

QUALITY OF LIFE

Preserving the rural character of Washburn County

by Preserve Washburn County

Land Use: Defining appropriate land use is about more than making ecologically intelligent choices. It is also about retaining values, lifestyles, cultural assets, and community character.

Overall Goal Statement: Maintain the quality of life in the Town of Brooklyn.

- Excerpts from the Town of Brooklyn's Comprehensive Plan -

What is Rural? Rural **refers to the country, country life, or country people**. It is characterized by agriculture and a low population density. The US Census Bureau defines rural as all territory, population, and housing units located outside urban areas. The Bureau's definition is the only federal definition that applies the term "rural" in an official, statistical capacity. People move to rural communities for the *quality of life*. Some of the top reasons include more land or space around home, fewer people, more home for less money, a safe environment with clean air and water, lower cost of living, no traffic, and different culture.

83% of the population in Washburn County is considered rural. 17% of this population is considered urban. The population density is low: 19 people per square mile. Table #1 shows the population of towns in Washburn County excluding cities and villages.

Rural communities generally want to preserve large contiguous blocks of open space, agricultural lands, and natural resource areas such as lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands, and wildlife habitat. They want to be sure that land-disturbing activities do not generate impacts to air, land, wildlife, and water. They generally desire to curb high-intensity and high-density development which may negatively impact the rural nature and Northwoods character so highly valued by the community. They want any new developments to blend into the rural landscape, complement the local environment, and not represent a nuisance to other residents.

Washburn County is a beautiful place to live, work, raise a family, and retire. But there are big changes happening in our area. Land speculators are targeting Washburn County and converting farmland and land zoned for residential development into massive, high-density RV Subdivisions and seasonal trailer park "campgrounds". Many rural people and places are seeing their defining characteristics disappear, and this is having a negative impact on the county residents' *quality of life*.

According to Wisconsin state law, each site in a "campground" may be occupied continuously by six individuals or "an individual family" for up to eight months. Given these lax and unenforceable occupancy rules, it's possible for individual sites to be occupied by large family groups, especially on holidays. Nevertheless, assuming an average of four (4) occupants per site, it is worth considering the total potential seasonal residency of RV Parks under the limits proposed by the Ad Hoc Campground Ordinance Review Committee's proposed caps: 50, 75 and 100 units. These represent seasonal populations of 200, 300, and 400 *in a single "campground" approved at the maximum allowed size*. Table #1 shows the percentage of seasonal increase in population of each town when just one campground is approved at the proposed limits.

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Table #1

TOWN NAME	POPULATION 2000 CENSUS	% Increase – 50 sites	% Increase – 75 sites	% Increase – 100 sites
Barronett	405	49%	74%	99%
Bashaw	921	22%	33%	43%
Bass Lake	535	37%	56%	75%
Beaver Brook	643	31%	47%	62%
Birchwood	442	45%	68%	90%
Brooklyn	281	71%	107%	142%
Casey	466	43%	64%	86%
Chicog	268	75%	112%	149%
Crystal	323	62%	93%	124%
Evergreen	1,076	19%	28%	37%
Frog Creek	160	125%	188%	250%
Gull Lake	158	127%	190%	253%
Long Lake	737	27%	41%	54%
Madge	454	44%	66%	88%
Minong	548	36%	55%	73%
Sarona	382	52%	79%	105%
Spooner	2,573	8%	12%	16%
Springbrook	536	37%	56%	75%
Stinnett	263	76%	114%	152%
Stone Lake	544	37%	55%	74%
Trego	885	23%	34%	45%
TOTAL TOWN POPULATION:	12,600			
AVERAGE TOWN POPULATION:	600			
MEDIAN TOWN POPULATION:	466			

A typical rural town in Washburn County would experience a 40% increase in population from just one 50-unit RV Park, a 60% increase in population from just one 75-unit RV Park, and nearly a 90% increase in population from just one 100-unit RV Park. With the potential for multiple RV Parks in or near a single town, as is already the case in Beaver Brook, Birchwood, Spooner, and Trego, the impact is that full-time, tax-paying residents can quickly be outnumbered by seasonal RV residents.

Preserve Washburn County is not against development or campgrounds. We believe there is a place for limited size, well-run campgrounds as part of a balanced and diverse tourism industry in Washburn County. We are for preserving the rural character of Washburn County and implementing policies that protect the rural landscape. Even with the proposed limits on campgrounds, land speculators are bringing the cities to Washburn County, and people come here to get away from the city!

Table #2

RURAL LIVING: Quality of life factor for residents	HOW RV CAMPGROUNDS IMPACT THE RURAL WAY OF LIFE
Less population, more open space.	RV parks create an instant town inside a town, often increasing the population by town 50% or more. Campgrounds built in inappropriate locations are an intrusion on the rural lifestyle with very little or no benefit to the community.
Privacy.	High-density RV parks can pack the population of a small town into as little as 10-20 acres. With the current zoning ordinances, a campground could end up next to anybody!
A sense of peace and tranquility.	Even with designated (though often unenforceable) quiet hours, RV parks can be a nuisance to nearby residents with loud music, barking dogs, people having parties, and a steady stream of ATVs. Some even have big-screen televisions mounted to the exterior of their RV so they can sit outside the RV and watch television loudly. There is very little oversight or enforcement in these situations.
Less pollution.	Increased traffic, waste, trash, dust, and light pollution.
More in contact with nature and wildlife.	RV parks are generally a crowded form of development which displaces wildlife. Domestic animals, trash, and increased trespassing on nearby private lands are introduced into agricultural areas, undeveloped parcels, and forests under active land management plans. Land historically used for hunting becomes fragmented and less accessible.
Lower crime rates.	Increased population = increased crime.
Lower stress.	Increased noise, traffic, pollution.
Less expensive.	RV owners do not pay their fair share of taxes which results in higher tax bills for everyone else to cover the shortfall for roads, public safety, and emergency services.

Preserve Washburn County (PWC) believes that the size, location, and duration of permanent RV encampments should be limited. *We support capping “campgrounds” at 50 units along lakes and streams and 75 to 100 units in other areas as a reasonable start* and hope this is the just the beginning of other needed changes.

PWC believes the rural character of Washburn County can best be preserved for the long-run by:

- *Limiting the size of new seasonal campgrounds and RV Subdivisions to 25 units or less.*
- *Eliminating seasonal campgrounds as conditional uses in existing RR-2 and RA, and F zoning districts.*
- *Creating a new Rural-Residential/Recreational-Commercial (RR-RC) zoning district where seasonal campgrounds are one of several conditionally-permitted uses. This will guarantee that private campgrounds are actually serving temporary campers and thereby encouraging tourism. Otherwise, we're just encouraging sub-standard seasonal housing on the cheap, with big long-term impacts to current county residents.*

With strategic planning, such as a *comprehensive plan*, the county and our towns can prioritize which land is most important to conserve and which land can accommodate the projected need for future growth, rather than converting land to developed uses in a haphazard manner. There needs to be a framework for determining whether proposed developments fit with the desired community character and help achieve the community's economic, environmental, and social goals. There should be a strong relationship between the towns and the county government to ensure there is consensus on how to plan for new development and strive to make identified growth areas more attractive to the development community than other areas where the community does not want development.

One key to preserving a sense of place and improving the community is to *use the appropriate density for the setting*. The density of development helps shape the character of a community. Densities that are inconsistent with community character in rural areas create a development pattern that can be worrisome from economic, environmental, social, and health perspectives.

Overall, the comprehensive plan is a guide that reflects the community's vision of a desirable community. Ultimately, the success of the planning process will be measured by the future *quality of life* experienced by both residents and visitors. While Preserve Washburn County favors a more comprehensive approach to planning, we at a minimum support limiting the density and size of campgrounds to preserve the rural Northwoods character that draws us all here: residents and tourists and everyone in between.