

Columbia County

FARMLAND PRESERVATION PLAN 2026-2035



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Columbia County Board of Supervisors

Troy Ryan	Steven Rohrbeck	Andrew Kolberg	Susan Schweitzer
Donna Fowler	Char Holtan	Denise Brusveen	Andrew Groves
Josiah Wynn	Derek Granquist	David Faust	John Stevenson
Joe Harvestine	Andrew Fischer	James Stilson	Tess Carr
Adam Field	Steven Balsiger	Keith Miller	Tom Dunn
Tim Henney	Brad Cook	Darren Schroeder, chair	Jeffrey Leckwee
Rich Bailey	Liz Miller	Henry St. Maurice	Douglas Richmond

Columbia County Staff

Kurt Calkins, Land Resources Director
Renee Pulver-Johnson, Principal Land Use Planner – Planning and Zoning Department
Lauren Ramirez, Office Coordinator – Planning and Zoning Department
Colton Lee, Zoning and Land Use Specialist – Planning and Zoning Department
Casey Bennett, Agricultural Outreach Specialist – Land and Water Conservation Department

Past Acknowledgements (2013 Initial Plan Development)

Columbia County Board of Supervisors

Robert McClyman	Brad Basten	Susan Martin	Mark Sleger
Mary Cupery	James Foley	John Tramburg	Andy Ross, Chairman
Adam Field	James Bechen	Mike Weyh	JoAnn Wingers
Kenneth Hutler	Robert Westby	Vern Gove	Barry Pufahl
Don DeYoung	John Stevenson	Kirk Konkel	Susanna Bradley
Bruce Rashke	Philip Baebler	Richard Boockmeier	Harlan Baumgartner
Tim Zander	Kevin Kessler	Fred Teitgen	Teresa Ann Sumnicht

Columbia County Farmland Preservation Steering Committee

Harlan Baumgartner	Darren Schroeder
Fred Teitgen	Darwin Selle
Mike Weyh	Alan Kaltenberg
Mary Cupery	Bruce Walker
Jim Foley	Bob Breneman
Debra Healy Wopat	Ralph Levzow
Bill Hoffman	

Columbia County Staff

John Bluemke, Director of Planning and Zoning Department
Randy Thompson, Planning and Zoning Administrator
Susan Runnion, Office Administrator - Planning and Zoning Department
Kurt Calkins, Director of Land and Water Conservation

Consultant Staff

Acknowledgements

Mark Roffers, AICP, Project Manager

MDRoffers Consulting LLC
4324 Upland Drive
Madison, WI 53705
(608) 770-0338
www.mdoffers.com

Jessica Schmiedicke, AICP, Principal Author
Dan Eckberg, GIS Technician
Elona Bartnick, Associate Designer
Parker Jones, Intern

Vandewalle & Associates
120 East Lakeside Street
P.O. Box 259036
Madison, WI 53715
(608) 255-3988
www.vandewalle.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	I
CHAPTER 1: FRAMEWORK AND OVERVIEW	1
PURPOSE AND RELATIONSHIP TO PAST PLANNING	1
PLANNING PROCESS SUMMARY.....	2
ORGANIZATION OF PLAN	2
THE IMPORTANCE OF AGRICULTURE	2
REGIONAL INFLUENCES	3
EXPECTED CHANGES IN AGRICULTURE	4
<i>Map 1: Jurisdictional Boundaries</i>	6
<i>Map 2: Columbia County's Regional Influences</i>	7
VISION, GOAL, AND OBJECTIVES	8
OVERVIEW OF COLUMBIA COUNTY'S FARMLAND PRESERVATION PROGRAM.....	9
Incentives	9
Land Use Planning and Zoning	10
<i>Figure A: Effect of the Working Lands Law on Columbia County</i>	12
<i>Figure B: Effect of the Working Lands Law on Columbia County, cont.</i>	13
<i>Figure C: Columbia County's Farmland Preservation Program</i>	14
<i>Map 3: Farmland Preservation Map for Columbia County</i>	15
CHAPTER 2: FARMLAND PRESERVATION PLANNING & ZONING APPROACH	16
OVERVIEW.....	16
FARMLAND PRESERVATION PLAN MAP AND CATEGORIES	16
FARMLAND PRESERVATION AREA.....	17
Purpose and Description	17
Mapping Criteria for Farmland Preservation Area	17
General Policies, Programs, and Actions for Farmland Preservation Area	18
Rezoning and Density Policies for Residential Development in Farmland Preservation Area	20
<i>Figure D: Residential Development Approaches within Planned Farmland Preservation Areas</i>	22
<i>Figure E: Alternative Rezoning Approach for Pre-1984 Substandard (<35 acre) A-1 Lots with Non-Farm Residence</i>	23
Siting Policies for Residential Development in Farmland Preservation Area	23
DEVELOPED/INFILL AREA	25
Purpose and Description	25
Mapping Process and Criteria for Developed/Infill Area	25

Table of Contents

Policies, Programs, and Actions for Developed/Infill Area	26
URBAN TRANSITION AREA.....	26
Purpose and Description	26
Mapping Process and Criteria for Urban Transition Area	27
Policies, Programs, and Actions for Urban Transition Areas	27
CITY OR VILLAGE AREA	28
Purpose, Description, and Mapping Criteria	28
Policies, Programs, and Actions for City or Village Area	28
<i>Map 4: Town of Arlington Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	30
<i>Map 5a: Town of Caledonia Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	31
<i>Map 5b: Town of Caledonia Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	32
<i>Map 6: Town of Columbus Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	33
<i>Map 7: Town of Courtland Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	34
<i>Map 8: Town of Dekorra Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	35
<i>Map 9: Town of Fort Winnebago Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	36
<i>Map 10: Town of Fountain Prairie Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	37
<i>Map 11: Town of Hampden Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	38
<i>Map 12: Town of Leeds Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	39
<i>Map 13: Town of Lewiston Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	40
<i>Map 14: Town of Lodi Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	41
<i>Map 15: Town of Louville Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	42
<i>Map 16: Town of Marcellon Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	43
<i>Map 17: Town of Newport Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	44
<i>Map 18: Town of Otsego and Village of Doylestown Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	45
<i>Map 19: Town of Pacific Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	46
<i>Map 20: Town of Randolph Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	47
<i>Map 21: Town of Scott Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	48
<i>Map 22: Town of Springvale Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	49
<i>Map 23: Town of West Point Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	50
<i>Map 24: Town of Wyocena Farmland Preservation Plan Map</i>	51
<i>Map 25: Town of West Point Agricultural Enterprise Area Map</i>	52
CHAPTER 3: IMPLEMENTATION	53
ACTIONS FOR PLAN IMPLEMENTATION	53
Implementation of Land Use Initiatives—Immediate Zoning Ordinance Considerations	53
Implementation of Land Use Initiatives—Other Considerations	54

Table of Contents

PLAN ADOPTION, EVALUATION, AMENDMENTS, AND UPDATE	54
Plan Adoption	54
Plan Monitoring	54
Plan Amendments	55
Plan Update	56
APPENDIX A: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION RESULTS	57
STEERING COMMITTEE MEETINGS.....	57
TOWN/PUBLIC MEETINGS—ROUND 1	58
TOWN/PUBLIC MEETINGS—ROUND 2.....	59
DATCP MEETING AND COMMUNICATIONS	59
PUBLIC HEARINGS	59
OTHER OUTREACH EFFORTS	59
2026 UPDATE MEETINGS	59
APPENDIX B: EXISTING CONDITIONS AND TRENDS	61
POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS	61
Population Trends	61
Demographic Trends	62
SOURCE: AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (2020 5-YEAR ESTIMATES)	64
AGRICULTURE.....	64
Economic Contribution of Agriculture	64
Agricultural Production and Specialties	64
Agricultural Resources	64
Agricultural Trends	65
Agricultural Storage and Processing	67
Agricultural Supply and Distribution	67
Market Value of Farm Products	68
Land Use Issues Related to Agriculture	70
MUNICIPAL EXPANSION	70
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION.....	71
Water Resources	71
1 Percent Annual Chance Flood (100-year flood)	71
Wetlands	71
Upland Woods	71
Parks and Other Public Lands	71
ECONOMIC GROWTH	72
ENERGY	73

Table of Contents

UTILITIES, COMMUNITY FACILITIES, AND SERVICES.....	73
Community Facilities	73
Telecommunications and Utilities	73
Public Safety	74
Water Supply	74
Wastewater	74
Waste Management	74
TRANSPORTATION	74
Highways	75
Railroads	75
Air Transportation	75
Public Transportation	75
The Merrimac Ferry	75

CHAPTER 1: FRAMEWORK AND OVERVIEW

Purpose and Relationship to Past Planning

The Columbia County Farmland Preservation Plan adopted in 2013 replaced a 1988 plan of the same name. This new plan, now revised in 2026, continues to provide direction for farmland preservation in Columbia County over the next decade and beyond (see Map 1). This Farmland Preservation Plan has been prepared and adopted to be the County’s State-certified “farmland preservation plan” under Wisconsin’s Working Lands Initiative (Chapter 91 of Wisconsin Statutes).

What is the Wisconsin Working Lands Initiative?

The Wisconsin Working Lands Initiative was passed as part of the State’s 2009—2011 biennial budget bill. The Wisconsin Working Lands Initiative is primarily documented through a rewrite of Chapter 91 of Wisconsin State Statutes. Main components of the Initiative include:

- Modernization of land use planning and zoning program for farmland preservation, including minimum zoning standards and soil and water conservation standards.
- Requirement that all counties update their farmland preservation plans
- Establishment of a competitive Agricultural Enterprise Area (AEA) program to designate areas with greatest opportunity for and commitment to farmland preservation
- Increased State income tax credit opportunities for farmers in areas with farmland preservation zoning or AEAs
- Development of a Purchase of Agricultural Easement (PACE) program, which provides

This Farmland Preservation Plan focuses on Columbia County’s land use planning and zoning approach to farmland preservation. This Plan identifies “farmland preservation areas” and also accommodates compatible growth in planned locations, forms, and densities. It responds to emerging trends, activities, policy discussions, and opportunities as well.

This Farmland Preservation Plan is an integral part of the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046, which the County Board adopted in 2007 as the County’s Comprehensive Plan under Section 66.1001 of Wisconsin Statutes. The Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 was prepared in conjunction with comprehensive plans for most of the towns in Columbia County and also reflected city and village plans. The Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 includes an “Agricultural, Natural, and Cultural Resources” element; a future land use map that identifies planned “Agricultural and Other Open Space Areas,” and policies for limited residential development within such areas. Concurrent with adoption of this Farmland Preservation Plan, the County adopted amendments to the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 to ensure full consistency with this Farmland Preservation Plan, which itself was adopted as a detailed component of the County’s Comprehensive Plan under Section 66.1001.

In March 2012, after a 3½ year effort that overlapped with the State’s adoption of the Working Lands Initiative, Columbia County adopted a “comprehensive revision” to its general county zoning ordinance. The County elected as part of that process not to make substantial changes to its agricultural and open space zoning districts and zoning standards. Instead, the County agreed to defer such effort until after the completion of this Farmland Preservation Plan and to treat such second effort as another “comprehensive revision.” Under Wisconsin Statutes, a comprehensive revision to a general county zoning ordinance must be approved by each town in the county for that zoning ordinance to take effect in that town. In May 2014, the County completed

Chapter 1: Framework and Overview

this second comprehensive revision to the zoning ordinance. The 2014 comprehensive revision added a new agricultural and open space zoning district, specifically targeted for use in transition areas.

The 2026 updates focus on defining new and emerging trends the County has been experiencing during the past 10-year timeframe, with minor map revisions to areas that are now seeing development.

Planning Process Summary

The success of this Farmland Preservation Plan is linked to the County's ability to implement related zoning regulations and pursue other initiatives, in cooperation with town, city and village governments; farmers and their organizations; farm-related businesses; economic development organizations; and other agricultural stakeholders and landowners. Therefore, collaboration in the development of this Plan was important.

The County engaged in a public process to create this Plan starting in Spring 2012. A Steering Committee comprised of the County Planning and Zoning Committee and other key stakeholders including farmers directed Plan content and helped provide and interpret public input. Opportunities for public involvement punctuated the planning process, including two rounds of public meetings focused particularly on town officials. Following recommendations from the Steering Committee and Planning and Zoning Committee, the County Board adopted this Plan. Summaries of participation opportunities can be found in Appendix A.

During the 10-year update, the County opted to develop a public input survey. Additionally, direct mailings were provided to all Towns, with the ability to conduct one-on-one planning meetings, if desired. A series of public informational meetings were held to gauge input on the previous 10 years of Plan implementation and to provide an opportunity for the public to weigh in on goals and objectives for the next 10 years.



Organization of Plan

This Plan is organized to first communicate the County's general framework for farmland preservation and then elaborate with the detailed policies, with a particular focus on land use policies related to farmland preservation.

This Plan is presented in three chapters, plus appendices with supporting information. Chapter 1 provides the framework for farmland preservation in Columbia County. Chapter 2 includes the County's farmland preservation land use planning and zoning approach. Chapter 3 outlines the steps that will be used to implement this Plan.



The Importance of Agriculture

Agriculture remains central to Columbia County's economic and land use future. The eastern two-thirds of the county are dominated by a mixture of dairy, cash crop, and livestock farms. These farms sit on productive soils, enriched by ten thousand years of prairie growth on glacial deposits. The remainder of the County has more

Chapter 1: Framework and Overview

variable soil quality, less farming activity, more significant topographical changes, and more population and non-farm development.

Columbia County's farmers own and manage over 296,000 acres of land. The average farm size in Columbia County is approximately 222 acres. The industry also contributes over 4,500 jobs in the County, accounts for one quarter (\$1 billion) of business sales in the County, contributes \$261 million to County income, and pays \$24 million in property taxes. Corn, soybean, and wheat production continues to dominate the cash crops grown in the County, though dairy (through the sale of milk) is also strong. Other crop production includes potatoes, beans, peas, tree nuts, oilseeds, berries, vegetables, and more.

Columbia County adopted its first agricultural preservation zoning district in 1973. The County's program was refined following the State's adoption of its farmland preservation planning, zoning, and tax credit program in 1977, and then again in 1988 with the adoption of the County's last Farmland Preservation Plan.

Regional Influences

Understanding the forces that have shaped the County's past and will influence farmland preservation (and development) in the future requires understanding the County's broader context. As illustrated in Map 2, the County's proximity to the growing Madison metropolitan area, related commuting patterns, major recreational and tourism destinations, and the physical landscape are key shapers of change in the County. They also place pressure on the agricultural landscape and farming, while at the same time creating and growing markets for farm products.

The County's excellent access via Interstate 39/90/94 and U.S. Highways 151 and 51, its relatively affordable cost of living, and its rural character have led to commuter development pressure in the southern part of the County in particular. Dane County is, by a substantial margin, the second most common work destination for Columbia County workers (outside of Columbia County itself). The recent economic recession has slowed development and kept people closer to metropolitan areas and job centers. However, as the economy recovers, the former trend may continue.

Columbia County has a wealth of recreational amenities and natural resources – from the Wisconsin River and numerous state wildlife areas and public hunting grounds to the “water park capital of the world” in Wisconsin Dells. There is also high demand for lakefront seasonal recreational homes and retirement homes along the Wisconsin River and its Lake Wisconsin flowage. The Merrimac Ferry, the only free ferry in Wisconsin, takes travelers to Sauk County via the Wisconsin River, providing access to additional attractions like Baraboo and Devil's Lake State Park in the summer months. Within the last 10 years, the County has seen substantial growth and demand for short-term rentals, or tourist rooming houses, within the desirable Wisconsin River/Lake Wisconsin area. This new land use pressure has added to the already high demand for homes in these areas, and thus the County has seen additional development pressure adjacent to these areas.

In 2021, Alliant Energy announced closure of the Columbia Energy Center, a coal-fired power plant located in the Town of Pacific. The anticipated date of closure is 2029, at which time it is expected the plant will be transitioned to natural gas. The Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) electric transmission system running through the County has a large amount of available space, making the County a prime location for renewal energy projects within agricultural areas. These large renewable energy projects have put pressure on farmers looking to rent acreage for farming, as competition for land use has driven up the cost of rent per acre. Notable projects include Good Oak Solar (98MW), Gristmill Solar (67 MW), Ursa Solar (200MW), and High Noon Solar Energy Center (300MW) projects. Approximately 5,000 acres of farmland within the County will be impacted by these projects, which are expected to be operational by 2028.

Columbia County is positioned at the ecological transition between the agricultural landscape of southern and central Wisconsin and the forested landscape of northern and western Wisconsin. Its position at this transition zone creates an attractive rural landscape mosaic of farm fields and open spaces interspersed with dense forest stands. This transition landscape influences the aesthetics and recreational opportunities within the County—not to mention providing diverse choices in living environments. The most agriculturally productive areas are

located in the southeastern area in the County. Known as the Arlington Prairie, this former deep soil prairie is intensively farmed due to highly productive soils. Productive agricultural areas surround the County as well, as evidenced by nearby Agricultural Enterprise Areas (state-approved long term agricultural focus areas) in Dodge, Sauk, and Dane counties.

Without continued dedication to long term farmland preservation and careful planning, these influences may result in direct conversion of farmland, and increased difficulty in conducting normal farming activities if nearby lands develop. On the other side of the coin, local and regional populations and visitors create sizable markets for locally grown products.

Expected Changes in Agriculture

Columbia County's rich agricultural heritage, the continued prominence of farming here, and the County's position in the south-central Wisconsin region influence the opportunities and anticipated changes in the nature, scope, location, and focus of agricultural production, processing, supply, and distribution. In general, agriculture will remain a critical part of the County's economy and landscape, particularly in areas with the highest quality soils. The County anticipates:

- Continued interest in consolidating farm tracts in the hands of fewer owners, and in other owners expanding their cropland by leasing more land. This will help minimize the fragmentation of farm tracts, while resulting in additional smaller lots around existing and former farmsteads.
- A renewed interest in new rural homesites, particularly as the national and regional housing market continues to rebound, if gas prices remain modest, and if home prices closer to Madison remain high. Still, rural home demand in Columbia County is not expected to approach 1990s and early 2000s levels during the planning period. Properly sited at low densities, new homes will infuse fresh capital into farm operations. Poorly sited homes at too high of densities would negatively affect farming.
- Especially if corn and other grain commodity prices remain high, a continued interest in farming as a profession and in increasing cropland acreage, which will counterbalance the incentive to divide lands for housing.
- Continued interest in increasing livestock herd sizes, which the chances for the largest herds highest in areas that are more remote from cities, villages, and waterfront development areas.
- Increased interest in local food production for regional consumption. Growing interest in locally and organically produced food in the Madison, Chicago, and Milwaukee markets will likely lead to increased interest in smaller-acreage farming in Columbia and other nearby counties, even as production agriculture or large tracts continues to dominate the County's agricultural landscape.
- An expected increase in participation in the farmland preservation tax credit program, particularly for larger holdings, which will result in increases in both farm income and conservation and nutrient management planning and implementation.
- Expanded agricultural commodity processing in the County's industrial parks, rural business locations, and on farms themselves, enabled by incentives and zoning rules that promote such activities, and influenced by the local foods movement.
- An increased demand for solar and wind development on large tracts of agricultural lands.
- Continued extreme weather conditions, such as extended drought periods followed by excessive moisture conditions, will continue to cause significant concern among farmers. These conditions affect management decisions, crop yields, and overall production.
- Land values are expected to continue to increase, as renewable energy development impacts available acreage, along with a decreasing number of acres sold.

Chapter 1: Framework and Overview

- A continued decline in the number of farms within the County (the County has experienced a decline by 13% since 2012), while the average farm size has increased slightly.
- An increased desire for small-scale “homesteading” farms, on which people grow their own food and raise their own livestock, with a focus on sustainable practices. A small amount of sales may occur at local farmer’s markets. Growth began during COVID-19 pandemic, and continues to remain steady as people seek to become more self-reliant.
- Increased use of technology and data, including agricultural robotics, agri drones, precision agriculture, and farm analytics. These advancements allow farmers to effectively manage their crops with a better understanding of soil nutrient levels, fertilizer needs, and site specific crop and livestock management, including application of precise amounts of water, pesticides, and fertilizers to optimize yield quality and productivity.
- An increased interest in regenerative agriculture, which prioritizes minimal soil disruption. This practice also focuses on enhancing soil biodiversity and rejuvenating topsoil through reduced or no till farming, crop rotation, and more.

Map 1: Jurisdictional Boundaries

Map 2: Columbia County's Regional Influences

Vision, Goal, and Objectives

Columbia County has made a commitment to preserve farmland and farming for future generations. The following vision statement, included within the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046, provides a useful starting point for how the County views farmland preservation relative to other priorities.

Further, the goal of “preservation of the most productive agricultural areas in the County” from the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 remains appropriate for this Farmland Preservation Plan.



Columbia County's Vision

Columbia County will continue to have a high quality of life and be an exceptional place to live, work, and engage in recreation. The County will continue to find balance among economic development, the preservation of agriculture, the protection of natural and cultural resources, and the recognition of private property rights. Well-planned development, supported by appropriate infrastructure and an efficient transportation system, will ensure a vibrant and sustainable economy, and provide a strong quality of life for its citizens. Columbia County's agricultural resources are regarded as irreplaceable resources to be protected for future generations.

Additionally, agricultural preservation objectives within the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 contributed to the following Farmland Preservation Plan objectives which are intended to advance this goal.

1. Preserve and protect the best agricultural soils by developing and implementing appropriate land use regulations.
2. Focus new development in areas, on sites, and in forms (e.g., clusters) that will not adversely impact productive farmland in the County.
3. Review residential and other development proposals for potential impacts and encroachments on the land needed for agriculture.
4. Encourage efforts to slow and reduce the fragmentation of agricultural lands.
5. Limit non-farm development on prime agricultural soils.
6. Maintain the integrity of the agricultural (farmland preservation) zoning district by restricting the uses in this district to those related to agriculture.
7. Implement a density-based standard for limited housing on lands planned for farmland preservation, including modest incentives for clustering of smaller lots as opposed to large residential parcels.
8. Encourage the owners of farmland to follow best practices to minimize impacts to the County's natural resources.
9. Support animal agriculture in the County, considering the management of large herds using livestock siting rules from the State of Wisconsin.

Chapter 1: Framework and Overview

10. Support the continuation and enhancement of State income tax credits to those farmers who wish to take advantage of that program.
11. Support town and farmer initiatives to preserve farmland via approaches that go beyond farmland preservation zoning.
12. Encourage the continued growth of the agricultural economy in Columbia County.

Overview of Columbia County's Farmland Preservation Program

The County's farmland preservation program is aimed at providing and enabling:

- The right economic conditions for farming and the growth of the agricultural industry,
- Appropriate incentives and flexibility to help farmers continue farming, and
- A land use planning and zoning approach to retain productive agricultural lands and attain a compatible development pattern.

Economics

Agriculture is and should continue to be an economic driver in Columbia County, contributing to both individual and community success. As a result, agricultural-related economic development is a component of the County's farmland preservation program.

The importance of commercial (production) agriculture is documented earlier in this chapter. The County will continue to support the health and growth of commercial (production) agriculture, in part through complementary land use policies and providing incentives for keeping large blocks of land in agricultural production. There is also increasing interest from consumers in locally produced, organic and specialty agricultural products, including dairy products, meat, vegetables, and fruit. County stakeholders should make the most of these additional opportunities.

Agritainment opportunities play a vital role in educating and involving consumers in local agricultural practices. These operations generally involve family engagement through corn mazes, sunflower fields, hayrides, you-pick flowers, fruits and vegetables, and special events.

Local processing of local agricultural products also creates significant future opportunities. This includes food processing industry—extending in scale from small and on-farm operations to major businesses within the industrial parks in the County. There are also multiple “new use” opportunities for agricultural products, including energy, plastics, pharmaceuticals, and fiber-based products. The County's land use, zoning, and economic development efforts support agricultural product processing in appropriate locations.

Finally, agricultural support businesses, such as implement dealers, feed and seed operations, and agricultural product processors provide necessary services, materials, and access to markets for the County's farmers. As such, the maintenance and expansion of these businesses are critical to the economics of farmland preservation in Columbia County. The County will continue to support agricultural support businesses in appropriate locations that are close to the farms they serve.

Incentives

Farmers control most of the land in Columbia County and have alternative means of profiting from that land via housing and other non-agricultural development. An overall farmland preservation approach that includes financial incentives as one component can serve to counteract this pressure to convert farmland.

The Wisconsin Working Lands Initiative continues the opportunity for farmers within areas planned and zoned for agricultural preservation to claim farmland preservation income tax credits. In tax season 2023, State of Wisconsin residents were paid out \$20.5 million in Farmland Preservation Plan credits. For the same 2023 tax season, Columbia County residents claimed Farmland Preservation credit on 100,433 acres, totaling \$1,012,625. Claimants must be in an area planned and zoned for agricultural preservation, have \$6,000 in gross farm revenue

Chapter 1: Framework and Overview

(including rental revenue) in the past year or \$18,000 over the past three years, and have been issued a Certificate of Compliance by the Columbia County Land and Water Conservation Department that certifies they are in compliance with the NR 151 Agricultural Performance Standards and Prohibitions incorporated into ATCP 50. In exchange for farming and meeting conservations standards, landowners can receive an annual income tax credit. The amount of the tax credit depends on whether the land is located within a farmland preservation zoning district or covered by a farmland preservation agreement, or both. The County continues to support the tax credit as a key incentive tool for farmland preservation. Eligible farmers may collect the following:

- \$10 per acre for landowners with a farmland preservation agreement signed after July 1, 2009, and located in an agricultural enterprise area, or for landowners who have modified an agreement initially signed before July 1, 2009.
- \$10 per acre for landowners in an area planned and zoned for farmland preservation.
- \$12.50 per acre for landowners in an area zoned for farmland preservation and in an agricultural enterprise area with a farmland preservation agreement signed after July 1, 2009, or in an area zoned for farmland preservation and with a farmland preservation agreement modified after July 1, 2009.

Landowners who wish to claim farmland preservation tax credits must comply with State soil and water conservation standards. The Columbia County Land and Water Conservation Department is responsible for certifying compliance and providing technical support to meet compliance as needed. Compliance with these standards often overlaps with other programming carried out by the Columbia County Land and Water Conservation Department. Additional financial resources from both the State (DNR, DATCP) and federal government (NRCS, EPA) may be used to help offset the technical cost of implementing the necessary Best Management Practices to help landowners reach and maintain compliance. Compliance must include all of the NR 151 Agricultural Runoff Performance Standards and Prohibitions incorporated into ATCP 50.

An Agricultural Enterprise Area (AEA), another creation of the Working Lands Initiative—is defined as a contiguous land area devoted primarily to agricultural use and locally targeted for agricultural preservation and agricultural development. AEAs preserve areas considered most valuable for current and future agricultural use, promote the development of agricultural businesses, and ensure eligibility of farm owners for enhanced tax credits through farmland preservation agreements. The State is authorized to designate up to one million acres total statewide. In 2014, the West Point Agricultural Enterprise Area was created. The boundary was updated in 2017 (see Map 25). To date, this is the only AEA in the County. AEAs in surrounding communities can be viewed on Map 2. The County will support the creation of one or more AEAs where consistent with this Plan, and where there is sufficient town government and landowner initiative to create the AEA. Where a landowner has entered into a new farmland preservation agreement with the State, the tax credit rate is \$12.50 per acre where land is both in an AEA and zoned for farmland preservation, and \$10 per acre if only in an AEA. Once current farmland preservation agreements with individual farmers expire, only location in a farmland preservation zoning district or in an AEA (with a new agreement if in an AEA) will allow interested farmers to collect tax credits.

Land Use Planning and Zoning

This Farmland Preservation Plan focuses particularly on the land use planning and zoning aspects of farmland preservation. These are the aspects within which the County has the most direct legal abilities, responsibilities, and experience. A focus on land use planning and zoning reflects the fact that the County has limited resources to devote to other types of farmland preservation initiatives.

The Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 established the most recent and applicable framework for farmland preservation planning and zoning in the County. That framework was established after years of analysis and discussion in the mid-2000s. The 2009 adoption of the State's Working Lands Initiative has required some adjustments to the County's program, which were consider as part of the planning process and are documented in Figures A and B.

Chapter 1: Framework and Overview

The resulting County farmland preservation land use planning and zoning approach focuses on continued farmland preservation and other agricultural/open space zoning of most lands within unincorporated parts of the County, as summarized in Figure C. Within the planned “Farmland Preservation Area,” depicted in Map 3 and in the 21 component Town farmland preservation maps in Chapter 2, agricultural-related development will be supported, and non-farm development will be limited. Residential development in the planned Farmland Preservation Area will be limited to a *density* (not a minimum lot size) of one home per 35 acres of land. This density-based approach to housing will better serve to preserve farming than the large-lot zoning approach of the past. The County’s program further provides incentives for clustering allowable home sites, as suggested in Figure C. Outside of planned Farmland Preservation Areas, the County supports denser housing development and other types of development to support the County’s quality of life and economy. This includes some development that may also support the agricultural economy, such as industrial parks that include sites for businesses that process locally produced agricultural products.

Chapter 2 of this Farmland Preservation Plan, combined with the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and the County zoning ordinance, describes the County’s land use/zoning approach to farmland preservation in detail.



Figure A: Effect of the Working Lands Law on Columbia County

Figure B: Effect of the Working Lands Law on Columbia County, cont.

Figure C: Columbia County's Farmland Preservation Program

Map 3: Farmland Preservation Map for Columbia County

CHAPTER 2: FARMLAND PRESERVATION PLANNING & ZONING APPROACH

Overview

This chapter describes the County’s approach to farmland preservation-supportive land use planning and zoning. The policies and maps in this chapter will guide County decision-making on future development, preservation, zoning changes, and land divisions, in combination with land use policies and maps in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046. The chapter is generally organized by the general categories of future use presented on Maps 3 through 24, particularly focusing on the Farmland Preservation Area presented on those maps.

This chapter and its included maps do not identify, in detail, the specific types of future land uses that are allowed or encouraged in different parts of the County. For example, they do not show areas appropriate for residential versus commercial development or provide any detail within cities and villages. Instead, within the unincorporated areas, this level of planning detail is included in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and within town comprehensive plans. Within incorporated areas and their proposed growth areas, this detail is available within city and village comprehensive plans.



Farmland Preservation Plan Map and Categories

Map 3, the Columbia County Farmland Preservation Map, presents recommendations for future preservation and development in Columbia County. The “future” can generally be understood as a 10+ year planning horizon, in light of the fact that both the State’s comprehensive planning and Working Lands laws will require that this map be revisited at least once every 10 years. Based on interactions with local governments in Columbia County, the Farmland Preservation Map may be amended more frequently.

For purposes of managing growth and preserving land resources, all land in Columbia County has been delineated into one of the following four “base” future preservation or development categories:

- Farmland Preservation Area
- City or Village Non-Farmland Preservation Area
- Developed/Infill Area
- Urban Transition Area

The assignment of land into one of the above categories is based on mapping criteria presented later in this chapter under each category description. Each of these four future preservation or development categories is described in the sections that follow, along with mapping criteria and policies related to each category. The policies are particularly focused on approaches for preserving and enhancing agriculture.

Farmland Preservation Area

Purpose and Description

Asserting the right of Columbia County landowners to continue farming with minimal disturbance and conflict from current and future land uses is critical to the future survival of farms. The purpose of the Farmland Preservation Area is to:

- Preserve productive agricultural lands in the long-term.
- Preserve the rural character and aesthetic quality of Columbia County.
- Provide equity and fairness to owners of land with comparable resource and location characteristics.
- Minimize non-agricultural development on prime farmland.
- Maintain the integrity of agricultural zoning districts allowing for accepted agricultural practices.
- Protect existing farm operations from encroachment by incompatible uses.
- Allow a maximum residential development density of one residence per 35 acres of land, as described in greater detail in the policies that follow.
- Maintain farmer eligibility for farmland preservation incentive programs, such as tax credits.

The Farmland Preservation Area is mapped primarily to accommodate agricultural uses or agricultural-related uses (e.g., implement dealerships), and to focus on areas actively used for farming, with productive agricultural soils, with topographic conditions suitable for farming, and with long-term (15+ year) suitability for farming. This category also includes and is intended to accommodate forest management, farmsteads, limited non-farm housing in accordance with the policies described below, associated home occupations and family businesses, and other uses identified as permitted and conditional uses in implementing zoning districts.

Mapping Criteria for Farmland Preservation Area

A variety of factors were used to map the Farmland Preservation Area on Maps 3 through 24, focused particularly on requirements and guidance supplied under the State's Working Lands law.

The Farmland Preservation Area identified on the maps largely coincides with the area designated for future "Agricultural and Other Open Space" use on the Future Land Use map (Map 8-3) within the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and within individual town comprehensive plans. The Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and most individual town comprehensive plans were prepared during the same mid-2000s planning process. As a result, the Future Land Use map in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 closely coordinates with similar maps in local comprehensive plans.

The Future Land Use map in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 also reflects future land use maps from city and village comprehensive plans without change, where the respective city or village identified areas beyond its municipal limits for future development. This is in response to the County's interpretation of the requirements of Section 59.69(3)(b) of Wisconsin Statutes. The County incorporated those city and village future land use map recommendations on the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 Future Land Use map knowing that some city/village planned development areas would not be ripe for development within the ensuing 20+ years. However, only those lands that are NOT planned for non-agricultural development in the next 15 years were identified as Farmland Preservation Areas. As a result, there are differences in some geographic areas between the Farmland Preservation Area shown on Maps 3 through 24 and the future "Agricultural and Other Open Space Use" area on the Future Land Use map in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046. This is not an inconsistency, but rather an acknowledgement of different planning timeframes and land demand forecasts.

Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

Other factors that contributed to where the Farmland Preservation Area is shown on Maps 3 through 24 include the following:

- Areas with concentrations of prime farmland, lands currently being farmed, agricultural infrastructure, and uses that are compatible with agriculture such as mineral extraction sites.
- Lands in which current residential development density generally does not exceed a density of one home per 35 acres; or with scattered, small-scale, pre-existing commercial uses. The purpose of this factor is to allow, within the Farmland Preservation Area, a limited amount of pre-existing zoning and use conditions that do not technically meet Farmland Preservation Area policies, while at the same time assuring that a vast majority of lands that are planned for farmland preservation are also zoned for farmland preservation.
- Lands outside of current city and village limits, except for certain lands within the Village of Doylestown that are planned and zoned for farmland preservation.
- Lands outside of the planned Urban Transition Area and Developed/Infill Area, as described in the associated sections below.

General Policies, Programs, and Actions for Farmland Preservation Area

1. **Preferred Zoning District:** Utilize the A-1 Agriculture zoning district as the preferred primary zoning district to implement Farmland Preservation Area policies.
2. **Other Primary Zoning District Option:** Utilize the AO-1 Agriculture and Open Space district as a primary zoning district to implement Farmland Preservation Area policies within interested towns, under the following circumstances:
 - a. A town under general county zoning has requested use and mapping of the AO-1 zoning district as an alternative to the A-1 district in all or parts of the town.
 - b. The town has provided justification for use of the AO-1 district instead of the A-1 district.
 - c. The AO-1 district will be mapped over one or more large blocks of the interested town, not less than one-quarter section each in area.
 - d. The requesting town has made landowners in the proposed AO-1 zoned area aware that they will no longer be eligible for farmland preservation tax credits.
 - e. As of the date of adoption of this Farmland Preservation Plan, the AO-1 District was not used by any Town as an alternative zoning tool to implement Farmland Preservation Area policies but instead was used as a transitional zoning district as described later in this chapter.
3. **Secondary Zoning Districts:** Additional zoning districts consistent with the Farmland Preservation Area category include the AO-1 Agriculture and Open Space, A-2 General Agriculture, A-3 Agriculture Business, A-4 Agricultural Overlay, and RC-1 Recreation (for open space uses) districts. Other zoning districts may be utilized on an occasional basis, particularly based on pre-existing land use and zoning patterns and, in the case of the RR-1 Rural Residence District, to implement the “Rezoning and Density Policies for Residential Development in Farmland Preservation Area” below.
4. **Preexisting Residences to Remain:** Allow legally established residences to remain within the A-1 zoning district when historically zoned in that manner, except where new land divisions are required outside of farm consolidation situations. Support State administrative rules and/or statutory changes to enable all preexisting residences to be allowed as legal conforming uses in the A-1 district. In the meantime:
 - Define “preexisting farm residence” with the maximum flexibility allowed in statutes to minimize the number of preexisting residences in the A-1 district that will become non-conforming uses under current State law.

Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

- Adjust non-conforming use standards in the County zoning ordinance to allow reasonable modifications, expansions, and replacement of non-farm residences without rezoning away from the A-1 district.
 - Anticipate proposed administrative rules (ATCP 49), by indicating in the County zoning ordinance that all preexisting residences in the A-1 district will become legal conforming uses if and when such rules are adopted in a manner that allows for this type of treatment.
5. **Residential Lots Resulting from Farm Consolidation:** When the owner of a preexisting residence legally established before December 21, 1977 desires to divide the land occupied by such residence and accessory buildings from the farm, in conjunction with a farm consolidation, require the resulting residential lot to be as small as practical, considering the desire to keep accessory buildings with the residence and the future probability that farm animals will be kept on the lot.
 6. **Agricultural-Related Businesses:** Encourage agricultural-related businesses that support farmers, including farm-scale businesses in the A-1 and AO-1 zoning districts (meeting statutory requirements as applicable), and larger-scale operations in the A-3 Agriculture Business district. Utilize criteria in Section 91.48 of Wisconsin Statutes and the County's zoning ordinance in evaluating proposals for rezoning land from the A-1 district to the A-3 district.
 7. **General Rezoning Criteria:** Whenever land is proposed for rezoning from the A-1 district to a non-DATCP-certified zoning district, require that the following criteria are met:
 - a. The land is better suited for a use not allowed in the A-1 zoning district.
 - b. The rezoning is consistent with the applicable town and County comprehensive plans.
 - c. The rezoning is substantially consistent with this County certified farmland preservation plan.
 - d. The rezoning will not substantially impair or limit current or future agricultural use of surrounding parcels of land that are zoned for or legally restricted to agricultural use.
 8. **Conversion of Prime Farmland:** Minimize the conversion of prime farmland, as shown on Map 5-6 of the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 (generally Class I-III soils), for residences and other nonfarm development. The County Planning and Zoning Committee will consider creation of new residential lots on prime farmland only if the Committee determines that no available non-prime farmland exists on the parcel of record or that placement of lots on prime farmland provides better protection of land, environmental, and habitat resources than a non-prime location. In addition, per Section. 91.46(2) of Wisconsin Statutes, new development may not convert prime farmland from agricultural use or convert land previously used as cropland, other than a woodlot, from agricultural use if on the farm there is a reasonable alternative location or size for a nonfarm residential parcel or nonfarm residence; or significantly impair or limit the current or future agricultural use of other protected farmland.
 9. **Limitation on Subdivision Plats:** The division of four or more lots from lands in Contiguous Common Ownership requires a subdivision plat. Subdivision plats to accommodate residential development are not permitted within the Farmland Preservation Area. Landowners desiring to develop a subdivision plat must first achieve County Board approval of an amendment to this Plan redesignating the affected lands out of the Farmland Preservation Area.
 10. **Support for Complementary Town Policies and Initiatives:** Where associated policies within the adopted town comprehensive plan are stricter than County policies for lands within a designated Farmland Preservation Area, support the town in its actions on rezoning requests, so that the stricter policy based on the town's comprehensive plan may be applied. In addition, support town development of creative farmland preservation approaches, such as purchase of conservation easement (PACE) and transfer of development rights (TDR), where consistent with the policies of this Farmland Preservation Plan.

Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

11. **Potential Agricultural Enterprise Areas (AEAs):** Support landowner/town applications to DATCP to establish new Agricultural Enterprise Areas that meet the following criteria:
 - a. The AEA is located within portions of the Farmland Preservation Area particularly suited for long-term agricultural enterprise development.
 - b. The AEA is consistent with DATCP criteria for such designation.
 - c. The AEA is clearly consistent with this Plan.
 - d. There is sufficient interest among area farmers and town governments.
12. **Land Conservation:** As budget resources allow, work through the Land Conservation Department to assist farmers in the Farmland Preservation Area meet land conservation and nutrient management requirements.
13. **Lands Also Mapped as Environmental Corridors:** Environmental corridors include environmentally sensitive and developmentally challenged lands; corridors are susceptible to negative impacts from intense development including damage to natural resources and private property. The Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 describes and maps environmental corridors (see particularly Maps 5-7 and 8-3 of that plan), and Appendix B also includes a description. In addition, the above policies within this section of the Farmland Preservation Plan, the County will use associated policies within the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 where lands overlap with a mapped environmental corridor.

Rezoning and Density Policies for Residential Development in Farmland Preservation Area

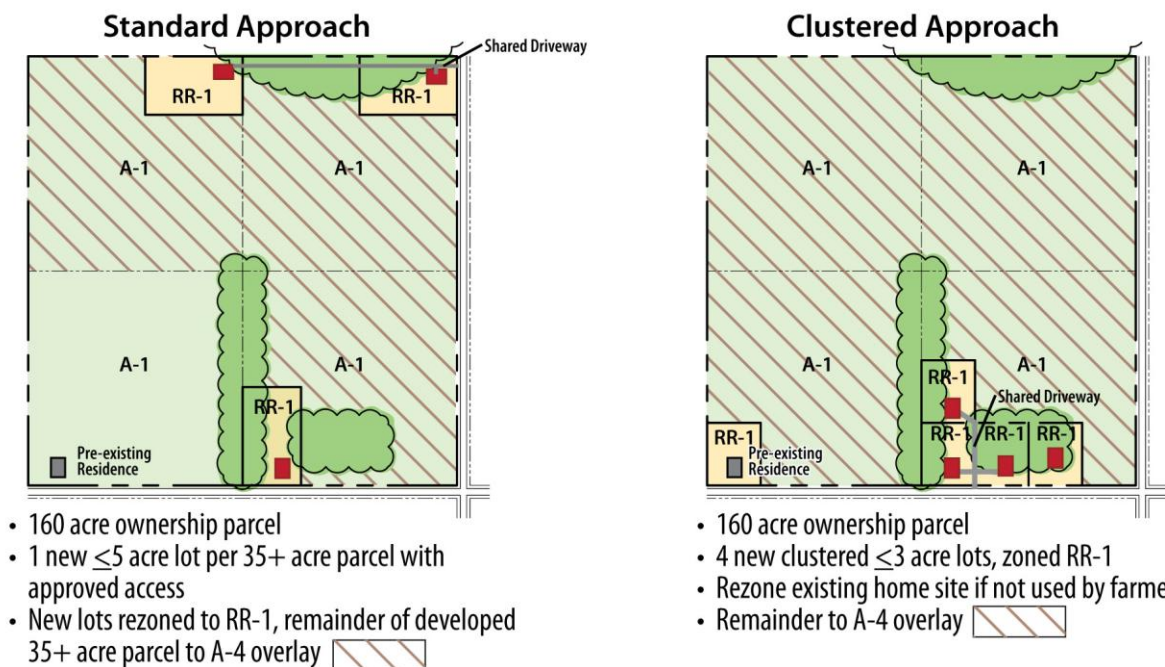
1. **New Residences Require Rezoning:** Allow no new residences in the A-1 and AO-1 zoning districts, except for replacement of existing residences permitted under the Working Lands law and the County zoning ordinance. Instead, require the rezoning of A-1 and AO-1 zoned lands to another district when new homes are proposed.
2. **RR-1 as Preferred Rezoning District:** Utilize the County's RR-1 Rural Residence zoning district as the preferred zoning district for rezoning for new housing in the Farmland Preservation Area, in accordance with the maximum residential density policy in this section. Consider a different zoning district, such as the R-1 Single Family Residence district, where the applicant can demonstrate to the satisfaction of the associated town and the County Planning and Zoning Committee that such different zoning district meets the Farmland Preservation Area purpose and policies and responds to a unique circumstance not generally applicable to other properties in the area.
3. **Right-to-Farm Notice on Residential CSMs:** Protect the rights of farmers by requiring that the following language be included on all new certified survey maps (CSMs) that enable new residential development in the Farmland Preservation Area, to notify future residents of the potential effects of nearby farming activities on their property: "Through Section 823.08 of Wisconsin Statutes, the Wisconsin Legislature has adopted a right to farm law. This statute limits the remedies of owners of later established residential property to seek changes to pre-existing agricultural practices in the vicinity of residential property. Active agricultural operations are now taking place and may continue on lands in the vicinity of this plat/CSM. These active agricultural operations may produce noises, odors, dust, machinery traffic, or other conditions during daytime and evening hours." If a town has alternate preservation text requirements for certified survey maps, the County will support that language in lieu of the above.
4. **Definitions:** As used in this Farmland Preservation Plan, the terms listed below shall have the definitions so indicated:
 - a. Contiguous: Lots or parcels shall be considered contiguous if they share a common boundary. Parcels in common ownership which are directly across from a public street, rail right-of-way, easement, or

Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

- navigable river, stream, or creek, along with parcels that meet only at a corner, shall be considered contiguous.
- b. **Common Ownership:** Any combination of contiguous parcels singly owned by one uniquely named entity as identified by deed. Such an entity includes, but is not necessarily limited to, an individual person, a married couple or family trust, or a partnership or corporation.
 - c. **Contiguous Common Ownership:** For determining the right to develop lands in the Farmland Preservation Area, means all contiguous lands zoned A-1, AO-1, and/or A-2 and under common ownership at the time of the development proposal. Contiguous Common Ownership may include one or more tax parcels, “40’s”, or lots with lots defined as a parcel designated in a recorded plat or certified survey map, or described in a conveyance recorded in the office of the Register of Deeds, except that each residential lot legally created through a “farm consolidation” process and documented with a recorded certified survey map (CSM) shall not be considered part of any Contiguous Common Ownership. Determinations of Contiguous Common Ownership may require research by the Planning and Zoning Department and/or verification as to acreage and ownership from the landowner/applicant.
 - d. **Cluster:** A contiguous grouping of three or four allowable lots for new residential development.
5. **Residential Development Density—35+ acres in Contiguous Common Ownership:** Subject to County and town rezoning approval and compliance with all associated County Comprehensive/Farmland Preservation Plan and ordinance requirements, the owner of each set of lands in Contiguous Common Ownership of 35 acres or greater within the Farmland Preservation Area may develop single family residences, subject to the following criteria:
- a. The owner is allowed one single family residence per 35 acres of Contiguous Common Ownership, including any existing house(s) within the Contiguous Common Ownership, except where a cluster is approved per policy 5(f) below. Figure D illustrates this “standard approach” for executing residential density.
 - b. Before or at the time of rezoning, the owner may acquire additional land from adjacent landowners to assemble a larger Contiguous Common Ownership, provided that such land is also in the Farmland Preservation Area and is not restricted against additional residential development by policy, zoning rule, deed restriction, conservation easement, or otherwise.
 - c. Each new residence must be on a new lot of one acre or greater created by CSM. Each new lot for a new residence may not exceed five acres in area, except that larger lots may be permitted where other policies in this Plan are met and where an additional ten acres in Contiguous Common Ownership are restricted via A-4 zoning for every one acre greater than the five-acre normal maximum. If the affected town has a base density policy that is stricter than policy 5(a) above, the requirement for additional restricted land associated with a lot that is larger than five areas may be waived or modified.
 - d. Each newly created residential lot must abut a public road or have a suitable access easement approved by the affected town or the Planning and Zoning Committee.
 - e. The balance of the acreage used to enable the approval of a single-family residential lot within the Contiguous Common Ownership shall be restricted to agricultural or open space uses via A-4 Agricultural Overlay zoning. Land in the A-4 district cannot be used together with other land not in the A-4 district to achieve the acreage normally necessary to build another single-family residence. The location of the restricted A-4 lands will be determined through the review process and under associated zoning requirements.
 - f. Landowners with the ability to build three or more single family residences under this residential density policy may develop one or more clusters of lots for single family residential purposes. Clustered lots need not have frontage on a public road provided that the affected town and County both approve

a shared access easement and agreement. Where Contiguous Common Ownership allows, clusters may be located adjacent to other clusters. Where no lot in the cluster exceeds three acres and all lots are restricted against farm animals, any existing residence(s) on the Contiguous Common Ownership at time of development does not count against the number of single-family residences permitted under the residential density policy (see “clustered approach” in Figure D).

Figure D: Residential Development Approaches within Planned Farmland Preservation Areas



6. **Residential Development Density—35+ acres in Non-Contiguous Common Ownership, or Multi-Party Ownership:** Subject to County and town rezoning approval and compliance with all associated County Comprehensive/Farmland Preservation Plan and ordinance requirements, the owner(s) of each set of lands in ownership of 35 acres or greater within the Farmland Preservation Area may develop single family residences, subject to the following criteria:
 - a. A property owner may request a rezone to the RR-1 Rural Residence district, provided additional lands within the same Town are also proposed for restriction through the application of the A-4 district so that the combined total of RR-1 and A-4 lands is at least 35 acres. These lands must be in the Farmland Preservation area and cannot already be restricted against additional residential development by policy, zoning rule, deed restriction, conservation easement, or otherwise. The location of the restricted A-4 lands will be determined through the review process and under associated zoning requirements.
 - b. Each new residence must be on a lot of one acre or greater. Each lot for a new residence may not exceed five acres in area, except that larger lots may be permitted where other policies in this Plan are met and where an additional ten acres are restricted via A-4 zoning for every one acre greater than the five-acre normal maximum. If the affected town has a base density policy that is stricter than policy 6(a) above, the requirement for additional restricted land associated with a lot that is larger than five acres may be waived or modified.

Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

- c. Each newly created residential lot must abut a public road or have a suitable access easement approved by the affected town or the Planning and Zoning Committee.
7. **Residential Development Density - <35 acres in Contiguous Common Ownership:** Subject to County and town rezoning approval and compliance with all associated County Comprehensive/Farmland Preservation Plan and ordinance requirements, the owner of each set of lands in Contiguous Common Ownership less than 35 acres within the Farmland Preservation Area may have a total of one single family residence, subject to the following criteria:
 - a. The Contiguous Common Ownership, and all parcels within it, shall be a valid parcel(s) created legally prior to November 1, 1984.
 - b. The Contiguous Common Ownership and each newly divided lot for a residence must abut a public road.
 - c. The landowner has the potential to develop a maximum of one single-family residence for all parcels that make up the Contiguous Common Ownership combined, including any existing residence.
 - d. The balance of the Contiguous Common Ownership shall be restricted to agricultural or open space uses via A-4 Agricultural Overlay zoning, and against any further land division. Land in the A-4 district cannot be used together with other land not in the A-4 district to achieve the acreage normally necessary to build another single-family residence. The location of the restricted A-4 lands will be determined through the review process and under associated zoning requirements.
 - e. Consider different zoning options for the future of such lands, including the A-2 General Agriculture district and combinations of the RR-1 Rural Residential and A-1 zoning districts (see Figure E).

Figure E: Alternative Rezoning Approach for Pre-1984 Substandard (<35 acre) A-1 Lots with Non-Farm Residence



- Rezone ≤ 5 acre lot to RR-1 and remainder to A-1 with A-4 overlay 

Siting Policies for Residential Development in Farmland Preservation Area

Except where a town applies comparable siting policies in its Comprehensive Plan or in an ordinance, the County will apply the following policies for siting new residential development in the Farmland Preservation Area.

1. **Effect on and of Agricultural Operations:** The proposed residential lot(s) will not adversely affect agricultural operations in surrounding areas or be situated such that future inhabitants of a residence on that lot(s) might be adversely affected by agricultural operations in surrounding areas. In considering whether this policy is achieved, the County Planning and Zoning Committee shall evaluate the following factors:
 - a. The proposed lot(s) are located in a manner as to minimize the amount of agricultural land converted to nonagricultural use, including compliance with statutory requirements related to prime farmland (will be applied by County per statutes even if town policies also used).

Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

- b. The proposed lot(s) are not located within 100 feet of any operating farm animal facility.
 - c. A new road or driveway needed to serve the site does not divide existing farm fields.
2. **Unsuitability for Agricultural Use:** The proposed residential site(s) is not well suited for agricultural use by virtue of wooded areas, topography, shape of parcel, soil characteristics, or similar factors. In considering whether this policy is achieved, the County Planning and Zoning Committee shall evaluate the following factors:
- a. Whether the area of the lot(s) is enrolled in a land preservation program (e.g., CRP, CREP, farmland preservation tax credit).
 - b. The site(s) is not of a size or shape to be efficiently worked for farming.
 - c. Prime farmland is preserved per statutory requirements and this Plan, and not more than 70 percent of the soils on the proposed site are rated as National Prime Farmland (will be applied by County per statutes even if town policies also used).
 - d. Isolated small pockets of uncultivable land in an area otherwise farmed will not result.
 - e. Slopes in excess of 12 percent but not more than 20 percent may be developed only in accordance with an approved erosion control plan.
3. **Suitability for Residential Use:** The proposed residential lot(s) is particularly well suited for residential use, as indicated by rolling topography, wooded areas, soil types, vistas, proximity to lakes or streams, or similar factors, proximity to school bus routes, traffic access and egress, established transportation routes and adequacy of area schools to accommodate increased enrollment that might result from such development. In considering whether this policy is achieved, the County Planning and Zoning Committee shall evaluate the following additional factors:
- a. The site has soils that are able to support a private on-site waste treatment (septic) system, other than a holding tank.
 - b. Soils on the site afford sound structural support for buildings.
 - c. Proposed development has adequate access to existing town roads or, the developer shall provide such a road built to town road standards or such other suitable access approved by the town and County, at the developer's expense.
 - d. Proposed access points shall meet minimum spacing requirements as established by County and town ordinances, as applicable.
 - e. Proposed driveways will not exceed 1,000 feet in length, except as otherwise may be allowed by County zoning ordinance.
4. **Relationship to Natural Resources and Character:** The residential lot(s) relates positively to the natural resources, beauty, and rural character of the area. In considering whether this policy is achieved, the Planning and Zoning Committee shall evaluate the following specific factors:
- a. The lot(s) is not on land prone to flooding.
 - b. The lot(s) is not detrimental to natural resource components within mapped environmental corridors.
 - c. The lot(s) is not on slopes exceeding 20 percent.
 - d. The lot(s) is not on land considered to be of archaeological, cultural, historical, or religious significance.
 - e. The lot(s) minimizes the visibility of structures by utilizing landforms, existing vegetation, and/or new plantings to provide screening.

Developed/Infill Area

Purpose and Description

Areas mapped as Developed/Infill Area include areas of existing non-agricultural development within unincorporated areas and internal and adjacent undeveloped parcels that are planned and often already zoned for development. Designation of an area as a Developed/Infill Area does not guarantee that that area will develop further or is even buildable. There may be challenges to building, including soil limitations and other environmental constraints. Lands mapped within the Developed/Infill Area may not be zoned in a certified farmland preservation zoning district (e.g., the County's A-1 district). Therefore, the owners of such lands may not collect farmland preservation tax credits. The rationale for this is that such owners are generally not collecting tax credits and/or have shorter-term opportunities to realize non-farm returns from their land via development, and that limited State resources should be committed to other areas where there is more uniform commitment to long-term farmland preservation.

What is “pre-zoning?”

The zoning of undeveloped land for development, in advance of a specific private development proposal, the need for such development, the capabilities of local governments to provide services to the area, or some combination.

Mapping Process and Criteria for Developed/Infill Area

In contrast to the Urban Transition Area described below, the Developed/Infill Area category does not include large areas that are currently undeveloped but are expected to develop with non-agricultural uses in the next 15 years. Instead, the Developed/Infill Area was mapped based on the following criteria:

- ❁ Undeveloped parcels that are specifically planned for a non-agricultural, developed future land use per future land use maps in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and/or individual town comprehensive plans, and/or zoned for development. These “infill” areas are smaller than individual Urban Transition Areas (usually 40 contiguous acres or less), are not generally planned to be served by public sewer and are usually surrounded on at least two sides by existing development.
- ❁ Currently developed parcels that are specifically planned for a non-agricultural, developed future land use per future land use maps in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and/or individual town comprehensive plans.
- ❁ Other groupings of 10 or more sub-35 acre developed lots, regardless of how they were designated on future land use maps or zoning maps. Smaller groupings and clusters were generally mapped within the Farmland Preservation Area, unless meeting the previous criterion for mapping in the Developed/Infill Area.
- ❁ Parks and other recreational spaces integrated within largely residential areas.



Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

- Densely platted or subdivided lands, such as along certain waterfront areas.
- Golf courses, campgrounds, and other intensively developed areas, even if zoned in one of the County's agricultural and open space zoning districts.

Policies, Programs, and Actions for Developed/Infill Area

1. Rely on the future land use maps in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and town comprehensive plans, associated detailed land use policies, and zoning regulations to determine the most appropriate use and timing for further development within the Developed/Infill Area.
2. Where land is not already zoned for development prior to adoption of this Plan, utilize the new AO-1 Agriculture and Open Space zoning district as the preferred zoning district to implement Developed/Infill Area policies where the underlying lands are not yet developed. This will encourage the interim use of undeveloped portions of the Urban Transition Area for farming and other open spaces, until the land is ripe for planned development and rezoned for development.
3. Discourage "pre-zoning" of lands for development within the Developed/Infill Area in advance of development proposals, except where development-based zoning had already been provided prior to adoption of this Plan and/or over already-developed lots. Require the submittal and detailed understanding of specific development proposals before supporting the rezoning of further Developed/Infill Area lands to the appropriate development-based zoning district.
4. Encourage towns to continually evaluate larger undeveloped areas designated as Developed/Infill Area on Maps 3 through 24, as some of them may be more suitable for farmland preservation given current use patterns and the softness of the residential development market.
5. Encourage higher density rural residential development in Developed/Infill Areas, following applicable minimum lot size standards in the County zoning ordinance and local ordinances, and in areas that are planned for residential development in County and local comprehensive plans.
6. In addition to the above policies, use policies associated with the detailed future land use designation for the property within the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046, including environmental corridor policies where the property overlaps with a mapped environmental corridor.

Urban Transition Area

Purpose and Description

Areas mapped as Urban Transition Area are unincorporated lands as of 2025 that have been identified in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and local comprehensive plans for non-agricultural development. Such non-agricultural development includes residential subdivisions, commercial/retail centers, and industrial uses. Additionally, lands mapped in the Urban Transition Area are anticipated for such development within the next 15 years (i.e., by 2028), based either on explicit direction included in associated local comprehensive plans or on County consultant analysis of the future land use recommendations and community growth projections in those plans. Designation of lands in an Urban Transition Area does not guarantee that that area will develop or is even buildable; there may be challenges to building, including soil limitations and other environmental constraints.

In general, the purpose of the Urban Transition Area is to:

- Coordinate growth and development planning between towns and incorporated municipalities.
- Design and locate housing in rural areas in a manner that minimizes adverse impacts on agriculture and maintains the rural character in Columbia County.

Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

- Encourage higher-density residential development, particularly in areas where public utilities will be available.
- Encourage nonagricultural-related businesses and industries to locate in areas where public utilities will be available.
- Designate lands intended for non-agricultural development within the next 15 years in something other than a Farmland Preservation Area, as required under the State's Working Lands law. The significance of this requirement is that lands designated as Urban Transition Area within this Plan may not be zoned in a certified farmland preservation zoning district (e.g., the County's A-1 district). Therefore, the owners of such lands may not collect farmland preservation tax credits. The rationale for this is that such owners presumably have shorter-term opportunities to realize non-farm returns from their land via development, and that limited State resources should be committed to other areas where there is more uniform commitment to long-term farmland preservation.

Mapping Process and Criteria for Urban Transition Area

A variety of factors went into the mapping of individual Urban Transition Areas, based on requirements and guidance supplied by the State's Working Lands law. The Urban Transition Area includes lands planned for non-agricultural development within the next 15 years, often to be served by public sewer service. To determine the location and extent of each individual Urban Transition Area, the County through its consultant:

- Reviewed all adopted town, city, and village comprehensive plans within Columbia County. The analysis focused in particular on future land use maps and policies, including planned city and village growth areas outside of current city and village limits.
- Analyzed future land use demand projections per adopted city, village, and town comprehensive plans. Under Wisconsin's comprehensive planning law, local comprehensive plans are required to include land use demand projections for a 20-year planning period, with such projections broken down into 5-year increments. This generally allowed for quick access to 15-year land use demand projections.
- Analyzed available undeveloped but developable land (i.e., vacant, non-environmental corridor land) within existing city and village boundaries to determine how much of projected 15-year future land use demand included in the respective city or village plan could be accommodated within the current city and village limits. The primary conclusion was that many cities and villages within Columbia County can technically accommodate their own 15-year projected land use demand inside their current (2012) municipal boundaries. Many others will require only a fraction of their comprehensive plan's planned development areas outside of current city or village limits to accommodate 15-year demand.

Resulting from this analysis, Maps 3 through 24 identify certain lands as Urban Transition Area based on further guidance within local comprehensive plans; environmental and topographic conditions including gravity flow drainage patterns where sewer development is anticipated; transportation access; consistency/redundancy in future land use recommendations between city, village and town plans over the same geographic area; current non-agricultural zoning; and the local knowledge and professional experience of the County's consultant.

Policies, Programs, and Actions for Urban Transition Areas

1. Rely on the future land use maps in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and local comprehensive plans, associated detailed land use policies, zoning regulations, and intergovernmental agreements to determine the most appropriate use and timing for further development within each distinct Urban Transition Area.
2. Limit new development in the Urban Transition Area in accordance with policies applicable to the Farmland Preservation Area, until such time when the County and affected local government(s) agree that particular mapped area is appropriate for more intensive development and the intended range of roads, other infrastructure, and any planned public services are available to each area.

Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

3. Utilize the new AO-1 Agriculture and Open Space zoning district as the preferred zoning district to implement Urban Transition Area policies, until such time as more intensive development is deemed appropriate. This will encourage the interim use of undeveloped portions of the Urban Transition Area for farming and other open spaces, until the land is ripe for planned development and zoned for development. Other zoning districts may also be utilized, particularly with reference to pre-existing developed land use and zoning patterns.
4. Strongly discourage the “pre-zoning” of lands for development within the Urban Transition Area in advance of development proposals, except where development-based zoning had already been provided. Instead require the submittal and detailed understanding of specific development proposals before supporting the rezoning of Urban Transition Area lands to the appropriate development-based zoning district.
5. Require all permitted rural development to be designed and laid out in a manner to not impede the orderly future development in the Urban Transition Area with more intensive future development, generally with public sanitary sewer services.
6. Encourage higher density urban (sewered) residential development in Urban Transition Areas, following applicable minimum lot size standards in the County zoning ordinance and local ordinances, and in areas that are planned for residential development in County and local comprehensive plans.
7. In parts of the Urban Transition Area that are near city/village and town limits, encourage intergovernmental boundary agreements or cooperative boundary plans to further determine the type, timing, jurisdiction, services, and other aspects of future development.
8. In addition to the above policies, use policies associated with the detailed future land use designation for the property within the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046, including environmental corridor policies where the property overlaps with a mapped environmental corridor.

City or Village Area

Purpose, Description, and Mapping Criteria

The City or Village Area category is mapped over the current (September 2, 2025) land area within cities and villages in the County. These incorporated areas are not subject to general County zoning regulations and are not intended for long-term farmland preservation. Instead, cities and villages are logical locations for more compact and intensive housing and economic development and redevelopment at higher densities. They are also current and potential locations for bio-based industrial production facilities and centers of local food consumption, which can help the local agricultural economy. Their thoughtful development and success is critical to preserving farmland in other parts of the County.

The purpose of the City or Village Area is to:

- Accommodate new development requiring a full range of urban utilities and services, including higher density residential development.
- Serve as compact communities accommodating an efficient use of land and buildings, thereby minimizing the amount of converted agricultural land needed for non-farm development.
- Facilitate development patterns that recognize a clear distinction between “city” and “country.”
- Respect the rights of cities and villages under State law to plan and zone lands within their boundaries.

Policies, Programs, and Actions for City or Village Area

Chapter 2: Farmland Preservation Planning & Zoning Approach

1. Rely on city and village comprehensive plans and ordinances to guide the types of future development (e.g., residential, commercial, industrial, mixed use), associated zoning, and design standards within each City or Village Area.
2. Work with local communities, real estate interests, the Columbia County Economic Development Corporation, and others to advance a land use pattern that directs more intensive development—including multiple family residential developments, larger subdivisions, commercial/retail districts, and industrial/business parks—into cities and villages and other limited locations in the towns, where a full range of urban services can be provided and conflicts between urban and rural/agricultural land uses can be minimized.
5. Encourage cities and villages to grow compactly and support redevelopment and infill within their current corporate boundaries before expanding outward, as a means to minimize conversion of farmland elsewhere to accommodate development. As just one example, 40 acres within a City or Village Area developed at 4 housing units per acre as opposed to 2 housing units per acre means that 80 additional homes can be accommodated there, rather than elsewhere in the countryside. In general, requiring all new development in cities and villages to connect to public sanitary sewer and water systems is an effective tool to facilitate compact, sequential urban development. Tools to accomplish redevelopment and infill include tax incremental financing and other incentive programs.
6. Encourage cities and villages to carefully consider the location of productive agricultural lands and the policies within this Farmland Preservation Plan during processes to update and refine their individual comprehensive plans and before making decisions on the expansion of sewer, water, and other urban services to their planned growth areas.
7. Communicate with cities and villages regarding their opportunities to be a partner in farmland preservation in Columbia County while at the same time advancing local economic development.
8. Strive towards community characteristics that draw people to cities and villages, including quality jobs, safety, strong local character and identity, vibrant downtowns, parks and other community gathering places where social life comes together, and a special sense of place.
9. Integrate and connect housing, employment centers, and shopping areas so that cities and villages contain places to live, work, shop in proximity.
10. Facilitate development within different sections of each City or Village Area only after the intended range of roads, other infrastructure, and any planned public services are available to that section. Encourage the interim use of undeveloped portions of the City or Village Area for farming, until the land is ripe for planned development.
11. Facilitate agricultural-related industry, such as food and other bio-based product manufacturing, as a component of city and village industrial parks to support both the economic health of these communities and nearby agricultural areas.
12. Support farming-related retail development and direct marketing opportunities, such as farmers markets, that enhance local markets for farm products grown in the area and to enhance community sustainability.
13. Promote vital, distinctive, and varied neighborhoods and a diverse range of housing choices at different densities and for different life stages and income levels, including higher density residential development that is not compatible with other areas that are planned for farmland preservation.

Map 4: Town of Arlington Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 5a: Town of Caledonia Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 5b: Town of Caledonia Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 6: Town of Columbus Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 7: Town of Courtland Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 8: Town of Dekorra Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 9: Town of Fort Winnebago Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 10: Town of Fountain Prairie Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 11: Town of Hampden Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 12: Town of Leeds Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 13: Town of Lewiston Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 14: Town of Lodi Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 15: Town of Lowville Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 16: Town of Marcellon Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 17: Town of Newport Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 18: Town of Otsego and Village of Doylestown Farmland Preservation Plan
Map

Map 19: Town of Pacific Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 20: Town of Randolph Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 21: Town of Scott Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 22: Town of Springvale Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 23: Town of West Point Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 24: Town of Wyocena Farmland Preservation Plan Map

Map 25: Town of West Point Agricultural Enterprise Area Map

CHAPTER 3: IMPLEMENTATION

Few of the recommendations of the initial 2013 Plan were automatically implemented. Specific follow-up actions were required for the Plan to become reality. This final chapter is intended to describe Columbia County's roadmap for the initial implementation actions, focused in particular on zoning ordinance amendments that were required. Chapter 3 also provides the required procedural steps for evaluation, amendments, and updates to this Plan, to assure that it remains current and responsive to County trends, needs, and policy desires.

The County's comprehensive plan is a collection of adopted documents, this Farmland Preservation Plan being one of them. Further, the planning requirements of Chapter 91 of Wisconsin Statutes are fulfilled not only by this Farmland Preservation Plan, but also by information contained in other components of the County comprehensive plan. Specifically, the separate Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 document includes certain required supporting information about the nature of agriculture in Columbia County, as well as implementation recommendations related to agriculture, economic development, and other topics addressed in this Farmland Preservation Plan and required by statute.

Actions for Plan Implementation

As first identified in Chapter 1, Columbia County's overall farmland preservation program consists of three interrelated components—Economics, Incentives, and Land Use Planning and Zoning. All three are critical to ensuring the protection and continuation of the County's agricultural landscape, character, and economy. This Plan has focused in particular on the Land Use Planning and Zoning component. The implementation discussion that follows therefore emphasizes implementing land use recommendations, particularly through ordinance amendments.

Implementation of Land Use Initiatives—Immediate Zoning Ordinance Considerations

The focus of this Plan has been to establish policies for future land use decision making related to farmland preservation. These policies will be used as one basis to make decisions on future requests for actions like rezoning lands for development, directing intensive development to areas with urban services, and interacting with local units of government on land use issues.

Under Chapter 91 of Wisconsin Statutes, the County is required to amend its zoning ordinance to implement the recommendations in this Farmland Preservation Plan. Such ordinance amendments must be certified by DATCP and during the 2013 Plan implementation phase, the amendments were also subject to approval by any town that wanted the ordinance to apply to it. This is because the County treated the associated 2013 zoning ordinance amendments as a "comprehensive revision" to the County zoning ordinance under Section 59.69 of Wisconsin Statutes. As a result, close coordination with both DATCP and the towns was essential.

Zoning ordinance amendments that were pursued concurrent with the finalization of the original 2013 Farmland Preservation Plan are summarized as follows:

- An update to the A-1 Agriculture district.
- Creation of the AO-1 Agriculture and Open Space zoning district.
- Slight modifications to the A-2 General Agriculture, A-3 Agriculture Business, A-4 Agriculture Overlay, and RR-1 Rural Residential Districts.
- Maintain flexibility for older farm residences in A-1 district, which have been legally built in that district for decades.
- Pursuit of necessary zoning map amendments.

Implementation of Land Use Initiatives—Other Considerations

Beyond the short-term zoning ordinance amendments that were implemented, the County considers the following additional land use initiatives related to farmland preservation:

- Ongoing consideration of changes from the existing land use pattern to realize the future land use pattern depicted on Map 3 of this Plan and Map 8-3 of the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046, if and when private property owners make requests for rezoning, subdivisions or land divisions, conditional use permits, or other development approvals.
- A significant update to the County's Land Division and Subdivision Code was completed in 2016 to work effectively with the County Comprehensive/Farmland Preservation Plan and zoning ordinance, help implement residential density policies within this Comprehensive Plan, require right-to-farm notices for new residential developments, and require the identification and protection of natural resources and environmentally sensitive areas.
- Ongoing education and communication with County officials, key private partners, and the general citizenry about this Plan and implementing ordinance amendments.
- Attempt to influence changes to Chapter 91 of Wisconsin Statutes and pending Wisconsin Administrative Rules (ATCP 49) related to farmland preservation planning and zoning in a way that helps the County implement its program and reduces unnecessary negative impacts on private landowners, through the Wisconsin County Code Administrators' Association and otherwise.

Plan Adoption, Evaluation, Amendments, and Update

Plan Adoption

A first step in implementing the revised Columbia County Farmland Preservation Plan is making sure that it is adopted in a manner which supports its future use for more detailed decision making. The County included all necessary process steps and substantive elements for this Plan to be adopted as a farmland preservation plan under Chapter 91 of Wisconsin Statutes, and as another detailed component of the Columbia County comprehensive plan under Section 66.1001. With concurrent amendments to the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 document, this Farmland Preservation Plan is consistent with the remainder of the Columbia County's comprehensive plan.

Following certification by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) and a recommendation from the County's Planning and Zoning Committee, the Columbia County Board adopted this Farmland Preservation Plan on March 18, 2026. The County simultaneously adopted amendments to the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046, which consisted mainly of map updates. These amendments ensured full consistency among all comprehensive plan elements. Following these adoptions, the new Farmland Preservation Plan and the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 amendment were distributed to a variety of overlapping and adjacent units of government.

Plan Monitoring

The plan monitoring step enables the routine assessment of what is working or not working with the Plan. The Planning and Zoning Committee and its staff intend to evaluate this Plan regularly, even if the Plan is not actually amended following such evaluations. The County intends to constantly evaluate its decisions on private development proposals, public investments, regulations, incentives, and other actions against the recommendations of this Plan. Further, the County will work to assure that this Farmland Preservation Plan remains consistent with and helps advance other components of the County's comprehensive plan.

As several components of this Plan are based on the recommendations of adopted town, city, and village comprehensive plans, the County will evaluate if and how amendments to such local plans over time may affect

Chapter 3: Implementation

this Farmland Preservation Plan. County staff, in consultation with the Planning and Zoning Committee where time permits, should take the opportunity during local comprehensive plan amendment processes to share comments with local governments as to how the proposed amendment relates to the goals, policies, and directions of this Farmland Preservation Plan and other components of the County's comprehensive plan.

Plan Amendments

Amendments to this Plan may be appropriate in the years following adoption, in instances where the Plan becomes irrelevant or contradictory to emerging policy or trends, or where errors or omissions have been identified. Frequent amendments to accommodate specific development proposals should be avoided. This Plan was written to provide flexibility regarding future decisions to implement it, which should minimize the need for a number of future amendments. The fairly complex process to amend the Plan—outlined below—may also deter frequent amendments.

The process to amend this Plan is guided by procedures under both Section 66.1001(4) and Chapter 91 of Wisconsin Statutes. This requires the same formal process to amend this Plan as was used for its initial adoption. Specifically, the County intends to use the following procedure to amend, add to, or update this Plan:

1. Either the County Board or Planning and Zoning Committee initiates the proposed Plan amendment. This may occur as a result of an annual Planning and Zoning Committee evaluation of the Plan, or at the request of a local government, property owner, or developer. In its evaluation of the proposed Plan amendment, the Committee and County staff will evaluate whether the proposed amendment meets the vision and goals of this Plan, and whether it meets State requirements to maintain this Plan as a certified farmland preservation plan. This may require contact with DATCP staff during this step or later steps of the process.
2. The County Board adopts a resolution outlining the procedures that will be undertaken to ensure public participation during the Plan amendment process, per Section 66.1001(4)a of Wisconsin Statutes. This may be completed on a one-time basis to cover all potential Plan amendments between the time this Plan was initially adopted and the time it must be updated under Wisconsin Statutes (see "Update" guidance below).
3. The County Planning and Zoning Committee prepares or directs the preparation of the specific text or map amendment to the Farmland Preservation Plan. If such an amendment affects a particular town, the Committee intends to share the requested language or map change with that town during this and subsequent steps.
4. County staff forward materials required under Section 91.20 of Wisconsin Statutes to DATCP to facilitate certification of the Plan amendment. These materials include a copy of the adopted ordinance and Plan amendment; summaries of key changes from the previously-certified Plan, the process used to amend the Plan, and the relationship of the Plan amendment to the County's comprehensive plan; and a statement certifying that the Plan amendment complies with Section 91.18.
5. The County Planning and Zoning Committee holds one or more public meetings on the proposed Comprehensive Plan amendment. Following the public meeting(s), the Planning and Zoning Committee makes a recommendation by resolution to the County Board by majority vote of the entire Committee, per Section 66.1001(4)b of Wisconsin Statutes.
6. County staff directs the publishing of a Class 1 notice associated with the proposed Plan amendment, with such notice published at least 30 days before a County Board public hearing and containing information required under Section 66.1001(4)d of Wisconsin Statutes.
7. The County Board holds the formal public hearing on an ordinance that would incorporate the proposed Plan amendment into the County's Farmland Preservation Plan (and, by extension, the Columbia County comprehensive plan as a whole).

Chapter 3: Implementation

8. Following the public hearing and DATCP certification, the County Board approves (or denies) the ordinance adopting the proposed Plan amendment. Adoption must be by a majority vote of all members. The County Board may require changes from the Planning and Zoning Committee recommended version of the proposed Plan amendment.
9. County staff send a copy of the adopted ordinance and Plan amendment to all adjacent and surrounding government jurisdictions, DATCP, nonmetallic mine operators, any person who has registered a marketable nonmetallic mineral deposit with the local government, and any other property owner or leaseholder who has requested notification in writing as required under Sections 66.1001(4)b and c of Wisconsin Statutes.

Plan Update

The State's comprehensive planning law (Section 66.1001) requires that the County's comprehensive plan be updated at least once every 10 years. Further, the State's farmland preservation law (Chapter 91) specifies that DATCP may certify a farmland preservation plan for a period that does not exceed 10 years.

Given these two State requirements, it is the County's intent to update this Plan again by 2036, at the latest. As opposed to a Plan amendment, this update would constitute a substantial re-write of this Plan document and maps. This re-write need not significantly affect the vision, goals, and policy direction of this 2026 Plan, if decision makers consider the prior directions sound.

The County may continue to elect to update this Farmland Preservation Plan and the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 simultaneously. This leads to a more efficient, cost-effective, and coherent planning process.

APPENDIX A: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION RESULTS

Steering Committee Meetings

May 1, 2012 Meeting

The consultants presented the Steering Committee with an overall of the planning process and timeline and described the project purpose and goals. The consultants also discussed the County's current farmland preservation program and the impact of the State's new Working Lands Initiative. The group discussed key policy refinement options that would be presented to the public. The Committee confirmed the County wants to stay in the State's zoning program and have a certified farmland preservation zoning district.

July 10, 2012 Meeting

The consultants presented the common themes and general impressions from the Town Quadrant meetings that the County hosted in June. The Committee discussed the concerns brought up by the public and some of the challenges associated with the options including what to name the new farmland preservation zoning district, nonconforming designation for farm consolidation residences, and the level of County involvement in non-land use issues related to agricultural preservation. The Committee provided direction on desired components of the first draft of the Farmland Preservation Plan to follow.

August 7, 2012 Meeting

The Committee reviewed and commented on the first draft of the new Farmland Preservation Plan. Comments focused on specific policy decisions related to the Farmland Preservation Area and A-1 Agriculture zoning district, including whether to allow new farm residences in that district. The consultants also described draft Farmland Preservation Plan maps for each town, explaining the purpose and methodology for mapping each of the board future use categories on those maps.

October 2, 2012 Meeting

The consultants presented proposed revisions to the Farmland Preservation Plan draft. The County's Director of Land & Water Conservation presented his analysis of the impacts of the "15-year growth area" rule on landowner eligibility for tax credits. The Committee discussed a communication approach related to this issue. The consultants presented the first draft of proposed zoning ordinance amendments to implement the Plan. The Committee recommend that rezoning away from the A-1 and AO-1 zoning districts for all new residences require, for the following reasons:

- ❖ Does not require the County or affected town to try to determine whether a new residence will be a legitimate "farm residence," as only "farm residences" could be allowed in the A-1 district by statute.
- ❖ Does not suggest ongoing monitoring of who is occupying a home in an A-1 district, as again only "farm residences" could be allowed.
- ❖ Was advised by Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 and most town comprehensive plans, after considerable debate in mid 2000s.
- ❖ Facilitates density tracking through the County's A-4 overlay zoning district, and deed restrictions attached to rezoning/CSM if desired and applied by the affected town.
- ❖ Based on the premise that all new houses can have similar effect on the rural landscape and on farming, regardless of who occupies them.
- ❖ Does not discriminate between "farmers" and "non-farmers"—everyone who wants to build a new home is treated equally.

Appendix A: Public Participation Results

- Better facilitates home siting in desired locations. The County and the affected town have the clear ability to decide whether to rezone an area for housing, and precisely where and what size the area will be.
- Better reflects modern lending requirements.
- Presents a cleaner representation of the underlying landscape when viewing a County zoning map.

February 5, 2013 Meeting

The Committee reviewed and considered input from the second round of town/public meetings and from DATCP (described below), related to the draft Plan and zoning amendments. The Committee recommended County approval of the proposed Farmland Preservation Plan update and associated zoning ordinance amendments.

Town/Public Meetings—Round 1

In early June 2012, the County and its consultants hosted four Town/Public Meetings to obtain input from local residents and officials on farmland preservation planning and zoning in the County. Approximately 75 people attended these meetings, 18 provided written input through a comment form, and many others provided verbal input at the meetings. Themes and general impressions from those meetings are summarized below.

- There were varying opinions on the naming of the farmland preservation district. Some felt it important to clearly distinguish the farmland preservation zoning district from other agricultural districts, while others felt that maintaining the A-1 district name would eliminate the need for rezoning large areas of land while retaining a connection to the historic certification district.
- Siting a new home should require rezoning to a residential district. There were varying opinions, however, on whether such rezonings should be strictly limited to a rural residential district versus allowing rezoning to other residential districts as well.
- There was no consensus on the location and function of the farmland preservation district. Many felt that a single non-certified district should be mapped for both 15-year growth areas and other areas where certified farmland preservation zoning is not desired. Others favored the approach of mapping a “transitional” non-certified zoning district for 15-year growth areas and a second “permanent” non-certified zoning district for larger continuous blocks of longer-term preservation areas.
- The County should work with towns to rezone all or parts of current sub-35-acre A-1-zoned parcels with pre-existing residences to A-2 or RR-1, with A-4 zoning applied to any remaining balance. This approach would assure that the existing residences on such parcels would not become non-conforming uses.
- There was no consensus on how the County should approach Agricultural Enterprise Areas (AEAs). Half of respondents indicated that the county should actively promote and assist in creating AEAs where agriculture is particularly strong, and interest is high as a means to improve farmland preservation prospects and increase tax credits in these areas; and half of respondents indicated that the County should respond to local interest in AEAs by issuing letters of support where appropriate and generally assuming a reactive role.
- The County should take an active role to help grow the agricultural economy through efforts like promoting local food processing, bio-energy production, and direct sales through farmers markets and other settings. Others felt that farmers should take the lead on growing the agricultural economy.
- Other general comments from participants included:
 - Concern about property owner rights and the inability to subdivide land into smaller lots.
 - Concern about the creation of nonconforming uses and related restrictions on lending.

Appendix A: Public Participation Results

- Need to address the changing demographics of farmers over the next 40+ years.

Town/Public Meetings—Round 2

In December 2012, the County and its consultants hosted two Town/Public Meetings to obtain input from local residents and officials on the draft Farmland Preservation Plan update and associated zoning ordinance amendments, including proposed maps. Approximately 75 people attended these meetings, 15 provided written input through a comment form, and many others provided verbal input at the meetings. Nine respondents indicated that they generally support the draft farmland preservation program changes. Two respondents indicated that they do not support the draft farmland preservation program changes as currently proposed.

DATCP Meeting and Communications

In November 2012, the County's consultants provided draft Farmland Preservation Plan update and associated zoning ordinance amendment materials to DATCP staff for review and comment. In January 2013, County staff and consultants met with DATCP staff to discuss the materials and potential changes to meet State requirements. County staff and consultants were in contact with DATCP staff at other stages of the process as well.

In January 2023, upon receiving notice of zoning ordinance expiration on December 31, 2024, the Department requested a 2-year extension to DATCP in order to coordinate both Farmland Preservation Plan and Comprehensive Plan updates together, with the zoning certification following said updates. On January 30, 2023, DATCP issued an order extending certification through December 31, 2025.

Public Hearings

The County held a public hearing on November 5, 2013 to hear citizen comments on the draft Farmland Preservation Plan. On March 3, 2026, the County held a public hearing to hear citizen comments on the 10-year update to the Farmland Preservation Plan.

Other Outreach Efforts

In January 2013, the County notified the owners of all undeveloped, larger parcels whose property would be rezoned from the A-1 Agricultural district to another, non-DATCP certified zoning district. County staff fielded many questions and requests in response to this effort. County staff also worked one-on-one with a number of towns and their representatives to address concerns with farmland preservation plan maps, zoning maps, and policy changes associated with these efforts.

In December 2024 a survey was distributed to all Towns, and was publicly noticed in the County Ag Reporter, in the local newspaper via Press Release, as well as noticed on the County's website with responses required by March 2025. The survey gauged the public's knowledge of the Farmland Preservation Plan and requested feedback on the County's plan implementation techniques. Results were generally favorable and indicated that the County maintain the current policy implementation tools.

2026 Update Meetings

September 2, 2025 Meeting

An open house was held prior to the Planning and Zoning Committee meeting. The Committee was given additional background information on the update and was informed that the update does not include many policy changes or goals but instead focuses on map updates and updates to influences, trends, and pressures.

December 2, 2025 Meeting

A second open house was held prior to the Planning and Zoning Committee meeting.

Appendix A: Public Participation Results

March 3, 2026 Meeting

A final open house was held prior to the Planning and Zoning Committee meeting. The plan was recommended for adoption by the Committee during the March 3, 2026 meeting.

APPENDIX B: EXISTING CONDITIONS AND TRENDS

This Appendix contains relevant details about the existing conditions and trends in Columbia County, including population, demographic and housing trends, and agricultural changes. This document also includes background information pertaining to municipal expansion, natural resources, utilities and community facilities, transportation, and economic development in Columbia County. This Appendix provides the relevant background information to provide a basis for understanding the trends currently influencing development and preservation in Columbia County as well as how they may affect the County in the future. It also meets requirements of Chapter 91 of Wisconsin Statutes.

Population and Demographic Trends

Population Trends

Figure B-1 compares Columbia County's population trends from 1970 to 2020 with abutting counties and the state. As indicated below, Columbia County has experienced steady population growth since 1970—more than 45 percent in 50 years. The County grew by 3 percent between 2010 and 2020, which is a moderate pace compared to neighboring counties and the State.

Figure B-1: County and State Historic Populations

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020	Population Change	
							2010-2020	1970-2020
Columbia County	40,150	43,222	45,088	52,468	56,833	58,490	2.92%	45.68%
Adams County	9,234	13,457	15,682	18,643	20,875	20,208	-3.19%	118.84%
Dane County	290,272	323,545	367,085	426,526	488,073	561,504	15.04%	93.44%
Dodge County	69,004	75,064	76,559	85,897	88,759	89,313	0.62%	29.43%
Green Lake County	16,878	18,370	18,651	19,105	19,051	19,018	-0.17%	12.87%
Marquette County	8,865	11,672	12,321	15,832	15,404	15,592	1.22%	75.88%
Sauk County	39,057	43,469	49,975	55,225	61,976	65,697	6.0%	68.21%
State of Wisconsin	4,417,821	4,705,642	4,891,769	5,363,675	5,686,986	5,893,718	3.52%	33.41%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure B-2 compares the populations of Columbia County townships from 1970 to 2020. Most townships experienced population increases over the past 50 years. The Towns of Pacific and West Point experienced the greatest population increases during this period. Alternatively, the Towns of Columbus, Courtland, Hampden, Leeds, and Otsego experienced population decline during this period.

Figure B-2: Town Historic Populations

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020	Population Change	
							2010-2020	1970-2020
Town of Arlington	701	752	748	848	806	803	-0.37%	14.55%
Town of Caledonia	855	923	1,031	1,171	1,378	1,495	8.49%	74.85%
Town of Columbus	715	704	838	711	646	626	-3.10%	-12.45%
Town of Courtland	628	601	528	463	525	491	-6.48%	-21.81%
Town of Dekorra	1,763	1,914	1,829	2,350	2,311	2,500	8.18%	41.8%
Town of Fort Winnebago	673	860	825	855	825	812	-1.58%	20.65%
Town of Fountain Prairie	816	771	743	810	887	938	5.75%	14.95%
Town of Hampden	704	650	566	563	574	581	1.22%	-17.47%
Town of Leeds	869	845	809	813	774	755	-2.45%	-13.12%
Town of Lewiston	984	1,122	1,123	1,187	1,225	1,262	3.02%	28.25%
Town of Lodi	1,357	1,855	1,913	2,791	3,273	3,282	0.27%	141.86%
Town of Lowville	819	976	938	987	1,008	1,017	0.89%	39.19%
Town of Marcellon	759	809	880	1,024	1,102	1,140	3.45%	45.2%
Town of Newport	562	657	536	681	586	607	3.58%	8.0%
Town of Otsego	754	767	647	757	693	670	-3.43%	-11.14%
Town of Pacific	756	1,215	1,944	2,518	2,707	2,791	3.1%	269.18%
Town of Randolph	729	700	676	699	769	762	-0.91%	4.53%
Town of Scott	585	602	639	791	905	857	-5.30%	54.7%
Town of Springvale	504	521	466	550	520	539	3.65%	6.94%
Town of West Point	873	1,122	1,285	1,634	1,955	2,028	3.73%	132.3%
Town of Wyocena	1,098	1,225	1,228	1,543	1,666	1,756	5.40%	59.93%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Demographic Trends

Figure B-3 compares 2020 age and gender distribution data for Columbia County to neighboring counties and Wisconsin. Age distribution is an important factor when considering the future demands for housing, schools, parks, and recreational facilities and the provision of social services. Columbia County's median age of 42 is average compared to its neighboring counties. Similarly, the percentage of the population age 65 and older is about 17 percent of the County's population.

Figure B-3: Age and Gender Distribution

	Median Age	Under 18 (%)	65 and over (%)	Female (%)
Adams County	54.2	14.7%	29.4%	46.04%
Columbia County	42.7	21.3%	17.8%	48.62%
Dane County	35.2	20.4%	13.7%	50.27%
Dodge County	43.0	19.8%	17.7%	47.76%
Green Lake County	45.6	22.2%	22.0%	49.52%
Marquette County	50.2	19.4%	24.6%	48.95%
Sauk County	41.0	22.8%	18.4%	50.24%
Wisconsin	39.6	21.9%	16.9%	50.24%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2020)

As indicated by Figure B-4, educational attainment levels have been on the rise since 2000. Columbia County's high school graduation rate was at 93.3 percent in the 2020 American Community Survey, which is higher than neighboring counties except Dane. Similarly, more residents in Columbia County hold bachelor's degrees or higher compared to most neighboring counties. Dane County is the primary exception, which is indicative of multiple institutions of higher education there.

Figure B-4: Educational Attainment

	High School Graduates or Higher			Bachelor's Degree or Higher		
	2000	2010	2020	2000	2010	2020
Adams County	76.7%	84.0%	87.4%	10.0%	10.8%	14.5%
Columbia County	86.2%	90.6%	93.3%	16.7%	19.9%	24.2%
Dane County	92.2%	94.3%	96.2%	40.6%	45.4%	52.4%
Dodge County	82.3%	86.1%	91.2%	13.2%	15.2%	18.0%
Green Lake County	81.9%	87.0%	90.7%	14.5%	16.5%	20.9%
Marquette County	78.8%	85.6%	90.5%	10.1%	12.8%	14.2%
Sauk County	83.5%	88.8%	91.2%	17.6%	20.0%	23.8%
State of Wisconsin	85.1%	89.4%	92.6%	22.4%	25.8%	30.8%

Source: US Census (2020), American Community Survey (2020 5-year estimates)

Housing Trends

Figure B-5 compares the County's housing characteristics with surrounding counties and the State. As indicated in Figure B-5, Columbia County's owner-occupancy and vacancy rates are comparable to neighboring counties, with the exception of Adams County, which has an exceptionally high vacancy rate and the highest owner-occupancy rate of the comparison counties. A housing unit is considered owner-occupied if the owner or co-owner lives in the unit, regardless of whether the unit is mortgaged or owned without a mortgage. A housing unit is vacant if no one is living in it at the time when it is counted. In terms of median home value, Columbia County is higher compared to nearly all neighboring counties with Dane having higher home values. The higher

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

home values in the County correlate with higher farmland values. The proximity to Dane County/Greater Madison area also factor in to these increased values.

Figure B-5: Housing Characteristics

	Total Housing Units	Vacant (%)	Owner Occupied (%)	Median Value Owner Occupied	Median Gross Rent
Adams County	16,692	45.79%	54.21%	\$151,800	\$1,175
Columbia County	26,565	10.11%	89.89%	\$206,300	\$1,473
Dane County	248,795	4.17%	95.83%	\$278,700	\$1,808
Dodge County	38,123	7.05%	92.95%	\$170,100	\$1,338
Green Lake County	10,671	24.10%	76.3%	\$150,100	\$1,214
Marquette County	9,758	30.63%	69.37%	\$158,800	\$1,226
Sauk County	30,784	11.99%	88.01%	\$190,800	\$1,402
Wisconsin	2,727,726	10.97%	89.03%	\$196,500	\$1,436

Source: American Community Survey (2020 5-year estimates)

Agriculture

Economic Contribution of Agriculture

Many Columbia County residents live and work on farms and rely on income generated from farming or associated processing and manufacturing. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, there were 1,199 farms in the County (down from 1,357 in 2017) and a total of 290,003 acres of farmland.

According to the 2019 Columbia County Agriculture: Value and Impact Report prepared by the UW-Extension, agriculture provides 5,262 jobs in the county, accounts for \$1.5 billion in business sales in the County, and pays \$25.7 million in taxes. Agricultural jobs are diverse and include farm owners, on-farm employees, veterinarians, crop and livestock consultants, feed and fuel suppliers, food processors, farm machinery manufacturers and dealers, barn builders, and agricultural lenders.

Agricultural Production and Specialties

Grain is the largest contributor to agricultural in Columbia County, contributing \$101.7 million to the County's economy. Dairy is another major agricultural industry in Columbia County. On-farm milk production generates \$73.5 million in business sales. The County's other top commodities include cattle and calves (\$29.3 million), vegetables (\$4.5 million), and Hay and other crops (\$3.7 million).

Agricultural Resources

As of 2019, Columbia County had over 304,058 acres of farmland, accounting for 62 percent of total land area of the County.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service groups soils into eight classes based on their capability to produce common cultivated crops and pasture plants without deteriorating over a long period of time. The County defines prime farmland as Class I and Class II soils, plus the best of the Class III soils. Map 5-6 of the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046 illustrates these soils.

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

Agricultural Trends

The combination of crops harvested in Columbia County has shifted somewhat since the early 1990s. As indicated in Figure B-6, the number of acres devoted to wheat for grain production decreased by 8.45 percent since 2017 while oat production increased by 2.38 percent. The acreage devoted to corn for grain increased by about 5.26 percent since 2017. In general, the number of acres devoted to cropland has decreased since 1992. These figures may not accurately represent current conditions since increased commodities prices have shifted some operations from dairy to corn production.

Figure B-6: Columbia County Changes in Crops Harvested

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2017	2022	% Change 1992- 2022	% Change 2017- 2022
Total cropland (acres)	260,747	253,404	264,572	241,903	243,906	224,613	-13.86%	-7.91%
Harvested cropland (acres)	218,886	220,834	236,490	220,236	227,669	211,025	-3.59%	-7.31%
Corn for grain (acres)	109,330	109,907	120,858	125,903	103,800	109,266	-0.06%	5.26%
Wheat for grain (acres)	1,986	4,762	6,307	9,894	6,996	6,405	322.51%	-8.45%
Oats for grain (acres)	8,059	4,778	3,290	1,938	545	558	-93.07%	2.38%

Source: USDA Agricultural Census

As indicated previously, the number of farms in Columbia County has decreased by nearly 17 percent since 1992. The amount of farmland in the County is declining, down over 11.36 percent since 1992. Figure B-7 suggests downward trend toward smaller farms throughout the County—the average farm has increased from 227 acres in 1992, down to 242 acres in 2022.

Figure B-7: Farmland Trends

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2017	2022	% Change 1992- 2022	% Change 2017- 2022
Total Farms	1,443	1,359	1,526	1,585	1,357	1,199	-16.91%	-11.64%
Farmland (acres)	327,185	325,723	348,369	316,193	304,058	290,003	-11.36%	-4.62%
Average Farm Size (acres)	227	240	228	199	224	242	6.61%	8.04%

Source: USDA Agricultural Census

Figure B-8 compares the changes in size of Columbia County farms from 1992 to 2022. As depicted in Figure B-9, the number of smaller farms (i.e. between 1 and 49 acres) is increasing in the County. One-to-nine-acre farms grew by 6.72 percent in 2017 and 2022. From 10 to 49-acre farms decreased by 24.88 percent. The

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

number of larger farms has declined since the early nineties; however, very large farms (i.e., 1000+ acres.) increased by more than 106 percent between 1992 and 2022.

Figure B-8: Changes in Number of Farms by Size of Farm

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2017	2022	% Change 1992- 2022	% Change 2017- 2020
1-9 acres	87	70	111	148	134	143	64.37%	6.72%
10-49 acres	190	222	332	414	426	320	68.42%	-24.88%
50-179 acres	552	510	560	563	398	335	-39.31%	-15.83%
180-499 acres	476	391	351	311	230	226	-52.52%	-1.74%
500-999 acres	107	120	107	94	108	78	-27.10%	-27.77%
1,000+ acres	31	46	65	55	61	64	106.45%	4.92%

Source: USDA Agricultural Census

Agricultural Storage and Processing

A number of storage facilities, supply and processing companies support and add value to agricultural products in Columbia County. The following grain storage, dairy processing plants, and meat processing operations serve the County's farmers.

- Peavey Co. (Arlington)
- Vita Plus Grain (Fall River)
- Associated Milk Producers (Portage)
- Cesar's Cheese (Columbus)
- Grand Cheese Company (Wyocena)
- JJ Felician Trucking (Poynette)
- Sassy Cow Creamery (Columbus)
- D&G Processing (Poynette)
- Johnson's Sausage Shoppe, Inc. (Rio)
- Lodi Sausage Company and Meat Market (Lodi)
- Ethanol plants (Randolph and Courtland towns)
- Alsum Produce (Friesland)
- Del Monte Foods vegetable canning factory (Cambria)
- Landmark Services Cooperative (Fountain Prairie)

Agricultural Supply and Distribution

Farms in Columbia County are served by a network of local agricultural support businesses, such as implement dealers, feed and seed operations, agricultural product processors, and transportation systems (including rail), which provide necessary services, materials, and access to markets for the County's farmers. As such, the maintenance and expansion of these businesses are critical to the economics of farmland preservation in

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

Columbia County. The County will continue to support agricultural support businesses in appropriate locations that are close to the farms they serve.

Market Value of Farm Products

Figure B-10 depicts changes in the market value of farm products sold in Columbia County and the amount of government subsidies paid to farmers in the County from 1992 to 2022. The market value of farm products sold in Columbia County increased by nearly 216.42 percent from 1992 to 2022. Government payments to farmers decreased by 32.38 percent from 1992-2022, whereas the average payment per farm increased by 44.75 percent during this period.

Figure B-10: Changes in Market Value and Government Payments

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2017	2022	% Change 1992-2022	% Change 2017-2022
Market value of farm products sold	\$102,963,000	\$105,498,000	\$105,113,000	\$166,672,000	\$222,288,000	\$325,796,000	216.42%	136.56%
Average per farm	\$102,963	\$117,481	\$68,881	\$105,156	\$163,809	\$271,723	163.90%	65.88%
Government Payments	\$3,771,000	\$3,911,000	\$5,896,000	\$5,505,000	\$1,602,000	\$2,550,000	-32.38%	59.18%
Average per farm	\$5,522	\$4,883	\$7,270	\$5,407	\$3,217	\$7,993	44.75%	148.46%

Source: USDA Agricultural Census

Figure B-11 depicts the total number of agricultural land sales in Columbia County compared to neighboring counties and the State, including the number of sales and acres converted to non-agricultural uses. As indicated below, a total of 135 acres of Columbia County farmland was converted to non-agricultural uses in 2019 to 2020. There were no agricultural conversions in Columbia County in 2018.

Figure B-11: Agricultural Land Sales

	Land Continuing in Agricultural Uses			Land Converted to Other Uses		
	Agricultural Transactions	Acres Sold	Percent of Total Sales	Agricultural Transactions	Acres Sold	Percent of Total Sales
2020						
Adams County	23	2,222	97.80%	3	50	2.20%
Columbia County	22	1,505	94.59%	4	86	5.41%
Dane County	50	3,040	92.40%	6	250	7.60%
Dodge County	32	2,310	97.30%	1	64	2.70%
Green Lake County	17	1,163	98.81%	1	14	1.19%
Marquette County	12	480	100%	0	0	0.0%

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

	Land Continuing in Agricultural Uses			Land Converted to Other Uses		
	Agricultural Transactions	Acres Sold	Percent of Total Sales	Agricultural Transactions	Acres Sold	Percent of Total Sales
Sauk County	43	3,037	95.90%	3	130	4.10%
Wisconsin	1,668	101,118	95.95%	132	4,271	4.05%
2019						
Adams County	11	2,245	97.95%	2	47	2.05%
Columbia County	17	1,337	96.46%	2	49	3.54%
Dane County	43	2,122	99.48%	1	11	0.52%
Dodge County	36	2,507	100%	0	0	0.0%
Green Lake County	13	899	100%	0	0	0.0%
Marquette County	11	465	100%	0	0	0.0%
Sauk County	26	1,292	100%	0	0	0.0%
Wisconsin	1,434	90,691	98.73%	36	1,542	1.27%
2018						
Adams County	8	323	74.94%	4	108	25.06%
Columbia County	18	1,367	100%	0	0	0%
Dane County	46	2,869	84.61%	13	522	15.39%
Dodge County	29	1,574	96.74%	2	53	3.26%
Green Lake County	15	716	100%	0	0	0%
Marquette County	21	1,280	100%	0	0	0%
Sauk County	44	2,637	96.49%	4	96	3.51%
Wisconsin	1,504	89,582	94.25%	159	5,469	5.75%
2010						
Adams County	9	659	100%	0	0	0.0%
Columbia County	29	2,009	100%	0	0	0.0%
Dane County	47	5,875	99.3%	1	40	0.7%
Dodge County	44	3,426	93.2%	2	248	6.8%
Green Lake County	25	1,553	99.0%	1	15	1.0%
Marquette County	12	864	98.7%	1	11	1.3%
Sauk County	15	894	100%	0	0	0.0%
Wisconsin	1,425	103,619	95.5%	129	4,912	4.5%
2009						
Adams County	5	352	91.7%	1	32	8.3%
Columbia County	22	1,660	94.9%	6	90	5.1%
Dane County	24	1,764	87.6%	5	250	12.4%

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

	Land Continuing in Agricultural Uses			Land Converted to Other Uses		
	Agricultural Transactions	Acres Sold	Percent of Total Sales	Agricultural Transactions	Acres Sold	Percent of Total Sales
Dodge County	37	2,506	95.2%	2	125	4.8%
Green Lake County	9	455	100%	0	0	0%
Marquette County	11	490	93.9%	2	32	6.1%
Sauk County	18	1,182	82.1%	10	258	17.9%
Wisconsin	1,020	72,432	91.5%	158	6,702	8.5%
2008						
Adams County	14	1,841	100%	0	0	0%
Columbia County	32	2,340	92.7%	7	184	7.3%
Dane County	24	2,306	82.8%	9	514	17.2%
Dodge County	37	2,615	89.3%	8	312	10.7%
Green Lake County	14	994	100%	0	0	0%
Marquette County	11	1,684	100%	0	0	0%
Sauk County	23	1,408	91.0%	7	140	9.0%
Wisconsin	1,571	125,107	93.5%	219	8,666	6.5%
Source: National Agricultural Statistics Service						

Land Use Issues Related to Agriculture

The majority of the unincorporated land in the County is classified as productive farmlands, pastures, and woodlands, all of which contribute to the County's rural character and agricultural heritage. The primary issue related to agricultural land is the pressure to convert farmland to other land uses—mainly residential. An increasing number of non-farm related residential uses in agricultural areas can lead to conflicts associated with farm odors, farm machinery on highways, and late hours of field operations. In addition to residential uses conflicting with agriculture, the County has also been experiencing increased pressure to allow traditional (i.e., coal power plants) and alternative energy systems (i.e., wind, solar, ethanol production) as well as large animal confinement facilities to be located in the County. Such development can impact the rural character and quality of agricultural lands.

Municipal Expansion

Expansion of municipal boundaries in Columbia County will likely be based on comprehensive plans and population increases. In addition, the County has historically encouraged higher density residential development in areas where public utilities will be available and non-agricultural businesses and industries to locate in areas where public utilities will be available. Columbia County also intends to work with incorporated municipalities and adjoining towns to preserve sufficient area around existing cities and villages to allow reasonable municipal growth, balancing such growth with farmland preservation, natural resource protection, and the desires of town governments and residents. Municipal expansion in accordance with a city/town or village/town intergovernmental boundary agreement or cooperative boundary plan is usually the best way to achieve such balance.

Natural Resources and Environmental Preservation

Columbia County is rich in natural resources. Most of the County's outstanding natural resources are found along the Wisconsin River, which dominates the landscape of the western region of the County. Wetlands and floodplain are present throughout the County and can help provide fertile soil, improve water quality, and act as natural flood buffers; however, they can also cause crop loss, soil erosion, and equipment damage in the case of a flooding event. Columbia County offers a diversity of recreational activities.

Water Resources

Water resources are abundant in Columbia County with approximately 23,219 acres of surface water covering about 4.5 percent of the County; included in this total are 58 named and unnamed lakes and ponds, and 23 streams and rivers. The Wisconsin River is the largest stream corridor in the County, which also forms the County's largest lake, Lake Wisconsin. The sub-continental divide is also located in Columbia County with precipitation falling in the Wisconsin River basin draining to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico and precipitation falling in the Rock-Fox River Basin draining to the Great Lakes.

Environmental Corridors

Environmental corridors include lands with one or more of the following characteristics:

- Floodplains
- Wetlands
- 35-foot buffers along all lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, and drainage ways
- Publicly owned lands for park and conservation purposes
- Steep slopes over 12 percent
- Shallow soils to bedrock
- Woodlots 20 acres or greater

1 Percent Annual Chance Flood (100-year flood)

100-year floodplain areas, depicted on Map 5-10 in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046, are those areas which are subject to inundation by the 1 percent annual chance flood, meaning that there is a one percent chance that this event will happen in any given year.

Wetlands

Columbia County has over 87,584 acres of wetlands, shown on Map 5-11 in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046, about 17 percent of the County's total land area. Wetlands serve important functions in maintaining the County's water quality, as well as assisting with groundwater recharge, flood storage, and providing plant and wildlife habitat. Wetlands are generally located along lakeshores, stream banks, and large, poorly drained areas. While wetlands are scattered throughout Columbia County, large wetland complexes are concentrated in the Towns of Lewiston and Pacific.

Upland Woods

Woodlands cover over 89,000 acres in Columbia County, or about 17.5 percent of the total area. Woodlands are generally concentrated on the western portion of the County within areas of steep slopes, floodplains, wetlands, or marginal farmland. Woodlands are depicted on Map 5-12 in the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan 2046.

Parks and Other Public Lands

Columbia County owns and maintains six County Parks that total approximately 116 acres. Over 28,000 acres of land in Columbia County are in other public ownership and available for open space and outdoor recreational uses. These outdoor recreation areas include land owned by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for hunting grounds and wildlife areas, lands owned by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Madison

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

Audubon Society for waterfowl production areas, and lands along the Wisconsin River owned by Wisconsin Power and Light that are open to public hunting.

State Natural Areas located in the County include Gibraltar Rock, Audubon Goose Pond, Lost Lake, Baraboo River Floodplain Forest, Rocky Run Oak Savanna, Dells of the Wisconsin River, French Creek Fen, Springvale Wet Prairie, Grassy Lake, and Pine Island Savanna.

The Glacial Habitat Restoration Area (GHRA) Project is a regional approach to wildlife habitat management that focuses on establishing a patchwork of restored wetlands and grasslands in combination with croplands to provide all of the elements necessary for the life cycle of waterfowl, wild pheasants and non-game songbirds. The goals of the program are to establish 38,600 acres of permanent grassland nesting cover and restore 11,000 acres of wetlands within 24 townships in Columbia, Dodge, Fond du Lac and Winnebago Counties, which totals about 530,000 acres. In Columbia County, the Towns of Courtland and Fountain Prairie are included in the target areas for the program.

Economic Growth

Columbia County is a rural county with 58,490 people living in the County's 21 towns, ten villages, and four cities. The County's villages and cities have historically served as economic and social centers for the surrounding farm families. Today, many of these communities are working to diversity their economies.

Columbia County's economy is primarily based in education, health care, manufacturing, and agriculture. Tourism is also an important component of the County's economy with major attractions like Wisconsin Dells, the Wisconsin and Fox Rivers, and numerous public hunting and wildlife areas. Leading employers in the County include Divine Savior Healthcare, Inc., Columbia County, Portage Community Schools, Associated Milk Producers, Inc., and Wal-Mart. As identified in a community opinion survey conducted as part of the County's 2005-2007 comprehensive planning process, residents support the continued expansion of the manufacturing, agricultural, and tourism sectors of the economy, as well as growth and expansion in the commercial and retail sectors.

The County's strengths in attracting desired new business and industries include:

- Available land in industrial parks.
- Excellent access to major highway, rail, and utility networks.
- Proximity to major economic and urban centers.
- High quality of life.
- Abundant natural, cultural, and environmental features and abundant recreational opportunities.
- Affordable housing opportunities.
- Economic development agency and tourism groups available in the County.
- Access to a technical college and a general proximity to major universities.
- Quality schools and healthcare.

Weaknesses to overcome include:

- An over dependence on manufacturing and agricultural sectors of the economy.
- Loss of labor force to other counties.
- High seasonal employment.
- Limited revenue and financing options for infrastructure development to support economic development.

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

- Lack of public/private financing and support for entrepreneurs and inventors.
- Lack of venture capital.
- Loss of young people to other areas.

The Columbia County Economic Development Corporation (CCEDC) serves as the lead economic development organization in the County. Its mission is to foster and encourage activities in the county that result in constructive economic development and/or result in an improved quality of life. CCEDC's programs and activities include:

- Supporting business recruitment, retention, and expansion.
- Promoting natural and recreational resources.
- Promoting agri-business retention and expansion.
- Assisting town, village, city and county governments with local economic development activities.
- Promoting a new Highway 51 Tourism Initiative.

Energy

The Rural Power Community Scaled Renewable Energy and Rural Economic Development, New Rules Project predicts that rural America's major growth sector will be renewable energy technologies. While there are currently no known waste-to-energy facilities in Columbia County, bioenergy research continues to advance around the County, including that carried out through the University of Wisconsin, Madison College's Consortium for Education in Renewable Energy Technologies and the grant for development of a low-carbon Advanced Bioenergy Campaign received by the Wisconsin Farmers Union. UW-Madison is home to the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center. The early focus of this Center is to conduct basic research toward a suite of new technologies to help convert cellulosic plant biomass—cornstalks, wood chips and native grasses—to sources of energy. Solar energy production facilities are often located within Farmland Preservation areas due to the need for large swaths of land. This impacts available agriculture within the County by reducing tillable acreage.

Utilities, Community Facilities, and Services

Utilities, community facilities, and services can both aid and put pressure on agricultural resources. Groundwater is a crucial water source for crop irrigation, with many large farm operations utilizing high-capacity wells. Rural homes sites must have a corresponding well and private waste treatment system, which can convert additional lands away from cultivation to support the rural development. Farmers and rural homeowners rely on the County's waste management system to ensure proper disposal of waste. Below are different aspects of utilities, community facilities, and services within Columbia County:

Community Facilities

Columbia County's government offices operate out of several buildings throughout the County. County buildings include the Carl Fredrick Administration Building, Columbia County Annex, Columbia County Jail, Health and Human Services building, and Law Enforcement Center in the City of Portage, the Recycling and Waste Processing Facility in the Village of Pardeeville, and the Highway and Transportation Department and the Columbia Healthcare Center in the Village of Wyocena.

Telecommunications and Utilities

AT&T, Verizon, and CenturyTel, Inc. provide telephone services to the County. Two utility companies and four municipal electric utilities provide electrical service; these include Alliant Energy, the Adams-Columbia

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

Electrical Cooperative, Columbus Water and Light, Lodi Municipal Light and Water, Pardeeville Electric Utility, and the Wisconsin Dells Municipal Electric Utility.

Public Safety

The Columbia County Sheriff's Department serves as the primary law enforcement in the County. Local fire and rescue departments provide fire and emergency medical services. There are 19 fire districts and 14 EMS districts in Columbia County.

Water Supply

Fourteen public water systems are available in Columbia County including the Arlington Waterworks, Cambria Waterworks, Columbus Water and Light Department, Fall River Waterworks, Friesland Waterworks, Harmony Grove Sanitary District, Lodi Waterworks, Pardeeville Waterworks, Portage Waterworks, Poynette Waterworks, Randolph Water Department, Rio Waterworks, WI Dells Waterworks, and Wyocena Waterworks. Most residents in towns obtain their water supply from private wells.

Sources of groundwater in the County include the glacial-drift and bedrock aquifers of the Wolf-River Basin, Wisconsin River Basin, and the Rock-Fox River Basin. These aquifers supply the water to County residents through private and municipal wells. Water quality in the County is generally good, although hard water is prevalent in the County.

Wastewater

Public sanitary sewer service is available in fifteen communities in Columbia County, most of which are village and city systems. The Village of Doylestown is the only incorporated community in the County that does not provide sanitary sewer service.

The majority of Columbia County's unincorporated towns handle the treatment of domestic and commercial wastewater through the use of individual private on-site wastewater treatment (septic) systems (POWWTS), with notable exceptions in certain areas (e.g., Interstate/Highway CS interchange area in Dekorra). There are currently six types of on-site treatment system designs authorized for use today: conventional (underground), mound, pressure distribution, at-grade, holding tank, and sand filter systems. The majority of POWWTS in Columbia County are conventional systems, mound systems, and holding tanks. The Wisconsin Department of Commerce (COMM) regulates the siting, design, installation, and inspection of most private on-site sewage treatment systems in the State. In 2000, the State adopted a revised private sewage system code called COMM 83. This revised code allows conventional on-site systems and alternative systems, such as those that employ biological or chemical treatment. In some cases, alternative waste treatment systems can be used in areas where conventional systems are not feasible due to unsuitable soil conditions.

Waste Management

The County Solid Waste Department provides solid waste disposal, recycling, and composting services and operates a recycling and composting facility on Highway 16 in the Town of Pacific. The facility processes 22 tons of recyclable materials per day and the compost machines process 70 tons of waste per day with a maximum capacity of 80 tons per day. The facility is expected to meet the needs of the County for the next ten years.

Transportation

A strong transportation system is vital to agricultural services in the County. They are vital to agricultural supply chains, moving everything from fertilizer to crops. The following transportation systems exist within Columbia County:

Appendix B: Existing Conditions and Trends

Highways

A strong transportation network serves Columbia County—Interstate 39/90/94 serves the County, connecting the County to Madison, the Twin Cities, Chicago, Milwaukee, and the north woods. US Highways 51 and 151 and State Highways 16, 22, 33, 30, 73, and 78 also serve the County.

Railroads

Columbia County has a significant network of rail lines, in part due to its central location in the State. Three freight rail companies currently serve the County with approximately 102 miles of track passing through 16 of the County's 21 towns. In addition to freight rail, passenger rail is also an important function of the rail system in Columbia County. Amtrak's Empire Builder passes through the County on its run between Chicago and the Pacific Northwest. The Empire Builder operates one train per day in each direction and stops in Columbus, Portage, and Wisconsin Dells.

Air Transportation

The Dane County Regional Airport in Madison, the Central Wisconsin Airport in Wausau, and the General Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee provide commercial aviation services for Columbia County. The Portage Municipal Airport is the County's only general utility airport. The Wisconsin DOT's Five-Year Airport Improvement Program identifies the Portage Municipal Airport is to be relocated to a new site on the north side of the City. In addition, 19 other airport facilities are located in the County, most of which are small, privately owned airstrips or heliports. The two exceptions are Gilbert Field in Rio that is a privately owned but available for public use and the Lodi Lakeland Airport that is publicly owned by the Town of Lodi but is not open to public use.

Public Transportation

Public transit in Columbia County consists of bus service, shared ride taxi service, and the state vanpool. Greyhound Bus Company serves the City of Wisconsin Dells with regularly scheduled service. Other charter bus lines also provide charter service to the County.

The Merrimac Ferry

The Colsac III ferry, which crosses the Wisconsin River between Columbia and Sauk counties, is Wisconsin's only free ferry. It shuttles traffic on Highway 113 between the Town of West Point near Okee on the east bank of the river to Merrimac on the west bank. The ferry is open for service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, normally from April through November.