

Dakota County Farmland and Natural Area Protection Plan

***Adopted by the Dakota County Board of Commissioners on
January 29, 2002***



Prepared by the Dakota County Office of Planning, in collaboration with:

***1000 Friends of Minnesota
Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District
Dakota County Township Officers Association
Friends of the Mississippi River
Minnesota Farmers Union
Minnesota Land Trust
The Trust for Public Land
Township Agricultural Protection Task Force
University of Minnesota Extension Service – Dakota County***

*Funding for this project provided by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources (Legal
Citation: ML 1999, Chapter 231, Section 16, Subdivision 8)*

The Dakota County Farmland and Natural Areas Project Collaborative:

Who are we?

Dakota County

Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District

Dakota County Township Officers Association

Friends of the Mississippi River

Minnesota Farmers Union

Minnesota Land Trust

The Trust for Public Land

1000 Friends of Minnesota

Township Agricultural Protection Task Force

University of Minnesota Extension Service – Dakota County

Acknowledgements:

Dakota County wishes to thank the citizens of the County for their participation in this planning process and for the submission of scenic farmland and natural area photos, many of which are used throughout this plan.

Dakota County is truly a beautiful place, and it is our hope that this plan will help preserve high priority lands in a fiscally responsible manner that is in accordance with the values of the citizens of Dakota County.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Executive Summary

Overall findings.....	iii
Farmland findings.....	iii
Farmland strategies.....	iv
Natural area findings	v
Natural area strategies.....	vi

Chapter 1: What is the problem and who cares?

Rapid Growth	1
Citizen Concern over loss of farmland and natural areas.....	1
Maintaining the quality of life in Dakota County	1
Impact of land use change	2
Loss of natural areas.....	3
Loss of farmlands	4
Support for land protection	5
Willingness to pay for land protection	6
Moving forward.....	7

Chapter 2: Farmland

Resource

Farmland as a resource	9
Farm related businesses	10

Threat

Analyzing the threat to farmland and farming	11
Dynamics of impending urbanization	11
Transition point from farm to non-farm communities	12
Analyzing the threats to farmland in Dakota County.....	12
What is needed to make farming work in Dakota County	13

Opportunities to Protect Farmland

Public purpose for protecting farmland	15
Responding to challenges	15
An incentive based approach to land conservation	16
Conservation easements.....	16
Narrowing down what lands to protect and where	16
Opportunities to protect farmland using conservation easements.....	17
Assumptions of three conservation easement scenarios.....	17
Development of farmland protection strategies	21
Investigation of agricultural protection incentive programs	22
Recommendations from agricultural program studies	25
Opportunities to assist cities and townships with local controls.....	25

Chapter 3: Natural Areas

Resource

Natural areas as a resource	27
Overview of natural areas	27
Tour of Dakota County's remaining natural areas	27

Threat

Analyzing what is needed to make natural areas sustainable	37
Analyzing the threat to natural areas	37
Protection using existing tools.....	37

Opportunities to Protect Natural Areas

Public purpose for protecting natural areas	38
Responding to challenges	38
An incentive based approach to land conservation	38
Conservation easements.....	39
Advantages and disadvantages of using conservation easements	40
Dakota County citizen perspectives	40
Narrowing down what lands to protect and where	41
Natural corridors approach.....	42
Three natural area protection strategies	43
Opportunities to coordinate with other agencies.....	44
Public protected natural areas and private unprotected areas	46
Current natural area projects and studies in Dakota County	47
Partnerships with non-profits.....	48
Opportunities to protect land with large companies/landowners	49

Implementation

Implementing plan strategies	I-2
Program Maps.....	I-3
Implementing levels/options.....	I-4
Other Open Space Needs	I-6
Challenges/Program Specifics	I-7
Funding.....	I-12

Appendices

Appendix A: Stakeholder Perspectives
Appendix B: Project History and Fact Sheets
Appendix C: The Preservation Tool Box
Appendix D: County Financing Options Survey

Dakota County Farmland and Natural Area Protection Plan Executive Summary

Project Purpose

The purpose of the farmland and natural area project is to address citizen concern over the loss of farmland and natural areas and determine how to protect these areas using incentive based tools.

Overview

In the late 1990s, Dakota County learned through focus groups, a Citizens' Jury and telephone surveys that citizens were interested in protecting farmland and natural areas. The 2001 Dakota County Residential Survey confirms that 91% of people surveyed said that it is important that the County pursue an active role in protecting farmland from development. Similarly, 96% of people surveyed said it was important for the County to play an active role in protecting natural areas.

In response to citizen concerns, the County Board of Commissioners applied for and received a \$200,000 grant from the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCMR) to work in partnership with other government agencies and non-profits to:

- Hold community meetings to identify the issues and obtain citizen opinions
- Identify and prioritize important farmland and natural areas
- Conduct a county-wide survey of citizen support for ways to fund land protection
- Acquire donated conservation easements on 300-500 acres of land
- Develop a plan with recommendations on tools and programs for local governments

This plan was written to summarize citizen concerns, identify the threats to farmland and natural areas, and tailor a strategy that fits the needs of Dakota County's citizens to protect high priority farmland and natural areas.

Overall Findings

Finding Dakota County continues to be one of the fastest growing counties in the Midwest.

Finding Surveys of Dakota County citizens show that growth is the number one concern.

Finding Citizens are concerned about how growth impacts farmland and natural areas and want Dakota County to play a role in protecting these resources.

Finding In a Feb. 2000 County Financing Options Survey, citizens have indicated a willingness pay for farmland and natural area protection within limits (about \$9.65 per \$100,000 of home value per year).

Finding Both farmland and natural areas are threatened by development, but the challenge of protecting farmland is different from protecting natural areas.

- The challenge of protecting farmlands is that they are relatively inexpensive but they are expansive in quantity.
- The challenge of protecting natural areas is that they are few and far between but are often some of the most expensive lands in the county.

Finding There are approximately 48,600 acres of priority natural areas in Dakota County. About 12,600 of those acres are currently being protected by other agencies and 36,000 acres are in private ownership.

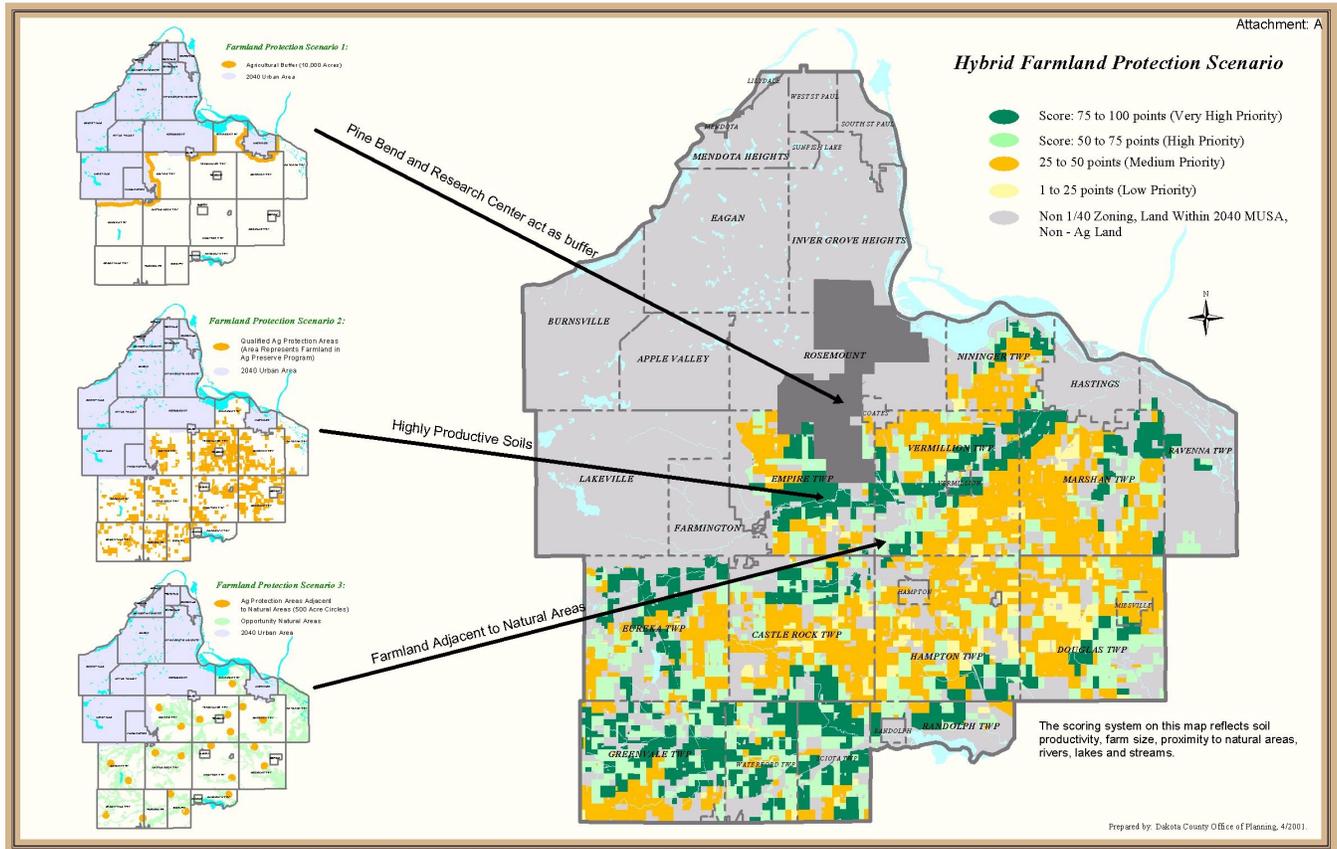
Finding There are approximately 221,000 acres of farmland in Dakota County. About 42,000 of those acres are considered high priority farmland because they are highly productive and adjacent to natural areas.

Finding Priority farmland and natural areas were identified using the following criteria developed at public meetings. The priority areas are identified on the maps on following page:

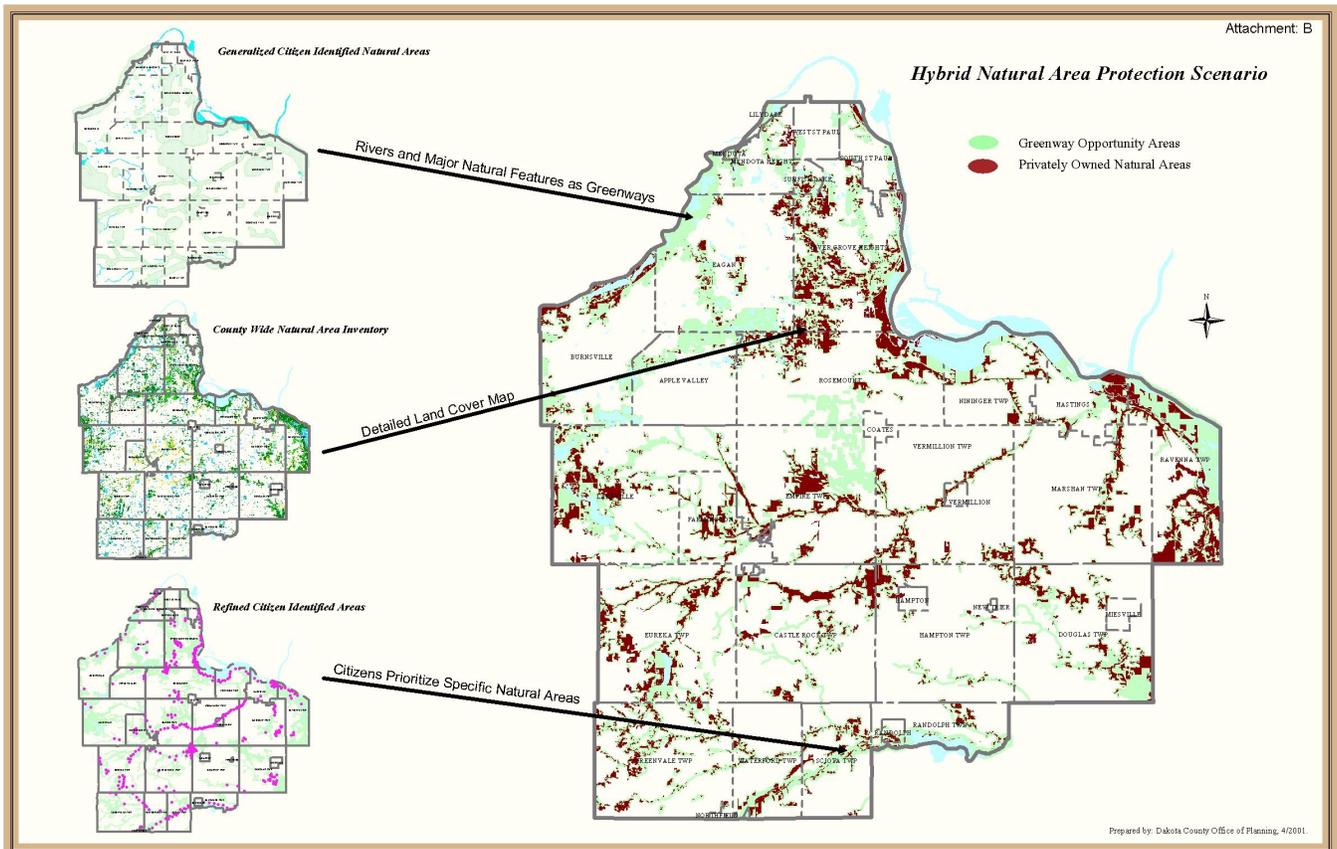
FARMLAND	NATURAL AREAS
<p><u>42,000 priority acres for protection were identified using the following criteria:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Farmland outside of the 2040 MUSA boundary▪ Farmland zoned 1/40▪ Farmland enrolled in either Green Acres or Ag Preserves▪ Productive farmland (class 1,2, or irrigated)▪ Farmland adjacent to natural areas▪ Farmland near (1/2 mile) rivers and streams using best management practices to protect water quality▪ Farmland in large contiguous blocks▪ Land that can be used in the future as farmland or open space.	<p><u>36,000 priority acres were identified using the following criteria:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lands of biologic significance▪ Lands adjacent to lakes, rivers, and streams▪ Lands that could improve/protect water quality▪ Lands that provide wildlife habitat▪ Lands that provide some level of public access▪ Lands that can be protected in natural corridors

High Priority Farmland and Natural Areas

Attachment A



Attachment B



Farmland Findings

- Finding Local factors that influence farm economics include: land prices, demand for land for urban development, investment in the farm operation, and land use conflicts from rural residential development.
- Finding Communities can support farming through local plans and zoning ordinances that encourage agriculture and direct non-farm land uses outside of farming areas.
- Finding Agricultural 1/40 zoning and the Metropolitan Agricultural Preserve Program have been effective at limiting rural residential development in communities that have low development pressure, but they have been ineffective in communities with higher development pressure.
- Finding Successful farmland protection programs have tried to protect as many farming operations as possible in large contiguous blocks of land. National experts recommended protecting a minimum of 50,000 acres using a variety of tools.
- Finding This project used an incentive based approach to land protection and conservation easements are one example of a voluntary tool that can be used to protect farmland in Dakota County.
- Finding The County has an opportunity to leverage local dollars to obtain funding from other Federal, State and metropolitan agencies that support farmland protection.
- Finding Through an extensive citizen participation process, a “hybrid” farmland protection scenario was developed to use a combination of conservation easements, Agriculture Preserves, and local plans and zoning.
- Finding The public purpose for protecting farmland includes:
- a) Protect productive agricultural land as a natural resource
 - b) Maintain tax paying open space on productive land
 - c) Support an important industry in rural Dakota County
 - d) Preserve rural character and quality of life as desired by the County’s citizens
 - e) Protect the 100 million dollar farm sales economy
 - f) Promote a land use that generates more taxes than service costs
 - g) Protect a source of fresh farm products adjacent to the metropolitan area

Natural Area Findings

- Finding Many of Dakota County's remaining natural areas are candidates for residential development. The same qualities that make these lands desirable to develop make them desirable to preserve.
- Finding Communities can support natural areas through local plans and zoning ordinances but cannot deny landowners reasonable use of their properties.
- Finding Traditionally, natural areas have been protected using park dedication and fee title acquisition. Public parks are one way to protect natural areas, but natural areas can also be protected on private lands using conservation easements.
- Finding Successful natural area protection programs protect natural systems in connected corridors. These corridors provide an ecologically functioning habitat that supports a diversity of plant and animal species.
- Finding This project used an incentive based approach to land protection; conservation easements are one example of a voluntary tool that can be used to protect natural areas in Dakota County.
- Finding The County has an opportunity to leverage local dollars to obtain funding from other Federal, State and metro agencies that support natural area protection.
- Finding Through an extensive citizen participation process, high priority natural areas were identified with the following characteristics:
- a) Lands of biological significance
 - b) Lands adjacent to lakes, rivers, and streams
 - c) Land buffers and best management practices for water quality
 - d) Lands that provides wildlife habitat
 - e) Lands that provides some level of public access

Finding The public purpose for protecting natural areas include:

- a) Natural areas increase adjacent property values and enhance the appeal of neighborhoods.
- b) Provide connections between communities and neighborhoods.
- c) Provide critical habitat for animals and plants, and pathways for animals to move between their breeding and feeding areas.
- d) Provide environmental services, including: filtering pollutants from soil and water, and reducing soil erosion. Natural vegetation absorbs air pollutants and carbon dioxide
- e) Provide natural flood control for area streams and rivers by retaining vegetated corridors to absorb flood waters

Recommended Farmland Protection Strategies

- F-1 Protect productive farmland in contiguous blocks next to natural corridors using conservation easements from willing sellers.
- F-2 Promote the use and enhancement of the Metropolitan Agricultural Preserves program.
- F-3 Assist communities with local growth management controls to guide development away from priority farmland using subdivision ordinances and transfer of development rights.

Recommended Natural Area Protection Strategies

- N-1 Protect priority natural areas in corridors using conservation easements and fee title acquisition from willing sellers and donors.
- N-2 Work with other agencies through their programs to protect County priority natural areas.
- N-3 Work with large land owners and agencies to protect natural areas on their properties with conservation easements and natural resource management plans.

Chapter 1: What is the problem and who cares?

Rapid growth

Dakota County has been and will continue to be one of the fastest growing Counties in the Midwest. The Twin Cities regional economy has been strong and the Metropolitan Council projects that approximately 480,000 more people will live in this region by the year 2020. About 100,000 of these additional people will live in Dakota County.

Citizen concern over loss of farmland and natural areas

In light of Dakota County's rapid growth, polls strongly suggest widespread concern over the loss of farmland and natural areas. In fact only 2%-3% of Dakota County's original natural areas remain. Many of these natural areas contain rare and endangered plant and animal species that would likely be destroyed as a result of development. Agricultural lands are being converted to residential and commercial areas at a rate of 2000-3000 acres per year. Some of these lands are very productive soils that have been farmed by the same families for generations.

Maintaining the quality of life in Dakota County

Throughout this project, the County's citizens have indicated that the preservation and protection of existing and future open space is important to maintaining the quality of life in Dakota County.

Dakota County's growth rate in the 1990's was 8,000 people per year.

Each year, over 3,000 housing units are added to Dakota County.

Lakeville will be the largest city in the County by 2020 with a population of 72,000 people.



Impact of land use change on natural resources at Cliff Road and Pilot Knob in Eagan

These aerial photos illustrate the change on the landscape that is typical of suburban Dakota County. In this example, the lands around Thomas Lake have been preserved as a natural passive open space park.



1945



1987

Impact of land use change on farmland in Nininger Township

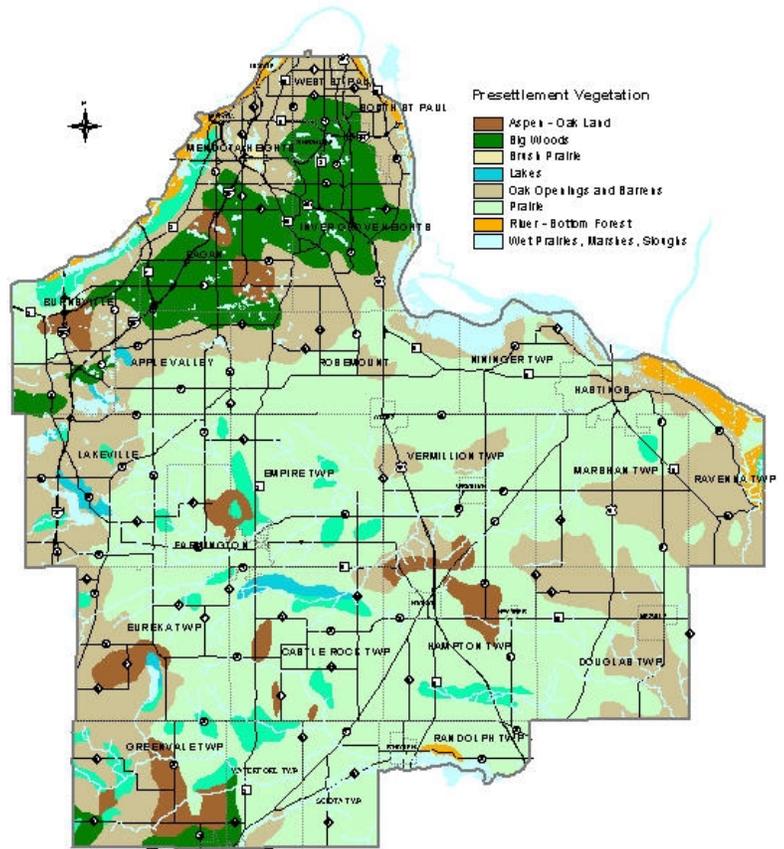
The side-by-side photos below show suburban housing encroaching on a farm in Nininger township. The approaching houses mean change for the land and the people that live in these areas. If the farm remains, higher taxes, nuisance complaints, and land use conflicts will increase as it is surrounded by homes. The challenge of this plan is to balance the need to provide housing for the growing metropolitan area, with the desire to preserve farmland and rural character.



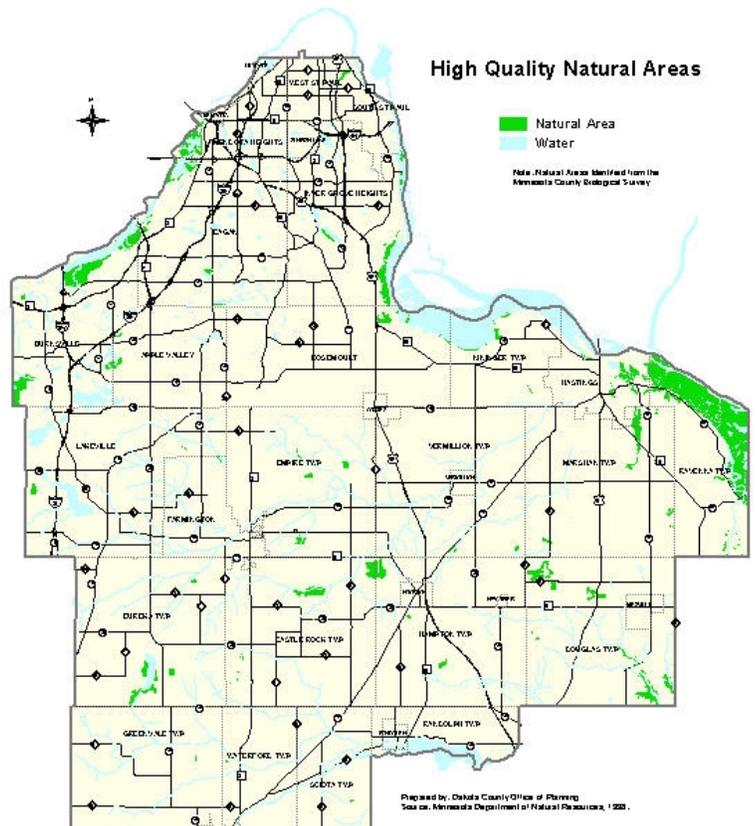
Loss of natural areas

Pre-settlement Vegetation

The Marschner map (figure) shows the patterns of pre-settlement vegetation in Dakota County. Dakota County's original landscape has been substantially altered by farming and land development. The County's rich soils and proximity to Minneapolis St. Paul have meant that between farming practices and development pressures, very few of the County's original wetlands, prairies, upland forests, and savannas remain.



High Quality Natural Areas Today
In Contrast, the Minnesota County Biologic Survey map shows the few high quality natural areas that remain (figure). Many of these areas are not currently protected. The more fragmented these natural areas become, the harder it is for natural communities to function. If these areas are not protected, they will not exist for future generations.



Impact of growth on farmland and natural area resources

Population growth and land use change is a part of any growing metropolitan area. But how that growth occurs, can have a major impact on farms and natural areas.

In order to have stable agricultural areas in the County, farms need to be located next to farms. Too much rural residential development can lead to land use conflict and instability in the farm economy. Similarly, natural areas need to function as systems to remain healthy. This means that natural areas need to be next to each other to allow animals to move within their habitat and survive.

Approximately 2000-3000 acres of farmland are converted to houses each year in Dakota County



80-90% of the wetlands in the County have been filled or drained

2%-3% of the County's original natural areas remain



Support for land protection

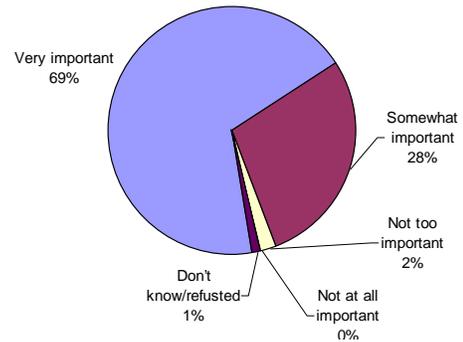
Citizen Surveys

Citizen surveys indicate that Dakota County's residents are concerned about the loss of farmland and natural areas. Dakota County has conducted telephone surveys in 1997, 1999, and 2001 all with similar results. The surveys have also indicated significant support for conserving and protection farmland and remaining natural areas.

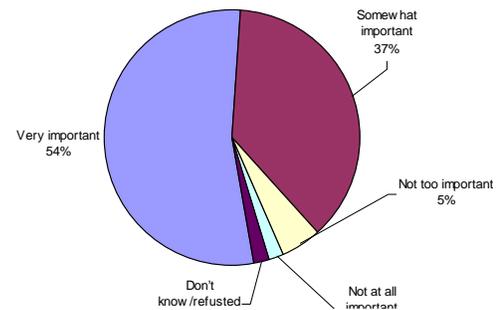


Here are some of the responses from the 2001 Citizen survey:

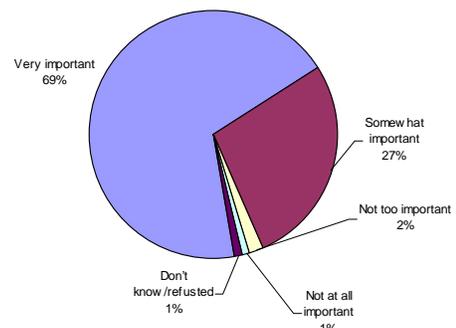
How important is it that Dakota County pursue an active role in **protecting lakes, streams, and wetlands?**



How important is it that Dakota County pursue an active role in **protecting farmland from development?**



How important is it that Dakota County pursue an active role in **protecting remaining natural areas?**



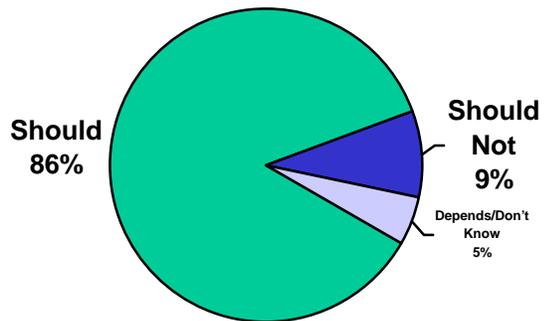
Dakota County citizens are concerned about the loss of farmland and natural areas, but are they concerned to the point that they would pay additional dollars to protect these areas? In February of 2000, a financing survey of Dakota County voters was conducted to learn whether there was enough support among citizens to pay for a farmland and natural area program. The entire survey can be found at the end of this document (figure), but the answers to these two questions give the best indication of people's willingness to pay.

Willingness to pay for land protection

(Source: Financing Options Survey)

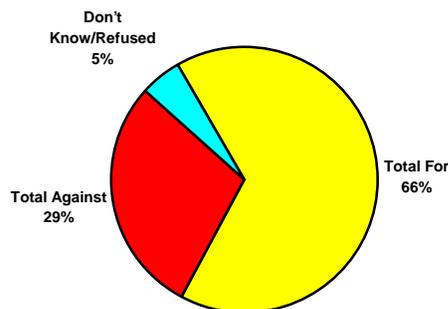
Generally speaking do you feel that Dakota County should or should not have an ongoing program designed to purchase and protect natural areas and farmlands?

69% Strongly – should
 18% Not strongly – should
 4% Not strongly – should not
 6% Strongly – should not
 2% Depends
 3% Don't know



Would you vote for or against an annual property tax increase that would cost \$9.65 per \$100,000 of home value and would raise about \$2 million per year for the purpose of purchasing and protecting natural areas and farmland in your county?

34% Definitely for
 32% Probably for
 11% Probably against
 18% Definitely against
 4% Don't know
 1% Refused



The results of the financing options survey suggest that County residents would be willing to pay to protect farmland and natural areas within limits. It is clear that while there is an interest in paying additional dollars for land protection, that dollar amount is probably less than \$20 annually per \$100,000 of home value.

Moving forward

Dakota County's productive farmland and high value natural areas are both threatened by development. As part of this project, these land areas have been inventoried, evaluated, and prioritized.

The real question for Dakota County's citizens is how to protect the open spaces that they say that they want to protect, and what will be the future for farmland and natural areas in Dakota County?

Chapter 2 - Farmland

The Resource, Threat, and Opportunities to Protect

Farmland as a Resource

Farming is part of the heritage of Dakota County. Since the 1850's, generations of farmers have tilled Dakota County's fertile soils to produce food for their families, the region, and the world. Dakota County agriculture today consists primarily of corn, soybeans and livestock; but also includes wheat, alfalfa, hay, horse ranches, sod farms, nurseries, vegetables, and farm market produce. While many farming practices have changed over time, Dakota County continues to be a source of fresh food for people in the Twin Cities metro area.

The 1997 Agricultural Census reported that there were about 221,000 acres of land in agricultural production. This is about 60% of the land area of Dakota County. In 1950, about 85% (about 316,000 acres) of the land was in agricultural production. In the 1990s, farmland was developed at about 2,000 – 3000 acres per year.

Dakota County has 221,000 acres of land in agricultural production

There are 890 farms in Dakota County

The average farm is 249 acres



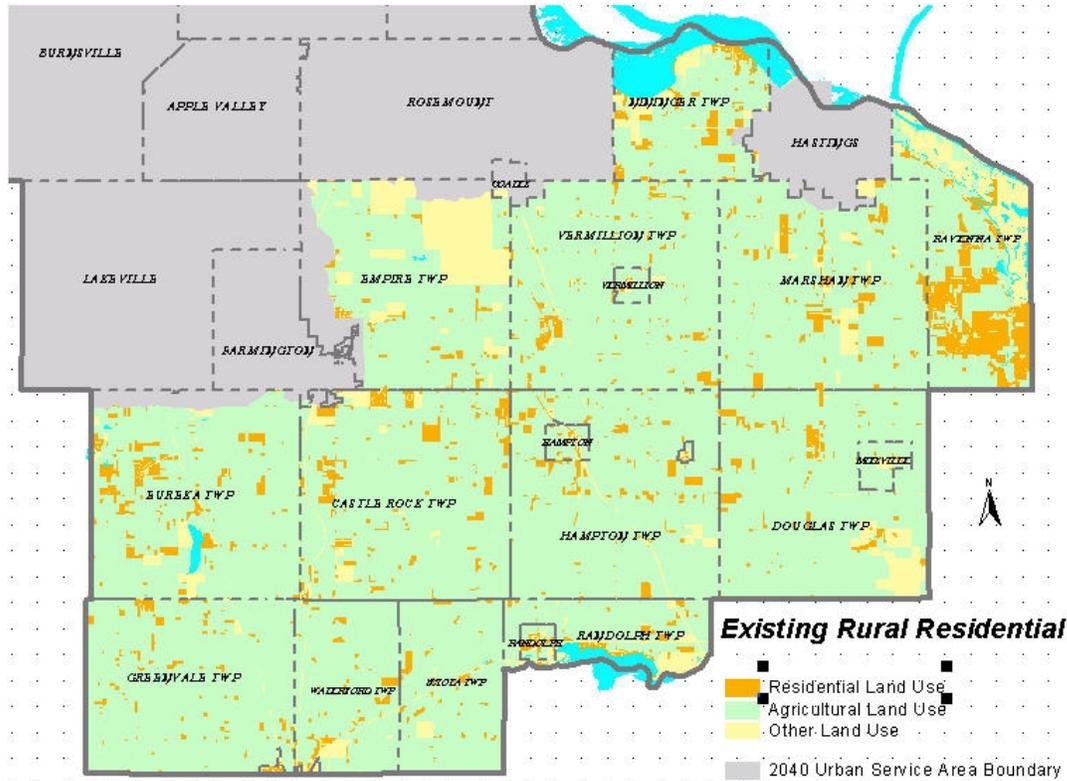
The total market value of agricultural products sold in 1997 was \$103 million

About 19% of farmland is irrigated

202,000 acres (91%) of Dakota County farmland is zoned 1 house per 40 acre maximum density



Dakota County's agricultural lands (outside of the 2040 Metropolitan Urban Service Area boundary (MUSA) are shown on the map below:



Farm related businesses

In addition to the farms themselves, there are many businesses in Dakota County that are dependent upon agriculture for their sales or purchases. These businesses include:

- Agricultural services
- Processing of food and kindred products (meat, dairy, grain, fruits and vegetables)
- Farm and garden machinery
- Farm product raw material
- Farm supplies

Together, the farms and related businesses represent a total economic impact of agriculture on the County's economy. A 1995 study of the agricultural economy in Dakota County, indicated that the combined impact of farms and farm related businesses exceeded \$430,000,000, which is 4.77% of the County's total economy and consisting of between 4405 and 5397 employees.

Analyzing the Threat to Farmland and Farming

Vast, but threatened farmland

The tremendous amount of farmland in Dakota County is both an opportunity and a challenge. Historically, the cities in Dakota County have looked to agricultural land as a land supply for development. Local plans and zoning have been changed from agricultural to urban land uses



Dynamics of impending urbanization

Zoning density change to more than 1 unit per 20 acres

Higher density residential development breaks up the contiguous agricultural land areas and can restrict farmers' operations. Complaints about noise, odor, and dust are more likely. As a result, there is decreased political support for keeping agricultural protections (such as zoning and Agricultural Preserves Program)

Demand by non-farm residents to have urban services in rural areas

When non-farm residences are built in agricultural areas, the demand for paved roads, new schools, parks, and other services increases. If the community decides to provide these services, the cost is passed back to all landowners, including farmers with extensive land holdings.

Speculation on agricultural land for development purposes

This leads to higher land prices that can price farmers out of the market. High land prices can prevent the transfer of these farms to other farmers in the family or in the community.

Belief that farming will not remain as the primary occupation in the community

Sometimes referred to as the "impermanence syndrome", farmers in urbanizing areas reduce their expenditure for maintenance of land and buildings, do not make new farming investments, and tend to sell for development. In addition, heirs are uncertain about continuing the family farm operation since agriculture is no longer the defining character of the community.

Transition point from farm to non-farm communities

National experts have said that the end result of these urbanization dynamics is that the agricultural community would be transformed into a non-agricultural community. This transition point generally occurs when about 15% to 20% of the land in the community is not engaged in agricultural uses. The year by year addition of non-farm residences within the townships, which seem inconsequential at the time of their approval, can have a cumulative impact that results in the loss of long term agriculture in the community.

Analyzing the threats to farmland in Dakota County

Traditionally, agriculture has been a transitional land use that has been phased out to make room for the growing suburbs in the County. While most of this growth has occurred in suburban communities in a planned and orderly way, rural residential development in the townships threatens agricultural areas.

It is this farmland outside of the 2040 Metropolitan Urban Service Area (lands where city sewer and water are planned) that is the focus of farmland protection in this planning process.

Since 1980, the townships in Dakota County have protected agriculture through policies in their local comprehensive plans and with zoning ordinances (a maximum density of 1 house per 40 acres). These regulatory policies and controls have established agriculture as the primary land use in rural areas and have restricted residential development.

While agricultural zoning has been effective in communities that have planned to have farming and have low levels of development pressure, it has been ineffective in communities with high development pressure. These communities have changed their local plans in response to allow rural residential development. Current planning and zoning is unable to permanently protect farming and farmland when it is threatened by urban annexation or by rural residential development. In some cases cities and townships reach an agreement on how to allow orderly annexation; in other cases townships want to prevent annexation, but are unsuccessful. Rural residential development that is mixed in with farming areas results in land use conflicts.

The Dakota County Comprehensive Plan “DC 2020” includes a goal to “support and encourage orderly development.” As a result of this goal, this project does not consider the long term protection of farmland in future urban areas (with the exception of specialty produce farms).

Analyzing what is needed to make farming work in Dakota County

Farming as a business, is influenced by land productivity, economics, community support, and government programs.

Land Productivity

Productive soils are key to any successful farming area. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, prime farmland is defined as the land best suited to producing food, feed, forage, fiber and oil seed crops. When managed according to acceptable farming methods, prime farmland has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce a sustained high yield of crops. Soils that have limitations (high water table, flooding, or inadequate rainfall) may qualify as prime farmland if these limitations are overcome by measures such as drainage, flood control, or irrigation. The vast majority of the farmland is high quality productive farmland.

Economics

In simple terms, a viable farm is an operation that makes more money selling farm products than what it costs to produce those products. At a more complex level, international markets, new technology, multi-national agri-businesses, and government price supports for commodities all play a major role in farm economics.

At the local level, there also factors that influence farm economics. Local factors include; a) land prices, b) demand for land for urban development, c) investment in the farm operation, and d) rural residential development that can impede normal farming practices. This plan addresses local economic factors. (note: Dakota County's 103 million dollars in total market value of agricultural products sold in 1997 is an indication of the County's farm economy).

Community Support

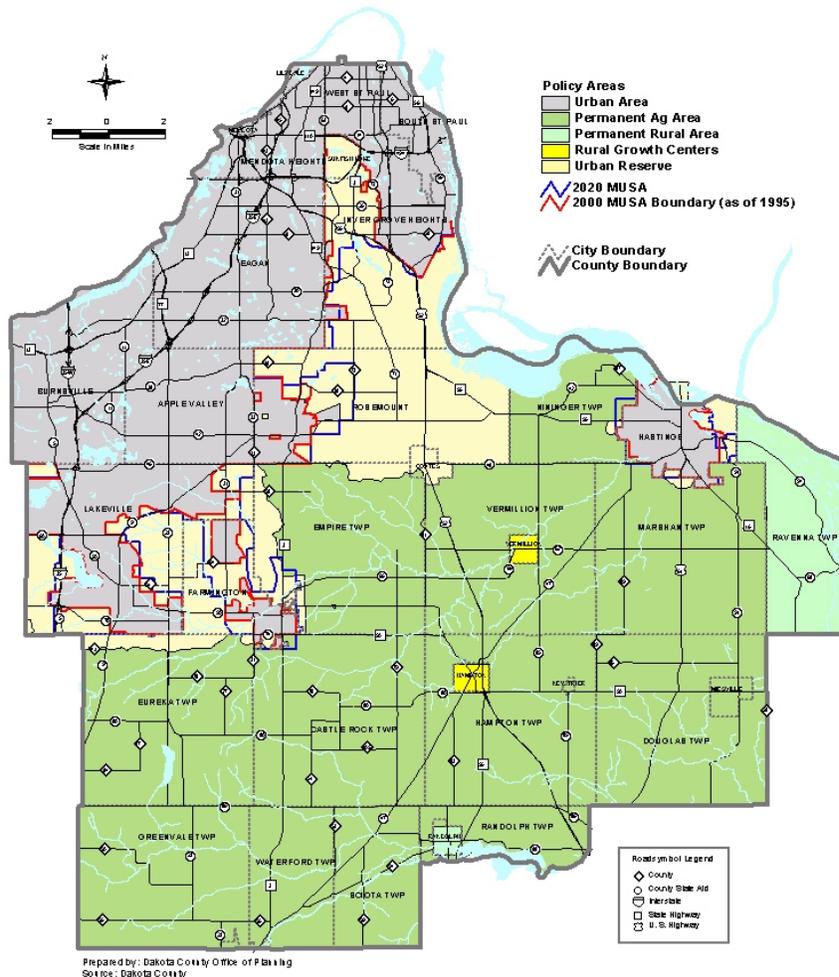
Communities can support farming through local plans and zoning ordinances that encourage agriculture and direct non-farm land uses outside of farming areas. In Dakota County, 12 of 13 townships have plans that support agriculture as a long-term land use. The majority of land in these 12 townships is zoned agricultural but allows residential development at a density of 1 housing unit per 40 acres. These communities have also adopted "right to farm" ordinances that limit nuisance complaints about normal farming practices.

Government Programs

Federal government price support programs can be an important factor in the viability of Dakota County farms. This plan does not address these programs.

State and regional programs, such as Metro Agriculture Preserves and Green Acres, can help reduce development pressure on farming operations. The Metro Ag. Preserve program is the more effective of the two programs at protecting long term agriculture. The consistency between regional programs and local planning for agriculture is also a critical element of effective farmland protection.

The Metropolitan Council's Regional Blueprint contains a regional growth strategy for the 7 county region. As part of their policies for orderly growth, a Metropolitan Urban Service Area (MUSA) has been defined for growing urban communities. The MUSA line can be extended and impact farmland on the edge of growing communities. In Dakota County, the MUSA line has been projected out to 2040, largely within the communities of Lakeville, Farmington, Inver Grove Heights, Rosemount, and Hastings. The rate and location of the MUSA expansion can be critical to farms on the edge of the growing metropolitan area and affect the level of investment in the farm.



Opportunities to Protect Farmland and Farming

Public purpose for protecting farmland

There are many reasons why people in Dakota County want to protect farmland. Some are economic, others are based in the kind of community that people want to live in. A few examples of the public purpose for protecting farmland are:

- a) Protect productive agricultural land as a natural resource
- b) Maintain tax paying open space on productive land
- c) Support an important industry in rural Dakota County
- d) Preserve rural character and quality of life as desired by the County's citizens
- e) Protect the 100 million dollar farm sales economy
- f) Promote a land use that generates more taxes than service costs
- g) Protect a source of fresh farm products adjacent to the metro area

Responding to challenges

As described above, the challenges of protecting farmland are different from the challenges of protecting natural areas. Farmland is relatively inexpensive (outside of the cities) but expansive. Natural areas are few and far between but are often some of the most expensive land in the County. Our challenge in this plan is to protect the integrity of those resources in a manner that is technically feasible and practically affordable.

National experts recommend the following controls to make a farmland protection program successful:

- Comprehensive Plans
- Differential assessment of farmland (e.g. based on agricultural value, not market value)
- Agricultural districts (e.g. Metro Ag. Preserves Program)
- Right-to-Farm ordinance (Dakota County Townships have adopted these)
- Agricultural zoning (limits non-farm development)
- Urban growth boundaries (e.g. MUSA)
- PDR/TDR ordinances

All of these tools except PDR and TDR are being used in Dakota County. A combination of regulatory and incentive based (voluntary) tools are considered most effective at permanently protecting land. For example, for farmland to qualify for the Agricultural Preserve Program (an incentive based tool) it must be identified as long-term agricultural use in the local comprehensive plan, and have 1/40 agricultural zoning density.

An incentive based approach to land protection

At this project's conception, the goal was to take an incentive based approach to farmland protection.

- 1) Conservation Easements from willing sellers (PDR, TDR)
- 3) Voluntary enrollment in the Metropolitan Agricultural Preserve Program
- 4) Voluntary enrollment in agency cost share programs (RIM, CRP, WRP)

Conservation easements are new to Dakota County and Minnesota

A relatively new tool known as the conservation easement offers an alternative to regulatory control and can be used to protect farmland. Conservation easements are voluntary easements that give the holder the right to prevent certain uses (e.g. residential development). The landowner retains all remaining rights to use their property. They can and have been used around the country to protect farmland and natural areas. They provide resource protection on privately owned land and the land remains on the tax rolls. The conservation easements that are used to protect farmland are different than conservation easements that are written to protect natural areas. Conservation easements written for farmland are structured so that the land can remain in agricultural production yet prohibits development of the property.

The Financing option survey indicated that ***nearly ¾ of Dakota County residents are unfamiliar with conservation easements***. Nationally, however, hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland have been protected using permanent conservation easements in Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Wisconsin, and many other states. In Pennsylvania, the statewide average cost for conservation easements has been \$2,000 per acre. These programs have been funded by real estate transfer tax, bond referendum, lottery proceeds, state general fund, cigarette tax, and the Federal Farmland Protection Program. A local program must be established to access this Federal funding.

While conservation easements have been allowed in Minnesota for many years, it was only in 1997 that the State Legislature provided enabling legislation to allow local government to use purchase of development rights and transfer of development rights. However, there are not any state-wide or metro area programs that provide matching funding for permanent conservation easements for working farms at this time. A proposal to create a 2 million dollar metro match for to fund conservation easements was defeated in the 2001 session of the legislature.

Narrowing down what lands to protect and where: Farmland

In a series of meetings held in February 2000, more than 200 citizens worked in small groups to identify areas of priority farmland. Citizens identified entire townships of farmland for protection, in part due to the fact that the majority of farmland in Dakota County is of high quality.

In other parts of the nation, successful programs have targeted preserving as many farming operations as possible in large contiguous blocks. The contiguous block strategy is based on restricting non-farm development as much as possible to reduce land use conflicts and nuisance complaints that are obstacles to normal farm practices.

In June of 2000, a panel of national experts met with citizens, farmers, elected officials, and project partners to describe successful programs and how they have been funded and implemented. They recommended that local communities need to protect a critical mass of farmland (minimum 50,000 acres) to have a sustainable farm economy. They also recommended that local communities use a variety of tools that are tailored to local land protection needs.

Opportunities to protect farmland conservation easements

In a strategy workshop, national experts proposed several scenarios that could work in Dakota County. The scenarios were based on the following approaches:

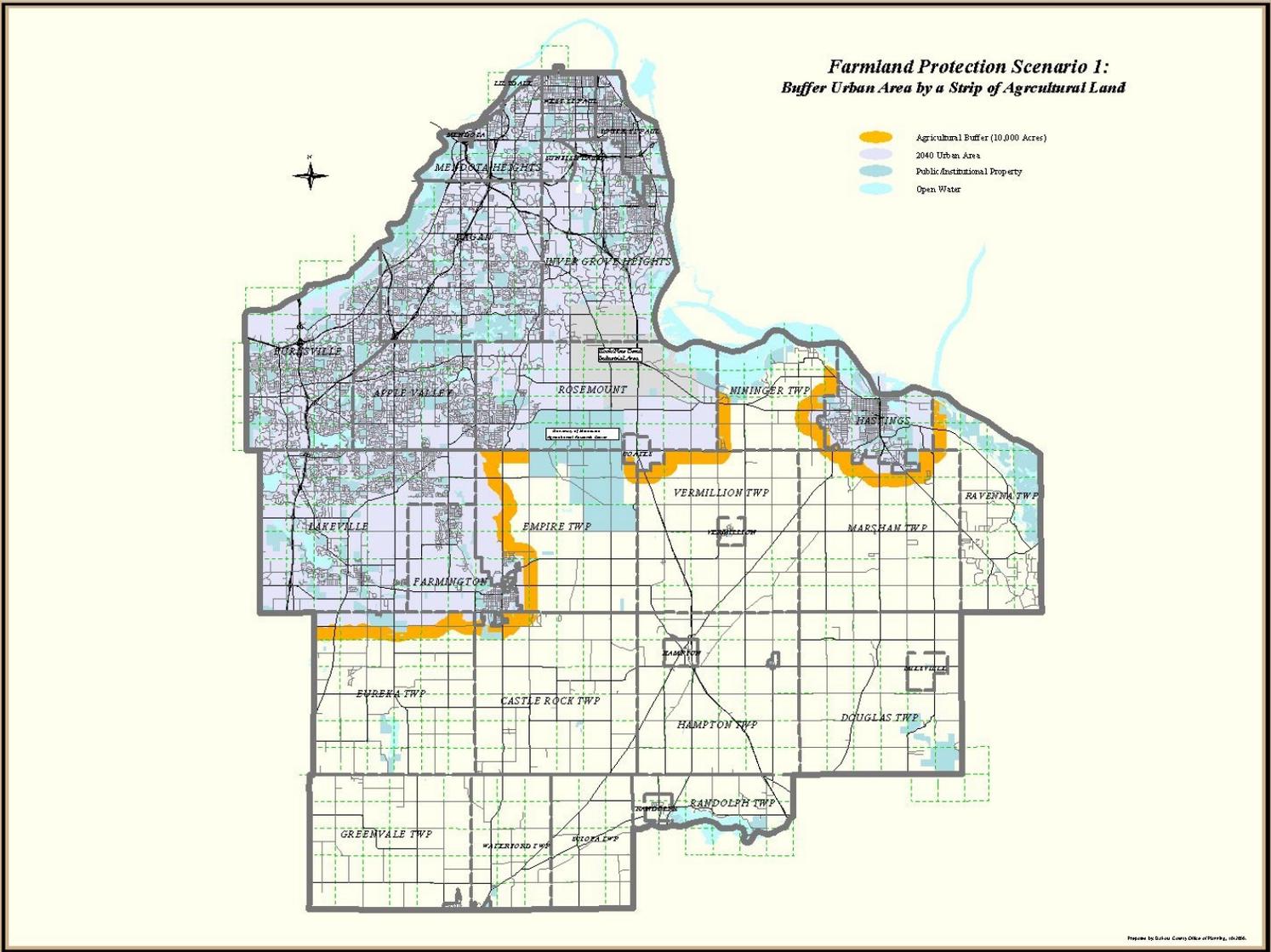
- 1) Protect farmland in a continuous buffer adjacent to the Metropolitan Urban Service Area (MUSA)
- 2) Protect the most productive farmland in contiguous blocks (represented by enrollment in the Metropolitan Ag. Preserves Program)
- 3) Protect farmland adjacent to natural areas.

Assumptions of three conservation easement protection scenarios:

All three land protection scenarios assumed the following:

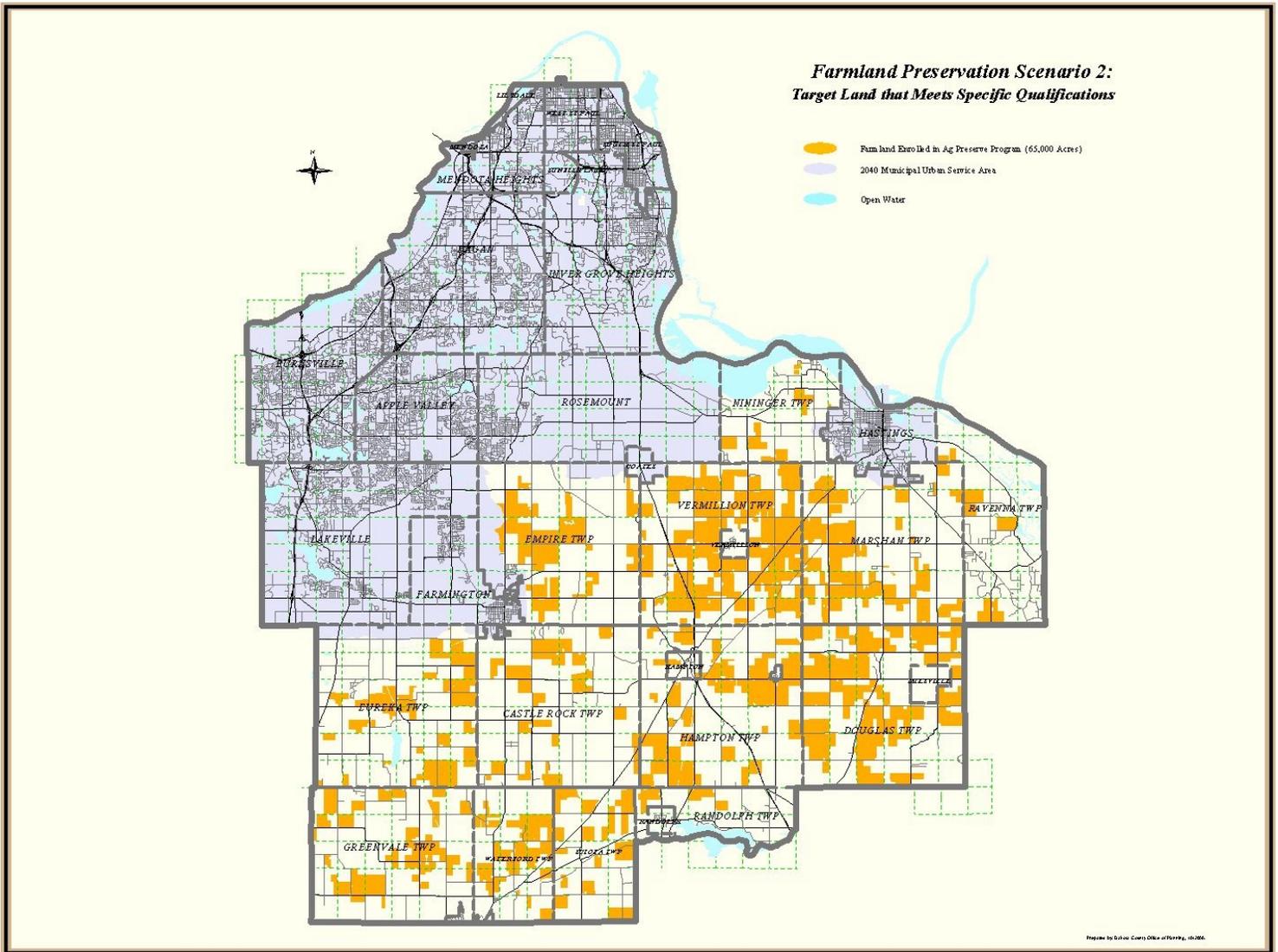
- 1 Million Dollar Annual Program (assumes 2 million dollars from Financing Options Survey split ½ for farmland and natural areas)
- Land Identified as Ag. In Local, County, Metro Council Plans
- Urban Farming (Orchards, Nurseries, Vegetables, Berry patches, Farm Markets) treated as “Open Space”
- All three land protection scenarios use purchase of conservation easements.

Each scenario was evaluated with regard to its effectiveness at protecting farmland, cost to implement, long term implications for development, and County-wide public benefit. The following maps and tables illustrate how conservation easements could be used to protect farmland in Dakota County.



Buffer Scenario

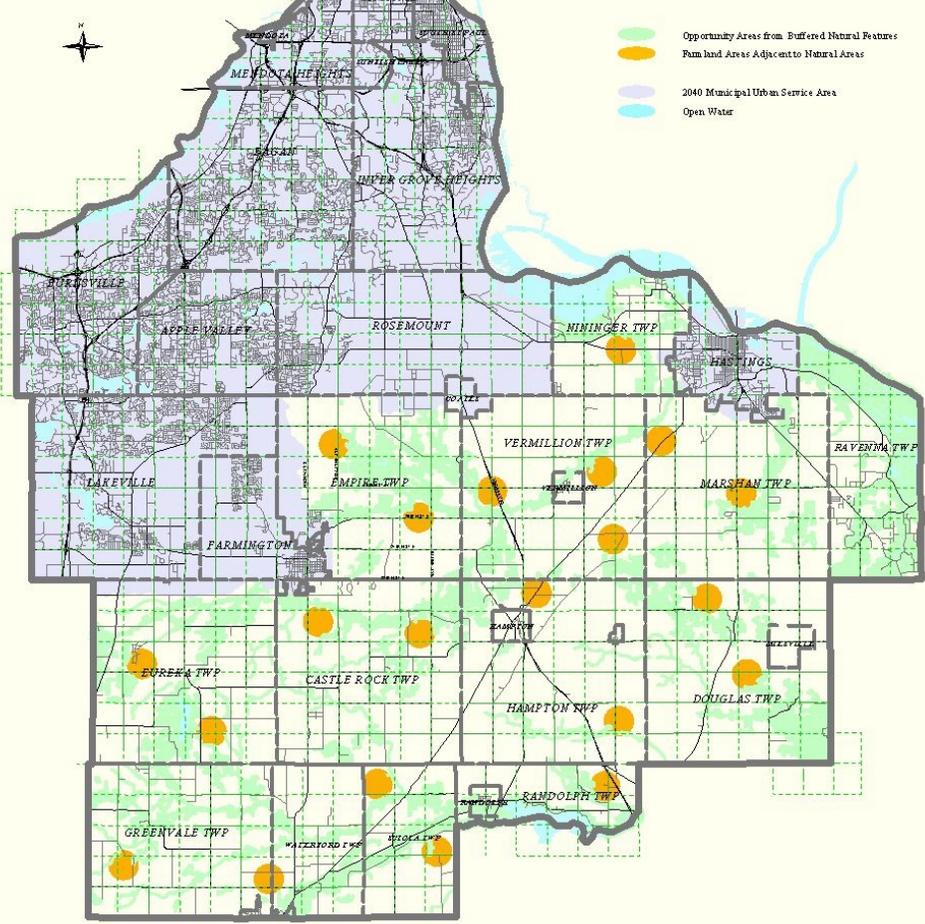
Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Appears to create a clear separation between urban and rural areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Expensive land •Voluntary participation means gaps in boundary •Wouldn't stop rural residential growth •Long term implications of permanent buffer



Most Productive Contiguous Farmland

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Most fertile soils preserved •Most dedicated farmers enroll •Lower cost to implement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •“Pure” farmland protection may not have popular support of all residents •Does not consider locations of natural areas •Long term implications of permanent farmland

**Farmland Preservation Scenario 3:
Protection of Farmland Adjacent to Natural Areas**



Prepared by Susan County Office of Planning, 10/2006

Farmland Next to Natural Areas

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Farmland and natural area protection has mutual benefits •Permanent farmland protection could become “open space” in future •Conservation farming could be requirement of participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Not all farms are adjacent to natural areas •Farm practices not always compatible with natural areas •Farmland protection cannot be scattered but must be in large blocks

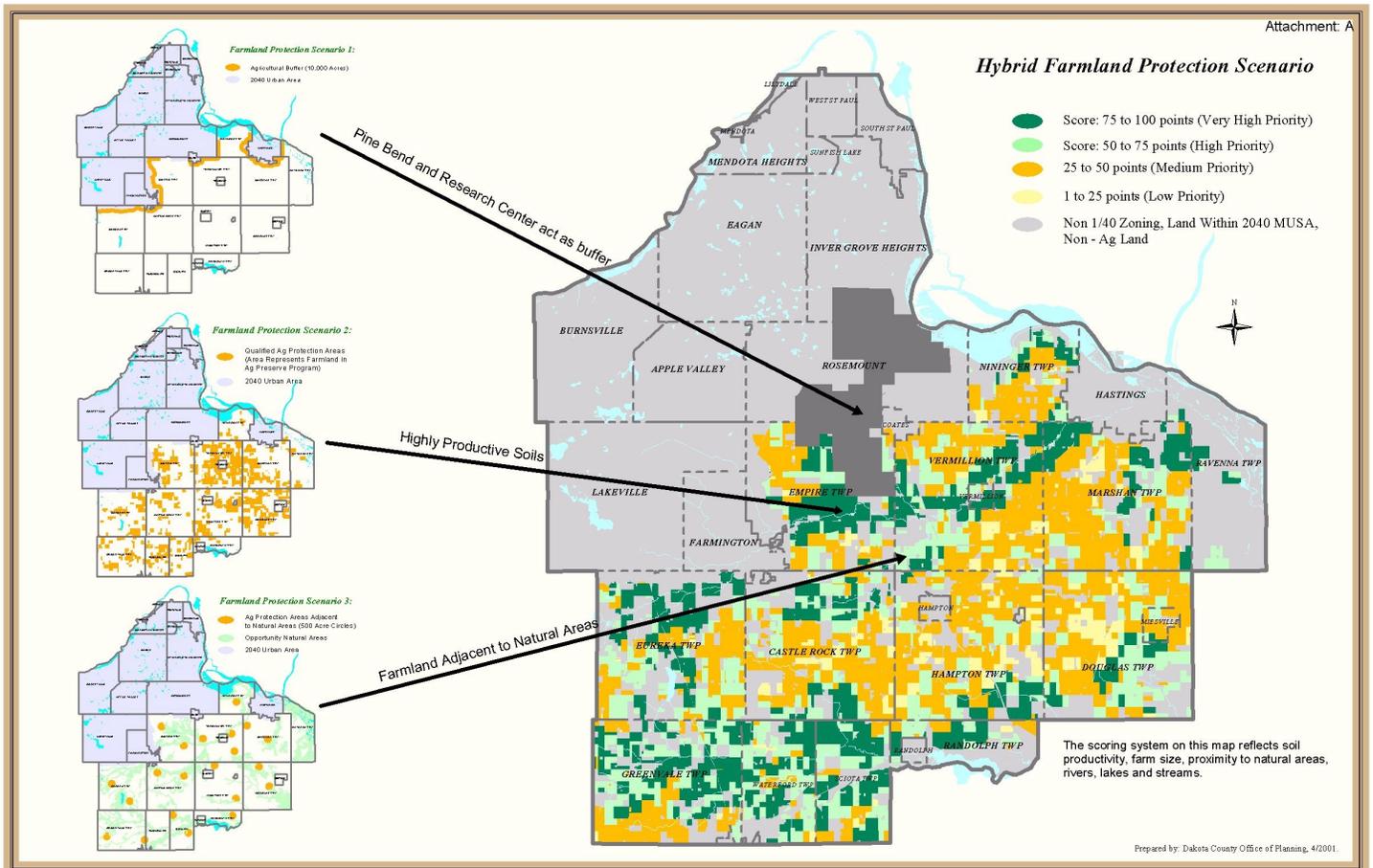
Development of farmland protection strategies

As a result of public comment and discussion at 6 public meetings, the majority viewpoint was to combine the best elements from each scenario into a “hybrid” conservation easement scenario. The “hybrid” scenario incorporates; soil productivity, local/regional plans, wildlife habitat, water quality, and future use into a farmland protection strategy. Using these criteria, approximately 42,000 acres of priority farmland were identified and are shown in dark green on the map below.

Strategy F1: Protect productive farmland in contiguous blocks next to natural corridors using conservation easements from willing sellers

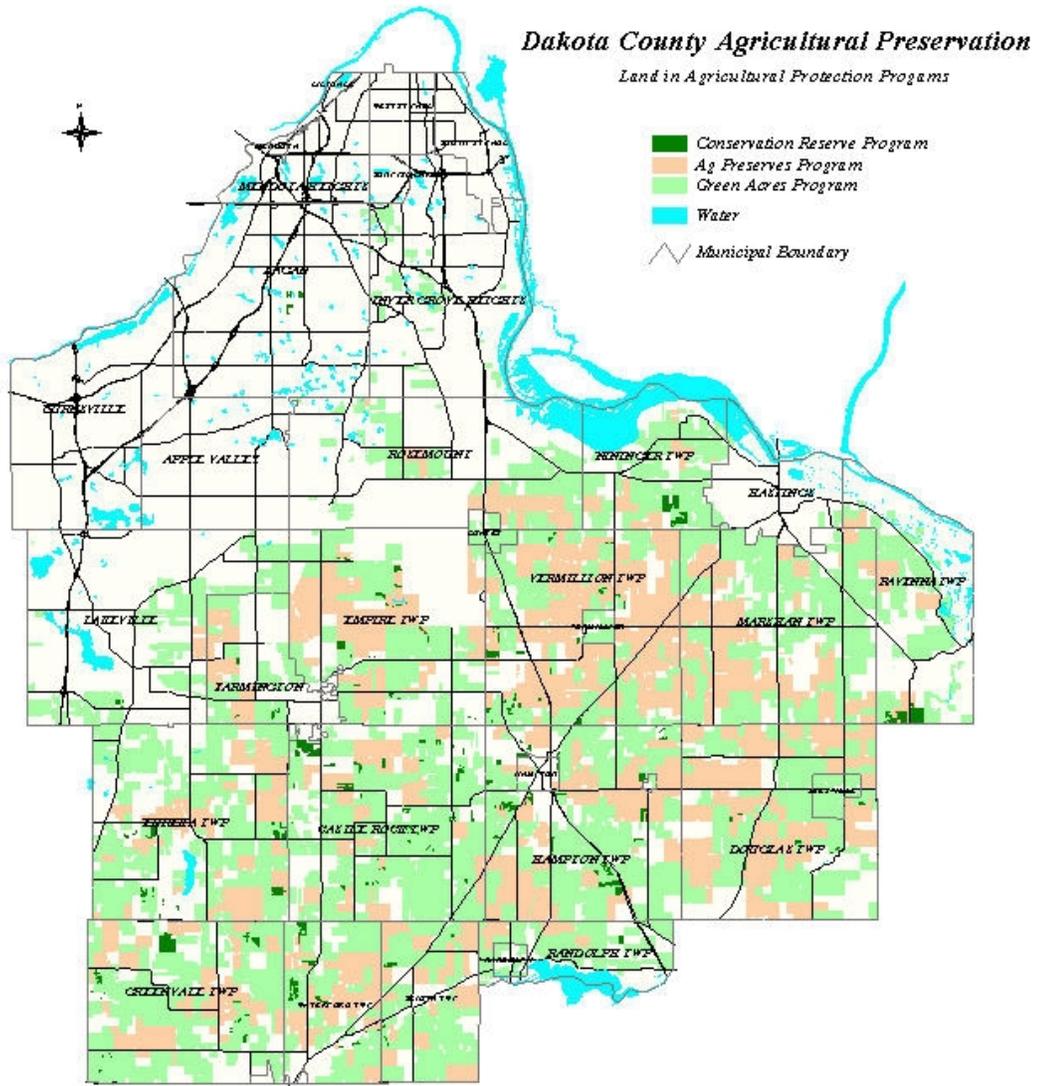
Outcomes:

- Protects highly productive soils outside of 2040 MUSA in 1/40 zoning districts, enrolled in Ag. Preserve)
- Conserves the land for water quality (best management practices required)
- Provides additional wildlife habitat adjacent to natural areas
- Flexible use in future as either farmland or open space (future generations have options)



Investigation of Agricultural Protection Incentive Programs

There are two programs available to Dakota County farmers that provide incentives to keep land in agricultural use; “Green Acres” and “Metropolitan Agricultural Preserves”. A third program, the Conservation Reserve Program, is a land retirement program that is not evaluated in this chapter as an agricultural protection program.



Green Acres

The “Green Acres” program is a statewide program that provides for deferment of assessment and taxes payable on farmlands whose valuations have been increased due to residential or commercial development potential. For land parcels of 10 acres or more, property owners who are engaged in agricultural can apply for deferment of higher valuations and higher taxes payable, including special assessments, and continue to have the property valued on the basis of its farm purposes. In addition, the owner must be able to verify a minimum gross annual income of \$300 plus \$10 per tillable acre. The program does not require any covenants on the land, nor does it require that agricultural zoning must be in place.

Dakota County landowners have 115,900 acres enrolled in the Green Acres Program. While many landowners are in green acres with the intention of long-term farming, the Green Acres program is attractive to land speculators.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Offers temporary protection for land owners who cannot meet the qualifications for Ag. Preserves program.▪ Offers tax relief▪ Require minimum acreage and agricultural production to promote farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Not tied to local planning and zoning▪ Can be used by land speculators and hobby farmers to reduce taxes▪ No long term commitment by the land owners▪ Does not offer protection against assessments.▪ Not an effective long-term farmland protection tool

Agricultural Preserves

The Metropolitan Agricultural Preserves Program provides a package of benefits to enable farmers near urban areas to continue farming on equal footing with farmers located outside the metropolitan area. The intent of the law is to:

- Preserve important agricultural land in the metro area from competing land uses,
- Protect the local agricultural economy and support businesses
- Promote orderly and planned growth and development of urban and rural land uses
- Allow farmers to make long term agricultural investments with the assurance that their land can continue in agricultural use without interference from urban pressures.

In order for landowners to enroll, local governments have to identify areas where agriculture is to be preserved. Landowners receive property tax credits and additional benefits by placing a restrictive covenant on their land (minimum of 8 years), limiting its use to agriculture or forestry. Farmers in the agricultural preserve program are protected from urban assessments, and pay taxes based on the farmland value of their property.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Farmland is valued at its “agricultural value” for tax purposes ▪ Land cannot be assessed for urban improvements (sewer, water, and roads for urban expansion) ▪ Landowners enroll for at least 8 years, providing some certainty about the short-term future of agriculture ▪ Program is coordinated with local planning and zoning ▪ Voluntary Program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does not protect land permanently ▪ Farmers still may need to pay higher tax rates even though their land is taxed at its agricultural value ▪ Tax credit is relatively small (\$1.50 per acre) ▪ Term of enrollment is relatively short (8 year)

In 1999, Dakota County farmers enrolled 60,810 acres of land in Agricultural Preserves out of an eligible 202,386 acres. In 2000, 64,823 acres were enrolled. In other words, about 30% of all land eligible to be enrolled in Agricultural Preserves has been enrolled. Of the 60,258 acres enrolled, 29,177 have filed an expiration date to come out of the program (or potentially re-enroll) within 8 years. The following table summarizes year 2000 enrollment by city and township.

DAKOTA COUNTY	1999 acres Enrolled	2000 acres Enrolled	Amount Changed
Castle Rock Township	3,366	3,519	153
Douglas Township	9,286	9,482	196
Empire Township	5,714	5,636	-78
Eureka Township	4,569	4,639	70
Farmington	1,424	1,439	15
Greenvale Township	3,798	4,087	289
Hampton	75	100	100
Hampton Township	5,484	6,494	1,010
Lakeville	299	259	-40
Marshan Township	6,288	6,797	509
New Trier	0	2	2
Nininger Township	1,264	1,025	-239
Randolph Township	555	686	131
Ravenna Township	1,147	1,242	95
Rosemount	1,844	1,730	-114
Sciota Township	2,499	2,682	183
Vermillion Township	10,241	12,079	1,838
Waterford Township	2,957	2,925	-32
TOTAL	60,810	64,823	4,013

Recommendations from Agricultural Program Studies

In 1999, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and Metropolitan Council produced a study titled “Evaluation of Minnesota Agricultural Land Preservation Programs”. The study concluded that the Metropolitan Ag. Preserve Program was an effective approach to protecting farmland. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture recommends an increase in the minim credit per acre to \$3.00 and a subsequent increase in the transaction fee to \$17.00 to increase enrollment in the program.

Strategy F2: *Promote the use and enhancement of the Metropolitan Agricultural Preserves program*

Outcomes:

- Reduces uncertainty and encourages farm investment
- Sends signal about land expectations/land use
- Means to implement local plans/policies
- Reinforces 1/40 zoning
- Protects individual farmers from urban assessments
- Tax incentives encourage continued agricultural use

Opportunities to assist cities and townships with local controls and incentives

The focus of this project was to investigate incentives and voluntary tools as a means to farmland protection as opposed to focusing on the use of regulatory tools. However, many regulatory tools can be modified to provide landowners with incentives to protect farmland. For example, in other areas transfer of development rights programs are used to provide density bonuses to landowners that direct development away from productive farmland. Clustering is another technique that provides landowners with flexible zoning and density incentives to group houses on the edge of fields or away from farming areas. Similarly, the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District is working on an initiative called “Low Impact Development” that offers technical assistance to landowners and cities and townships that want to accommodate development, yet reduce impacts to land and water resources.

While Dakota County does not have regulatory land use authority, the County can work with cities and townships to accomplish farmland protection goals by providing technical assistance and helping to modifying local controls to offer landowners incentives to protect priority farmland.

Strategy F3: *Assist communities with local growth management controls to guide development away from priority farmland using subdivision ordinances and transfer of development rights.*

Outcomes

- Communities protect priority resources while still allowing development according to local plans
- Land use conflicts are reduced
- Fiscal impacts and demand for services are reduced

Chapter 3 - Natural Areas

The Resource, Threat, and Opportunities to Protect

Natural Areas as a Resource

Dakota County's distinctive natural areas include a mixture of forest, prairie, wetlands, major rivers, blufflands, and trout streams, which provide habitat for wildlife and open spaces for people to enjoy.



Overview of natural areas

While Dakota County does not have many of its original natural areas, those that remain are highly valued by the County's citizens. Some of these areas are pristine natural communities that contain rare and endangered plant and animal species. Other natural areas are degraded, yet still have value as scenic open spaces that provide habitat to common animals such as deer, pheasants, waterfowl, and song birds. Whether environmentally pristine, or valued because of their open space qualities, Dakota County's citizens have responded, through surveys and through participation at public meetings, that they would like to protect some of these areas for today and for future generations.

Tour of Dakota County's "priority" remaining natural areas

The following pictures and descriptions of Dakota County's "priority" natural areas represent the places repeatedly identified by citizens at public meetings. These areas were identified by people on maps, through pictures, and from evaluation forms as opportunities for land protection. While there are other areas that have been identified, these areas constitute the County's "***Most Wanted***" natural areas. A more analytical summary of all natural areas in the County follows this photo tour.

Marcott Lakes (Undeveloped Lakeshore)

Scenic undeveloped lakeshore is rare in a metropolitan area and was identified by citizens as important land to protect. These pictures from the Marcott Lakes area of Inver Grove Heights show the scenic beauty of lakes, wetlands, and uplands wetlands in an area that is platted but has not yet been developed. This land is also identified on the County Biologic Survey as a pristine natural community.



Mississippi River (River bluffs)

The Mississippi River is internationally significant. Not surprisingly, many citizens identified the river and its scenic bluff land as important to protect. Efforts are already underway to protect some of this land by the Minnesota DNR, yet many areas along the river remain unprotected.

The Mississippi River offers many beautiful views and natural settings that are increasing difficult to find in an urban area.



Chub Lake and Chub Creek

Chub Lake is one of few lakes in Dakota County south of Lakeville and Farmington. While it is a shallow lake, it is home to many waterfowl and wildlife species. Some of Chub Lake's shoreline is already protected by a Wildlife Management Area but most is not. Chub Creek is the outlet to the lake that flows southeast and eventually into the Cannon River.

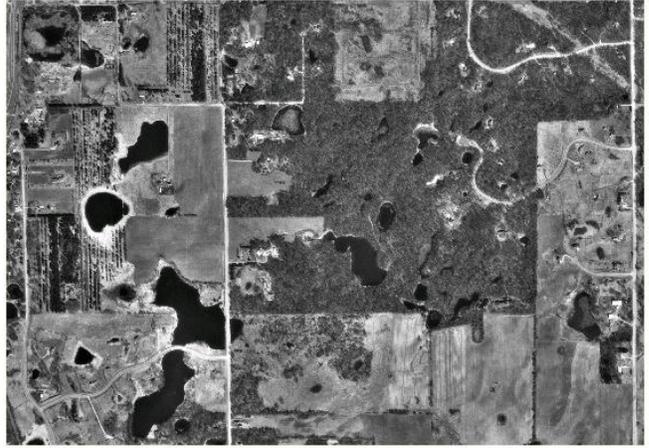
Much of the land around Chub Lake remains in its natural state within close proximity to the rapidly developing city of Lakeville.



Northern Rosemount Area Lakes and Woods

The rolling hills, lakes, and wetlands in northern Rosemount are typical of many of the areas of northern Dakota County that have already been developed. The beauty of this landscape is what has attracted many residents to Dakota County over the past several decades.

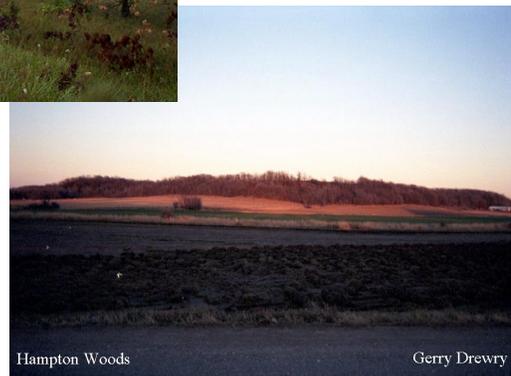
While some of this landscape has been protected as part of Lebanon Hills Regional Park, many other areas are now candidates for development.



Hampton Woods (Hampton and Vermillion Twp)

Hampton Woods was considered at one time as a candidate for a County Park. It is the largest upland deciduous forest in south central Dakota County. The land is partially subdivided but still contains a large natural community identified on the County Biologic Survey.

Its prominence as a natural feature is accentuated because it is surrounded by miles of agricultural land



Southern Inver Grove Heights (“Cliff Woods and Koch Refining Buffer Area”)

The rolling woods and fields in southern Inver Grove Heights were identified repeatedly by citizens that enjoy the open space and character of this landscape.

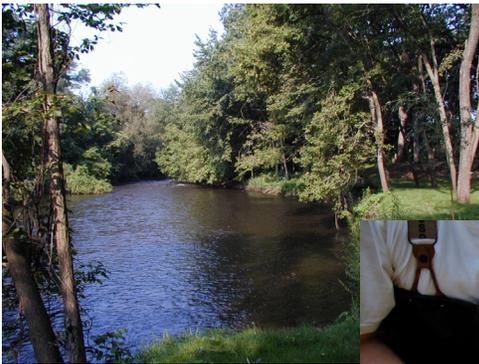
There are several large landowners in this area that use these lands as “buffer” property for their industrial operations. The lands are not currently protected.



The Vermillion River (Central Dakota County)

The Vermillion River is a naturally reproducing trout stream that is fed by cool groundwater and drains more than 55% of Dakota County's land area. It winds through central Dakota County through farmlands and remote natural areas.

The Vermillion River and its tributaries that extend into many townships and cities offer many opportunities for land protection and restoration.



University of Minnesota Research Center Property

The University of Minnesota Research Center is publicly owned land in the heart of Dakota County. Originally a munitions plant during World War II, the land is now an agricultural research center. Plans are currently underway to protect and restore significant natural areas on this 7500 acre property.

This property is offers a unique opportunity to coordinate with the University of Minnesota on resource protection, restoration, and education.



Central Eagan (North of Lebanon Hills)

Not unlike the areas of Inver Grove Heights and Rosemount that were described earlier, Eagan still has some undeveloped lake shore and open spaces. Some of these are in close proximity to Lebanon Hills and could potentially be linked through a park and open space corridor.

The challenge with these and similar lands is the cost of acquiring properties in nearly developed areas that have outstanding amenities.



Threats to Natural Areas

Analyzing what is needed to make natural areas sustainable

According to ecologists, healthy natural areas are in fact natural systems. They contain a diversity of plant and animal species. Natural areas need to be large and/or connected to provide habitat for animals and to allow natural systems to function. While it may not be possible to restore natural areas to what they were, it is important to know how these systems work so that people can make informed decisions about their protection, restoration, and management.

The strategy of most resource protection agencies has been to protect large enough natural areas (typically 10 acres or more) to provide wildlife habitat and to connect these areas to other natural areas whenever possible. The pattern of development can also have a major impact on natural systems. In other words, if the same amount of isolated fragmented natural areas is far less valuable for wildlife habitat than that same amount of land if it can be connected or protected as larger parcels.

Analyzing the threats to natural areas

Many of Dakota County's remaining natural areas are candidates for residential development. They are often lands with amenities such as lakeshore, rivers and streams, mature woods, or scenic views, making them desirable for development. Obviously, these are the same qualities that make these lands desirable to preserve. While each situation is unique, these lands remain undeveloped for one or more of the following reasons:

- 1) All or a portion of the site is protected by zoning ordinances that limits development (eg. floodplain, shoreland, wetlands, steep slopes)
- 2) Landowners are waiting for the right price before selling the property.
- 3) Landowners are holding the property until some time into the future and plan to develop it themselves or for a family member.
- 4) Conservation-minded landowners desire to leave the land in its natural state.

Protection using existing tools

While zoning can provide some form of protection for the most sensitive lands, zoning cannot be used to deny landowners reasonable use of their property. In this County, and in Minnesota in general, natural areas have been protected through park dedication and public acquisition. Although this can be an effective tool, it is also an expensive one. Public acquisition costs are threefold. They include; acquisition costs, purchase price, operations and maintenance of property, and loss of tax revenue. Of course, there are many public benefits associated with land acquisition that include: public recreation, clean water, wildlife habitat, and amenities that people like to either visit or live next to.

Opportunities to Protect Natural Areas

Public purpose of protecting natural areas

- a) Increase adjacent property values and enhance the appeal of neighborhoods.
- b) Provide connections between communities and neighborhoods.
- c) Provide critical habitat for animals and plants, and pathways for animals to move between their breeding and feeding areas.
- d) Provide environmental services, including: filtering pollutants from soil and water, and reducing soil erosion. Natural vegetation absorbs air pollutants and carbon dioxide.
- e) Provide natural flood control for area streams and rivers by retaining vegetated corridors to absorb flood waters.

Responding to challenges

As described above, the challenges of protecting farmland are different from the challenges of protecting natural areas. Farmland is relatively inexpensive (outside of the cities) but expansive. Natural areas are few and far between but are often some of the most expensive land in the County. Our challenge in this plan is to protect the integrity of those resources in a manner that is technically feasible and practically affordable.



An incentive based approach to land protection

At this project's conception, the goal was to take an incentive-based approach to land protection.

- 1) Conservation Easements from willing sellers and donors
- 2) Acquisition of fee title from willing sellers and donors
- 3) Voluntary enrollment in natural resource agency cost share programs (RIM, CRP, WRP)

Conservation easements are new to Dakota County and Minnesota

A relatively new tool known as the conservation easement offers an alternative to regulatory control. Conservation easements are voluntary agreements that give the holder the right to prevent certain uses (e.g. residential development). The landowner retains all remaining rights to use their property. They can and have been used around the country to protect farmland and natural areas. They provide resource protection on privately owned land and the land remains on the tax rolls. These are permanent easements that are placed on the property deed through voluntary agreement and are transferred to subsequent property owners at the time of property sale. Conservation easements can either be donated or are sometimes purchased by government agencies from willing sellers. Conservation easements on natural areas are written agreements tailored to the protection of the natural resources on individual pieces of property.

Some examples of conservation easement use in Minnesota:

- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).
This program was created to retire marginal agricultural lands in the Minnesota River watershed to reduce soil erosion and runoff. Willing landowners are paid to place a permanent conservation easement on their land, thereby improving water quality and creating wildlife habitat. Minnesota dollars are matched 2/1 with Federal dollars. The goal is to protect 100,000 acres in the watershed.
- Minnesota Land Trust.
The Minnesota Land Trust has worked with landowners and local governments to protect 16,500 acres on 175 properties throughout Minnesota (as of 12/31/2000) using permanent conservation easements.

Examples of conservation easements in Dakota County

- Nature Conservancy
The Nature Conservancy holds a conservation easement on land in Burnsville that is managed with the DNR as a Scientific and Natural Area (SNA)
- Use of Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM)
Dakota County farmers are participating in the RIM program that permanently retires marginal agricultural land using conservation easements.
- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)
The CRP program is a term easement program that pays landowners to hold agricultural land out of production. Over 5000 acres of land in Dakota County are enrolled in CRP, but the land is not permanently protected.

The Financing option survey indicated that ***nearly ¾ of Dakota County residents are unfamiliar with conservation easements.*** Nationally, however, over 1.3 million acres have been protected using conservation easements held by land trusts.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Conservation Easements to Protect Natural Areas

Conservation easements provide a means to protect natural areas that can be very attractive to landowners and citizens. Landowners are able to retain control of their property, yet permanently protect a natural resource that they may believe is important. Since the development value of the property has been retired concurrent with creation of the conservation easement, they will often pay lower taxes to reflect the limited use of their property.

The value of conservation easements to citizens is that they can protect natural resources without the full cost of purchasing the property, maintaining the property, and removing private land from the tax roles. Conservation easements have been used in other parts of the country to preserve rural character, retain scenic views, protect wildlife habitat, manage surface water, and protect groundwater.

The disadvantage of using conservation easements is that the land remains in private ownership and may not have public access. Since the land is not accessible to the public, the public may not always support the use of public funds for conservation easements on private land.

Dakota County Citizen Perspectives on the Use of Conservation Easements

At County-wide meetings, citizens were asked to consider the use of conservation easements as a land protection tool. People at the meetings were asked to comment on the following land protection approaches:

- 1) Protect remaining natural areas on private lands with conservation easements even if there is no public access.
- 2) Protect natural areas on private lands with conservation easements provided that there is some public access (adjacent public land, public trail easement, fishing easement)
- 3) Protect natural areas by purchasing land for public ownership (parks).

Public opinion was varied, but the majority of people that attended the meetings favored a mix of private land protection and public access. This has been accomplished in other land protection programs by giving preference to landowners that are willing to provide some level of public access, or through a selection process that gives priority to private lands that are adjacent to publicly protected lands that have trails, parks, or other public access.

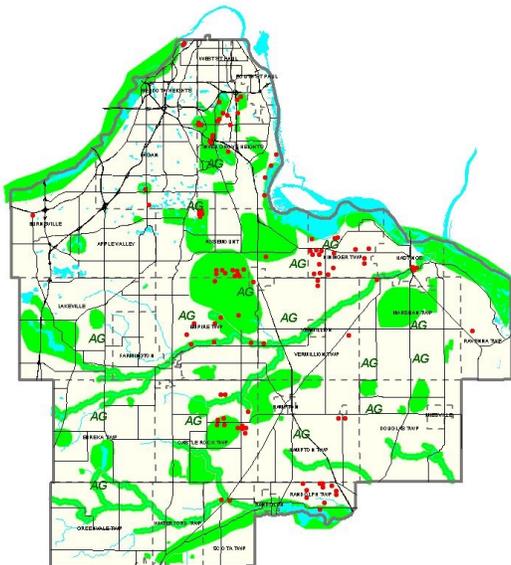
Narrowing down what lands to protect and where: Natural Areas

In a series of meetings held in February of 2000, more than 200 citizens worked in small groups to identify areas on maps that they believed should be evaluated for protection. As a result of the meetings, 40 maps were created using magic markers to identify important areas. Staff at the Dakota County Office of Planning took these separate maps and combined them to create the “citizen map” depicted in the figure below. At the same time, the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) mapped and analyzed the land cover throughout the County. The “land cover map” below is the result of that mapping effort.

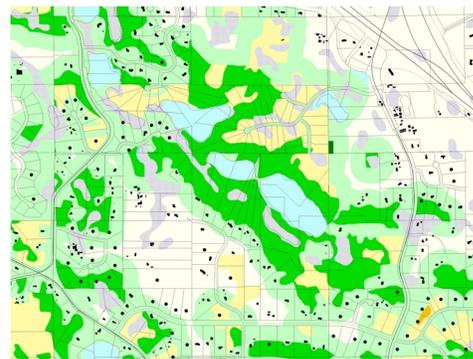
The objective of mapping the natural areas in detail was to respond to citizen interests and use biological data to evaluate the quality of remaining natural communities in the preference areas. The final step in the landcover analysis was to identify which of these natural areas were already protected because they were publicly owned and which natural areas were still privately owned.

Origins of the Natural Corridor Map

Citizen Map



**Land cover map
(example of detail)**



- Generalized Land Cover*
-  Woodland/Forest
 -  Shrubland
 -  Grassland
 -  Sparse Vegetation
 -  Open Water
 -  Wet Areas
 -  Opportunity Areas from Buffered Natural Features

As a result of information gathered from public meetings and surveys, citizens were interested in protecting land with the following characteristics:

- Lands of biological significance
- Lands adjacent to lakes, rivers, and streams
- Land buffers and best management practices for water quality
- Lands that provide wildlife habitat
- Lands that provide some level of public access

Natural corridors approach

As described earlier, natural area experts advise that there are far more benefits gained from protecting connected natural areas than can be achieved protecting isolated and fragmented land. Connected habitat provides corridors for the movement of wildlife and can enhance surface water quality when located next to lakes, rivers, and streams. Natural corridors are privately or publicly owned corridors of open space that often follow natural land or water features, managed primarily to protect and enhance natural resources. The “natural corridors” approach has been used to achieve these results throughout the nation.

The benefits of using a natural corridors approach in Dakota County area as follows:

- *When situated along rivers and streams, natural corridors protect water quality by filtering out and holding nutrients, sediments, and chemicals.*
- *They can provide natural flood control for area streams and rivers by retaining vegetated corridors to absorb flood waters.*
- *Corridors maximize the natural resources of an area by providing habitats for diverse plant and animal species.*
- *They provide important connections between high quality natural areas, which animals and plants use to move through the landscape to the habitats they depend on.*
- *They can be a good economic value for county residents because corridors can be established, on a voluntary basis, on private land. This can be cheaper than the outright purchase of land.*
- *Natural corridors can soften urban and suburban landscapes with ribbons of green that improve the quality of life and enhance property values.*
- *They can help local communities direct development and growth away from important natural resource areas.*
- *Communities with protected natural corridors are more attractive to new and existing businesses.*

Opportunities to coordinate with other agencies on land protection

There are many opportunities to work with other agencies toward land protection in Dakota County. These agencies include; MN Department of Natural Resources, local watershed management organizations, National Resource Conservation Service, National Parks/MNRRRA, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and the U.S. Army Corp. of Engineers.



Each of these agencies has its own programs targeted toward different types of resource protection. The county-wide natural areas map shows lands that have already been protected by other agencies (see figure). While the nature of these programs fluctuate over time and between political administrations, they certainly provide opportunities to match local dollars with outside funding.

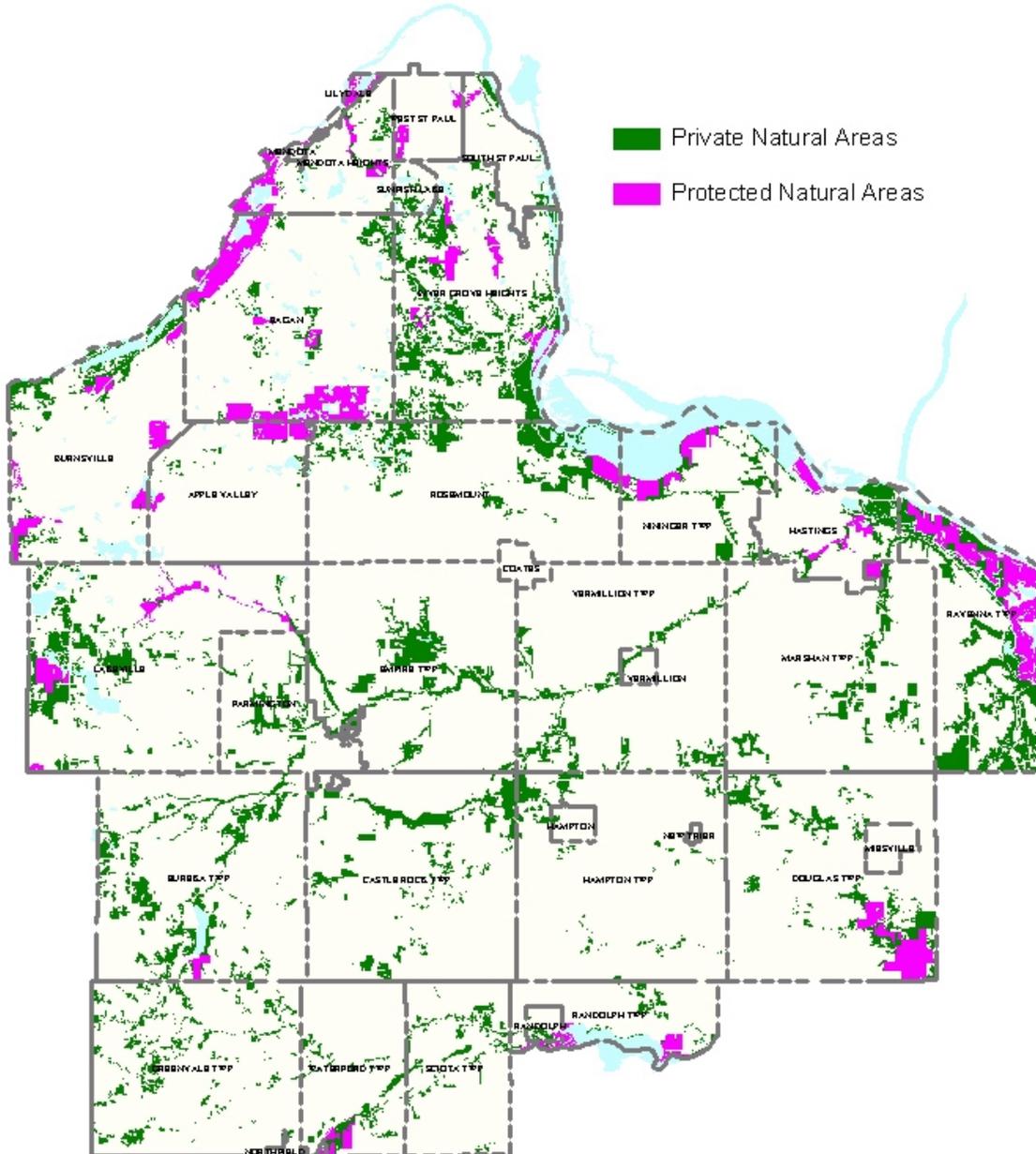
At an agency meeting in November of 2000, representatives from each agency described their programs and land protection goals. Many of these programs target areas that Dakota County's citizens identified as priority natural areas. While a local match is sometimes required to attract outside resources, these programs provide the opportunity to leverage local dollars with State and Federal in targeted areas.

The following chart identifies natural areas protected by other agencies in Dakota County:

Agency	Program
<p>DNR</p> <p>4,365 acres</p> <p>(1,644 of which is in the Minnesota Valley Wildlife Refuge)</p>	<p>The DNR Metro Greenways program has helped protect the Juveland WMA, and several other properties in the County have been nominated.</p> <p>The County has three Wildlife Management Areas (WMA's), two Scientific and Natural Areas (SNA) and one additional potential SNA is planned.</p> <p>A portion of Fort Snelling State Park is also in Dakota County.</p>
<p>U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service</p> <p>160 acres</p>	<p>This agency has protected land in the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (listed as DNR land in the acreage totals to the left) and through a Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) in southwest Lakeville</p>
<p>Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)</p>	<p>This agency restores and protects lands using easements on private lands through the Reinvest in Minnesota Program (RIM), Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), and Conservation Reserve Program. There are no acres enrolled in the WRP program in Dakota County and the CRP is a temporary land protection program.</p>
<p>Dakota County Parks</p> <p>4180 acres</p>	<p>Dakota County Parks has a dual mission to protect land and provide passive recreational opportunities. There are four regional parks in Dakota County and two regional trails. Dakota County also manages a County Park (Thompson)</p>
<p>Ramsey County Parks</p> <p>177 acres</p>	<p>Part of Lilydale Regional Park is in Dakota County</p>
<p>Hennepin County Parks</p> <p>160 acres</p>	<p>Part of Murphy Hannrehan in in Dakota County</p>
<p>Cities and Townships</p> <p>2847 acres</p>	<p>There are many city parks in Dakota County. The acreage totals to the left reflect those parks with a natural area protection focus</p>
<p>Private Colleges</p> <p>582 acres</p>	<p>Macalester and Carleton Colleges have natural areas in the County that they manage for research purposes.</p>
<p>Dodge Nature Center</p> <p>302 acres</p>	<p>The Dodge Nature Center in West St. Paul protects land and offers natural education programs</p>
<p>The Nature Conservancy</p> <p>94 acres</p>	<p>Purchased land in Burnsville that is managed with DNR as Black Dog Scientific and Natural Area</p>

Public protected natural areas and private unprotected natural areas

The following map shows where natural areas are already protected by public agencies along with the County's remaining natural areas that are still in private ownership.



Current Projects and Studies that could be coordinated with the Farmland and Natural Area Plan

Project	Primary Organization	Description
Mississippi River Greenway	Friends of the Mississippi River	Metro Greenways planning grant. Detailed sub-area planning study to investigate greenway opportunities along the Mississippi River. Involves communities of Rosemount, Nininger, Hastings, and Ravenna Twp.
Central Dakota County Greenway	Dakota County SWCD	Metro Greenways planning grant. Detailed sub-area planning study of Mendota Heights, Inver Grove Heights, Rosemount central natural area corridor.
Low Impact Development	Dakota County SWCD	Metro Council grant. Study to investigate techniques and land use patterns that minimize storm water runoff and impacts to the environment
Pool 2 Study	Metro Council	Multi county study to evaluate opportunities and projects to improve, navigation, water quality, natural habitat, and economic development.
Watershed Governance Study	Dakota County	Minnesota Board of Innovations grant. Study to determine the organizational structure that would best manage the Vermillion River watershed
Wildlife Corridors	MN Waterfowl Assn.	LCMR grant to fund conservation projects that protect and restore wildlife corridors. A coalition of public and private organizations are supporting this project.
Dakota County Park System Plan	Dakota County	The park and opens space plan for Dakota County that provides direction for future park acquisition and natural area protection
MORE Park Study	University of Minnesota	Plan for the Rosemount Research Station that protects and restores natural areas on 7500 acre site
Koch Litigation	State agencies	Possible court penalty or settlement that could be used for environmental projects in the Pine Bend Bluffs area.
Koch Natural Resource Master Plan	Friends of the Mississippi River	On-going discussions with Koch to manage resources and place conservation easements on natural lands within the Koch reserve.
Metro Greenways Nominations	Multiple	Nominations of property for protection in Inver Grove Heights and Hastings within Dakota County FNAP Corridors
SMART Growth Twin Cities	Metro Council	Metro Council study to evaluate growth patterns in the Twin Cities and among other issues their impacts on natural resources and farmland
Empire Treatment Plant Expansion Study	Metro Council Environmental Services	Metro Council study to evaluate waste water treatment needs and options in the South metro. The study could involve the protection of natural areas or greenways associated with the movement of treated wastewater to the Mississippi River
Inter-regional Corridors Study	Minnesota Dept. of Transportation	This transportation study along Hwy 52 has a natural area mapping and inventory component. Transportation improvements in the corridor may be coordinated with natural area avoidance, mitigation, protection and restoration
Big Rivers Partnership	Metro Greening	

Partnerships with non-profits

Many non-profit agencies are also working toward natural area protection in Dakota County. Not all of these agencies have an outside source of funding but are working toward natural area protection through existing programs. Some of the more active organizations are:

- Trust for Public Land
- Friends of the Mississippi River
- Friends of the Minnesota River Valley
- 1000 Friends of Minnesota
- Minnesota Land Trust
- McKnight Foundation
- Dakota County Habitat Alliance
 - Ducks Unlimited
 - MN Waterfowl Assn.
 - Pheasants Forever
 - Trout Unlimited

Strategy N2: Work with other agencies through their programs to protect County priority natural areas

Outcomes

- Local dollars leverage DNR, NRCS, National Parks/MNRRRA, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Corp. of Engineers, U of M Research Center, and foundation resources
- County priorities help direct land protection initiatives of outside agencies

Opportunities to protect land with large companies and large landowners

Dakota County is home to large companies and has numerous large landowners. These companies may be open to protecting natural areas as corporate citizens and in some cases for tax purposes.

Specifically, Koch Refinery and the University of Minnesota Research Center may offer opportunities for land protection. Koch has assembled thousands of acres of land around the refinery as a buffer. They are working with Friends of the Mississippi River on land conservation efforts. The University of Minnesota Research Center is 7,500 acres.



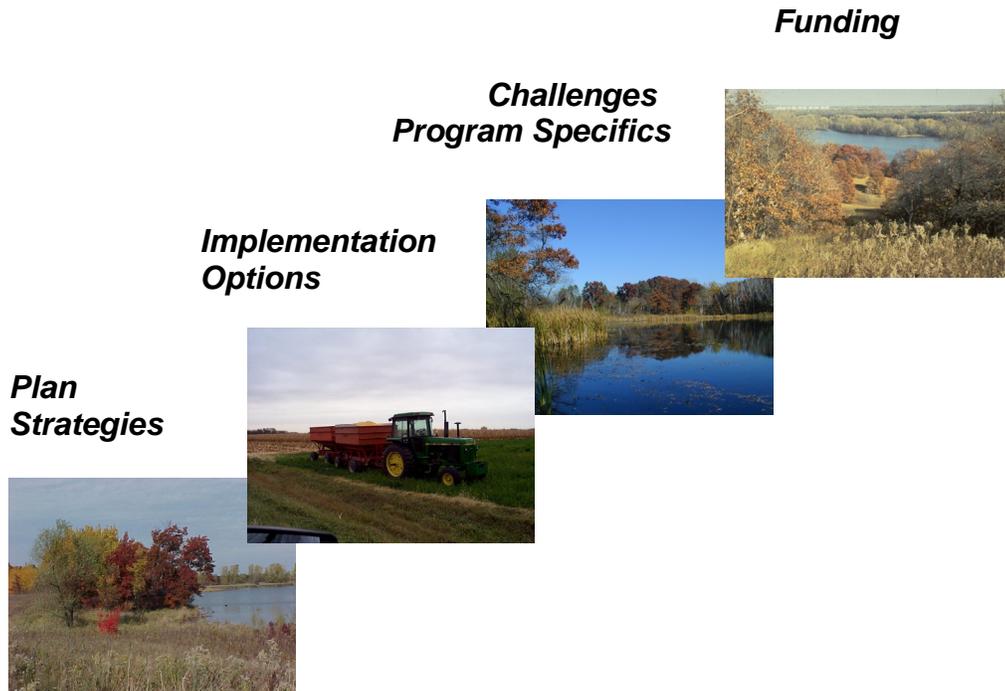
The University has recently completed a Minnesota Outreach, Research and Education Park plan for their property that focuses on natural resource protection and restoration.

Strategy N3 Work with large land owners and agencies to protect natural areas on their properties with conservation easements and natural resource management plans

Outcomes:

- Protect natural resources on private lands
- Protect and restore natural resources on public land used for research purposes

Implementation of the Farmland and Natural Area Protection Plan



Draft Farmland Protection Strategies

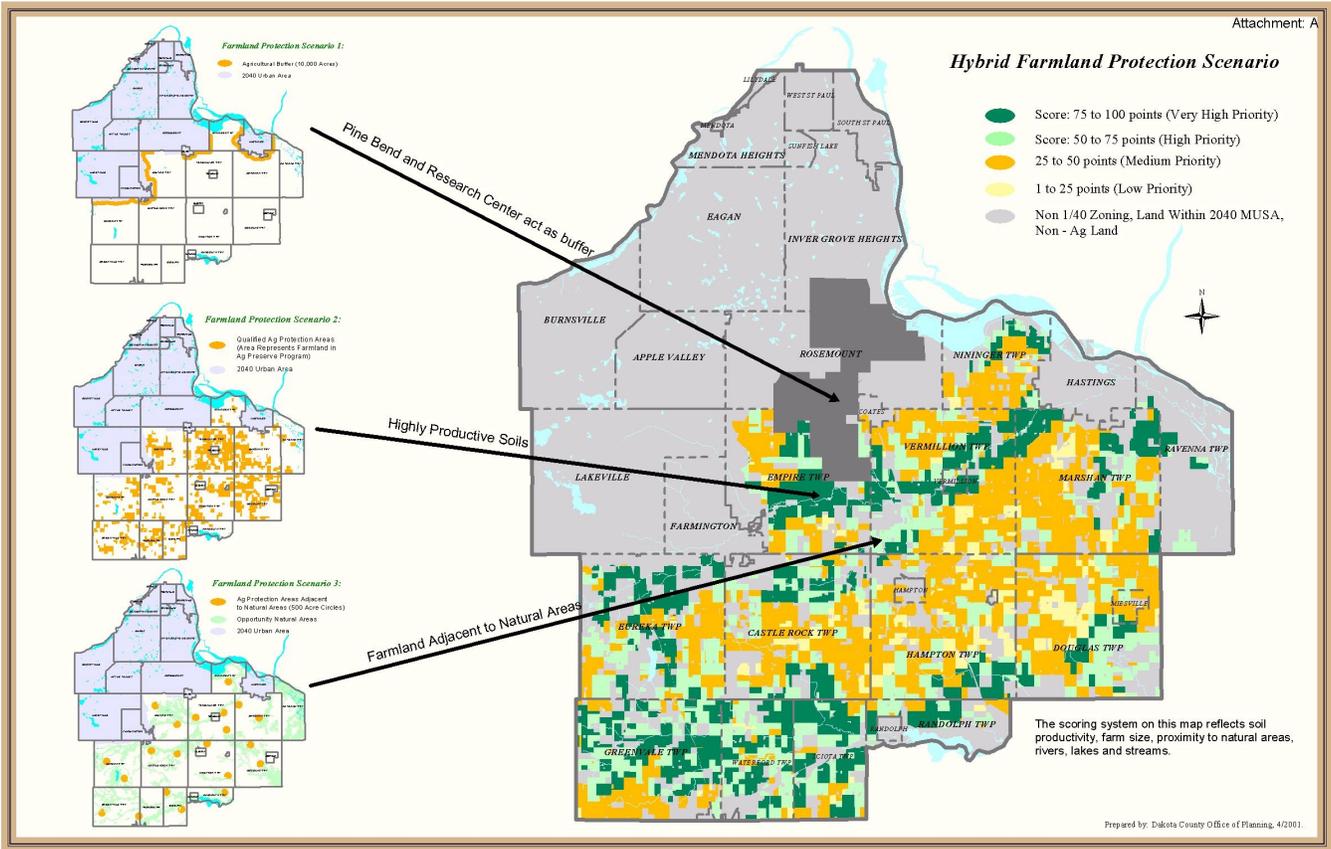
- 1) Protect productive farmland in contiguous blocks next to natural corridors using conservation easements from willing sellers***
- 2) Promote the use and enhancement of the Metropolitan Agricultural Preserves program***
- 3) Assist cities and townships with local growth management controls to guide development away from priority farmland using subdivision ordinances and transfer of development rights***

Draft Natural Area Protection Strategies

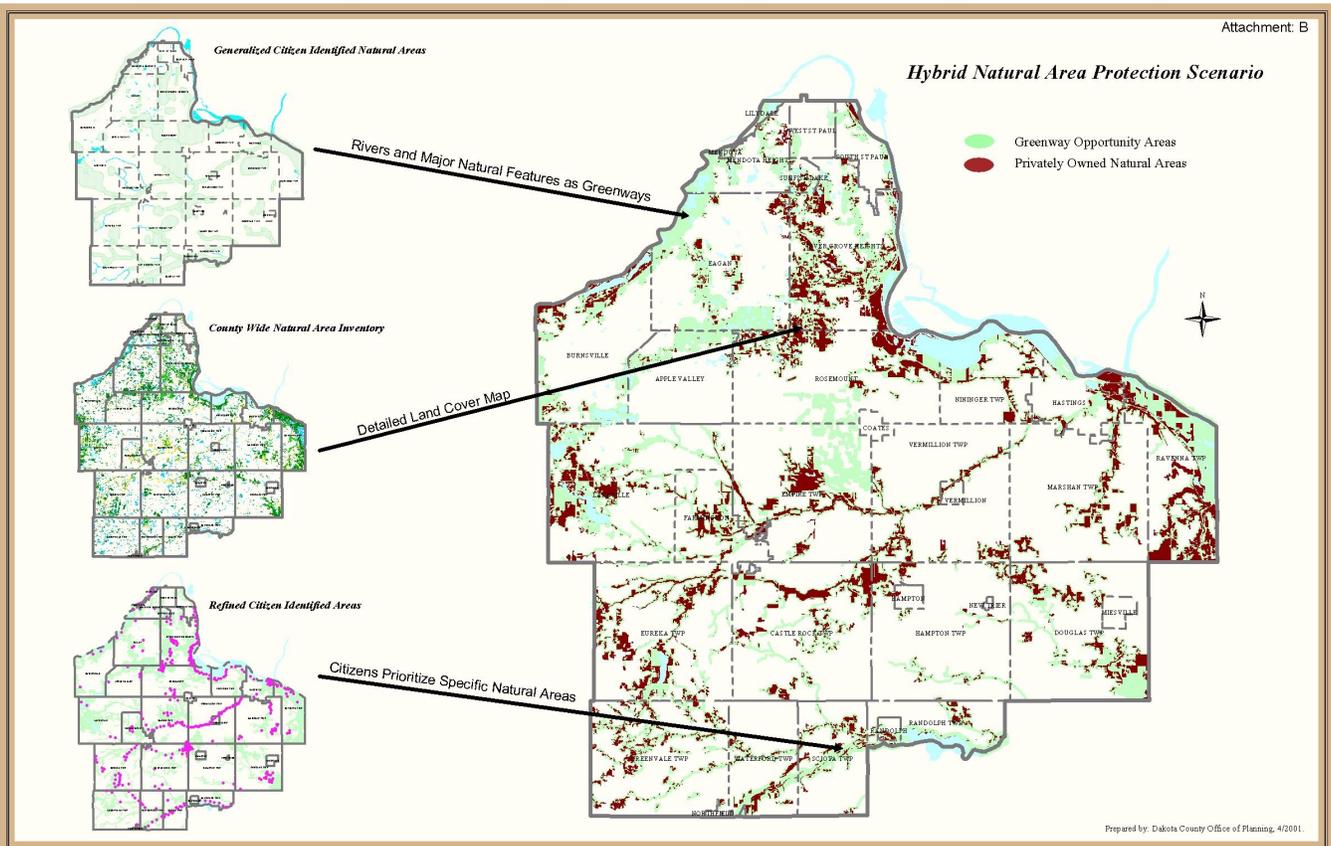
- 1) Protect priority natural areas in corridors using conservation easements and fee title acquisition from willing sellers and donors***
- 2) Work with other agencies through their programs to protect County priority natural areas***
- 3) Work with large land owners and agencies to protect natural areas on their properties with conservation easements and natural resource management plans***

What those strategies look like on a map

Attachment A



Attachment B



Options for Protecting Farmland and Natural Areas

The following options were discussed with County citizens at the final series of public meetings that were held in May, 2001. The options were later discussed by the County Board at a workshop on October 16, 2001. The options are grouped by levels of program implementation, funding, and land protection acres (see chart). Each level contains all of the elements of the previous levels.

Level 1: “Adopt the Plan; no program; no additional funds”

- Adopt the *Dakota County Farmland and Natural Areas Protection Plan* including the map of priority farmland and natural areas.
- Encourage and seek out other entities (DNR, etc.) to purchase or donate priority farmland or natural areas for protection.
- Consider County cost-share with other entities on land protection opportunities, using “in-kind” local match (no new funding).
- Support state and federal legislation that provides incentives for preserving farmland, including the Metropolitan Agricultural Preserves Program.

Level 2: “Seed Money; \$100,000 in County funds; no program”

- Provide financial incentives to assist other entities with purchases or donations of natural areas and farmland from County levy or fund balance on an on-going or case-by-case basis
- Encourage the Metropolitan Council to provide funds for the acquisition of conservation easements and development rights on locally-identified priority farmland, as part of the forthcoming *Blueprint 2030*.
- Continue to request State funding for the protection of natural areas and farmland, perhaps use County funds as local match.
- Use County funds to pay the stewardship fee for donated conservation easements.

Level 3: “Pilot Program; \$93,800 LCMR Funds; \$200,000 County Funds”

- Establish selection criteria, technical and citizen review committees.

- Advertise the program and conduct outreach to landowners in priority areas, and purchase easements/fee title from willing sellers. Purchased easements, public access easements, and fee title acquisitions would be held by the Dakota County SWCD or Dakota County.
- Establishment of pilot program and local funding may qualify County for federal matching funds for farmland protection.
- Hire specialized land use and zoning consultant to work with the townships to create local controls that guide rural residential development and provide protection for priority farmland/natural areas.
- Provide County funds for the purchase of conservation easements and/or development rights on priority farmland in some amount (\$116 million is the estimated cost for all priority areas).
- Provide County funds for the purchase of some conservation easements on priority natural areas or for the fee title acquisition of some priority natural areas.

Level 4: “Full Program and Referendum/Bond; \$2,000,000 levy”

- Fund the acquisition of *some* natural areas or the purchase of conservation easements from a bond issue passed by a referendum.
 - \$236 million for the acquisition of all 36,000 acres
 - 184 million for conservation easements over all 36,000 acres
- Fund the purchase of conservation easements on priority farmland from a bond issue passed by a referendum (estimated cost of 116 million for all priority areas)

Other Open Space Concerns Discussed at County Board Workshop

In addition to the concern for protecting farmland and natural areas, the County Board discussed other open space protection needs at a workshop on Oct. 17th, 2001. The Board discussed park land acquisition, the Minnesota Zoo, and the Caponi Art Park as facilities that provide an open space function and the acreage and funding needs for these facilities are identified in the following table.

Land Protection Options with Respect to Other Open Space Needs in Dakota County

	PARKS		NATURAL AREA			FARMLAND		COMBINATION	SPECIAL	
	In Holdings	New Regional Park Acquisition	Natural Area Acquisition	Natural Area Easement Acquisition	Natural Area Easement Acquisition Matching Funds	Farmland Easement Acquisition	Farmland Easement Acquisition Matching Program	Combined Natural Area/Farmland Easement Acquisition Program	Minnesota Zoo	Caponi Art Park
Acres	815 acres	200 to 1,000+ acres	36,000 priority acres	42,000 priority acres	78,000 priority acres	60 acres				
Estimated Cost	\$20-\$25 million	\$5-\$20 million	Total cost \$236 million	Total cost \$184 million	Total cost \$116 million	Total cost \$300-352 million	\$18 million bond issue \$100 million master plan	Assessor's value \$1,184,000		
Funding Planned	\$2.4 million over next five years in budget	None	\$93,800 LCMR Implementation	\$93,800 LCMR Implementation	\$93,800 LCMR Implementation	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown		
Funding Options	Metro CIP funds Fund balance Bond issue	Metro and State Bonding	Demonstration program for 10% of cost over 10 years or \$23 million	Demonstration program for 10% of cost over 10 years or \$18 million	Demonstration program for 10% of costs over 10 years or \$11 million	\$100,000 to \$200,000 for each of three years	Demonstration program or 10% of total or \$20 million	State bonding \$18 million Private funding \$6 million		

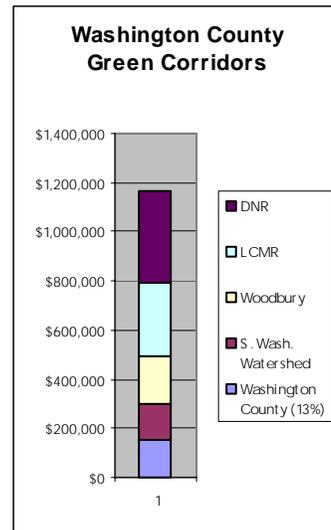
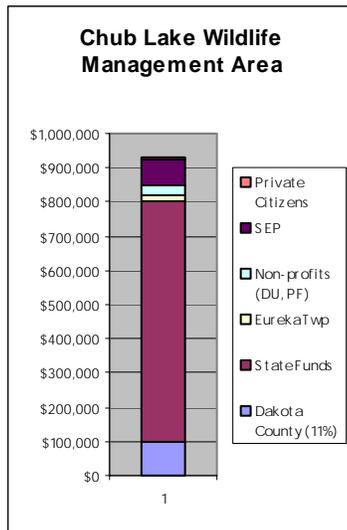
Challenges/Program Specifics

Recent County Participation in Natural Area Protection

Outside of the County Park System, the County participates in natural area protection by working with the Mississippi River Greenway project, Central Greenway project, and assisting DNR and other entities with information on acquisitions on scenic easements (e.g. Pine Bend Bluff property). In addition the County provided \$100,000 in 2000/2001 to assist DNR with the purchase of the Chub Lake Natural Area. The County provided 11% of the total purchase price.

This participation with several funding sources to acquire property or easements is not limited to the Chub Lake project in Dakota County. Washington County recently purchased easements over four natural area parcels for a total cost of \$1,164,400 for 142 acres. Washington County spent \$150,000 toward the purchase. There were eight other property owners who expressed an interest in participating in this pilot program. The Washington County program does not have a source of long-term funding.

The Chub Lake example and the Washington County Green Corridors project are examples of how Dakota can leverage land protection using funding from outside sources.



Acquisition versus Easements for Natural Area Protection

The Farmland and Natural Area Protection Plan proposes to use acquisition of fee title and acquisition of conservation easements to protect natural areas. The following table highlights key differences between these protection methods:

Characteristics	Public Ownership	Easement Over Private Land
Protection	Full protection of acquired area.	Full protection of land area within the conservation easement.
Cost	\$52 m. more (est.)	\$52 m. less (est.)
County control	Control what can and can't be done and can change this	Control what can't be done; requires amending agreement to change ;
Zoning affect on use (which is not controlled by Dakota County but by the Townships; can be changed on a majority vote)	No affect on use unless County decides to sell or develop land	Property area with easement over it does not change; surrounding property use can change and be developed according to new zoning (e.g. change from Ag to Residential)
Public Access to the area	Can provide public access as in public ownership, if desired	Negotiate public access, if desired
Contiguous parcels to maximize natural area being preserved	County can determine what parcels it wants to pursue for acquisition and decide if the parcels should be contiguous.	If voluntary, control over contiguousness of parcels must be determined to be important in easement acquisition criteria
Permanency	Permanent until County sells	Permanent if a requirement of the program.

Characteristics of Using Easements for Farmland Protection

The Farmland and Natural Area Protection Plan proposes to use acquisition of conservation easements to protect farmland (sometimes called purchase of development rights). The following table highlights key characteristics a program that would purchase farmland conservation easements from willing landowners:

	Easement over private farmland
Protection	Protects land area defined within the conservation easement.
Ownership	Privately owned property with easement guaranteeing use remains agriculture
Public access	Typically, no public access
Zoning and future use	Township controls future zoning and use on the property not controlled by County; easement would stay on farm, but not necessarily on neighboring properties if zoning went from 1 unit in 40 acres
Contiguousness of parcels	If voluntary, no guarantee; can make it a priority criteria in the program
Permanency	Can require permanency; but leave room to renegotiate in future under certain conditions

Summary of Existing Agricultural Preservation Programs in Dakota County

In addition to the use of permanent easements, farmland can be protected through State programs that offer landowners tax incentives to keep their land in agricultural use. It is a common practice in other parts of the country to coordinate these preferential taxation programs with programs that purchase conservation easements. Many participants at the projects public meetings suggested strengthening these programs with added financial incentives to increase landowner participation and reduce the pressure to develop farmland. The following table summarizes key characteristics of these programs in Dakota County:

Program	Commitment to Ag use	Benefit	# Acres eligible	# Enrolled /%	Cost
State Green Acres	Annual	Delays assessments Maintain Ag tax status	Any 10 acre minimum that is demonstrated in agricultural use	115,900 acres	Not determined
Metro Agricultural Preserves	8 year easement for agriculture or forestry	\$1.50 property tax credit per acre No assessments Maintain Ag tax status	202,000 acres in 1/40 zoning	64,28 acres or 32% of eligible	\$96, 387
Combination of both programs				180,158 or 82% of total ag. Acres in County	

Importance of Zoning in Coordinating Farmland/Natural Area Protection

According to most land protection experts, zoning is probably the most effective tool for protecting farmland and natural areas and is an important ingredient in successful land protection programs. Zoning decisions made by locally elected officials are an exercise in democracy where the will of the voters is reflected in a community's land use plan and zoning to implement that plan. Further, zoning is relatively inexpensive when compared to other tools such as purchase of development rights. The challenge for most communities is balancing the public purpose of protecting farmland and natural areas using zoning with individual property rights. Consequently, the following limitations can interfere with the exclusive use of zoning to protect farmland and natural areas:

For Farmland:

Legally, zoning can be used in Minnesota to restrict land to agricultural use. Practically, local governments have not exercised their full land use authority because they believe that an unfair economic burden is placed on a few landowners that are providing open space for the larger community at their own expense. In other words, zoning restricts landowners from selling their land for development and realizing its full economic value so that the majority of others in the community can enjoy the positive externalities of open space and rural character. In a word, many communities see restricting landowners to agricultural land use indefinitely as unfair.

Unlike many other metropolitan counties, townships control land use in Dakota County. 12 of the 13 townships in Dakota County zone agricultural land at a density of one dwelling unit per 40 acres, representing 202,000 acres or 91% of the 221,000 acres of total farmland in the County. In addition some townships permit development rights (dwelling unit/40 acres) to be transferred from one property to another property (called clustering). For example, one 40 acre parcel might have two dwelling units but there would be no dwelling units on another 40 acres. The three members of the town board may change the zoning on a property by a 2 to 1 vote of the town board.

For Natural Areas:

The main limitation for using zoning to protect natural areas is that zoning cannot result in a taking of private property and cannot regulate land so that it does not have any economic value. This makes it difficult to zone an entire natural area to a designation that prevents either development or agriculture. Natural areas can be preserved concurrent with development using cluster zoning that directs houses away from these areas by awarding density bonuses if houses can be clustered outside of natural areas. The challenge with this approach is that it is the natural areas themselves that attract people to rural settings and protecting these areas using zoning is often in conflict with using them as home sites.

Clearly, local zoning is important in protecting natural areas and farmlands, but most experts believe that zoning should be used in conjunction with other tools to reach a balance between community goals and individual rights. While zoning has some limitations, it would be nearly impossible to have any meaningful protection strategy without using zoning as a regulatory tool.

Expectations of Public Access on Land Protected by Conservation Easements

At the public meetings, there was an expectation that a combination of private protection and public access would need to exist in the natural corridors. One option would be to give highest priority to conservation easement proposals with some level of public access (such as via a trail, fishing easement, or navigable water way. In some cases, such as properties with rare and endangered plant or wildlife species, it may not be necessary or even desired to have public access.

Impacts on Neighboring Property from Easement Programs

There are a number of ways that an adjacent property can be impacted:

- a) Case studies have shown that in most cases land adjacent to protected land increases in value.
- b) If public access is allowed on a conservation easement, the public could impact the neighboring property.
- c) If a neighbor's property is eligible for land protection, and adjacent to a protected property, it will score higher according to the proposed criteria
- d) Protected properties could block extension of urban services (a positive or a negative impact depending on the neighboring landowners perspective).

Tax Impacts of Easement Programs

Property taxes for farmland would be held at farmland levels – just like today if farmers are enrolled in the Ag. Preserve Program. The cost of providing services to these areas would also be held at today's levels. While farmland does not pay much in property tax, it is generally recognized that farming pays more than the cost of the services that it requires.

Natural areas will pay taxes based on what the land would sell for on the open market without its development rights. Again, the relatively low tax generated should be evaluated relative to the cost of services that the land requires. Studies have shown that over time these natural lands can be very desirable and it is common for the surrounding land to increase in value, resulting in more tax revenue from adjacent property.

Responsibility for Program Management

The County has several options with respect to implementation. If there is a County program that uses County dollars to purchase conservation easements the County may wish to be the implementing agency or work in partnership with another agency such as the Soil and Water Conservation District. In some programs, non-profit organizations have the responsibility of holding and monitoring conservation easements. If State or Federal funds become available, the terms of land protection would have to be coordinated with these agencies.

Funding

Successful land protection programs rely upon a sufficient, sustained source of funding. Almost without exception, these programs combine funding from Federal, State, and local sources. The largest of these sources is typically State funding. County funding could be leveraged and coordinated with funding from these other sources. Even low cost efforts such as using donated conservation easements would require funding to monitor and enforce the easements.

If the County Board wants to explore an easement acquisition program here's what residents said in a 1999 survey about their level of support:

Funding Source for natural areas	Approve	Disapprove
Annual Property Increase of 9.65 per \$100,000 home value per year	58%	38%
Sales tax increase	38%	57%
1/10 of sales tax increase on ballot	52%	44%
20 Year bond referendum (no dollar figure)	49%	41%
20 Year bond referendum (4 million) of 1.47 per year per \$100,000 of home value	62%	31%
\$35 flat fee per household per year	32%	63%
Increase deed transfer tax	33	55
Developer impact fees	63%	28%

Based on these results the property tax referendum, 20 year bond, and the 1/10 of one per cent sales tax all have the best chance of passing. Impact fees are not permitted in Minnesota.

**Local Funding Options
Impacts on County Fund Balance and Property Taxes**

	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5
	Allocation from the Fund Balance for X years	\$100,000 annually from the levy (new levy dollars)	\$200,000 annually from the levy (new levy dollars)	\$1,000,000 annual Bond Issue based on referendum for 10 or 20 years	\$2,000,000 annual Bond Issue based on referendum for 10 or 20 years
Property Tax Impact On A \$100,000 Home	Out of \$40 Million in fund balance reserved for special projects	\$.42 in 2002	\$.85 in 2002	\$4.23 per year	\$8.46 per year
Property Tax Impact On A \$181,000 Home	Out of \$40 million in fund balance reserved for special projects	\$.77 in 2002	\$1.73 in 2002	\$7.65 per year	\$15.31 per year

Appendix A: Stakeholder Issues, Concerns and Input

Stakeholder Identification

Throughout the course of the farmland and natural area project, there was an on-going effort to identify different perspectives about land conservation and learn about the concerns of people that could be impacted by the use of land protection tools. The following summary characterizes viewpoints of major stakeholders:

- Citizens from meetings
- Farmers/landowners
- Agriculture related businesses
- Resource Protection Agencies
- Realtors/Developers
- Cities and Townships

Citizen Perspectives

Perhaps the most important element of this study has been gathering citizen input to define the public purpose for protecting farmland and natural areas. Citizen input has been collected in the form of comments at public meetings, public opinion surveys, photos that have been submitted, and as a result of numerous one on one conversations, letters, and e-mails. At public meetings, citizens were asked to rank priority natural lands for protection. The top four areas identified were:

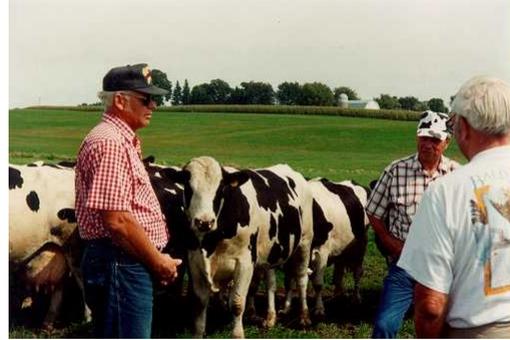
- Large contiguous areas of natural habitat
- Wetlands
- Land within 300' of rivers and streams
- Lands of biological significance

The citizens that attended the public meetings were given disposable cameras and asked to take pictures of the natural areas and farmlands that they felt were important to protect. In all, more than 400 photos were taken and submitted to project partners. While the photos themselves are valuable, several trends emerged. Most of the photos contained water, either lakes, streams, rivers or wetlands. Many of the photos were taken at the same locations that citizens identified on maps as priority areas to protect. The following areas were photographed repeatedly:

- Mississippi River
- Minnesota River
- Vermillion River
- Cannon River
- Areas next to regional parks
- Rich Valley area
- Marcott Lakes area and lakes and ponds in IGH and Rosemount

Farmer Perspectives

Farmers are important stakeholders because they are the private landowners most impacted by land protection initiatives. Farmers in Dakota County are dealing with many unknowns. They need to make decisions about whether or not to continue to farm and whether or not their children will farm.



In short, farmers need to assess whether to keep farming or to cash out after analyzing their family needs and evaluating external circumstances. They must consider a combination of economic and moral factors. If the County considers a program to purchase conservation easements from willing landowners, farmers will have more options available to them, but also more decisions to make. The following list summarizes some of the key points from the farmer stakeholder meeting discussion.

- Desire to farm vs. desire to cash out
- Permanent easements vs. temporary easements
- Land prices have increased rapidly over the last several years
- Permanent farms vs. permanent development
- Many farmers have a very strong desire to preserve land that goes beyond maximizing economic gain
- In general farmers were supportive, but desire to learn more
- Some farmers were wary of the use of conservation easements and want to make sure that a program does not limit their opportunity to develop land in the future.

Agriculture Related Business Perspectives

Project planners met with representatives of the County's agri-business community including; lenders, implement dealers, feed and seed distributors, elevator operators, dairy processing. Their main concerns/points are:

- Businesses have a key interest in long term agriculture in Dakota County
- Livestock businesses may create greater land use conflict
- If the number of farms in the County continues to decrease, businesses will need to diversify beyond sales to the agricultural sector.

Perspectives of Other Resource Protection Agencies (programs)

There are many agencies that are interested in land protection in Dakota County. Project planners met with a number of these agencies to talk about how their land conservation interests may coincide with the County's priorities. The following are some the opportunities that were identified:

- Wildlife management areas
- Waterfowl production areas
- Wetland reserve program
- Ag. Preserve program
- Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM)
- Match grants (finance)
- Use conservation easements on private land to buffer and enhance other protected lands

Realtor/Developer Perspectives

Dakota County realtors and developers are major stakeholders in any proposal to protect or conserve land. Land is the fuel of the development industry and land protection programs can restrict the supply of land. In meetings with representatives from the realty and developer community the following points were discussed:



- Avoid unintended consequences of open space preservation (non-crossable green spaces, government interference with market)
- More land protection may mean more expensive lots and less affordable housing
- Natural area protection can enhance neighborhoods
- Less interest in protecting farmland
- People in new developments like having farmland out their window and then are disappointed when it develops (unrealistic)
- Someday we will reach 2040 and need a land supply
- Advocate a natural resource master plan (give developer predictability)
- Balance development/preservation interests

City Perspectives

At meetings with city staff, project planners discussed how a County program may work with city planning and parks activities. The following list summarizes some of the key discussion points of those meetings:

- Many cities have applied for Metro Greenway grants (Mendota Heights, Inver Grove Heights, Rosemount, Hastings, and Apple Valley) Developed cities still value rivers, connections through regional trails
- Some cities are already using conservation easements next to parks and public land (Eagan, Burnsville, Hastings) Many cities are using ordinances as the primary means of protection
- Very little interest in protecting farms (exceptions: Inver Grove Heights, Rosemount, Lakeville farm heritage park) Conservation easements on private land make sense next to public land or on private land with public access.

Township Perspectives

Project planners met with township officials at work sessions to discuss how a County program would impact planning in the townships.

- Most still trying to enforce 1/40 but pressure is increasing
- Most interested in permanent farmland protection but some wonder if it is too late
- Many support natural area protection using conservation easements since they do not use park dedication

Notes from individual city meetings

Apple Valley

- Trying to create 200' wide greenway in south central Apple Valley, potential link to the Vermillion River
- May be interested in creating connections to Mississippi River across Rosemount
- Pahl's market may be the last "agriculture" in the city. Farm market is used and appreciated by residents.
- Applied to DNR for metro greenway planning grant for drainage area.

Burnsville

- Completed a natural resource management plan
- Worked with private land owners along the Minnesota River to consider conservation easements

Eagan

- Trying to create a greenway corridor between city hall/water park and Lebanon Hills. Would include Caponi property, McCarty property, others?
- City uses conservation easements adjacent to parks
- Golf course land in northern Eagan (maybe water quality management for industrial impervious surface)
- May be interested in connections to or land protection in adjacent Inver Grove Heights

Farmington

- Trying to create greenways and protect land concurrent with development.
- Using tools such as park dedication, wetland regulation, and river setbacks to reserve corridors.
- Main emphasis is Vermillion River main channel but interested in smaller greenway corridors in the city as well.
- Not particularly interested in farmland protection as a permanent land use in the city.

Inver Grove Heights

- City has done open space inventory for the northwest quadrant.
- Large grass roots contingency of people that would like to protect open space in the city.
- Have had some discussions with the DNR about a possible SNA in the Pine Bend bluffs area.
- Applied with Mendota Heights and Sunfish Lake for Metro greenways planning grant for Rich Valley area.
- Have tried to protect some farms in the past through special zoning districts that protect against assessments.

Lakeville

- Also trying to create greenway corridors concurrent with development.
- City passed a park referendum several years ago to increase park system and protection of lands.
- City uses tools such as wetland ordinances, stream setbacks, park dedication, and expenditures from park fund to protect land and assemble park system.
- City uses condemnation when necessary to acquire key pieces of land.
- May be interested in working with the County to identify future regional park location within city.
- Interested in making connections to the Vermillion River and outside of the cities boundaries.
- Not certain of the role of conservation easements using public dollars.
- May be interested in preserving “farming heritage” through preservation of an old farmstead in north eastern Lakeville.

Rosemount

- City is currently working with Friends of the Mississippi River on greenway planning in that corridor.
- Starting a parks and open space plan in Spring of 2001 that will incorporate greenways.
- May be able to create a greenway between civic center and Rosemount Research Center
- May be able to create a greenway in the northern part of the city where the MUSA is planned to expand.

South St. Paul

- Not particularly interested in conservation easements within city.
- Want to complete MRRT south past barge facility and into IGH. Protection of IGH land along river may be of some benefit.
- Sportsman groups might like wildlife conservation/restoration efforts for pheasant hunting, duck hunting, trout fishing in southern part of the County,
- May be interested in natural area protection along the NURT in West St. Paul once bridge is constructed over hwy 52.

Hastings

- City uses conservation easements adjacent to parks.
- May be interested in placing conservation easements along the Vermillion River on north side (\$200,000) metro greenway grant
- Interested in protecting land along Mississippi River on northwest side of city and in designated greenways
- City has designated greenways within and outside of the County