousand dollars per foot of shoreline. A significant percent of this land has been continuously in the hands of founding families, in many instances for as long as 100 years. As the resident population ages, they find it increasingly difficult on a fixed income to pay the ever-increasing taxes of their lake land. Through death and attrition, property ownership is gradually turning over. Changing family demographics have also played a role in the disposition of land. Heirs no longer always want the property that has been bequeathed to them, cannot afford to keep it, or wish to sell inherited property due to its significant cash potential. Due to the high price of the land, and even higher resale value, such sales are increasingly made to developers with an eye towards multiple-family construction such as condominiums and townhouses. The inventory of affordable housing in Town in general is low. For young families of working age with children such inventory of housing borders on non-existent.

A positive outcome from the decades of prosperity driven by the tourism industry is that the Town was able to build and now possesses a valuable physical infrastructure of facilities and institutions. Some of this was construction accomplished with tax dollars while philanthropically-minded residents provided the rest. The Three Lakes Volunteer Fire Department has a state-of-the-art firehouse armed with the latest equipment. The Demmer Memorial Library is recognized as one of the top three libraries in the State of Wisconsin. The Three Lakes School District is consistently rated as one of the best in the State. Both have been perennial drawing cards to young couples looking to raise and educate a family. The Edith Reiter Center and the Three Lakes Center for the Arts in the Northwoods are two examples of community facilities originating in private funding.

A major challenge facing the Town today is one of the largest declines in school enrollment in the State. The implications of the loss in tax revenue alone are wide-ranging. While a number of interrelated and complex factors have led to this decline, the main contributors are an aging population whose children have already passed through the school system, the inability of new students from young families to attend because their parents cannot find affordable housing in the Town and/or a good-paying job nearby, and the permanent loss upon graduation of students from the region who instead raise and educate a family in places other than in their home town.

The number of high school and college-educated students remaining in Three Lakes after graduation continues to decline not because of a drop-off in the quality of education they received at the local or state levels, or that which their children would receive in the future were they to reside here in adulthood, but in large part because there are too few jobs in the local economy to sustain them. There is also the issue of 21st century infrastructure expectations for the new generation of young people. Three Lakes is located in the heart of Wisconsin's rural north. It is an hour's drive or more – when the weather is cooperating – from what many urbanites consider to be "civilization". Cell phone and high-speed wireless coverage is still spotty at best in many locations. The Northwoods remains the State's most underserved and unserved area for technology. Many young people who grew up in Three Lakes, often the best educated and most ambitious of their class, move away from the area because of opportunities they cannot find here. Once they are gone, these young people may never come back.

Cranberries and forest products are, in that order, the only economically significant agricultural crops still grown, harvested and used in the Town. While Wisconsin is the leading cranberry producer in the nation, and this industry is an important part of what defines the Town's character; the nature of the business is such that it does not provide many year-round jobs. There is good seasonal employment of local residents during the harvest, however, and a number of cranberry-related retail businesses have evolved in support of the crop.

Recent dramatic challenges in the area of transportation, in particular the rising cost of fuel, are beginning to have a measurable impact on the local economy. This is manifested in terms of gasoline prices for residents, fuel costs for home heating and businesses, and the increased cost for visitors to make the long drive from urban areas to Three Lakes. The impact of continued increases in fuel costs has the potential to affect nearly every aspect of the local economy and infrastructure. This must be carefully observed and woven into the plan's contingencies.

### **COGNITIVE MAPPING**

Full explanation of this public participation exercise is found in Appendix D & *Chapter 10: Future Land Use, pages 1 & 2*