



The Douglas County Comprehensive Development Plan

Developed with the Citizens of Douglas County

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Prepared By:





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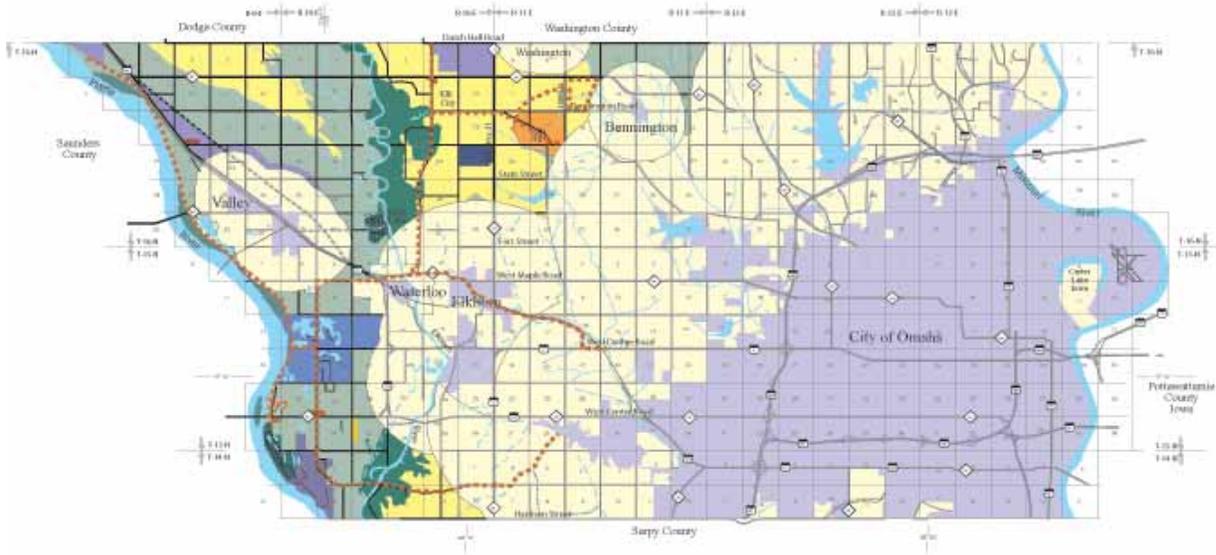


INTRODUCTION

Douglas County, Nebraska's most populous county, adopted its last comprehensive plan in 1998 (A Comprehensive Plan for Douglas County, Nebraska, August, 1998) for the area outside of municipal jurisdictions. This document recognized the annexation policies of Omaha, Elkhorn, and Valley and their impact on the county's planning jurisdiction. Nevertheless, it emphasized the importance of the county comprehensive plan in "helping to define the character of the leading edge of metropolitan growth, preserving vital environmental resources and agricultural lands, and discouraging unstructured development in rural areas and on the urban fringe of the metropolitan area." This fundamental mission of the county comprehensive plan remains as valid in 2006 as it was in 1998.



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The 1998 Douglas County Comprehensive Plan was built on five basic principles:

- The planning jurisdiction of Douglas County contains unique environmental resources and features that should be recognized and preserved.
- Land use planning in the county should integrate the demand for development with the needs of resource and open space conservation.
- Development and land use in the planning jurisdiction should be related to the character and capacity of the land.
- Land use policy should encourage unique settings for the metropolitan area.
- Land use and development policies for the county should anticipate a mature, final stage of development, rather than being viewed as a transition to higher density growth.

To implement these principles, the 1998 Douglas County Comprehensive Plan placed an emphasis on:

- Low-density residential development utilizing conservation design standards;
- Small town living, including opportunities for a New Urban “village;” and

- Water-oriented residential development, continuing the precedent of gravel pit reuse in the Platte River valley.

The plan did not anticipate extension of municipal utilities into the county jurisdiction, instead envisioning the use of self-contained or community systems to serve these special development forms. The plan also proposed an “Elkhorn Preserve”, a combination of public open space, easements, and private landholdings that would maintain the open quality of the scenic Elkhorn River environment. It also suggested for the first time a Western Douglas County trail system that would connect and extend the metropolitan region’s trail network.



Since 1998, however, major changes have occurred in both the development and physical trends that raise new policy and design issues. These include:

- *The imminent build-out of easily developable land in Douglas County.* In 1998, most observers believed that Douglas County and the Omaha jurisdiction would be able to meet development demand far into the future. However, continued rapid residential development indicates that the area of the county within potential urban services areas, capable of being served by sewers draining into the City of Omaha's wastewater system, may be fully built out within 25 years. The land resources that appeared inexhaustible in 1998 now are clearly limited.
- *Changes in the nature of residential development in the northern part of the county.* In 1998, most of the readily developable county jurisdiction seemed beyond the probable reach of municipal services. As a result, the previous plan focused on effective ways to develop without city infrastructure. However, since 1998, the far Northwest Omaha and Bennington areas have proven to be extremely popular for urban development. Newport Landing, a public/private partnership that included a major subdivision surrounding a new lake, helped establish this trend. The 2005 announcement of the planned Heritage development, providing about 1,000 lots with urban services, emphasizes the transition in market demand for the northwest part of the Papillion Creek watershed.
- Similar development attention is being given to the southwestern part of the county jurisdiction.
- *Differing market demands in the county jurisdiction.* The metropolitan area continues to experience demand for large lot and acreage development, typically with densities below one unit per acre. These developments typically use individual or community wastewater systems and have gravitated to areas on the edge of municipal jurisdictions, including areas of Douglas County. The Douglas County jurisdiction, combining scenic land and the convenience of adjacency to Omaha, is particularly attractive for acreage subdivisions. However, increased development demand at urban densities within the urban services area has begun to conflict with this pattern. The use of land within the potential urban services area for low-density development will reduce the potential population that Douglas County can accommodate and will ultimately spread development demand over a much larger area. This raises the question of the degree to which the county can accommodate both urban and acreage development, or whether low-density forms should be diverted to other areas that are beyond the feasible reach of municipal services.
- *Changing municipal jurisdictions.* The annexation case between the cities of Omaha and Elkhorn will ultimately be decided by the Nebraska Supreme Court in 2006. Regardless of the decision, new areas within the present county planning jurisdiction will be incorporated into the extra-territorial jurisdictions of municipalities. The county plan should generally be consistent with the development policies of its constituent cities, who will eventually incorporate these jurisdictions.
- *Increasing environmental awareness and demands for better quality development.* Efforts like the Omaha by Design program and the adoption of an Urban Design element of the Omaha Comprehensive Plan reflect a growing concern about the quality of development in the area and an increased commitment to new and more sophisticated types of development. A particularly important aspect of development design includes stormwater management practices that include the mandates imposing water quality standards on stormwater discharge. In addition, increases in the volume of stormwater runoff from additional development can affect downstream areas. Standards for excellence in county development should address environmental concerns such as stormwater management, wastewater treatment, development design, and community character.

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- *Elkhorn Preserve and regional open space planning.* The Elkhorn Preserve concept has since been incorporated into the Omaha Suburban Parks Plan and the Elkhorn Parks Master Plan. The county and the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District have joined with other jurisdictions in the development of the Western Douglas County Trails Plan.
- *Transportation and urban infrastructure.* The continuing development of the county's transportation system has an impact on the county plan. The Highway 275 freeway project has been completed between Waterloo and the Douglas/Dodge County line. The City of Omaha has also developed a transportation framework plan for its northwestern jurisdiction, and the widening of Highway 36 is likely during the planning period.

Methodology

Because of the special nature of planning in Douglas County, with an increasingly limited land supply, changing municipal jurisdictions, specific policies established by adopted city comprehensive plans, and demonstrated growth demands, traditional methodologies (such as population projections and allocation of urban land conversion needs) have limited usefulness. In view of metropolitan growth demands, this comprehensive plan addresses how to make the best use of available land resources, given development demands and environmental characteristics. In common with the 1998 Douglas County Comprehensive Plan, this plan draws on the work of the landscape architect and environmental planner Ian McHarg to overlay environmental constraints and opportunities. This technique is used to define appropriate policies for specific development districts. The plan's methodology also included an extensive community input



process, including individual and small group discussions and public workshops, to understand the various perspectives and priorities of those who have a stake in the development future of the county.

Reflecting this approach, the Douglas County Comprehensive Plan is divided into the following sections:

Chapter 1. Land Use and Land Use Trends. This section reviews land use patterns and trends within the county's planning jurisdiction.

Chapter 2. Environmental and Development Resources. This section considers those features that add value to the environment of the planning area or affect the course of future growth. It also examines infrastructure, including transportation and utility systems.

Chapter 3. Stakeholder Issues. This section summarizes the findings of the community participation process and identifies key issues and perspectives identified by stakeholders (including builders and developers, engineers, public officials, property owners, and neighbors).

Chapter 4. First Principles. This section establishes the guiding policy principles that guide the land use plan and should be used as criteria in evaluating development proposals.

Chapter 5. Land Use Plan. This chapter presents the county land use concept, along with land use policies for the county planning jurisdiction. It is built on the concept of development policy districts, guiding future private and public development decisions and investments.

Chapter 6. Transportation, Infrastructure, and Public Facilities. This chapter addresses public improvements that support the concepts of the land use plan.

Chapter 7. Plan Implementation. This section provides guidance and describes techniques for implementing key aspects of the county plan.

The plan also includes an extensive Appendix that presents the specific comments of stakeholders and includes a review of Best Development Practices, a variety of design techniques that should be incorporated into the design of new developments.